The Career of James J. Davis

The depression of the 1890's weakened the faith of many Americans in the ability of the nation's economic system to fulfill its promises of prosperity and abundance, but James J. Davis emerged from the harrowing decade with a renewed commitment to capitalism and individualism. It was not that the young iron puddler did not experience deprivation and hardship, for the coming of the depression threw him out of work and forced him to ride the rails from Pennsylvania and Ohio to Alabama and Louisiana. He met hungry and desperate men and with them cadged meals from trackside families. He witnessed the grinding poverty of rural blacks and saw at first hand how employers used the business downturn to slash wages. Yet, while other Americans interpreted similar experiences as a call for reform or as a summons to revolution, Davis saw them as a warning against extremism and self-pity. To him, the lesson of adversity was clear: the American way still offered bright promise, provided that the individual cultivate qualities of comradeship and charity. During a long career as fraternal order leader and businessman, Davis' emphasis on homey virtues and personal good fellowship stood him in good stead. The perspective first gained during the adversity of the nineties and validated in his private career remained with him through his twenty-four years as United States Secretary of Labor and Senator from Pennsylvania. It earned for him the reputation of a cheerful conciliator which provided much of his political appeal. At the same time, however, it betrayed a narrowness of vision that helps to explain why a man from a major industrial state holding key public offices for almost a quarter of a century had such a limited impact on public policy.¹

¹ There is no full-length biography of Davis. His autobiography, *The Iron Puddler: My Life in the Rolling Mills and What Came of It* (New York, 1922), is episodic and sentimental. Joseph Mitchell Chappie, "Our Jim": A Biography (Boston, 1928), and Alfred Pearce Dennis, "Puddler Jim," Saturday Evening Post, CCIII (Aug. 2, 1930), 14-15, 73-74, 76, rely heavily upon it and reflect its tone. For brief summaries of his career, see U.S. Congressional Record, 67
Just as his sojourn during the depression was both typical and unique, so were the circumstances of his birth and early life. Born on October 27, 1873, in Tredegar, Wales, Davis joined the late nineteenth-century trek of Europeans to America in 1881, when his family emigrated. Like so many of those who crossed the Atlantic, his father found work in the maturing industrial society. And, like so many immigrants, the Davises experienced poverty in their new homeland.²

Still, the Welsh emigration of which David and Esther Davis and their six children formed a part was not the exodus of a truly uprooted people. Although eagerly clinging to native customs and quick to form social clubs and fraternal bodies, the Welsh were at the same time fiercely independent and accustomed to the harsh ways of a business civilization. They brought with them not the habits and mores of Galacian peasants or Irish villagers, but rather the skills and discipline of coal miners, iron workers, and tin platers. Nor did they have to huddle together in the embrace of a church or synagogue whose very existence was strange and even frightening to other Americans, for these Welshmen were Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists, adherents to faiths firmly rooted in the American soil. Thus, while young James initially feared the journey across the ocean and dreaded his resettlement, he quickly grew accustomed to his new environment, free of many of the wrenching dislocations that migrants from other lands suffered.³

David Davis settled his family in Sharon, western Pennsylvania, where he toiled in the iron mills. The Davises were poor; whether in Wales or America they had always “been face to face with the problem of bread,” but Mrs. Davis instilled in her brood the values of hard work, thrift, and cleanliness. They kept alive the old traditions, for the mother sang the children to sleep with Welsh airs.

and hymns. The family kept up the Welsh language, conversing in
the native tongue with the frequent visitors who stopped at the
house. At the same time, James entered into the wider community,
playing clarinet in the town band, performing in bit parts at the
local opera house, and starring on the baseball team. Although
David Davis was illiterate, his wife encouraged the children to read.
"We took the Youth's Companion," James later recalled, "and it
was the biggest thing in our lives."  

If the Davises' home life was a mixture of native tradition and
American culture, their social outlook was a combination of working-
class values and middle-class aspirations. For all his love of drama
and reading, James balked at formal schooling and joined his father
in the mills at the age of twelve as a puddler's assistant. The iron
mills were hot and dirty and noisy, and the business fluctuations of
the late nineteenth century closed them periodically, plunging
families like the Davises into hardship. Such conditions bred in
many workers inchoate feelings of rage and rebelliousness, but to
James J. Davis the mill was a marvelous place, filled with excite-
ment and a sense of purpose. The work was hard, but it enabled
him to build a powerful body. Although he joined the Amalgamated
Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers, and believed in the
benevolent and charitable ends to which it was dedicated, he found
no reason for rebellion and no cause for resenting the wealth and
power of the owners. Once when a "reformer" complained about the
conditions in the mills, young James replied "Nobody forced me to
do this. I do it because I would rather live in an Iron Age than live
in a world of ox-carts." James believed fervently that hard work and
enterprise could lead to success. The rich, he believed, had also
started out poor; upward mobility was a fact of his life every bit as
much as hard work and occasionally hard times.  

