

Knute Nelson and the

A POLITICAL DILEMMA

THE CAREER OF MINNESOTAN KNUTE NELSON, the first Norwegian immigrant to serve in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate, exemplifies the personal dilemma that ethnicity has posed for foreign-born politicians. From the 1880s to the 1920s, during Nelson's congressional tenure, millions of immigrants arrived in the United States. Minnesota attracted a significant number of immigrants, especially Germans, Scandinavians, British, and people from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. The state's foreign-born population ranged from 36 percent in 1890 to 20 percent in 1920, with a high of 544,000 in 1910.¹

Many Americans distrusted these newcomers, blaming them for a host of socio-economic maladies and eventually demanding that the federal government reduce their numbers. This demand put ethnic politicians in the predicament of facing a contentious issue directly related to their own foreign birth. Nelson tried to resolve this difficulty by endorsing restrictive legislation and, at the same time, praising immigrant virtues, thereby striking an intriguing balance between his Old Country identity and the majority's expectations in his adopted land.

Conditions during these years of Minnesota's often turbulent transition from a predominantly rural-agrarian state to an increasingly urban-industrial one help to explain the development of Nelson's

Robert Zeidel, who received his Ph.D. from Marquette University, teaches American history at the University of Wisconsin-Stout and serves on the board of his hometown Afton Historical Society. His dissertation and articles in the Illinois Historical Journal and North Dakota History have focused on the formation of U.S. immigration policy.



Immigration Question

ROBERT F. ZEIDEL



Immigrant politician Knute Nelson (seated with child on lap), celebrating his Norwegian heritage with his family, probably near his Alexandria home

seemingly contradictory stance. The excellent works of historian Carl H. Chrislock have captured the essence of these chaotic times and are particularly important for understanding Nelson. Chrislock has shown that the “political heterogeneity” of Minnesota’s growing foreign-born population “prevented the organization of a solid immigrant voting block.” This fragmentation necessitated coalition building with old-stock or native-born Americans. Biographers Millard L. Gieske and Steven J. Keillor have presented Knute Nelson as the embodiment of such a union, calling him a “Norwegian Yankee.” Their fine work gives a richly detailed account of Nelson’s life while ultimately assessing his era as a time of political failure. Examination of his response to the immigration question, however, shows his mastery of this especially difficult issue.²

As a Norwegian immigrant, the politically ascending Nelson no doubt identified with others of foreign birth who wished to improve their lot in America. They, in turn, could look to him as one of their own, as their spokesman. In 1892 John Lind, a Swedish immigrant and U.S. congressman from Minnesota, shared his thoughts on their common obligations: “Both of us are burdened to a certain extent not only with the responsibility of our individual success, but by reason of the peculiarity of our situation with maintaining and furthering the good name and fame of a great people in a strange land.” Nelson’s transplanted countrymen certainly expected nothing less as they supported him in his bids for elective office.³

Yet to succeed in public office, Nelson had both to maintain and transcend his ethnic heritage. He had to preserve his ties to fellow immigrants, especially Minnesota’s large Norwegian American community, while at the same time demonstrating that he had assimilated mainstream American values. This balance was especially important in his statewide campaigns for governor and senator, which required broad-based support. Nelson met this challenge by successfully combining his innate ethnic appeal with evidence of an acquired native-born sensibility. Over the course of his career, this dichotomy served him well.

Its formation began with his own immigration and assimilation. Born in Evanger, Norway, seven-year-old Knute and his mother came to the United States in 1849, appropriately arriving in New York City on the Fourth of July. The newcomers moved on to Chicago and eventually to Dane County, Wisconsin. He subsequently studied at the nearby Albion Academy, a decidedly Yankee institution, taking time out to teach school in the predominantly Norwegian American township of Pleasant Springs. The classroom gave him an early

opportunity to balance his Norwegian past and American present. He was “Old Country” enough to communicate with immigrant and first-generation children and enough of a “Yankee” to appeal to those with older American roots. During the Civil War, Nelson served in the Fourth Regiment Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry and was both wounded and held as a prisoner of war. At the close of hostilities he returned to Albion, graduating with a bachelor’s degree. He thereafter trained for the bar but soon answered the siren call of public service.⁴

