

## Alf M. Landon, as Leader of the Republican Opposition, 1937-1940

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THE AVERAGE person remembers Alf M. Landon as a badly beaten presidential candidate in 1936, but there are better reasons for remembering him. Among other things, he used his meagre and ill-defined powers as titular leader of the Republican minority between 1937 and 1940 to mitigate intraparty strife. In so doing, he made a substantial contribution to the Republican revival in the 1940 election. His achievement was all the more remarkable because previous titular executives had either been nonfunctional or self-interested schemers. Landon demonstrated the constructive possibilities in the office but his example was wasted on both his contemporaries and his successors. Either they shunned responsibility or pursued personal ambition under the delusion that they were serving their party. So the Landon experiment was an interlude rather than the beginning of a useful tradition.

Since the American constitution made no provision for political parties, the job of titular minority leader—like other party posts—developed outside the formal structure of government. Unlike his opposite number, the President, the minority leader has neither patronage power nor other constitutional prerogatives to strengthen his hand in dealing with members of his party in congress. Matters might have developed differently if defeated Presidential candidates had been encouraged to seek a seat in either house of congress. Such an arrangement might have been difficult to work out, but not impossible. A member of the congressional minority from the same state as the defeated Presidential candidate would have had to resign to make a place for him. The cumbersome features of the procedure militated against its adoption. Moreover, tradition frowned on an active role for defeated Presidential candidates as well as retired Presidents. Both were supposed to withdraw and act like elder statesmen. Some defied tradition, but the results were often disastrous. Thus, the titular leader of the minority party was usually a figurehead with neither authority nor prestige. Even if he tried to become a party spokesman and develop issues

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for the next election, he possessed no way of imposing his strategy and views on the minority in congress.

Confronted with this unpromising situation, most defeated Presidential candidates simply became inactive. The first Republican to defy tradition was Theodore Roosevelt in 1916, although at the time nobody could be sure whether he spoke for Bull Moosers or the Republicans. In any case, he made an unsuccessful effort to commit the congressional minority to a militant stand against German violations of international law. This episode raised the spectre of a ruinous cleavage in minority leadership. If Republicans saw the danger, they ignored it. They had been the minority party for only 12 years since 1860 and were soon headed for a dozen more years of uninterrupted power.

All of the explosive possibilities of 1916 were actualized in 1932 when the Republicans suffered an overwhelming defeat at the polls. The magnitude of the disaster undermined morale and led to mutual recriminations between the victims. Congressional Republicans blamed Hoover for an inept campaign and he blamed them for dragging their feet.<sup>1</sup> The agrarian element in the party denounced the wealthy industrialists, while the latter claimed that the unsound proposals of Western Republicans had deepened the depression and scared the voters. An ideological dispute about the viability of the free enterprise system was superimposed on older sectional animosities. Some professionals, who felt more concerned over the collapse of a serviceable political machine than the economic distress of the masses, swelled the chorus of criticism. The sources of frustration were too diverse to receive expression in clear-cut fashion. Yet polarization of a sort expressed itself: the bulk of the congressional minority acquiesced in New Deal emergency legislation and Hoover as titular party leader opposed it. Neither element was very vocal in 1933 but the cleavage became more pronounced as Republicans prepared for the midterm congressional elections. Republican legislators received thousands of short and virtually illegible letters from constituents ordering them "to support the President."<sup>2</sup> The instinct for survival was strong enough to override the ideological qualms of most G. O. P. congressmen with the result that outspoken conservatives campaigned for renomination and reelection as progressives.<sup>3</sup>

Hoover had secretly nursed the hope of vindication by the voters

1. "Hiram Johnson Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Johnson to C. K. McClatchy, December 4, 1932; "Charles L. McNary Papers," Library of Congress, McNary to Mrs. W. T. Stolz, November 10, 1932.

2. *Literary Digest*, New York, February 24, 1934.

3. "Johnson Papers," Johnson to John F. Neylan, February 25, 1934.

but had remained silent for a time while waiting for Roosevelt to destroy himself with wild assaults on American institutions. Proposals for the extension of the New Deal and the supine attitude of Republican congressmen brought the ex-President into the open during the winter of 1933-1934. As titular executive he was determined to define issues for the 1934 campaign and to retain his grip on the party machinery. He prodded National Chairman Everett Sanders into a series of violent broadsides against the New Deal. Republicans in congress retaliated on February 25, 1934. For the first time since 1866 they adopted a resolution divorcing the congressional and senatorial campaign committees from the national committee. Then they made preparations to oust Sanders as national chairman. The showdown took place at the Palmer House in June, where the congressional faction won a Pyrrhic victory. Sanders was dropped but Hoover persuaded the national committee to accept Henry P. Fletcher as his successor. Fletcher had voted for Roosevelt in 1912, but his progressive impulses had evaporated thereafter. The upshot was that he celebrated the 80th birthday of the Republican party at Jackson, Mich., by asserting that the 73d congress was full of rubber stamps and feeble minds. Fletcher did not bother to lessen the impact of the generalization by restricting it to the Democrats. Then Hoover took the hustings, bewailing regimentation and the loss of individual initiative. Voters who missed the speeches were able to sample his viewpoint in a series of *Saturday Evening Post* articles entitled "The Challenge to Liberty."