In the early nineties, the iron industry slackened. James searched
for work in Pittsburgh, in Ohio, and finally in Birmingham, Ala-
bama. During his wanderings he learned many things about men
and events, for the mills, freight trains, hobo camps, and boarding
houses that provided his environment held lessons for the student
of social problems. He encountered and grew to distrust reformers

and radicals, whom Davis judged to be invariably demagogic, confused, and spiteful, filled with abstract and self-serv ing notions. Thus, he declared that the hearty steelworkers thrived on a diet of "greasy meat, strong coffee and slabs of sweet pie with gummy crusts," while they sickened when they followed the advice of a "reformer" who persuaded them to forego such fare for balanced meals of milk, fruit, and eggs. Law and order among the brawling millhands was maintained not by soothing words but rather by a knife-wielding landlady. The young man also learned the dangers of labor agitation, for on one occasion he joined with his fellow workers in a strike, only to become trapped in virtual servitude in a Louisiana lumber camp in the desperate search for work that followed the walkout.6

His direct experience with hard times led him to an awareness that some of the problems of the unemployed and destitute were not of their own making. Many of the men he met and traveled with were hardworking and sober and he came to feel that those better off had a responsibility to help. Yet even in this conviction he did not follow the unorthodox proposals of his contemporaries Jacob Coxey and Eugene V. Debs, but rather the idea of fraternal association. During his travels he talked to men who belonged to fraternal bodies and was impressed with the possibilities of using those benign organizations as means through which to channel charitable impulses and to mitigate the harsh facts of economic life.7

In 1894 Davis returned North, eventually finding work in Daniel Reid's tin-plating factory in Elwood, Indiana. At the mill, as in Birmingham, he learned the dangers of labor agitation, for some of the men called a strike in response to minor grievances. Fresh from his Louisiana ordeal, James persuaded his fellows of the folly of a strike at a time when "We owned about the only jobs in Indiana." The men realized that he had saved them from disaster and he soon became president of the union local, as well as a confidant of the mill owners and an influential man among workers in the small city.8

7 Ibid., 134-139; James J. Davis, "The College Needs the Factory," Good Housekeeping, LXXXII (June, 1926), 42-43 ff.
In 1896 he campaigned with considerable success for McKinley in the normally Democratic working-class sections. Popular with his fellow employees and among businessmen as well, he was elected City Clerk in 1898. Although proud of his working-class origins, he now left the mills permanently. After returning to Sharon briefly to attend business college, he settled quickly into the white-collar, public-service pattern that he would pursue for the rest of his life.

For the next several years, James solidified his political and financial position in Elwood. In 1902 he was elected Madison County Recorder. He joined several fraternal and service organizations and attended night school to learn something of business law and mathematics. All the while, he lived frugally while cultivating and maintaining a reputation for good fellowship and helpfulness among both his former fellow millworkers and the professional and business elite of the community. Eventually, he accumulated a hoard of working capital which he used to make small and often informal investments in friends' business ventures and real estate enterprises. Within a few years of his departure from the mills, he had acquired a house and several thousand dollars, as well as a reputation for probity and friendliness. While on the road in the nineties he had met many who had lost faith in the American Dream, but his hard-won success proved to him that adversity was a stepping stone, not a stumbling block.9

On October 27, 1906, his thirty-third birthday, Davis joined the Loyal Order of Moose and embarked upon his life's career as an organizer and fraternal leader. He had long been interested in fraternal activities, viewing them as a means of combining social enjoyment with worthy charitable activities. In the depression he had talked with men active in fraternities and had concluded that such organizations as the Elks, the Eagles, and the Redmen could unite men, providing mutual aid as well as support for the orphaned and the elderly. "The dream of my life," he later declared, "was to build a great society. . . ." He had joined several organizations in Elwood and nearby Anderson, Indiana, and throughout his life he was to take membership in dozens of similar bodies, once asserting that "I am willing to join any fraternal society that will admit me

9 Ibid., 204-241, passim.
and has for its purpose the good of mankind." But it was to the Moose that he dedicated his energies and his considerable talents as an organizer and propagandist.

The last half of the nineteenth century was the great period of fraternal growth in the United States. Seeking comradeship and good cheer, millions of Americans joined the Knights of Pythias, the Elks, the Redmen, the Eagles, and similar associations. The Loyal Order of Moose was founded in Louisville on April 12, 1888. It grew steadily in the Ohio-Mississippi Valley during its early years, but by the mid-nineties membership had tailed off drastically. By 1906, when Davis joined while attending an Eagles' convention in Crawfordsville, Indiana, the Order had dwindled to 246 accredited members and seemed ready to join the long list of defunct organizations.

Davis, however, viewed the Moose as a vehicle for his charitable and entrepreneurial ambitions. He addressed the small gathering, outlining his vision of a fraternity that would find its purpose in good fellowship and uplifting social service. The group was both eager for leadership and impressed with his plans and eloquence. It named him Supreme Organizer on the spot.

Davis began his new duties with a combination of idealism and entrepreneurship. As Supreme Organizer, he entered into a contract with the Order that called upon him to organize lodges and to finance the project out of his own pocket. In return he received a percentage of each membership fee and gained a major voice in Moose policies and planning. He devoted full time to building membership, traveling indefatigably, investing money in the establishment of key lodges in Pittsburgh and Chicago, and originating charitable enterprises that he hoped would attract new members. In one year he journeyed over 75,000 miles, spending most of his

10 Ibid., 244-246; Warner Olivier, Back of the Dream: The Story of the Loyal Order of Moose (New York, 1922), 51, 57-58. The first quotation is from Davis to William A. Anderson, Dec. 26, 1934, Box 4, James J. Davis Papers, Library of Congress, while the second is contained in Dennis, "Puddler Jim," 73.