STATE GOVERNMENT PROVIDED Nelson’s political apprenticeship. He first served in the Wisconsin State Assembly, and after his 1871 move to Alexandria, Minnesota, he won election in 1874 to the state Senate. During the Civil War, he had changed his political affiliation to the Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln, abandoning the Democrats because he considered their behavior to be too frequently disloyal and antiwar. He thereafter championed Republicans as saviors of the Union and purveyors of sound fiscal policy and national prosperity. During his first Minnesota campaign, wherein he defeated Van Hoesen, a more experienced opponent, Nelson came across as the candidate who best could advance the region’s material interests. This especially meant securing railroad connections. An editorial from the nearby *Fergus Falls Journal*, reprinted in Nelson’s hometown *Alexandria Post*, described train service as being the difference between “wealth and poverty . . . happiness and misery.”⁵

Nelson may have wished to concentrate on economic development and other related issues, but ethnic concerns quickly came to the forefront. While still in Wisconsin he had angered his more pious countrymen with his antagonism toward some Lutheran clergymen who advocated parochial, as opposed to public, schools. In Minnesota he lost his first bid for the U.S. Congress in 1876, largely due to the machinations of the state’s old-stock Republican elite. In 1882 the creation of the new Fifth District, encompassing the predominantly immigrant regions of northern Minnesota, gave him a second opportunity. Attracting both ethnic and native-born support, Nelson prevailed in a tumultuous three-way race and became the first Norwegian immigrant in the U.S. House of Representatives. He won reelection twice before voluntarily stepping aside in 1889.⁶

Nelson’s experiences in the House of Representatives served as a prelude to the more intense immigration-related debates of his later career. He supported an 1885 law to prohibit employers from hiring contract laborers overseas, but many Americans, including peti-



Ambrotype of Nelson, a youth of about twenty, in his Civil War uniform

tioners from Nelson's home state, wanted even greater restrictions. Some in Congress also had concluded that it was time to "close the gates." Californian Charles N. Felton made this perfectly clear to Nelson after the Minnesota representative made a seemingly innocuous reference to Norway's seafaring prowess. That small nation, Nelson asserted during debate on mail-steamship subsidies, was "one of the most successful" in terms of nautical accomplishment. Felton took exception to this statement, describing Norway's poor standard of living as "the cheap and the nasty." He then asked why one of Nelson's committees had not produced a bill "to prevent objectionable immigration." Nelson responded by accusing Felton of letting his typically West Coast hatred of the Chinese carry over

to "everything else in the shape of a foreigner." This concluded their brief exchange, but it should have sent a clear warning to Nelson and other ethnic lawmakers: immigration was becoming a controversial and volatile issue.⁷

Minnesota's 1892 gubernatorial contest, Nelson's next campaign for public office, bore special witness to the difficulties faced by an ethnic candidate. Agrarian revolt, organized in support of the People's (Populist) Party, had attracted a significant Minnesota following, especially among wheat farmers in the state's northwest, home to many Norwegian Americans. Populist candidates included the firebrand Ignatius Donnelly. Republicans desperately wanted to beat back this rebellious challenge to their hegemony and maintain control of state government and its politically lucrative patronage. Hence they turned to Nelson, in part because he appeared as an orthodox contrast to the insurgent Donnelly. Even so, Nelson received subtle reminders of the need to avoid any hint of militant association or even sympathy. One writer expressed his certainty that "*Radical* Legislation in the Interests of the Granger or any other special clique would not meet with your approval." Such an admonition

would have been well taken if Nelson had only been concerned with attracting staid Yankee voters, but he also had to contend with populism's appeal to Scandinavian-immigrant voters.⁸

The ethnic issue quickly surfaced. "No one questions Knute Nelson's stalwart Americanism," asserted R. C. Dunn, publisher of the *Princeton Union*, but some did disparage his ethnic background. "I am a straight Republican, but I can *never* vote for you or any other man of foreign descent for the high office [to which] you aspire," wrote one voter, who professed to be writing for thousands of like-minded men. The self-proclaimed patriot acknowledged that Nelson was smart and capable but maintained, "*America must be run by Americans.*" Elsewhere, rumors circulated about an organized effort

Party ticket two years earlier. Bixby sent Nelson a map, asking him to identify the best places for making speeches in Norwegian and Swedish. “It is easy for a Yankee to be misled in this regard,” he explained, “and if I do not get my pointers from a well posted Scandinavian it is very liable to be inaccurate.”¹²