Not since the ill-fated effort of Theodore Roosevelt to speak for the party in 1916 had a titular leader defied the wishes of the minority in congress so pointedly. The legislative leaders could do nothing but disassociate themselves from a strategy that they regarded as suicidal. Some former Bull Moosers solicited and received endorsements from Franklin Roosevelt; others ran as constructive critics of the New Deal; and a few talked about non-political subjects.<sup>4</sup> In effect, there were two Republican minorities rather than one and dissension helped to swell the Roosevelt tide in November. For the first time in the 20th century, the party in power increased its majority in both houses in an off-year election.

On the morrow of the debacle Republican legislative leaders demanded a reorganization of the party. Borah snorted that people

4. Walter K. Roberts, "The Political Career of Charles L. McNary" (unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1954), p. 186; "Charles L. McNary Papers," James Cousins to McNary, August 23, 1934, September 21, 1934; "Arthur Capper Papers," manuscript division, Kansas State Historical Society, weekly Sunday evening radio addresses, October 2, 9, 16, 23, 1934.

couldn't eat the constitution and McNary added that "regimentation" filled the mouth but not the stomach.<sup>5</sup> Hoover not only ignored these jabs but acted as if he had missed the 1934 elections. In the year before the convention, he gave 10 major addresses and traveled incessantly. Old friends ruefully concluded that he was a candidate for renomination,<sup>6</sup> a fear that Hoover confirmed by working for a deadlocked convention which would turn to him.<sup>7</sup>

The nomination of Landon in June of 1936 momentarily ended the factional warfare because his political position was close to that of Republican congressional leaders. As a young man, Landon had deserted the Republicans to vote for Roosevelt in 1912 and for Robert M. La Follette in 1924, adhering thereafter to the restless agrarian wing of the state party. As governor of Kansas he had balanced the budget, cooperated wholeheartedly with the Roosevelt administration in the expenditure of federal relief funds, and limited himself to cautious criticism of the New Deal. Landon was looking "for the middle of the road between a government by plutocracy and a government by bureaucracy." He confided to a friend that four more years of Roosevelt "would wreck us," but he also felt that a reactionary program would put the United States "about the same place at the same time."<sup>8</sup> Landon took pains to keep Hoover out of the campaign and to advertise his independence of the Liberty League.

It was not until after his depressing loss to Roosevelt in 1936, however, that Landon unveiled a new concept of minority leadership. He might have interpreted his overwhelming rebuke at the polls as an excuse to retire, and thereby escape any responsibility for the tactics of what had become a pathetic minority. Alternately, he might have succumbed to the desire for vindication like his predecessor and moved on a collision course with the G. O. P. minority in congress. Instead Landon started from the assumption that the party record would be made by congressional Republicans and that he ought to cooperate with them whenever possible. He solicited their advice before speaking and simply remained silent if he could not accept their position. These tactics were part of the larger concept that the titular minority leader ought to be an honest broker, muting his own views in the interest of consensus

5. Ordo S. Finsckney, "William E. Borah and the Republican Party, 1932-1940" (unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1957), p. 79.

6. "Francis V. Keesling Papers," Stanford University Library, Stanford, Calif., Keesling to Orr M. Chenoweth, November 21, 1935.

7. "Chester Rowell Papers," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Rowell to Myrtle (niece), June 11, 1936.

8. "Alf M. Landon Papers," manuscript division, Kansas State Historical Society, Landon to Stanley High, November 4, 1936, September 17, 1935.

on the broadest possible basis. Rightly or wrongly, Landon ascribed Republican losses to intraparty strife, and believed that some of the dissidents would return if the leaders stopped airing their differences publicly. He likewise felt that silence was justified inasmuch as the voters had unmistakably relieved the Republicans of responsibility for governing the country. So he wanted the leaders to sit back; allow the Democrats to make errors; and then entice the disillusioned away from Roosevelt.

Landon launched the new policy under discouraging circumstances. The 1936 election had discredited his tactic of partial accommodation to the New Deal as decisively as the 1934 election had discredited the policy of denunciation. The Hoover faction and the ex-President himself were waiting restlessly in the wings for an opportunity to recapture control of the party. Recognizing the need for a reevaluation of party principles, Landon put out cautious feelers in January, 1937, for a midsummer roundtable discussion. What he had in mind was a relaxed forum of the type held by British parties rather than a formal convention.<sup>9</sup> Looking for ideas instead of controversies, he distrusted the kind of atmosphere associated with an official party gathering.

