

PHILANDER C. KNOX AND THE CRUSADE AGAINST MORMONISM, 1904-1907

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PHILANDER C. Knox's first term as a United States Senator (1904-1909) has been generally ignored by students of early twentieth century politics. Sandwiched between his tenure as Attorney-General for Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt and his term as Secretary of State under William Howard Taft, the five-year period was generally unproductive and in some senses merely a hiatus between two far more important and significant eras.¹ Yet during these years Knox was directly involved in one of this nation's most bitter religious controversies, a crusade against the Mormon Church as strong, if not so violent, as the campaigns of the middle nineteenth century. Refusing to allow himself to be a part of the automatic condemnation of a Utah colleague simply because of his religion, Knox kept himself, quite inadvertently, in the national spotlight. Without doubt the Senator's stand in favor of religious toleration for all Americans made him for awhile one of Pennsylvania's most despised leaders. It also momentarily increased his prestige to a new high.

The anti-Mormon crusade had begun more than one year before Knox was appointed to the Senate. In January 1903, the Utah legislature overwhelmingly chose Reed Smoot, a prominent Republican businessman from Provo and an "Apostle" in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, as one of that state's two United

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¹ Philander Chase Knox was born in Brownsville, Pa., May 6, 1853. He resided in Pittsburgh from 1872 until his appointment to the Attorney-Generalship in 1901. After the assassination of his close friend, President McKinley, Knox remained in office under Theodore Roosevelt, distinguishing himself through such work as the Northern Securities case (1903-1904). In January 1905, one month after taking his seat in the Senate, Knox was elected by the Pennsylvania legislature to a full six-year term. He resigned from the Senate in March 1909, to become Secretary of State, a post he held until the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson in March 1913. Three years later, he was re-elected to the Senate, where, in 1919, he became one of the "irreconcilables" in opposition to the Treaty of Versailles. On October 12, 1921, he died suddenly while still in office.

States Senators.² Though Smoot was not the first member of his church to be elected to Congress³, he was the highest ranking Mormon leader ever named. To millions of evangelical Protestants long suspicious of Mormonism, Smoot's choice was as shocking as the election of a Roman Catholic cardinal would have been.⁴ Petitions demanding that the new Senator be denied his seat began to pour into Washington by the thousands. Mormonism, so most of the petitions alleged, was a criminal organization which practiced polygamy while corruptly dominating state political affairs throughout the West. Smoot, it was tenuously argued, as a leader in that Church, must be guilty of criminal activities and thus should be ineligible for the Senate.⁵ No evidence was given to prove Smoot guilty of the charges made against him,⁶ but the usually inactive Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections nevertheless determined, with full Senate approval, to stage an investigation into the Mormon Church's activities before making any recommendation on Smoot's qualifications.⁷ In January 1904, it began to hear testimony in what was to become one of the longest congressional investigations of the decade.

Such controversy was not to be ignored by the nation's newspapers and they quickly began to focus on the often sensational aspects of the hearings. To many persons reading the daily reports, the investigation seemed providential. Many of the evils they had

2 Smoot was officially a member of the Mormon Church's Quorum of Twelve, the most important advisory body of that denomination. A good biographic study of the Utah Senator is Milton Rees Merrill, "Reed Smoot, Apostle in Politics," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1950.

3 Three others, Frank J. Cannon, W. H. King, and Joseph Howell, all Mormons in good standing, were elected to Congress before Smoot and seated with no trouble. A fourth, Brigham Roberts, an admitted polygamist elected in 1898, was excluded from his congressional seat after a long and bitter debate.

4 "The Smoot Case," *Independent*, LV (August 12, 1903), 3010.

5 Transcripts of some of the earliest petitions can be found in United States Senate, Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Proceedings before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate in the Matter of the Protests Against the Right of Hon. Reed Smoot, a Senator from Utah, to Hold His Seat* (Washington, 1906), I, 1-30. The Mormon Church had officially renounced polygamy in 1890.

6 Far from being a polygamist, Smoot, according to the testimony, was probably the most outspoken younger leader in Mormonism against the practice of plural marriage.

