

# GERALD BURTON WINROD AND THE POLITICS OF KANSAS

## DURING THE DEPRESSION

by

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Kansans held many positions of respect in both major political parties during the Depression. Democrats Guy Helvering and Harry Woodring were either members of Franklin Roosevelt's Cabinet or in his Executive offices through most of the decade, while Alf Landon was the Republican presidential candidate in 1936 and John Hamilton was the Republican National Chairman through the last half of the decade. Other notable Kansas Republicans from this period included Senator Arthur Capper, former Vice-President Charles Curtis, and William Allen White.

These men did their best to uphold the political heritage of Kansas. Although Kansas has long been considered a strong conservative and Republican state, it has also had a heritage of progressivism. Populists, Jerry "Sockless" Simpson, elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1880; Lorenzo D. Lewelling, successful gubernatorial candidate in 1892; and Mary Elizabeth Lease led the short-lived Populist Party to respect in the 1890s. Another group of Kansans, led by Henry J. Allen, Clyde Reed, and Alf Landon, championed the progressive movement in Kansas in the early decades of the twentieth century. As a result of these progressive movements black-listing was made illegal, unions were given the right to organize, the Australian ballot, referendum, recall and initiative were implemented, and women were given the right to vote. All of these reforms were instituted before federal legislation made them mandatory.

One man came close to destroying this heritage in the thirties. Fundamentalist preacher Dr. Gerald B. Winrod, called the "Kansas Fascist" by some, came close to winning the Republican senatorial primary in 1938. The social unrest and uncertainty resulting from the Great Depression helped catapult Winrod into the political arena as a right wing political figure.

Gerald B. Winrod was born in Wichita to James and Mabel Winrod in 1898. His father was a bartender who enjoyed the night life of Wichita, doing little else to support his family, while his mother was a gentle, caring, and religious woman who was devoted to her family. Winrod learned a deep respect of the Bible from his mother, which prompted him to strive for a career in the ministry. He left school in 1912 and began his religious career by attending revivals across the Midwest. By the age of twenty-one he was a respected minister and traveling evangelist, despite his lack of schooling in the ministry, a pastorate, a degree in divinity, or a membership in an established religious denomination.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1920s Winrod used his charismatic personality and ability to convey this personality over the radio to lead

the fundamentalist movement in Kansas. Early in the decade he used his writing skills to portray himself as fighting with the common man to defeat the evils of evolution, modernism in religion, atheism, immorality, alcoholism, communism, liberalism, and war. Winrod continually proclaimed during his speeches and radio addresses that these enemies would destroy the morals of American society. He found support for his fundamentalist views from many people in the lower economic classes throughout the Midwest, including much of the agricultural community of Kansas. Although most of the people who supported Winrod were of moderate incomes, they still managed to provide him with regular contributions. Winrod's success in the early part of the decade fueled his need to expand his operations and the easiest way he found to accomplish this was by the use of radio. He began broadcasting in the early 1920s with a Sunday morning radio show on KFH in Wichita and he soon expanded his programming to include several midweek shows over other Wichita stations. In the mid-1920s Winrod was facing increasing broadcasting costs, which resulted in his purchasing radio station XEAW in Mexico. Programs were broadcast daily in English and Spanish over XEAW to Mexico, the United States, and Canada. Through his speeches at revivals, his writings, and his broadcasting over radio Winrod had amassed a large group of supporters by 1925.<sup>2</sup>

In July of 1925, sensing his fundamentalist support, Winrod sent invitations to evangelists and preachers across the United States for a November meeting in Salina, Kansas. The meeting was meant to rally the fundamentalist movement and plot a course of righteousness for the country. From this meeting emerged a group named the Defenders of the Christian Faith, and its recognized leader was Gerald Burton Winrod. The Defenders quickly expanded to reach almost every state in the Union by the end of the decade. Part of this success must be attributed to Winrod's organizational and writing abilities. He showcased the latter through the official mouthpiece of the Defenders of the Christian Faith--The Defender magazine. This magazine, from its first issue in June of 1926, was Winrod's avenue to attack many of the society's ills. The stated purpose of The Defender magazine was "to withstand the powerful, destructive, anti-Christian forces which threatened to annihilate revealed religion, blast away the foundations of civilization and introduce chaotic conditions" into America.<sup>3</sup> This purpose was to be achieved through "opposition without malice."<sup>4</sup>