12 Whalen, Handbook, 105; Olivier, Back of the Dream, 51; Davis, The Iron Puddler, 244-245.
time in Pullman cars and hotels. After moving to Pittsburgh in 1907, he formed partnerships with several close friends to set up business concerns that financed land purchases and construction for Moose lodges and provided the membership with Moose-related reading material and motion pictures.\textsuperscript{13}

Davis believed that fraternal organizations should provide not only good fellowship but worthwhile educational and charitable activities as well. In 1913 he helped to found Mooseheart, an orphanage and school in Illinois. He also advocated the establishment of a home for aged Moose, a dream later fulfilled with the building of Moosehaven in Florida in 1922. Under his vigorous salesmanship, the Order expanded. By 1909 it contained 31,000 members, and with Davis and his associates redoubling their efforts it rose to 200,000 in 1911 and over 500,000 in 1916. Thereafter growth was slower, but in 1929 the Order contained 1,700 lodges with more than 650,000 members. In 1919 he became Supreme Dictator in recognition of his almost singlehanded resurrection of the once-decrepit body.\textsuperscript{14}

Davis' organizational success paid important dividends to him. His income fluctuated sharply, for it varied with his success in recruiting new members and in supplying members with various goods and services connected with the activities of the lodges. Some years yielded over $35,000, while in others he struggled along with barely $7,000. While Davis later claimed that in the early days "every cent I made went right back into the work" and "I had to draw on my reserves... in order to keep going," it appears that, in fact, his income was on a level with that of a relatively successful businessman or executive of a moderate-sized corporation. Rumors circulated that he had become a millionaire through his

\textsuperscript{13} See notes 11 and 12 above. Some of Davis' business arrangements are indicated in the following: Agreement between Fred Jones (an attorney associated with Davis) and American Bond and Mortgage Co., Pittsburgh, Oct. 5, 1914; agreement between Jones and St. Louis Moose Lodge No. 3, n.d.; articles of agreement between Davis, Rodney Brandon, Harry T. Brockman, Leonard F. Sollow, John J. Denny and W. W. Ryall (regarding the establishment of the Moose Publishing Co.), May 14, 1909; contract between Davis and the United Moving Picture Co., Aug. 26, 1911, all in Davis Papers, Box 36.

\textsuperscript{14} For the origins of Mooseheart and Moosehaven, see Olivier, \textit{Back of the Dream}, 114-121, 174-180, and \textit{Moose Magazine}, LIX (June, 1973), 3. For membership figures, Ferguson, \textit{Fifty Million Brothers}, 288-289, and Arthur Preuss, comp., \textit{A Dictionary of Secret & Other Societies} (St. Louis and London, 1924; Detroit, 1966), 258.
organizational efforts and through related enterprises, but, as he later remarked, while these stories were useful to him when he wanted to borrow money, they had no basis in fact.\textsuperscript{16}

Davis' leadership of the Moose also proved the pathway to his long political career. The years of traveling and organizing provided him with scores of friendships and contacts throughout the Middle West, while his role in the founding of Mooseheart and as chairman in 1918 of the Moose War Relief Commission helped to establish his reputation as a practical and effective humanitarian. Although he was not a major political figure, he had been moderately active in Republican politics in Pennsylvania; he supported Harding and other Republicans in 1920. Thus, it was natural, if not predictable, that in the winter of 1920–1921 Harding would turn to Davis as his nominee as Secretary of Labor.\textsuperscript{16}

The Department of Labor had been established as a separate Cabinet position in 1913. Its first secretary, William B. Wilson, a trade unionist and congressman, had come under heavy attack from businessmen and Republicans for alleged favoritism toward the labor movement. The bitter labor unrest of the postwar months added to their antagonism, for many critics of labor traced its postwar militance to the Democrats' encouragement of unions. Moreover, Wilson and his assistant, Louis Post, were prominent critics of the mass deportations and roundups of alien radicals conducted by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, thus further rendering themselves vulnerable to right-wing criticism. Since in 1920 the American Federation of Labor had supported Harding's Democratic opponent James M. Cox, many observers expected Harding to enlist directly in the accelerating open shop drive by choosing as secretary of labor a man unconnected with the labor movement and perhaps openly sympathetic to the campaign to chasten organized labor. Thus, John Glenn, president of the Illinois

\textsuperscript{16} Davis' federal income tax returns, beginning with 1914, are in Davis Papers, Box 35. His later statement about early financial hardships is in Davis to William A. Anderson, Dec. 24, 1934, \textit{ibid.}, Box 4. The report of his alleged great wealth appears in "Our Millionaire Secretary of Labor," \textit{Literary Digest}, LXIX (Apr. 9, 1921), 51–53, and \textit{New York Times}, Feb. 27, 1921.

Association of Manufacturers, declared that the success of the open shop effort depended in large part on "whether Senator Harding will appoint a man for Secretary of Labor who carries a union card..."\textsuperscript{17}

But Harding was not eager to antagonize laborites. "This administration cannot afford to be intolerant," he declared, pledging himself to "promote understanding and accord." This did not mean, as Samuel Gompers urged, the appointment of someone who was directly connected with the labor movement, but it did indicate that the President-elect would listen to moderate advisers who cautioned him against alienating so important an interest group as the AFL.\textsuperscript{18}

Thus, while Davis' name did not early appear in public speculation, he was a natural choice. He was a member of a conservative trade union and was happily untainted with recent militancy or untoward activism. His fraternal activities had given him a humanitarian reputation, while he had simultaneously demonstrated shrewd business acumen. Moreover, his party loyalty and his network of contacts and associations throughout Pennsylvania and the Middle West made his selection popular among fraternalists, a large and enthusiastic segment of the electorate. Harding, an ardent joiner himself, was impressed with the deluge of telegrams and letters from Moose and other fraternal members urging Davis' appointment. Although Davis was the last Cabinet nominee to be announced, he was all but assured of the appointment as early as January 21. The AFL voiced its disapproval of the selection of a man whose ties with the labor movement were so tenuous, and some businessmen were unhappy over Harding's failure to choose someone outspokenly antilabor. The President-elect, however, seemed convinced that Davis was "an outstanding figure."\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{18} Harding to George Sutherland, Jan. 9, 1921, Box 4, George Sutherland Papers, Library of Congress; Samuel Gompers to Harding, Feb. 7, 1921, Gompers Letter Books, AFL-CIO Library, Washington, vol. 275; Zieger, Republicans and Labor, 51-57.

