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Governor Shaw as a Politician

By FLEMING FRAKER JR.

As a well-known figure in Iowa public life, Leslie M. Shaw presented somewhat of a puzzle to his contemporaries, as he does to later historians. Brilliant, ambitious, able and positive always, he rose from an unknown country lawyer-banker to governor of the state in five short years. Perhaps his forceful personality was bound to create controversy, particularly at a time when political feeling ran high as it did during his second term.

He began his professional career as a practicing attorney in Denison, and later also went into the banking business there. His law partner was Carl F. Kuehnle who was probably more widely known than Shaw, or at least was more active in state political and fraternal circles for many years. The future governor gained considerable credit and acquaintance by becoming a leading layman in the Methodist Church, always a powerful factor in Iowa affairs.

Shaw was, of course, an active Republican in city and county affairs. His congressional district was represented by the popular, young Jonathan P. Dolliver. At the request of the Republican State Committee, Shaw made some speeches to counter the eloquence of William Jennings Bryan in the free silver campaign of 1896. But he was still largely an unknown among the voters of the state when brought forward as a candidate for governor the next year. An extensive effort was made to acquaint the people with this newcomer to state politics.

Judge J. P. Conner of Denison went to Boone county to ask support. Charles Mason and John L. Stevens, to whom he appealed, said if Shaw would pledge himself to Albert B. Cummins for senator they would help him get Boone county. The pledge was made by Judge Conner and later confirmed by the candidate.

The progressive group put forth H. W. Byers of

Shelby county, A. B. Funk of Dickinson county, and J. B. Harsh of Union county, as candidates for governor at the 1897 Republican convention in Cedar Rapids. Lieutenant governor Matt Parrott's strong gubernatorial aspirations were backed by most of the party's conservatives as the convention opened. Progressive support soon consolidated behind Senator Funk. Others respected his experience and political sagacity, making him clearly the leading candidate.

It was then Judge Hubbard of the Northwestern railroad suggested the availability of Leslie M. Shaw as the only man who could prevent Funk getting the entire Tenth District. Some delegates from Sioux City were understood to prefer Shaw. Funk always thought they were influenced in that stand by George D. Perkins, a loyal friend of Hubbard. Shaw's strength grew rapidly and he obtained the nomination largely through the influence of the group of Republicans who agreed with Judge Hubbard.

The nomination of Shaw in this manner occasioned some bitterness. The men who honestly wanted Parrott, Funk, Harlan, Byers, or Fuller did not like this coup by which the railroad politicians and federal officeholders had beaten them with an unknown. Many of them never forgot or forgave that defeat.

Shaw waged a vigorous campaign, becoming a popular candidate. On the speaker's platform, he was a revelation to people of Iowa. Clearly he was different in that he entertained his large audiences while at the same time teaching or instructing them. A ready wit, he employed homey stories stocked with Crawford county characters or occasionally the typical Vermonter, to effectively illustrate his points.

His major speeches were largely upon national issues. He dwelt with authority upon subjects like the gold standard in which there was wide interest at the time. In a restricted home environment, he had had little opportunity to become familiar with Iowa administrative or legislative affairs, so devoted a minimum of atten-

tion to these matters. Although Shaw ran some 300 votes behind the rest of his ticket in his home county, he was elected by a substantial majority throughout the rest of the state.

As governor of Iowa, Leslie M. Shaw was a new element in the state house. He displayed a cordial and friendly attitude, installing a rocking chair for seating visitors, extending both hands in greeting them, and usually had a new story to put them at ease. When he went down to the state house barber shop, a crowd usually assembled in anticipation of the amusing small talk. A serious man in conducting the state's business, Shaw enjoyed the social side of public life and exhibited a most likeable personality.

Shaw was awarded the customary second term as Iowa's governor, although it may be noted he did not carry Polk county in this election. He remained loyal to those responsible for his political success. His administration opposed the proposals of John Herriott to revise the method of railroad assessment. A manifesto by the governor ably defended the old policy against charges of favoritism and inequality.