Nelson’s candidacy succeeded in maintaining the traditional Minnesota-Republican coalition of native-born and Scandinavian voters. Norwegian Americans reported unbounded enthusiasm among their transplanted countrymen, with signs of their interest coming from as far away as Chicago. Having just returned from a visit, the *Nordvesten* editor reported that “Scandinavians’ everywhere is [*sic*] watching Minnesota and praying for your success.” Others offered more specific responses. Reverend L. G. Almen suggested that Nelson’s support for temperance measures would be attractive to Swedish and Norwegian Lutherans, and another correspondent asserted that few Scandinavians would vote for him unless he distanced himself from Governor William R. Merriam, the state’s reputed Republican boss.¹³

In the election, Nelson eked out a narrow victory over his three People’s, Prohibitionist, and Democratic challengers. Ironically, although voters selected him as the alternative to the obstreperous radical agrarianism of Donnelly, Nelson demonstrated great sympathy for embattled farmers, supporting measures to inspect grain elevators, build a state elevator at Duluth, and outlaw certain industrial trusts. Commentators have noted only slight divergence between Nelson and populist Sidney M. Owen, who opposed the governor’s successful reelection bid in 1894. Nelson—Norwegian American, reformer, and trustworthy Republican standard bearer—had accomplished the difficult task of appealing to a diverse constituency.¹⁴

The issue of Nelson’s ethnicity did not fade with his election. “Governor Nelson,” asserted St. Paul’s *North-Western Chronicle*, “seems to have persuaded himself that he has been elected the governor of Norway and Sweden instead of Minnesota.” This charge stemmed from his visit to the 1893 Chicago world’s fair. While there, Nelson failed to attend the dedication of the Minnesota Building but on the same day took part in a Norwegian liberty celebration. *Skandinaven*, a Chicago periodical, responded that Nelson’s administration was “not open to charges of clannishness. It is, in fact, the most thoroughly American administration Minnesota has had for many years.” The only legitimate charge was the disproportionately low patronage that had been doled out to Norwegian Americans. In a later speech at the fair, Nelson spoke of assimilation pro-



Ignatius Donnelly, Nelson’s political rival, 1890s

ducing men and women “of one language and of one spirit, intensely and truly American.”¹⁵

The public stump provided Governor Nelson with other opportunities to present his ethnic ideas. Amidst increasing demands for more stringent immigration restriction, including calls by his state party for the exclusion of all paupers, criminals, and “other dangerous and undesirable classes,” Nelson responded with paeans to immigrant virtue. Minnesota had been settled by a mixture of American Anglo-Saxons, Teutons, and Scandinavians who had built up the state. Immigrants to Minnesota had received full rights soon after their arrival, and they generally had “made an honest use of the gift.” In time, new elements would arrive and “assimilate and combine into one people,” American in character and “a No. 1 hard specimen of humanity.”¹⁶

IN JANUARY 1895, when senators were still chosen by state legislatures rather than elected by popular vote, Minnesota lawmakers picked Nelson to succeed William D. Washburn and become the first Scandinavian American to serve in the U.S. Senate. Nelson's tenure, which lasted until his death in 1923, coincided with the nation's contentious effort to resolve the so-called immigration question. For the better part of four decades, amid increased popular agitation, Congress tried to develop an acceptable policy for regulating the quantity and quality of alien newcomers.

Republican Party platforms, beginning in 1896, generally favored greater restriction. The Boston-based Immigration Restriction League, which carried on a nationwide campaign, listed Minnesota newspapers, trade unions, and farmers' associations as sympathetic to its cause. Letters from Minnesota organizations to league leaders indicated sharp and seemingly irreconcilable differences among Nelson's constituents. The loss of support from either side could have scuttled his career. Yet outside pressures were only part of the senator's dilemma.¹⁷

The immigration debate affected foreign-born leaders personally, requiring them to formulate national policy that touched on their very essence. Biographers Gieske and Keillor have noted that Senator Nelson could never escape his youthful Fourth of July passage through Castle Garden, the pre-Ellis Island entry facility. Some immigrant congressmen, such as German-born Richard Barthold of Missouri and Bohemian-born Adolph Sabath of Illinois, distinguished themselves as ardent antirestrictionists, but Nelson took a different tack. Throughout his long career he succeeded in establishing a middle ground.¹⁸