From 1926 through 1932 all of the "crusades" pursued in The Defender magazine were based on fundamentalist stands on issues like evolution, atheism, prostitution, modernism, alcoholism, communism, liberalism, and war. All of these stands were based on religious morals, with little attention to political ramifications. The nomination of Al Smith as the Democratic candidate for President in 1928 expanded Winrod's interest into political issues as well as religious issues. Smith possessed two characteristics that Winrod could not tolerate: he was Catholic and anti-prohibition. After Smith's presidential nomination, Winrod often attacked the evils of alcohol and the possible effect of Smith becoming President in The Defender magazine. He feared that Smith would reintroduce alcoholism into American society causing widespread drunkenness

in the country. Another of Winrod's fears was that Smith would be controlled by the Pope, making the United States a vassal of Rome. Winrod's influence against Smith's candidacy was slight, but it nevertheless was the beginning of Winrod's active interest in politics. By 1932 the existence of religious issues were no longer of major importance to Winrod's stands against political candidates.<sup>5</sup>

In the presidential election of 1932 Franklin Roosevelt, the Democratic nominee, campaigned for President on a platform similar to Smith's in that he supported the repeal of prohibition. Roosevelt stated that prohibition had been an expensive and disastrous attempt at social legislation that had not only failed, but also put an entire industry out of work. Winrod held just the opposite view. He believed that an industry that contributed to the destruction of people and families should be destroyed. Roosevelt was also an intellectual and a liberal, which meant that he supported legislation and reforms that Winrod and the anti-intellectual fundamentalists opposed.<sup>6</sup>

Winrod supported the prohibition Party candidate, William Upshaw of Georgia for the Presidency in 1932. He campaigned for Upshaw in Pennsylvania and New York in the late summer and early fall, perhaps believing that if Roosevelt could be defeated in his home state the election could be swung to the conservative incumbent, President Herbert Hoover. Although Hoover out polled Roosevelt in Pennsylvania there is little evidence that Winrod influenced the vote for Upshaw or against Roosevelt. In fact, Winrod left the east coast in October, returning to Kansas expressing the belief that the nation would elect the liberal Roosevelt and be doomed to destruction.<sup>7</sup>

Winrod's interest in political matters won him a number of enemies from 1925 until his death in 1957. He acquired a great number of these enemies as a result of an article he printed in the January 1933 issue of The Defender magazine. The article was titled, "Ten Deadly Enemies." These were the same enemies that he professed to fighting in the 1920s. They included evolution, modernism in religion, atheism, immorality, alcoholism, communism, liberalism, war and two new enemies; fascism and the Hidden Hand. Winrod had added fascism to his list of enemies in the late twenties. The Hidden Hand was a new enemy that he defined in the February issue of The Defender magazine as a clique of approximately three hundred wealthy Jews who were attempting to control the world through economic world depression. He stated further that these "renegade Jews" had created communism in Europe and stirred up racial tensions in the United States to cover their conspiracy. With the unmasking of the Hidden Hand conspiracy, Winrod also began an aggressive attack on the Roosevelt Administration through The Defender magazine and a new publication called The Revealer. Winrod connected Roosevelt with the conspiracy in 1933 as an unknowing participant, but in an article printed in the October 1936 issue of The Revealer he wrote that the President was knowingly assisting in the conspiracy. Winrod continued his attack on the President through 1937 when the attacks were mysteriously suspended.<sup>8</sup>

Winrod gained more enemies after he returned from a visit to Europe in the winter of 1935-36. He left for Europe in December

and visited most of the western European nations, but spent the most time in Nazi Germany. Winrod returned to the United States in February of 1936 with respect for Hitler and his work to defeat the Communists in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Although he still believed that Nazism was not practical for America, he had moderated his views toward fascists and stated that Germany was the only country in Europe that "had ever dared to try to completely extricate itself from the control of international Jewry."<sup>10</sup> After the trip to Europe, Hitler and Germany were treated with much more respect in articles appearing in The Defender magazine and Winrod was returned the favor because some of his writings were made available through the German Propaganda Ministry.<sup>11</sup>

In 1936 Winrod had to face the realization that Roosevelt would likely be re-elected President. He learned in 1932 not to support a third party candidate, so he supported the Republican candidate, Alf Landon. Winrod could not support Landon as wholeheartedly as he would have liked, because the Governor of Kansas was not as concerned with the prohibition issue as Winrod would have preferred. Landon had also initiated many reforms in Kansas similar to those that the President had initiated for the country. Landon entered office in March of 1933 and quickly achieved many reforms. The most impressive was that he escorted through the Kansas Legislature a bill that created an eighteen month redemption period on mortgage foreclosures. The Supreme Court struck down the Kansas Foreclosure Bill, but another bill was formulated in March of 1934 that was similar to the Minnesota bill that was judged to be constitutional.