7 Late in 1903 Smoot was asked to answer officially all the charges made against him. The committee's chairman, Julius Caesar Burrows of Michigan, however, was not really interested in Smoot. His only real concern was to expose the "abominations" of Mormonism. (Letter from Reed Smoot to C. E. Loose, January 26, 1904, quoted in Merrill, 52.)

believed associated with Mormonism in the past now seemed proven.⁸ The *New York Times* represented some of these feelings when its editors noted, immediately after the testimony of Mormon Church president Joseph F. Smith, that every comment of the religious leader "drove a nail in the coffin of [Smoot]. . . . It seems impossible that the Senate should consent to receive a representative of [Mormonism] as a representative of one of the United States. Either Utah must be demormonized or it must go without representation in Washington."⁹

Not everyone, however, agreed on the value of the investigation. Internal dissension was clearly present from the start. Senator William P. Dillingham of Vermont, a member of the investigating committee, believed that the hearings were not a "prosecution, but a persecution."¹⁰ Albert J. Beveridge, Indiana's junior Senator and another committee member, found the entire proceedings "disgusting." "Not a word of evidence has been offered against Smoot," he confided to a friend in 1904, yet "public clamor and coercion" were rampant.¹¹ The hearings often became a battleground between men such as the committee's highly vocal anti-Mormon chairman, Julius Caesar Burrows of Michigan, and the usually younger and more liberal Senators such as Beveridge. It was in this setting that Philander C. Knox received his initial experiences as a United States Senator.

On June 10, 1904, Pennsylvania Governor Samuel F. Pennypacker announced the appointment of Knox to the unexpired Senate term of Republican "Boss" Matthew Quay. Though he planned to take office on July 1, it was not until December that the new Senator was able to wind up his affairs in the Attorney-General's office and take his seat. Knox was immediately named to the Privileges and Elections committee, replacing George Hoar of Massachusetts who had died in September. Within days after assuming his seat, he was immersed in the religious controversy which surrounded Smoot's eligibility.

⁸ Mormon Church President Joseph F. Smith, for instance, freely admitted that he had five wives, each of whom had borne at least one child since 1890. He had, in all, he added, forty-two children. Smith's extended testimony before the committee can be found in *Proceedings*, I, 80-212, 287-319, 321-388, 474-481.

⁹ *New York Times*, March 6, 1904.

¹⁰ Quoted in a letter from Senator Albert J. Beveridge to Charles E. Coffin, March 24, 1904, in the Albert J. Beveridge Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

¹¹ Letter from Albert J. Beveridge to John H. Baker, March 18, 1904. (Beveridge Papers, Library of Congress.)

The hearings on Mormonism went on spasmodically until June 1906, with Knox actively participating in nearly every meeting. During that time, he and his Pennsylvania colleague, Boies Penrose, were inundated with anti-Mormon, anti-Smoother protests from thousands of constituents. Most of the petitions stemmed from three main sources: the Women's Christian Temperance Union, a united front of Presbyterian churches, and various local Methodist Episcopal churches and church societies.¹² By the end of the hearings, possibly as many as four million persons had signed the various protests.¹³ Knox, for his part, by early 1906 was placing in the *Congressional Record* mass petitions such as that of "36,630 women of Pennsylvania."¹⁴

On June 1, 1906, the committee finally voted on Smoot's right to remain in the Senate.¹⁵ Knox, despite all the pressure, had become convinced that the Utah Senator was not only qualified for his seat but could not constitutionally be kept from it. The majority of the committee disagreed. When a motion was made that Smoot was not entitled to his seat, the committee voted seven-to-five in favor of it with Knox and four other Republicans constituting the minority.¹⁶ Burrows' attempt to gain quick approval of the vote from the entire Senate, however, failed, and on June 11 both majority and minority arguments were submitted.¹⁷

12 Typical of the wide diversity of church societies, fraternal organizations, and other groups against Smoot and Mormonism were the W.C.T.U. of Philadelphia, the Euclid Avenue Reformed Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, the Homewood Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church of Pittsburgh, the Woman's Home and Foreign Missionary Society of Fleetwood, and the Y.M.C.A. of Millsville (United States *Congressional Record*, Senate, 59th Congress, 1906, XL, 7208-7209).

13 No complete record of the total signatures was ever made. Estimates ranged from one million to over four million. Probably an average between the two extremes would be accurate.

14 United States *Congressional Record*, Senate, 59th Congress, 1906, XL, 7589.

15 Smoot had been sworn into the Senate on March 5, 1903, with the understanding that all questions as to his qualifications would be reserved until later (United States *Congressional Record*, Senate, 58th Congress, 1903, XXXVII, 1-2).

16 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 1, 1906. The four other Republicans in the minority were Foraker (Ohio), Dillingham (Vermont), Hopkins (Illinois), and Beveridge (Indiana). Voting against Smoot were Democratic Senators Dubois (Idaho), Bailey (Texas), Clarke (Arkansas), Overman (North Carolina), and Pettus (Alabama), and Republicans Dolliver (Iowa) and Burrows (Michigan). De Pew (New York), a Republican member of the committee who was reportedly opposed to the Utah Senator, was sick in bed and did not vote.

17 The majority report against Smoot was written by Burrows of Michigan; the minority report was by Foraker of Ohio. The texts of both arguments can be found in *Proceedings*, IV, 467-505, or United States *Congressional Record*, Senate, 59th Congress, 1906, XLI, 8218-8238.