Considerable controversy was aroused by the Rood appointment. When the senate rejected the naming of a personal friend of the governor to the board of control, the position was subsequently offered to more than twenty-five prominent individuals. It was claimed that they were known to be unavailable or not interested and Shaw's enemies charged him with making the vacancy a political football—of deliberately obligating people to him.

Having promised to back Cummins for senator, Shaw seems to have developed similar ambitions himself. But when Senator Gear's first term expired in January 1900, the party leaders were compelled to nominate Gear again as the only candidate capable of defeating Cummins. The opportunity again presented itself five months later on Senator Gear's death, July 14, 1900. It is said that Shaw wanted to appoint a man who would be weak

enough to have a free field for a fight in the legislature; in that field the governor hoped he might win.

It was imperative to the corporate interests dominating party policy, that the appointee be one certain of being re-elected at the end of the short term, against Cummins or anyone else. Their choice was the dynamic congressman from Shaw's own district, Jonathan P. Dolliver. Though the governor hesitated, apparently for personal reasons, he finally accepted the recommendation of his political mentors and appointed Dolliver to succeed John H. Gear in the United States Senate.

The governor was criticized for exerting undue pressure upon the convention to nominate a candidate for Dolliver's congressional seat. There was a large field of candidates with Shaw's friend, Judge J. P. Conner only one of many. Shaw was accused of threatening to withhold the appointment of Dolliver for the beginning of the long term—from March 4 till the legislature met—unless the new senator backed Conner as his congressional successor. And it was stated that the governor wrote letters to Dolliver's friends, especially in Webster county, requesting them to repay Dolliver's debt by supporting Conner. The nomination of Judge Conner was thus interpreted by some as resulting from unjustified interference on the part of Governor Shaw.

Another act that did not meet with popular favor, was the governor's veto of the valued policy insurance law. Legislation to enforce insurance contracts which had been sought for many years, was finally passed. But it was clearly inadequate and not wisely framed, encouraging overinsuring of property among other things. Following hearings upon the measure after the adjournment of the General Assembly, Shaw exercised his veto. The disappointment of some interested parties was later reflected in the opposition to Shaw's feelers for an unprecedented third term.

Shaw had a distrust and an aversion to being quoted. He often asked newspapermen not to do so unless they wrote shorthand and could repeat his words verbatim.

Later in his life, he once remarked that he was often misquoted because he "seemed to say things that he did not."

Thus, although he had proved a capable chief executive, Governor Shaw's policies and personality aroused their share of antagonism around the state by the end of his second term in office.¹ His efforts at sounding out interest in a third term met with a decided coolness. Therefore, there was a great deal of surprise in some quarters when it was announced that Theodore Roosevelt had appointed him secretary of the United States treasury.

Shaw's entry into the cabinet was widely credited to Roosevelt's appreciation of the former Iowa governor's knowledge of public finance. But others felt that it more likely stemmed from the president's known dislike of and lack of sympathy with the progressive Republican movement in Iowa, which was rapidly gaining momentum in the state at that time.²

Shaw never came back to Iowa to live. He resigned as secretary of the treasury in March 1907 to become president of the newly formed Carnegie Trust Company in New York City. In 1909 Shaw made a pre-convention campaign for the Republican nomination for president, but withdrew in favor of William Howard Taft. He returned to private business as president of a large corporate trust firm in Philadelphia which he headed until his retirement in 1913. After that he drifted into obscurity, occupying himself chiefly with writing on financial affairs and traveling extensively. One of Iowa's most eminent public men, he died in Washington, D. C., March 28, 1932.

Few men in the official life of Iowa possessed a finer mind or labored more diligently in her cause than Leslie M. Shaw.

¹ Editorial, *The Sioux City Daily Tribune*, January 17, 1901, p. 4.

² Emory H. English, "Shaw's Entry into Public Life" (unpublished mss., Iowa State Department of History and Archives).

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