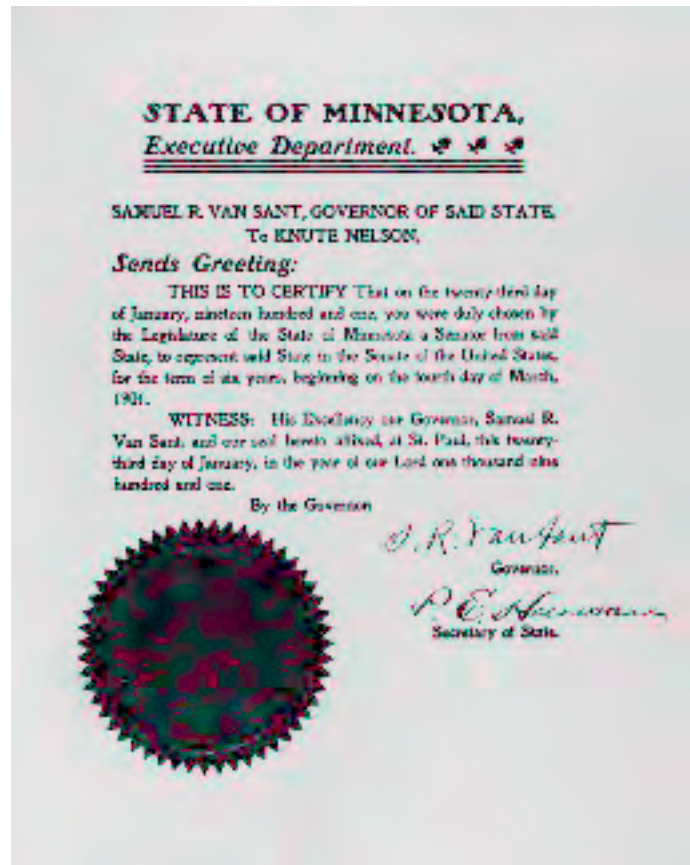
This balance paid political dividends. During the years between statehood in 1858 and Nelson's death in

1923, Minnesota sent 15 immigrants to Congress, but most filled only a single two-year term. Irishman James Shields, Minnesota's only other foreign-born U.S. senator, served for one year, 1858–59. Until 1917, just three immigrant representatives, Swedes John Lind and Charles A. Lindbergh and Canadian James T. McCleary, served more than 4 years. Among those who spoke up on the issue, German-born Andrew R. Kiefer (in office from 1893 to 1897) typified immigrant congressmen in his opposition to any changes to existing admission requirements. Interestingly, Lind (1887–93) favored the literacy test, a controversial proposal that would require most

adult immigrants be able to read and write some language, because he believed that it would ensure the admission of high-quality immigrants. Nelson agreed, but he did so in his usually balanced manner.¹⁹

In May and again in December 1896, during his first term as senator, Nelson endorsed the imposition of a literacy test. Such a provision, he averred, would be "entirely in harmony" with the particulars of American government, which necessitated an educated and intelligent electorate. Conversely, giving the vote to the ignorant, "like certain peoples of the Old World, especially in the Russian Empire, would be as dangerous as gunpowder in the hands of a child before a blazing fire." Restrictionists may have cheered such remarks, especially his denigration of eastern Europeans, but Nelson also went to great lengths to praise Europe's "intelligent working people," America's "most desirable" immigrants. This set him apart from most other restrictionists.²⁰

Indeed, the senator used most of his long and detailed May speech to highlight the extent to which those of foreign birth had contributed to America's