\textsuperscript{19} Harding to Davis, Jan. 21 and Feb. 14, 1921, Box 653, Warren G. Harding Papers, Ohio Historical Society; Murray, Harding Era, 103-104; New York Times, Feb. 25, 1921. Scores of communications to Harding from members of the Moose and other fraternities appear in Box 486, Harding Papers.
Forty-seven-years old at the time of his appointment, Davis was virtually unknown to the press and the general public. Short of stature but powerful in muscular development, the new secretary presented an impression of vigor, optimism, and willingness to accommodate. His light brown hair was already turning gray, although he retained a certain boyishness of aspect. Curious reporters described him as "stoutish," and as "more robust than rugged," with clearly defined facial features, highlighted by "deep brown eyes with a curiously melting light in them." Although his marriage to Jean Rodenbaugh of Pittsburgh in 1914 had occurred when he was forty-one, the couple eventually had five children, a circumstance that helped to emphasize Davis' status as one of the younger members of the Harding Cabinet.

While in Washington, Davis continued his Moose activities and continued to profit from his contract with the Order. He retained his title of Supreme Dictator throughout his stay in the Cabinet and often used speaking engagements at fraternal gatherings as opportunities to comment on public policy. Both in his own mind and in his conduct of his duties he made no sharp distinction between his role as Secretary of Labor and his fraternal activities, especially with regard to the charitable and benevolent aspects of the latter. Critics accused him of using his office for Moose organizational purposes, and it was true that Davis sometimes made appeals for Moose-sponsored charities on Department of Labor stationery, and that he considered charitable enterprises as integral aspects of recruitment and organization. Moreover, during the 1920's Davis had a major financial interest in the Moose Propagation Department, a quasi-official promotional body that sought to recruit members on a profit-making basis. Supporters defended his continued association with the Moose by contending that his charitable efforts helped to raise large sums for worthy causes and by claiming that his continued contact with the fraternal world enabled him to serve as an effective spokesman for the administration among large numbers of people uniquely interested in labor and welfare matters.


21 Chappie, "Our Jim," 51-54; Olivier, Back of the Dream, 68-69, 75-83; Davis' federal income tax returns, Box 35, Davis Papers; Ferguson, Fifty Million Brothers, 291. For a
Although the worst of postwar labor unrest was over by the time he took office, Davis faced some thorny problems in the early months of his new job. Employers sought wage reductions in response to the depression that had begun in mid-1920, while workers in war-inflated unions attempted to maintain gains won earlier. Bloody labor warfare raged in the coal fields of West Virginia, and major strikes threatened in the coal, railroad, and meat-packing industries. "When I began my work as Secretary . . . of Labor," Davis later reminisced, "I found that I had inherited from my predecessors about 70 different strikes in many industries. . . ."

Fortunately for the comfort of the new administration, labor was in no position to conduct aggressive campaigns against wage reductions and antiunion activities. Neither a coal nor a railroad strike materialized in 1921, and the weakness of the unions in the meat-packing industry enabled Davis to help arrange a six-months' truce, thus averting for the moment a large-scale strike. Success was short-lived, however, for neither his personal efforts nor the work of the United States Conciliation Service was able to forestall strikes permanently. The packinghouse workers, for example, went out in September, 1921, while major coal and rail strikes were to erupt in the summer of 1922. Still, Davis' efforts upon taking office enabled the administration to claim some quick successes, provided some relief from the continuous atmosphere of labor crisis that had pervaded the nation since 1919, and lent substance to Harding's and Davis' oft-repeated public statements about the administration's desire to promote industrial good will.

criticism of Davis' mixture of governmental and fraternal activities, see The Nation, CXXVIII (Mar. 13, 1929), 300, and an unsigned staff memorandum, ca. 1932, Box 1878, Gifford Pinchot Papers, Library of Congress. Historian Albert Bushnell Hart defended Davis in a letter to the editor of The Nation, CXXVIII (May 15, 1929), 585. Some of Davis' complex and apparently lucrative dealings with and through the Loyal Order of Moose can be followed in the stenographic record of United States vs. James J. Davis, a trial held in 1932 on charges of lottery violations leveled against Davis. Box 32, Davis Papers.


23 For the meat-packers' strike, see David Brody, The Butcher Workmen: A Study of Unionization (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 97-103 and statement by Davis, Mar. 24, 1921, Box 38, Davis Papers. Davis' reactions to the initial demands of his office and his satisfaction with his peacekeeping endeavors are indicated in Davis to E. J. Henning, May 6, 1925, ibid., Box 41. His efforts to dampen industrial conflict through soothing pronouncements
Such sentiments were sorely tested, however, in 1922, for in the spring and summer both the coal miners and the nonoperating railroad workers struck. Involving close to a million workers, these walkouts plunged the nation into a summer of turbulent unrest, exploding the administration's bland hopes for industrial peace. Although Davis, as Secretary of Labor, kept in close touch with events in both strikes, careful observers of the administration's course of action could see that two other Cabinet members—Secretary of Commerce Herbert C. Hoover and Attorney-General Harry M. Daugherty—were actually the administration's chief policy formulators and spokesmen.24