Landon's resounding defeat in the presidential election of 1936 convinced Winrod that the people of the United States wanted a dictatorship with Roosevelt as their tyrant.<sup>12</sup> However, an event occurred in 1937 that may have persuaded Winrod that Roosevelt did not actually have dictatorial control over the country. Roosevelt attempted to reorganize the federal judicial system early in 1937 which in effect would have packed the Supreme Court in favor of the New Deal. Winrod heard of the President's attempt to pack the Court while he was taking his wife to Mexico for a vacation. Upon reaching his destination he contacted his office in Wichita and ordered that a public opinion mailing be started to upset the attempted court packing scheme. Form letters were sent out to the subscribers of The Defender magazine with the instructions for the recipients to sign the letter and mail it to their representatives. The reorganization legislation was defeated in Congress and Winrod claimed major responsibility for its defeat. Winrod estimated that over one million copies of his opinion mailing had reached representatives in Washington. Roosevelt had lost the battle on paper, but his scheme did make the Supreme Court more sympathetic to New Deal legislation and programs, which was the purpose of the reorganization legislation. Winrod, mistakenly, claimed a victory over Roosevelt which may have induced Winrod into believing that the President's hold over the country was weakening.<sup>13</sup>

In January of 1938 Winrod announced that he was a candidate in the Republican senatorial primary in Kansas, the winner of which would meet New Deal Democrat, George McGill in the general

election. Winrod prepared a mailing list of 150,000 names and after thirty days he had 400,000 pieces of his campaign literature in circulation throughout the state. He also made use of the radio, beginning with a broadcast on Thursday, January 27 and continuing every Thursday through the end of the year. Winrod was serious about becoming a senator, but unfortunately for him, there were many other Republicans who would not brook his candidacy.<sup>14</sup>

Winrod ran a very efficient campaign and by the end of June was seen as the Ironrunner in the campaign ahead of Clyde Reed, Dallas Knapp, and Jesse Fisher. Winrod's writing and speaking abilities and his platform of maintaining isolation from European and Asian problems, favoring a balanced budget over deficit spending, and opposing the concentration of power in the executive branch, made him a formidable candidate. His campaign ran smoothly until the end of June.<sup>15</sup>

On July 1 a group of forty to fifty Republican party leaders gathered at the Broadview Hotel in Emporia, Kansas, at the request of William Allen White to begin the attack on Winrod's candidacy. The group drafted a statement that questioned Winrod's sources of campaign funds, his lack of civic service in Wichita, and his connections with Nazi Germany. White also used his paper, the Emporia Gazette, to print editorials unfavorable to Winrod and later in July he published a full page advertisement in most of the major newspapers in Kansas concerning Winrod's candidacy. The advertisement claimed that Winrod had alienated almost one quarter of the population in Kansas through his actions of the previous twenty years. White noted that there were six groups that were opposed to Winrod's candidacy: blacks, Catholics, Jews, organized labor, the religious community of Wichita, and those opposed to the Klu Klux Klan. White summarized his attack by proclaiming that Winrod also supported Nazi Doctrines, which tainted the image of the Republican party in Kansas.<sup>16</sup>

Another attack surfaced July 8 from a group of Kansas ministers and educators from across the state. The group was led by nine ministers that demanded that the Dies Committee for Un-American Activities investigate Winrod's connection with Nazi Germany. This demand was followed by a pamphlet released by this group that was concerned with the source of Winrod's unlimited campaign funds and his anti-Semitic views. This attack by a group of respected religious and intellectual leaders greatly damaged Winrod's campaign and made it necessary for him to answer their accusations.<sup>17</sup>