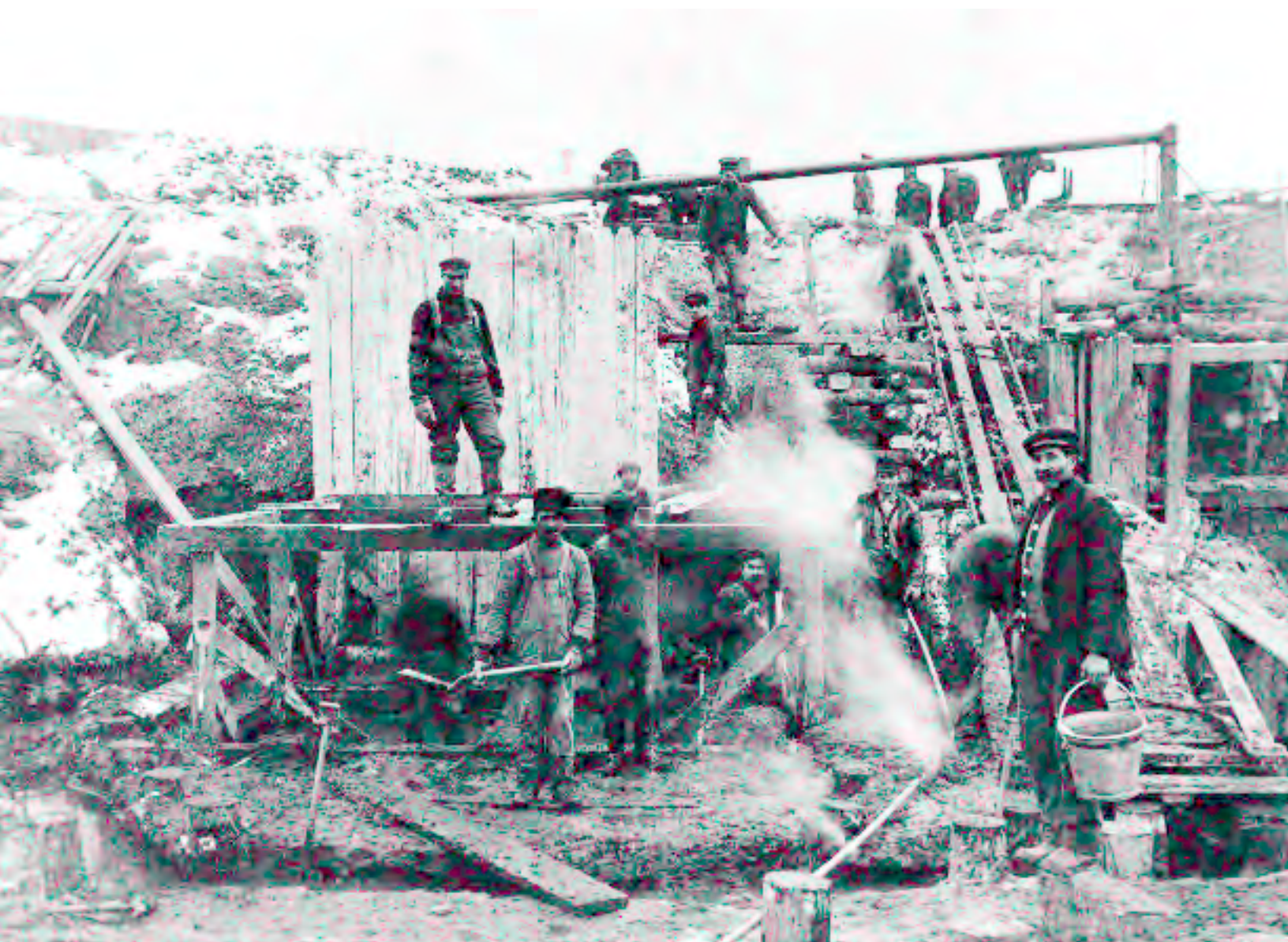


Certification of Nelson's appointment to a second term in the U.S. Senate. The state legislature chose senators until the 17th Amendment in 1913 instituted popular election instead.

greatness. Describing them as farmers, tradesmen, and unskilled manual laborers, Nelson told how they had worked hard to clear America's forests and build its railroads. Rather than displacing those already on the job, they had occupied positions willingly given to them by native-born workers. Immigrants also had contributed to victories in the War for Independence and the War of the Rebellion. Along with democracy and an abundance of free land, Nelson asserted, America owed its success to the tide of European immigration.

Nelson also repudiated any connection between his views on immigration and those of the virulently anti-Catholic American Protective Association. The A.P.A., which likely had a considerable following in Minnesota, especially among Lutheran Scandinavian Americans, opposed the immigration of non-Protestants. At the time of Nelson's May 14 speech, news of the association's national convention was making the front page of Minnesota newspapers. Maryland Senator Charles H. Gibson, who spoke immediately before Nelson in

Italian American workers, possibly a sewer construction crew, St. Paul, 1910





Italian American and Finnish American workers at the Lincoln mine near Virginia, Minnesota, about 1912





Knute Nelson, 1890s

May, accused literacy-test supporters of fronting for the association, and a later historian has noted that the A.P.A. had tried to encourage Nelson's gubernatorial candidacy among anti-Catholic Norwegians. Nelson railed against Gibson's accusation, saying that nothing "of an A.P.A. nature, or any opposition to the Catholic Church . . . ever entered my mind, and I do not think anything of the kind ever entered the minds of the [Senate immigration] committee."²¹