Both strikes resulted from problems left over from the war. While the miners struck in order to maintain traditional regional bargaining arrangements, the basic problems of the soft coal industry stemmed from overproduction, a circumstance exacerbated by wartime demand for coal. The railroad strike involved a test of strength between major carriers and the nonoperating unions which had expanded rapidly during the war but which now faced wage cuts and unfavorable changes in work rules. Both strikes directly involved the federal government. The contract under which the miners were working had been secured in 1919 through federal intervention, and the Harding administration was deeply concerned over the impact of a strike on the country's efforts to struggle out of economic difficulty. The rail strike involved decisions of the Railroad Labor Board, an agency established by the Transportation Act of 1920 to oversee railroad labor matters.25

From the outset, Davis sought conciliatory solutions to both strikes. He met early and often with representatives of the miners and operators and frequently sought to moderate the steady stream of propaganda directed against the United Mine Workers of America

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24 Zieger, Republicans and Labor, ch. 6.
that descended upon Harding. Although privately angry at some of the tactics of UMW president John L. Lewis, the Secretary eventually played an important part in arranging the negotiations that led to a settlement late in August.  

In the concurrent railroad strike, Davis stood at the periphery. The existence of the Railroad Labor Board precluded the use of the Department of Labor's usual tool, the United States Conciliation Service. Moreover, Herbert Hoover quickly emerged as the administration's leading spokesman in efforts to arrange a settlement in the summer. Davis did meet periodically with Bert M. Jewell, head of the AFL Railway Employees Department, and he showed a willingness to listen to the unions' grievances and to present them fairly within administration councils, but it was Hoover and Daugherty who shaped and articulated policy. Indeed, in September when Daugherty resorted to a far-reaching injunction aimed against the unions, Davis expressed surprise and anger, having had no prior notice of this drastic and controversial move.

Davis' relative inaction in the 1922 strikes provided ammunition for those critical of his early performance in office. From the outset of Harding's administration, laborites and liberals had assailed Davis for his alleged passiveness. In 1921, a unionist charged that Davis was acquiescing in the takeover by other departments of labor matters, while rumors circulated that the Department of Labor might be formally stripped of key functions or eliminated entirely in a major Cabinet reshuffling. In 1921 and 1922, the

26 Davis to Rodney Brandon, July 20, 1922, Box 39, Davis Papers; New York Times, July 23, Aug. 2, Aug. 6, 1922; Berman, Labor Disputes, 223-224. For Davis' criticism of Lewis, see his (unsent) letter to the United Mine Workers' president, July 27, 1922, Box 39, Davis Papers. Hoover later asserted he had an informal agreement with Davis wherein the Secretary of Commerce would concentrate on the railroad strike while Davis devoted his energies to the coal strike. Herbert Hoover, The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover (New York, 1952), II, 105. But even so Hoover played a major part in shaping the administration's policy in the coal strikes through July. Zieber, Republicans and Labor, 115-117, 123-125.

27 For Davis' peripheral role in the railroad negotiations, see New York Times, July 23, 1922, while Hoover's more central part is described in ibid., Aug. 1 and 2, 1922, and in Hoover, Memoirs, II, 105-107, as well as in various communications in Herbert Hoover Papers, Box 1-1/253, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa. For the injunction, see Sigmund, "Federal Laws," 143-150, and Berman, Labor Disputes, 238-239. For Davis' reaction, see E. J. Henning to John Denison, Sept. 7, 1922, United States Conciliation Service Records, File 170/1553A, Record Group 280, National Archives, and Davis to Lorenzo Dow, Mar. 23, 1923, Box 39, Davis Papers.
government held an important conference on unemployment, seemingly an obvious subject for Department of Labor leadership. But Davis deferred to Herbert Hoover's control of the conference and, after submitting recommendations, paid little attention to the matter. Nor was he a decisive figure in the administration's successful effort to eliminate the twelve-hour day in the steel industry, a project in which Hoover once again was the decisive figure. Hoover later recalled that when he had accepted Harding's call to serve as Secretary of Commerce, he had done so with the understanding that he would have a major influence in labor policy. He also recalled that in his efforts to exert this influence, "Secretary Davis was very cooperative." 28

Calvin Coolidge's succession to the presidency in 1923 further reduced Davis' influence. Coolidge relied even more heavily than did Harding on Hoover's advice and regarded Davis largely as a political emissary to the labor movement. Davis accepted his secondary role. Thus, on one occasion he wrote the President that, "Being at the tail end of the Cabinet, after all the others have taken up their questions with you, I somehow feel that I ought not to take up more of your time." Increasingly, Hoover emerged as the chief architect of the administration's economic policies and as the major spokesman for its domestic program. In regard to labor matters, he was the key administration figure in the two most significant developments of the Coolidge years: the signing of the Jacksonville Agreement in 1925, which temporarily delayed further conflict in the unionized soft coal regions; and the passage of the Railway Labor Act in 1926, which abolished the Railroad Labor

28 Typical liberal-laborite criticism of Davis' early performance as Secretary of Labor are found, e.g., in The New Republic, XLIV (Aug. 16, 1922), 340-341, and (Oct. 11, 1922), 163, and in the remarks of Edward F. McGrady, an AFL legislative agent, in The Boston Post (undated clipping enclosed in W. A. Coblenz to Davis, Sept. 5, 1921, U.S. Conciliation Service Records, File 165/358.) The labor movement's concern over the fate of the Department of Labor is seen in American Federation of Labor, Report of Proceedings . . . 42d Convention (1922), 99-100. Davis did have some astute views on the unemployment situation, as revealed in his letter to Hoover of Sept. 26, 1921, U.S. Conciliation Service Records, File 165/358B, and in a letter to Joseph G. Armstrong, June 27, 1922, United States Department of Labor Records, File 20/145A, Record Group 174, National Archives, but he did little to press them. Davis to Hoover, Sept. 19, 1921, U.S. Conciliation Service Records, File 165/358. For the elimination of the twelve-hour day, see Zieger, Republicans and Labor, 97-107, while Hoover's comments about Davis are in Hoover, Memoirs, II, 101.
Board. In both of these matters, Davis limited himself to occasional advice and to general support of the administration’s policies.29