The idea of a forum was almost immediately overshadowed by a development that allowed Landon to test his theory of leadership on a broader basis. Catching politicians of both parties unawares on February 5, 1937, Roosevelt demanded legislation to enlarge the supreme court. Within 24 hours it was clear that many Democrats would oppose the court plan. So a senate triumvirate composed of Borah, McNary, and Vandenberg persuaded their Republican colleagues to sit on the sidelines. With some apprehension, Townsend of Delaware approached Landon to tell him that opposition from the titular leader would only make the court plan more popular. To Townsend's surprise, Landon acquiesced readily in congressional leadership, observing that the legislators were on the firing line and knew what was best.<sup>10</sup> Other emissaries carried the same request to Hoover and officials of the National committee who were busy polishing up their Lincoln Day speeches. Hoover agreed to cooperate but soon repented. National Chairman John D. M. Hamilton was just as difficult to silence, and Landon had to apply pressure repeatedly on his fellow Kansan. Landon's position soon became untenable because he faced a rising tide of criticism from rank-and-file Republicans who objected to the policy of silence.<sup>11</sup> In late

9. *Ibid.*, Landon to Richard L. Jones, January 7, 1937.

10. *Ibid.*, Landon to Walter Edge, February 23, 1937.

11. *Ibid.*, Landon to Frank Altschul, April 2, 1937.

March he tried to find out when the Democrats fighting the court plan would "restore citizenship" to the Republicans, but received no response.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Landon held his peace except for occasional criticisms of the court plan delivered in nonpartisan fashion. This strategy eventually paid off in July when a Democratic-Republican senate coalition killed the measure.

The resulting cleavage in the Democratic party seemed to open up the prospect for a political realignment that would benefit the Republicans. Landon had been alive to the possibilities as early as February, 1937, and had given a private pledge to indorse any Democratic foe of the court plan who would run for reelection as an Independent in 1938.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, he did not want coalition on a basis which would result in the absorption of the Republicans by the Southern Democrats. So his policy was to leave the door open to party reorganization by preventing any authoritative statement of Republican principles that might repel potential converts. "If coalition comes," he noted, "it will come as naturally as the birth of a baby." He was equally certain that each state would have to follow its own pattern.<sup>14</sup>

Hoover viewed these tactics with dismay. He had resented Landon for excluding him from the Presidential campaign and now thought that the dissensions of the Democrats could best be exploited by an aggressive restatement of Republican principles. In fact, he had begun a campaign to wrest titular leadership of the party from Landon as early as the spring of 1937. Enlisting the support of National Chairman Hamilton, he demanded that the Republican party hold a national convention in midsummer. Presumably such a gathering would reaffirm the Hoover credo in broad philosophical terms, indorsing by implication the ex-President himself. There were all manner of objections to the project. For the transactions of a midterm convention to be binding on the party, delegates would have to be elected in the traditional fashion. Few G. O. P. leaders foresaw any profit from spending the necessary time and money to do so. Moreover, a general statement seemed likely to dampen coalition sentiment among Democrats and irritate G. O. P. congressmen.

Landon blocked the convention temporarily by refusing to sign the call, whereupon Hoover demanded that one be held in the fall. Letters were sent to delegates of the 1936 convention under the signature of an obscure college professor named Allison Reppy

12. *Ibid.*, William Hard to Landon, March 23, 1937.

13. *Ibid.*, Landon to Lewis Douglas, April 6, 1938.

14. *Ibid.*, Landon to Jay Hayden, June 21, 1937.

urging a fresh convention to restore Hoover to his rightful position in the party.<sup>15</sup> Simultaneously, Hoover embarked on a tour of Northern states, pushing his project. Landon objected to any kind of convention before the midterm elections; but instead of opposing it openly, he proposed conditions that would make it unacceptable to others.<sup>16</sup> He advocated a plan for the admission of delegates that would prevent the Hoover faction from dominating the convention. He aroused the misgivings of Republican congressmen just as artfully by demanding that the proposed convention pronounce on every current issue. Hoover found Landon polite but immovable when they conferred at the Sinissippi estate of Frank O. Lowden on October 3.<sup>17</sup> Landon was not nearly so restrained in his correspondence, however. Indignantly he branded Hoover as either the blindest politician in the party or "selfishly indifferent to his effect on it."<sup>18</sup> Landon went on to note that neither of them could be nominated in 1940, but that Hoover was suffering from delusions of grandeur.<sup>19</sup>

Unable to force a midterm convention, the persistent Hoover finally settled for a policy committee under the chairmanship of Glenn Frank of Wisconsin. This group was authorized to hold hearings and draw up a statement of party principles for the guidance of the 1940 convention. Landon refused to serve on the Frank committee, but observed with relief that it would produce no report until after the midterm elections.<sup>20</sup> The collapse of the convention movement ended Hoover's six-year effort to dominate the Republican minority.