Nelson then articulated ethnological views far different from those of other literacy-test supporters. Although he used terminology such as *race* and *stock*, indicating at least tacit acceptance of the then-popular notion that ethnic groups represented unique biological types, he did not do so to vilify. Immigrants, he argued, supplied more than mere physical labor. They provided moral, physical, and intellectual additions to American society. As a result, its citizens, although English speaking, were more cosmopolitan, with more pronounced elements of strength and energy, more force and vigor, than the English. The British themselves were an amalgamation of several different races, and this, he said, had made their kingdom the mightiest nation on earth. America's vast immigration had produced an even stronger stock, and the future promised more of the same.

Here, the senator took great pains to refute those who wished to belittle the potential contributions of more recent arrivals. Earlier immigrants, from similar Germanic tribes, had responded almost intuitively to American political, moral, and intellectual conventions. While some now contended that the so-called new immigrants, those from southern and eastern Europe, lacked the qualities necessary for assimilation, Nelson dismissed such arguments as wholly unfounded. The tremendous achievements of each beleaguered nationality, which he described in detail, illustrated its attributes. "A strain of the irrepressible, hot, riotous blood of these nations of southern Europe," he declared, "may be productive of much good. It may infuse into our stolid and phlegmatic German blood an element of vim, force, and fire now absent."

Nelson concluded by refuting two of the most common restrictionist allegations. First, he denied that immigrants adversely affected the labor force. Contrary to the notion that they depressed wages, the influx of new workers prompted existing employees to seek more profitable and prestigious positions, he declared. Earlier immigrants were pushed up the employment ladder by new arrivals. Nelson next used figures compiled by Hastings H. Hart, secretary of the Minnesota Board of Corrections and Charities, to debunk claims

that an undue number of the foreign born were criminals. Hart's calculations, adjusted to account for children—an overwhelmingly native-born and noncriminal class—showed that immigrants accounted for a smaller percentage of criminals than the native born in most northern and western states. Nelson attributed immigrant crimes to social and economic pressures. Foreigners usually arrived poor, and their impoverished condition forced them to live in urban slums, where some turned to crime to escape drudgery. Even so, these were the minority; many others arrived poor but worked hard to fulfill their intense desire to become good American citizens.

NELSON'S REMARKS RECEIVED extensive, favorable coverage. His hometown *Alexandria Post News* called his speech "an able defense of foreign immigration to this country. It has attracted very general attention, and all praise the address for its vigor, individuality and learning." The *Duluth News Tribune* praised the senator as being "more competent" than anyone else due to Minnesota's long-standing interest in immigration, to deliver such a "truthful and eloquent portrayal." By evidently ignoring his initial remarks calling for passage of the literacy test, St. Paul's *Weekly Globe* characterized the speech as being *against* additional immigration restriction.²²

The Scandinavian American press also responded positively. By fortuitous coincidence, Nelson gave the speech only three days before Syttende Mai, the May 17 celebration of Norwegian independence. Editors conveyed favorable impressions of his remarks by incorporating them into coverage of the ethnic festivities. This made the speech part of a larger tribute to Norwegian culture and history on both sides of the Atlantic, even though the senator had not called any attention to his own ethnic group. Clearly, the editors focused on the praise that Nelson directed toward immigrants in general rather than his endorsement of restriction. As historian Keillor has noted, he "had it both ways."²³

After considerable and often acrimonious discussion, Congress passed the literacy-test bill, but

President Grover Cleveland vetoed it in 1897. This certainly did not resolve the issue. Restrictionists, including those from Minnesota, expressed disappointment and vowed to continue their crusade.²⁴ Nelson clearly had established himself as one of their number but not as a zealous xenophobic. He instead had adopted a unique stance, one that allowed him to support what can only be described as anti-immigrant legislation while concurrently heaping praise upon its intended object.

Nelson persisted in this vein. Speaking to the Norwegian Old Peoples' Home Society of Chicago in 1905, as Congress prepared to renew its immigration debate, he stressed the benefits of immigration. "Her doors have been wide open," he said of the United States, "and she has received us with a welcome hand." The immigrants, in turn, had supplied necessary manual labor, contributed to the national wealth, and then risen up the economic ranks. America had experienced no difficulty absorbing the newcomers, and they had rapidly and wholeheartedly adapted themselves to its customs and traditions. Of particular importance, they had taken advantage of the nation's public schools. The cumulative effects had resulted in the "physical and intellectual reinforcement" of America's citizenry.²⁵



Winged Victory and inspirational busts adorn this night-school class for immigrants, sponsored by the Oliver Iron Mining Company in Eveleth, about 1895.