Not only did the Secretary of Labor forego vigorous leadership in specific policies, he saw his department decline in relative size and administrative weight throughout the 1920’s as well. In 1921, Davis had to impose rigid economies on his subordinates, as Congress had cut expenditures drastically. Although levels of funding and personnel rose somewhat during the decade, they did so at a far slower rate than in Hoover’s expanding Department of Commerce or the Department of Agriculture. Much of the expansion of Department of Labor activities came in the area of immigration, a matter that was of great importance to Davis personally but one which was peripheral to the original goals and purposes of his Department. Moreover, Davis and his subordinates had constantly to be on guard against Hoover’s administrative imperialism, for, not only did the dynamic Secretary of Commerce function more aggressively in specific situations concerning labor, but his experts and statisticians frequently criticized the efficacy and accuracy of Department of Labor activities. It was Hoover who early in the twenties aligned himself with those supporting major administrative overhauling, a project that some critics thought was designed in part to eliminate the Department of Labor. Davis resisted these thrusts and was able to maintain his department intact, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the United States Conciliation Service adding to their already strong reputations. Still, it was with some justice that Hoover later recalled that in the twenties he considered Davis to be largely in charge of labor matters only “from a technical point of view.”30

It was with regard to immigration that Davis exhibited leadership, both in terms of advocacy of restriction and the implementa-

29 Zieger, Republicans and Labor, 60–63, and chs. 9 and 10. Davis’ almost poignant remark is in his letter to Coolidge, May 20, 1924, Box 15, Calvin Coolidge Papers, Library of Congress.
tion of the quota laws passed in the twenties. He held that the American labor market was becoming overcrowded, that the country would no longer be able to provide the large numbers of low-skilled jobs that had made previous immigration necessary, and that labor-saving devices would soon "eliminate much of the need for manpower." He supported the immigration restriction laws of 1921, 1922, and 1924, dissenting only in way of urging ever more stringent requirements for entrants. He considered limitation of immigration a great benefit to organized labor and a key element in Republican economic policies in the twenties. "If I were asked what I thought was the most important thing for labor in America," he declared in 1924, "I would say that the regulation of immigration . . . [is] about the most important." 31

In addition, Davis sought to improve the administration of immigration statutes. His efforts to track down illegal entrants and to send Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization agents abroad to weed out potential rejectees won him the support of many laborites and patriotic groups, but some urban congressmen charged that his administration of immigration affairs smacked of ethnic and class favoritism. Particularly vocal was Congressman Fiorello La Guardia of New York City, who repeatedly charged that Davis fawned over visiting royalty, even if their credentials were not in order, but eagerly pounced upon the poor and destitute, especially if they were from eastern or southern Europe. La Guardia also assailed Davis' plans to register all immigrants and accused him of cooperating with employers to allow them cheap imported labor through loopholes in the restrictive laws. Generally, though, criticisms were few and immigration affairs continued to dwarf other activities of the Department of Labor. In 1925, Davis told Coolidge that when he assumed his office he carefully considered its various functions and "I came to the conclusion that immigration was of the greatest importance." Throughout the decade, much of the time and energy of Davis and his chief assistants was spent on immigration affairs,

31 Davis' quoted remarks are in his book Selective Immigration (St. Paul, 1925), 203, and in typescript of his speech of Jan. 21, 1924, Box 40, Davis Papers, respectively. Other significant and representative utterances of his on immigration restriction include a typescript of a question and answer session, dated Mar. 31, 1924, and his letter to Senator James E. Watson, Feb. 6, 1924, in ibid.
with expenditures for these matters consistently accounting for well over half of the Department of Labor's total budget.\textsuperscript{32}

His vigorous advocacy of immigration restriction and his efforts to present labor's view point in the councils of the administration won him the cautious respect of the AFL leadership. Although the Republican administrations in the 1920's did not ordinarily attack organized labor directly, laborites found few sympathizers in positions of influence in Washington. Thus, when Davis criticized labor injunctions, expressed concern about high levels of unemployment, or strove for reductions in working hours, organized labor mitigated some of its earlier opposition to his appointment. Davis campaigned vigorously for Republican candidates in industrial areas throughout the decade, particularly in 1924 when he was a major GOP spokesman against the "radical" doctrines associated with Robert M. La Follette and the Progressives. In 1925, William Green, new president of the AFL, endorsed Davis for reappointment as Secretary of Labor, noting that "The relationship between Secretary Davis . . . and the American Federation of Labor has been of a cordial and satisfactory nature" and commending Davis for "the excellent service which he has rendered during the past four years."\textsuperscript{33}

Throughout his long tenure as secretary, Davis compiled a reputation for moderation and practical humanitarianism. Critics continued to depict him as a pliant tool of the GOP hierarchy and as a man of little substance, committed only to his own aggrandizement and to his continued employment at public expense. Still, when Hoover reappointed him in 1929, he appeared to many a living symbol of the success of the Republican Party's efforts to quiet the labor turbulence of the postwar period and to institute a "new era" in labor relations. His qualities of loyalty and willingness to compro-


\textsuperscript{33} Davis on injunctions: "Injunctions in Labor Disputes," typescript draft, December, 1925, Box 42, Davis Papers; on unemployment: Davis to Coolidge, July 12, 1927, Box 1917, Coolidge Papers; on the twelve-hour day: Davis to Montague Perry, Jan. 13, 1923, Box 39, Davis Papers. Davis' 1924 campaigning is revealed in a series of speeches and press releases in \textit{ibid.}, Box 40, while Green's statement of Jan. 14, 1925, is in \textit{ibid.}, Box 41.
mise, together with his ability to gather support from influential fraternal, business, and labor groups enabled Davis to compile one of the longest periods of Cabinet service in American history.  