Winrod first had ignored the accusations, hoping that they would lose credence if he did not answer them, but it became evident that he would have to speak in his own defense if he planned to maintain his lead in the primary. Winrod began his counterattack on July 14 with an address titled, "Viewing the Facts." The address was an answer to the pamphlet published by the ministers and educators that had been released the previous week. Winrod charged that the attackers were using dirty politics and theorized that the attack was financed by eastern Jews. The charge that he was receiving campaign funds from Germany, he explained, was a Communist plot to undermine his campaign, and he further reiterated that the

contributions to his campaign came from responsible and concerned citizens of Kansas, and from the subscriptions and advertisements from The Defender magazine. Winrod answered the accusation of his being anti-Semitic by stating that he only opposed apostate Jews, who coincidentally were the leaders of the Hidden Hand conspiracy. The majority of the address was spent trying to persuade the voters of Kansas that he was not connected with the Nazi Movement in the United States. Winrod's address did not accomplish his objectives, but actually brought more attacks against his campaign from other sources.<sup>18</sup>

Retired U.S. District Court Judge W.D. Jochems responded to Winrod's address of July 14 with his own radio address the following week. Jochems, spokesman for the Wichita Committee for Tolerance, answered Winrod's claims that he was being slandered by stating that a candidate must run for office on his record and that his opponents and the public had every right to expose any mistakes in judgment a candidate had made in the past. Jochems also condemned Winrod's platform of preservation of constitutional democracy, by pointing out that the First Amendment of the Constitution guaranteed the freedom of speech and religion, two rights that Winrod did not always champion.<sup>19</sup>

Others who attacked Winrod's candidacy included John D.M. Hamilton, Max and John Levand, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Hamilton, the Republican Party National Chairman since 1935, was the second ranking Republican in the state next to Landon. His high position in the party made his recommendation of a candidate very important. Hamilton did not endorse a candidate in the senatorial primary, but he did denounce the candidacy of Winrod on July 22. Winrod claimed that Hamilton was forced by party leaders in the East to denounce his campaign or was paid by the financial interests in the East to insure his defeat. Hamilton denied publicly that party forces or economic interests from the east coast determined his opinion of Winrod's inability to be an effective senator for Kansas.<sup>20</sup>

The editors of the Wichita Beacon, Max and John Levand, were of Jewish descent and had been attacking Winrod actively since 1931. However, during the 1938 campaign the Levands did not use their paper to attack Winrod. They may have feared that if they allowed the writers of the Beacon to attack Winrod at will that Winrod could use the attack to fuel his Jewish conspiracy theory. Instead of using their paper to attack Winrod the Levands used it to build up the reputation of Winrod's opponent Clyde Reed. Reed needed to defeat Winrod in Wichita in order to comfortably win the primary. The Levands aided Reed by helping compose a massive advertising campaign in the Beacon the last three weeks of the primary and also printing all of the favorable material concerning Reed on page one. The Levands were effective in their strategy, as Reed carried Wichita in the primary.<sup>21</sup>

The NAACP denounced Winrod's candidacy on July 19. The reason for their opposition was that Winrod had "written, sponsored and published articles tending to create race hatred against the law abiding colored persons of the State of

Kansas . . . and . . . he had falsely charged the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People with being a communist organization."22

Winrod ran a poor third in the primary held on August third. Reed polled 104,918 votes to Knapp's 64,068 and Winrod's 53,149. Reed became the Republicans' popular choice for Senate as a result of a concerted effort to defeat Winrod. The progressive and "old guard" factions of the Republican party had rallied together to elect Reed and ensure Winrod's defeat. Winrod had his own view as to the reason for his defeat at the hands of Reed and in a circular letter dated September 8 he explained the reasons for his loss in the primary. He reasserted that he had been attacked by a conspiracy based on the east coast by wealthy Jews who feared Winrod's potential as a senator. He had done all that was possible to explain to the voters his stands on issues and how treacherous the attack on his candidacy really was. Winrod stated that the attack on his candidacy was a compliment to his stand against communism and the Hidden Hand, but was a disservice to the people of Kansas.

After the primary Winrod gave his support to the Republican ticket, except for the candidacy of Payne Ratner for Governor. His excuse for not supporting Ratner was that the gubernatorial candidate had changed his platform too often during the primary. It was more likely that Winrod disliked Ratner because he was Jewish.