During 1906–07 the immigration question returned to the forefront of congressional debate, and Nelson reiterated his concern for securing “as good a class of immigrants as possible.” He once again struck an intriguing balance, devoting almost all of his attention to the benefits of proper distribution. Too many of the newcomers colonized urban ghettos, where they failed “to become Americanized as swiftly and to become as prosperous and in as good condition as those who go to the West.” Nelson had seen this firsthand on a recent visit to New York City’s East Side. Its inhabitants stood in bleak contrast to Minnesota’s sturdy immigrant pioneers. Therefore, he hoped that his colleagues would support a plan to promote greater immigrant distribution. While Nelson’s allusion to bygone sod-buster days may have been outdated, his remarks nonetheless provided yet another opportunity to commend immigrants’ contributions to their new nation.²⁶

Nelson later admitted his own ambiguity on the matter of immigration. By 1916 he had voted for three unsuccessful literacy-test bills but was still not satisfied that the test was the best possible provision. One problem was the likelihood that it would exclude “thrifty, industrious” workers while leaving the door open to educated but worthless “sots.” Nelson wished that he could conceive of a rule that would proscribe the “educated tramps—tramps who are filled with socialism, who are quasi anarchists, who come here to exploit the Government of the United States.”²⁷

Despite these concerns, Nelson still pledged to support the pending literacy-test bill because it was the fairest rule that Congress had yet devised for reducing immigration. Present conditions necessitated its enactment, he believed. He had hoped that more recently arrived southern and eastern Europeans—“good people”—would settle in Minnesota, which needed farm laborers. Unfortunately, they did not, thereby creating the need for greater restriction.

CONGRESS FINALLY PASSED the literacy test in 1917, but this did not close the immigration debate. The U.S. entry into World War I that year had what has been aptly described as a chilling effect on virtually all aspects of ethnic expression, producing demands for 100-percent loyalty among the foreign born and their progeny. Nelson himself, who for the first time faced direct election rather than legislative appointment under the new 17th Amendment, came in for scrutiny during the resultant “anti-hyphenate” frenzy, but the senator’s diligent efforts to secure immigrant solidarity for the U.S. war effort clearly established his patriotic credentials. For example, he engineered the appoint-



ment of his friend and supporter, Nicolay A. Grevstad, as the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety’s monitor of the foreign-language press. His job was to ensure that the various periodicals complied with the Sedition and Espionage Acts by avoiding disloyal sentiments and publishing patriotic material. Nelson also supported the conscription of aliens into the U.S. military. During the 1918 election his backers characterized a vote for him as a Scandinavian American’s patriotic duty.²⁸



At war's end, legislators returned their attention to the matter of restriction. Initial figures indicated that there would be considerable immigration from war-ravaged Europe. To stop the expected onrush, Congress enacted a draconian quota system, setting annual limits for each immigrant nationality at only 3 percent of its total number in the United States according to the 1910 federal census. Nelson made no public remarks on this new policy, but the final roll-call vote

All-American welcome for Senator Nelson during a visit to his hometown of Alexandria, about 1915



Minnesota pioneers honored Nelson (front row, third from right) at a testimonial dinner at the home of C. A. Gilman, St. Cloud, 1910.

shows that he supported it. At the same time, he voted to defeat an even more severe alternative, which would have prohibited all immigration for two years.²⁹

It is difficult to understand the rationale behind Nelson's support for the quotas. The passage of time may have altered his beliefs, making him less positive about immigrants. Some have suggested that preoccupation with family problems, specifically a homicide involving his son-in-law, may have clouded his judgment when it came to other issues. Although either is conceivable, evidence suggests that national conditions played the strongest role. The war's end had ushered in the Red Scare, creating an hysterically antiradical milieu. Nelson had long made clear his disdain for the immigrant "nihilist . . . anarchist, or any of those things." They were to be as enthusiastically condemned as the honest and hard-working man or woman was to be welcomed.³⁰