These same qualities helped him to launch his electoral political career in 1930. Shortly after he began his Moose work, he had settled in Pittsburgh, and over the years he had developed a network of friendships and associations stemming from his fraternal and business dealings. At various times throughout the 1920's, associates from western Pennsylvania had urged him to run for Congress and for the governorship. Davis had rejected these advances, but he took advantage of the unique and tangled circumstances within the Pennsylvania GOP in 1930 to seek the senatorial nomination. With the tacit encouragement of the Hoover administration, he defeated Senator Joseph Grundy in the primary and swept to an impressive victory over his Democratic opponent in the general election, thus launching his fifteen year career in the Senate.

Over the years, Davis proved an enormously resourceful and fortunate politician. In 1930, for example, he benefited from a deep split within the state's Republican Party. Ever since the death of Boies Penrose in 1921, various factions had struggled to control the party machinery. The incumbent Senator, Joseph Grundy, was closely associated with major corporate interests and was bitterly hostile to the Philadelphia-based machine headed by William Vare. Vare, in turn, detested Grundy, for it was Grundy who had been appointed in 1929 to the Senate to fill the seat left vacant when Vare was denied admission on charges of fraud stemming from his


1926 primary victory over Gifford Pinchot and George Wharton Pepper. Circumstances were further scrambled in 1930 by the effort of Pinchot to reattain the governorship and by an informal alliance between Pinchot and Grundy. The Vare forces hated Pinchot because it was the Old Forester who as Governor had refused to certify Vare's election in 1926. Moreover, Pinchot was an ardent prohibitionist and an implacable foe of powerful railroad and utilities interests that provided much of the backing for the Vare machine. Vare's lieutenants, working closely with antiprohibition forces, devoted their energies to defeating Pinchot, first in the primary and then in the general election. They were unsuccessful, but Davis was a major beneficiary of their efforts for, with the unenthusiastic support of the Vare machine and the efforts of his personal followers in western Pennsylvania, he defeated Grundy in the primary. And, although he had not (in deference to the views of the Hoover administration, of which he was still a part) taken a wet stance, antiprohibition forces were so intent upon defeating Pinchot in the general election that Davis' wet Democratic adversary received very little attention or financial backing from repeal advocates.  

His subsequent campaigns also revealed a combination of shrewd politicking and great good fortune. In the election for a full Senate term in 1932, for example, he continued to receive the support of the Vare machine while Hoover was eager to have him on the ticket because of his popularity with laborites. He was free of re-election worries during the great New Deal tidal waves in 1934 and 1936, and by the time he was up for re-election in 1938 the domestic impetus of the Roosevelt revolution had been spent. Opposed by Grundy in the Republican primary, Davis nonetheless defeated his opponent and went on to overwhelm Democratic Governor George H. Earle, despite the latter's vigorous support from organized labor. Throughout his career in the Senate, Davis was able to depict him-

self as a people's candidate, as a man without powerful or influential friends, although in reality he owed his start in national politics as much to the Vare organization as to his own popularity.\textsuperscript{37}

While in the Senate, Davis compiled an undistinguished record. He voted in favor of most major New Deal reform and welfare measures, and he enjoyed considerable support from labor and minority groups. He hammered away at alleged abuses of New Deal programs, charging the Democrats with using WPA funds for political purposes, with fiscal extravagance, and with corruption. At the same time, he opposed those such as Grundy and Joseph N. Pew of the Sun Oil Company whom he accused of trying to make the Republican Party an antilabor instrument. In foreign affairs he was an early supporter of neutrality legislation, but by the late 1930's he emerged as an advocate of preparedness and of Anglo-American cooperation. Aside from his sponsorship of legislation in 1931 to insure that union wage rates would prevail in construction performed for the government, he played little role in shaping or introducing the legislative landmarks of the 1930's. Nor did he acquire a reputation for skill in debate or behind-the-scenes influence. He settled heavily into the clublike atmosphere of the Senate as a moderately liberal Republican, a man notable among his colleagues for his uncanny ability to maintain himself in public office rather than for intellectual distinction, legislative prowess, or political courage.\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{38} Davis' voting record for 1932-1939 on major legislation is conveniently listed in Box 34, Davis Papers. For his views on New Deal programs, see \textit{New York Times}, e.g., Aug. 9, 1934; Apr. 3, 27, 28, May 30, 31, Sept. 20, 29, 1936; Feb. 10, 1937; Oct. 7, Dec. 18, 1938; Jan. 20, 1939. For his support of antilynching legislation, see \textit{U.S. Congressional Record}, 75th Cong., 1 Sess., LXXXI, Part 8 (Aug. 10, 1937), 8594-8595, while his general views on foreign affairs are indicated in \textit{ibid.}, 75 Cong., 3 Sess., LXXXIII, Part 6 (May 3, 1938), 6106-6108, and in Davis to T. J. Bryant, May 7, 1936, Box 4, Davis Papers. For his opposition to more conservative Republicans, see his letter to Joseph N. Pew, Oct. 14, 1937, Box 28, \textit{ibid}. 