When Congress reconvened after a summer break for campaigning and electioneering, one of the first orders of business facing the Senate was the final solution of the now almost four-year-old "Smoot Case." On December 11, Burrows began the discussions with a long speech which gave a detailed and somewhat sordid history of Mormonism since its founding by Joseph Smith in 1830. During the next several weeks various speeches, both for and against the committee's decision, were made, but it was not until January 30, 1907, that final debate, discussion and a full Senate vote were scheduled.¹⁸ In the interim, impassioned oratory became the order of the day. Burrows, still as convinced of Mormonism's evil as he was the day the investigations started, was representative of all the anti-Mormon demands when he called on the national government "this day and hour" to stop the debauchery of Mormon Church members from "filling the land with their illegitimate offspring." "I protest," the Michigan Senator added, "this effort to drag the Christian churches of the land down to the low level of this abomination."¹⁹ Others, notably Beveridge of Indiana, spoke for Smoot and his right not to be found guilty by association.²⁰

Knox's turn to speak came on February 14, 1907. For days the pressure on the junior Senator had been mounting. He had been mentioned frequently as a possible candidate for the Republican Presidential nomination in 1908, and his actions now might serve to strengthen his candidacy or destroy it altogether. But Knox did not hesitate to declare eloquently his support for Smoot's right to a Senate seat. Utah, he said, was admitted as a state in 1896 with no special restrictions on it other than that polygamy in the future must be forever prohibited. Those plural marriages which had been made before that time were legally sanctioned. In no other way were citizens of the state to be disturbed about their religion. "Fetters on their minds were not sought to be imposed."²¹ There was no question that Smoot was qualified under the Constitution: he was at least thirty years old, he was a United States citizen, he resided in the state from which he had been elected, and he was legally chosen by the official elective branch in that state. To set up additional qualifications for Utah's Senators which were not required of

18 *Ibid.*, 1933-1934.

19 *Ibid.*, 3426-3427.

20 The text of Beveridge's speech, which, according to his biographer, reached "heights of eloquence never surpassed by him and seldom equalled," (Claude E. Bowers, *Beveridge and the Progressive Era* [Boston, 1932], 401) can be found in *Ibid.*, 3408-3412.

21 *Ibid.*, 2934.

those in the other forty-four states, Knox continued, would be a violation of the time-honored doctrine of state's rights.

I would be false to the traditions of my State, forgetful of the history and the relations she has sustained to the birth, development and defense of the National Government, if I failed to raise my voice in protest against an encroachment upon the rights reserved to the States.²²

Pennsylvania, Knox added, had been the first state to approve the Constitution. "I pray she will be the last to acquiesce in [this] invasion of rights." If a United States Senator could be deprived of his seat simply because the majority of his colleagues believed that his church followed doctrines which they considered dangerous, this country was in real peril. Next the criterion for disqualification would be politics, then economics, then a man's vote on certain legislation.²³

Knox was far from finished. As a talented lawyer, he could not rest his case without looking at some of the many other allegations that had been made against Mormonism. It had been argued repeatedly that the Mormon Church, for instance, was involved too much in politics. Knox had a ready answer. "If the Mormons are said to believe in a hierarchy more or less concerned with mundane affairs," he stated, "they are not the only sect whose priesthood meddles in worldly affairs without the members being for that reason excluded from Federal offices."²⁴ To those who claimed that the early history of the Church contained frequent examples of bloodshed and violence, the Senator added: "If . . . the history of the [Mormon] church is not unstained with deeds of blood, what Christian or Jewish sect has left out vengeance and has a bloodless history? The crusades and the wars of the sixteenth, seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and the old Jewish wars — numberless massacres and slaughters of heretics — these are not held to require the expulsion from the Senate of men who belong to the various Christian churches or are Jews."²⁵

The Senator clearly spoke to all the millions of anti-Mormon petitioners when he concluded his remarks with a rare display of emotion.

Mr. President, we are all sworn to support the Constitution of the United States. Personally I construe this to mean that I have solemnly obligated myself not to vote to deprive any person or State of any right guaranteed by that

²² *Ibid.*, 2935.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2939.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

instrument. Entertaining this view . . . I could not yield to the importunities and in some cases the demands that I cast my vote for Senator Smoot's expulsion without deliberately violating my oath of office, without yielding my judgement to others as it is alleged Senator Smoot will yield his to the Mormon Church, and without converting my place here from one of honor to one of shame.²⁶