Looking back on the factional squabble, Landon feared that it had resembled "two undertakers quarreling over a corpse."<sup>21</sup> His contribution to the spectacular Republican resurgence in November, 1938, is difficult to measure, but Landon had done more than anybody to suspend the intraparty ideological warfare during the campaign. He devoted his last two years as titular executive to the dual task of grooming new leadership for the G. O. P. and searching for common ground on the divisive issue of foreign policy. Long before the convention he made an open and emphatic withdrawal from the Presidential race. Then he tentatively swung his support

15. *Ibid.*, Jay W. Scovel to Jacob D. Allen, September 3, 1937.

16. *Ibid.*, Landon to James W. Arnold, September 22, 1937.

17. William T. Hutchinson, *Lowden of Illinois* (2 volumes), University of Chicago Press (1937), v. 2, p. 724.

18. "Landon Papers," Landon to Don Berry, October 14, 1937.

19. *Ibid.*, Landon to Berry, October 25, 1937.

20. *Ibid.*, Landon to Roger W. Straus, August 10, 1938.

21. *Ibid.*, Landon to Straus, June 2, 1938.

to Manhattan District Attorney Thomas E. Dewey, who most nearly met Landon's specifications for youthful, dynamic party leadership. Not only did Landon line up the Kansas delegation behind Dewey, but he resisted the early stampede to Wendell Willkie.<sup>22</sup> Although initially suspicious of the new standardbearer, Landon preferred Willkie to the shopworn leaders of the depression era and loyally supported him in 1940.<sup>23</sup>

The intensification of isolationist sentiment in the G. O. P. alarmed Landon, but he tried to fight the trend behind the scenes rather than air his differences with the Republican minority in congress. As a Theodore Roosevelt nationalist, Landon regarded the pacifism of the mid-1930's as sickly and unpatriotic. He opposed the neutrality laws and thought they bred a false sense of security. He also believed that they would lead to trade and production controls like other New Deal policies.<sup>24</sup> With some justice, Landon blamed Franklin Roosevelt for promoting the isolationist spirit that became an inconvenience to the President after 1937. Yet Landon refused to run interference for Roosevelt at the expense of the G. O. P. Although Landon twice received bids from the White House to join a coalition cabinet, he made his acceptance contingent upon an explicit disavowal of third-term aspirations by Roosevelt.<sup>25</sup> Negotiations broke down both times because Roosevelt refused to make the necessary pledge. So Henry L. Stimson received the post intended for Landon, entering the coalition cabinet with Frank Knox in June, 1940.

The desertion of two leading Republican internationalists on the eve of the party convention made the isolationists more truculent than ever. They overturned a cautious foreign policy plank sponsored by Landon and adopted one more critical of the Roosevelt administration. Landon was disturbed by the outcome because it tempted Republican orators to speak more charitably of foreign leaders than of their own government. In long letters to Willkie on August 31 and September 4, Landon warned of the danger that the voters would consider the party unpatriotic.<sup>26</sup> He also advised Willkie against taking any stand on specific issues that conflicted with the isolationist position of the G. O. P. minority in congress. Conceding that Willkie was in a difficult situation, Landon urged a series of vague but patriotic statements on foreign policy. Willkie

22. *Ibid.*, Landon to Charles P. Taft, July 10, 1940.

23. *Ibid.*, Landon to Cyrus Eaton, May 20, 1940.

24. *Ibid.*, Landon to William Hard, October 11, 1937.

25. *Ibid.*, Landon to Sterling Merton, January 13, 1949.

26. *Ibid.*, Landon to Wendell Willkie, August 31, 1940, September 4, 1940.



ignored this advice and divided the minority by colliding directly with the G. O. P. legislators on several issues before congress.

Whether different tactics would have improved Republican prospects in the 1940 election is a matter of conjecture. In any case, Landon's experiment in cooperation between the G. O. P. titular executive and the party minority in congress was an interlude in a protracted fight between the rival centers of party leadership. Although Landon had sought to stifle factionalism by avoiding unnecessary policy statements and adjusting his position to the party record of congress, he stopped short of enunciating a formal theory of minority leadership. His contribution was in the form of deeds rather than words. As a pragmatic effort to clarify the perplexities inherent in minority leadership, Landon's approach had no lasting impact on the party. It required an unselfish concept of service that many politicians honor in theory but spurn in practice. Nonetheless, it provided a model for statesmanship under discouraging conditions.