Winrod benefitted greatly from the Depression. He won the favor of many Kansans and Americans with his explanation of the reasons for the world depression. He blamed the Jews, a group of people that had for centuries been the scapegoats for the world's problems. His Hidden Hand conspiracy played upon the feelings of the people that were suffering through the Depression by giving them a nonviolent outlet for their aggression. Winrod built further on these feelings of insecurity by fabricating that President Roosevelt assisted the conspiracy. By blaming the Jews, communists, and the Roosevelt Administration, Winrod constructed an incredible explanation that he made seem logical and believable to his followers.

#### NOTES

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2. Schragg, 3-4.

3. What's Wrong With Winrod (Kansas City: Kansas City Friends of Democracy, 1938), 46; Hope, "Strident Voices," 55; Sullivan, "Gerald B. Winrod," 7, 13; Schragg, "Gerald Burton Winrod," 8; Waltner, "Gerald B. Winrod and the . . . Trial of 1944," 1, 3-5.

4. The Defender, I, June 1926, Kansas State Historical Society-Newspaper Archives.
5. Kansas City Times, 15 July 1938, Kansas State Historical Society-Newspaper Archives; Schragg, "Gerald Burton Winrod," 8; John D. Waltner, "Gerald B. Winrod: Deluded Defender of the Faith," Mennonite Life, January 1969, 30-31; Waltner, "Gerald B. Winrod and the . . . Trial of 1944," 7-9.
6. Hope, "Strident Voices," 56; Sullivan, "Gerald B. Winrod," 75; Waltner, "Gerald B. Winrod and the . . . Trial of 1944," 9-10, 19.
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8. Will Chasen and Victor Riesel, "Keep Them Out!," The Nation, 4 July 1942, 8; Schragg, "Gerald Burton Winrod," 14-15; Sullivan, "Gerald B. Winrod," 32-34, 37-38, 42; Waltner, "Gerald B. Winrod and the . . . Trial of 1944," 14-16; Gerald B. Winrod, "Facing Ten Deadly Enemies," The Defender, VII, January 1933, 3-7, Kansas State Historical Society-Newspaper Archives; Winrod, "Unmasking A World Conspiracy," The Defender, VII, February 1933, 3-5, Kansas State Historical Society-Newspaper Archives.
9. Hope, "Strident Voices," 62; Chasen and Riesel, "Keep Them Out!," 7; Schragg, "Gerald Burton Winrod," 22-23, 26; Waltner, "Gerald B. Winrod and the . . . Trial of 1944," 25.
10. Chasen and Riesel, "Keep Them Out!," 8.
11. Schragg, "Gerald Burton Winrod," 24.
12. Sullivan, "Gerald B. Winrod," 75; Schragg, "Gerald Burton Winrod," 11, 30; Waltner, "Gerald B. Winrod and the . . . Trial of 1944," 20, 22, 24.
13. Sullivan, "Gerald B. Winrod," 75; Waltner, "Gerald B. Winrod and the . . . Trial of 1944," 24-26.
14. Kansas City Star, 30 January 1938; Waltner, "Gerald B. Winrod and the . . . Trial of 1944," 27-29.
15. Hope, "Strident Voices," 55-57; Winrod, "Viewing the Facts," 14 July 1938, transcript of radio address over KCKN (Kansas City) and WIBW (Topeka), Kansas State Historical Society-Library.
16. Emporia Gazette, 2 July 1938, 1; 20 July 1938, 10; 3 August 1938, 4; Kansas City Times, 2 July 1938, 1; Topeka Daily Capital, 2 July 1938, 1; Wichita Beacon, 3 July 1938, 14; 28 July 1938, 7.
17. Emporia Gazette, 8 July 1938, 1; 9 July 1938, 1; Kansas City Times, 13 July 1938, 6; Topeka Daily Capital, 9 July 1938, 16; 10 July 1938, 2B; Wichita Beacon, 8 July 1938, 1; 9 July 1938, 1.
18. Topeka Daily Capital, 28 July 1938, 3; 2 August 1938, 14.
19. Wichita Beacon, 21 July 1938, 8.
20. Emporia Gazette, 23 July 1938, 1; 25 July 1938, 1; Topeka Daily Capital, 23 July 1938, 8.
21. Wichita Beacon, 8 July 1938, 1; 9 July 1938, 6; 10 July 1938, 1A; 18 July 1938, 1, 19 July 1938, 7.
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