Reaction to the Senator's speech was instantaneous, and generally favorable. The Pittsburgh *Gazette-Times* represented as well as any the Pennsylvania newspapers which supported Knox, when it editorialized: "There is no doubt that Mr. Knox appreciates the force of the people's opposition to Smoot. For a man in the Pennsylvania senator's position, representing a constituency such as he represents, to defend the Utah man's rights as he did yesterday requires a high order of moral and political courage."²⁷ The *New York Times*, having swung full-circle in its attitude toward Smoot, editorialized that Knox expressed "the opinion of most sane and instructed Americans who have paid attention to that case. He vindicates himself as a lawyer, a Senator, and a patriot."²⁸ Certainly the greatest praise, however, came from President Theodore Roosevelt, who, the following day, wrote Knox: "That was a mighty fine speech of yours on Smoot and it needed a brave man to deliver it. You were absolutely right. Surely when a public servant shows at the same time a high order of ability, entire fearlessness, and a lofty sense of public duty, the country is to be heartily congratulated."²⁹

Enthusiasm, though widespread, was anything but universal. To many, Smoot was not so much a man as a symbol of all Mormon ills. The York, Pennsylvania, *Dispatch*, for instance, commented: "If [Reed Smoot] does not stand for polygamy in the senate, he comes so near it that the country is justified in throwing him out for the sake of example." Knox's backing of the Utahan, the York editor continued, was reason enough to disqualify him for any further support from Pennsylvanians. Certainly any chance he might have had for the Presidential nomination in 1908 was now deservedly

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Pittsburgh *Gazette-Times*, February 15, 1907. Knox kept careful scrapbooks of all published comments about his work which are today a part of his papers in the Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. From the articles contained in these scrapbooks it is clear that the Senator had the support of at least the following Pennsylvania papers: Reading *Herald*, Philadelphia *Telegraph*, Philadelphia *Inquirer*, Allentown *Sun*, Wilkes-Barre *News* and the Crafton *Chartiers Daily*.

²⁸ *New York Times*, February 15, 1907.

²⁹ Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Philander C. Knox, February 15, 1907 (Knox Papers, Library of Congress). A copy of the same letter is also in the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

gone.³⁰ The *Northwestern Christian Advocate* admitted that the speech was "worthy of high compliment," but added the thought that "so were the great speeches of John C. Calhoun and [Robert Y.] Hayne [on nullification], and the argument of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney in the case of Dred Scott. Like the[se] arguments [however], the arguments of . . . Knox . . . would wreck the moral life of the Nation."³¹ The women of the Pittsburgh area were reportedly so incensed at Knox that they were demanding his immediate resignation from the Senate.³²

When the final vote was taken in the Senate six days later, Knox received all the support he needed. A motion to expel Smoot (and thus Mormonism) from the Senate was voted down 43-27;³³ a second motion made by Burrows that Smoot was not entitled to his seat was also defeated by the almost identical vote of 42-28.³⁴ On both votes Knox and Penrose sided with the majority.

No other event during the final two years of Knox's early senatorial career was so important to his public image as the smothering of the anti-Mormon crusade. During the summer of 1908, despite the earlier antagonisms, Knox was the state's "favorite son" candidate for the Republican Presidential nomination, but only Pennsylvania's sixty-eight votes went to him and he was easily overwhelmed on the first ballot by William Howard Taft. Throughout the election, Knox campaigned for Taft and his running mate, James Sherman, and, in large measure as a reward, the Pennsylvanian was offered the post of Secretary of State, a position that at the time he wanted very much. On March 5, 1909, Knox resigned from the Senate, not to return again until 1917.

It would be untrue to call Knox's first term in the Senate distinguished because of one important incident, yet nothing should diminish the contribution the Senator made to furthering the cause of religious toleration.³⁵ Battling against what the *New York Times*

30 *York Dispatch*, February 16, 1907.

31 *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, February 27, 1907, quoted in William Dean Orcutt, *Burrows of Michigan and the Republican Party: A Biography and A History* (New York, 1917), II, 194-195.

32 *Washington Post*, February 20, 1907.

33 *United States Congressional Record*, Senate, 59th Congress, 1907, XLI, 3429.

34 *Ibid.*, 3430.

35 In a typically off-the-cuff comment to Senator Smoot's daughter Chloe in 1908, Theodore Roosevelt took full credit for keeping the Utah Senator in office through the pressure he placed on the numerically superior Republicans in the Senate (Merrill, 102). This may, of course, be true, but it is interesting to note that nine Republicans voted against Smoot when their chance came.

called a "perilous tide of ignorance and recklessness,"³⁶ Knox refused to be swayed by the unusually strong pressure against Mormonism. In helping to promote a more widely accepted sense of justice for all Americans, Knox, though always a dedicated Republican, raised himself above commonplace party politics. In later years he was to be branded a "Dollar Diplomat" and an "Irreconcilable." It is important therefore to keep his early senatorial record in proper perspective.

³⁶ *New York Times*, February 22, 1907.