The circumstances of his personal life contributed to his relatively unexceptional career in the Senate. Plagued repeatedly by ill health and suffering frequently from bouts of exhaustion, he lost much of the buoyancy and cheerfulness that had characterized his earlier days, while the death of his wife in 1940 added to his personal burdens. Moreover, in 1932, Davis had been indicted on charges of participation in an illegal lottery, stemming from his work with organizational activities that he conducted on an entrepreneurial basis for the Moose. Eventually, after a mistrial and a postponement occasioned by his illness, Davis was acquitted, but the affair left him bitter and shaken. The Order's membership dropped sharply in the 1930's, and younger leaders of the organization grew impatient with Davis' antiquated methods of recruitment and publicity. He continued to devote a great deal of time and energy to organizational work, and in 1934 declared that "the Moose is what I am going to stick to for the rest of my life." But by the late 1930's the Order's Supreme Secretary, Malcolm Giles, and a staff of professional organizers and career functionaries were assuming control of the organization. Davis continued to hold the title of Supreme Director and drew a generous salary from the Order, but he was no longer the kingpin of the Moose.39

In the 1940's, Davis' decline was swift. In 1942 he sought the Republican gubernatorial nomination but lost in the primary to Edward Martin, the candidate of the Grundy wing of the party. Grundy, Martin, and Joseph N. Pew had long been opponents of Davis and made early moves to deny him the Republican nomination for re-election to the Senate in 1944. But despite private intimations of weariness with public office, he outmaneuvered his intraparty rivals and secured the nomination for re-election to the

39 On some of his physical problems, see Davis to T. J. Bryant, Sept. 12, 1935, Box 4, \textit{ibid.} The stenographic record of his first trial (see note 21 above) is the main source on his legal difficulties, but see also \textit{New York Times}, Sept. 4, 1932, Mar. 7, 12, May 2, June 13, Sept. 26, 29, Oct. 13, 1933. Davis' correspondence through the 1930's reveals deep involvement in Moose activities and close attention to the affairs of the Order. Davis to E. J. Henning, Apr. 11, 1934, Box 8; to William A. Anderson, Dec. 24, 26, 1934, Box 4; to Dave Nichols, May 18, 1939, Box 28; and his expense account for 1937 Moose work, Box 35; Boxes 4-16, \textit{passim}; see also his income tax returns in Box 35. For his loss of influence in the Order, see Olivier, \textit{Back of the Dream}, 75-91. The title Supreme Dictator was eliminated in 1939 (\textit{New York Times}, Aug. 31, 1939).
Senate in 1944. As with previous campaigns, he stressed his humanitarian voting record and his criticism of the high handedness and overcentralization of the Roosevelt administration. At the same time, he indicated support for a postwar world organization and continued peacetime efforts to achieve collective security. However, despite his recent elevation to the prestigious Committee on Foreign Relations and the predictions of victory of most experienced observers, Democrat Francis J. Meyers defeated him in the November election by a narrow margin.40

After leaving office in January, 1945, Davis worked for a time as an aide to Senator William Langer of North Dakota. He continued to live in Washington and to take part in Moose affairs. When an admirer in 1946 urged him to run for the Senate, Davis felt flattered but replied that the physical and financial strain would be too great for him. “I think it is well,” he wrote in what amounted to his political valedictory, “that I sit back and rest on my laurels. I have had great honor. . . . So be it—I am content.” Although until the late summer of 1947 he visited Moose headquarters daily, various heart and kidney ailments sapped his strength. In September he entered the Washington Sanitorium and Hospital in Takoma Park, Maryland, where he died on November 22.41

On the campus of Mooseheart, the school that he helped to found in 1913, stands a bell tower featuring a life-sized statue of James J. Davis. He is depicted with a look of hopeful resolve, his eyes fixed on the horizon and either arm around the shoulder of a child. The Museum of Moose History, also on the campus, contains a James J. Davis Memorial Alcove which includes an eternal flame. His name appears frequently in Moose publications and has become synonymous to thousands with practical, dignified charity, and good fellowship. Yet, although Davis served as Secretary of Labor for nine years, historians of the 1920’s have paid him little attention. And, although he represented Pennsylvania in the United States

40 “The Luck of Puddler Jim,” *Time*, XLIII (Feb. 28, 1944), 21–22; *New York Times*, Jan. 9, 1943; Nov. 8, 9, 24, 1944; Davis to Mrs. Harry E. Canter, Oct. 3, 1944, Box 24, Davis Papers; to Rhys Davies, June 8, Aug. 2, 1944, Box 25; to his son James, ca. late 1943 or early 1944, Box 29.

Senate during the epoch-making days of the great depression, the New Deal, and World War II, chroniclers of those years rarely mention him.\(^{42}\) In the 1890's he viewed at first hand the seamy underside of American life and drew from his experiences the lesson that individual enterprise, tempered by fraternal charity, constituted the best response that an American could make to the social problems of an industrial age. Such a viewpoint served him well in his successful fraternal career, but it proved inadequate as a guide to action during his long years in government service. Thus, it is fitting that he is remembered so fondly in the annals of the Loyal Order of Moose but hardly at all in the history of his country.

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\(^{42}\) Davis' career in the Cabinet has been covered more fully than has his subsequent service in the Senate. See John Bruce Dudley, "James J. Davis: Secretary of Labor Under Three Presidents, 1921–1930" (unpublished dissertation, Ball State University, 1972), and Zieger, _Republicans and Labor_. Still, standard studies of the 1920's, to say nothing of those dealing with the 1930's, rarely mention him.