In a letter to Nicolay Grevstad, Nelson disparaged radical tendencies even among his fellow Norwegian Americans, loathing their connection to the agrarian Nonpartisan League. The league's plan for state ownership of various agribusinesses had won the support of many of Minnesota's immigrant farmers, and their conduct dismayed Senator Nelson. "I hope I may live to see a change for the better. . . . I hope they may become more loyal and public spirited," he wrote. Nelson must have felt the same about other ethnic groups' perceived association with radical causes, which likely contributed to his support for the restrictive quotas. His contempt for the allegedly disgraceful would not necessarily conflict with his long held, favorable impressions of more upstanding newcomers.³¹

KNUTE NELSON DIED IN 1923, just before quotas became the permanent foundation of American im-

migration policy. Over the course of his long career, Nelson's remarks placed him squarely within the restrictionist camp but not necessarily among those who feared America's immigrant influx. He did consider selective limitation to be a just and proper manner of national self-protection, yet he did not view the "teeming masses" as being inherently bad. He saw in them many positive qualities that would benefit their new society. This was the message that he had developed as a nascent politician on the Wisconsin and Minnesota frontiers and that he carried over to his years in the Senate.

Given this positive attitude, along with his own ethnicity, Nelson's support of restriction cannot be seen as nativism—the dislike of immigrants themselves. He instead connected his ideas about immigration policy with civic duty. New arrivals were expected to be positive and peaceful additions to the nation. Norwegian Americans, whom he considered "radicals by nature," provided an excellent example in that "their prosperity and the freedom of our Government has made

them careful and conservative in public and national affairs."³² He expected other foreign arrivals to behave in a similarly acceptable fashion. By supporting more stringent immigration restriction, Nelson showed his personal concern for preserving America's social order. At the same time, he couched his remarks in such a way as to pay homage to his own immigrant heritage along with that of many million fellow travelers.

Carl Chrislock used the poignant phrase "ethnicity challenged" to explain Norwegian American experiences during World War I. Knute Nelson, who much earlier had sought a career in American politics, had long faced that test. "There would now be no 'immigration problem' to settle," eulogized Wyoming Senator Francis E. Warren, speaking of his deceased Minnesota colleague, "if all who seek our shores and the benefits of our glorious land were made of the same stuff." Paradoxically, it was Norwegian American Nelson's mastery of the immigration question that helped to propel his rise to fame and ensured his long-term success.³³ □

NOTES

1. *United States Census, 1920, Population*, 2:36; June D. Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 1–3.

2. Carl H. Chrislock, *The Progressive Era in Minnesota, 1899–1918* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society [MHS], 1971), 32, 33 (quotes)—36; Millard L. Gieske and Steven J. Keillor, *Norwegian Yankee: Knute Nelson and the Failure of American Politics, 1860–1923* (Northfield, Minn.: Norwegian-American Historical Assn., 1995). On failure, see Gieske and Keillor, xii–xiii.

3. Here and below, see, for example, John Lind to Nelson, Mar. 22, 1892, S. E. Olson to Nelson, Mar. 9, Apr. 12, 1892, and M. O. Hall to Nelson, Apr. 15, 1892—all Knute Nelson Papers, MHS, St. Paul.

4. Gieske and Keillor, *Norwegian Yankee*, 3, 10, 13–31, 34–54; Martin W. Odland, *The Life of Knute Nelson* (Minneapolis: Lund Press, 1926). Nelson's birth date is usually given as 1843, but a baptismal certificate filled out by his parson in 1923 gives the date as Feb. 2, 1842; see memorabilia folder, Nelson papers.

5. *Alexandria Post*, Aug. 21, 1874, p. 1; Gieske and Keillor, *Norwegian Yankee*, 48, 55–78.

6. Gieske and Keillor, *Norwegian Yankee*, 64–68, 97–119, 143–44; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (St. Paul: MHS, 1969), 3:145–49. By 1889 Nelson apparently considered himself a failure as a congressman.

7. *Congressional Record*, 50th Cong., 1st sess., 1888, vol. 19, pt. 3: 2635, vol. 19, pt. 7: 6275–78.

8. Cal W. Kyte to Nelson, July 20, 1892, Nelson papers;

Folwell, *Minnesota*, 3: 195–97; Carlton C. Qualey and Jon A. Gjerde, "The Norwegians," in *They Chose Minnesota*, 236–37; Carl H. Chrislock, "A Cycle in the History of Minnesota Republicanism," *Minnesota History* 39 (Fall 1964): 94–96. Chrislock refers to Nelson's political identity as "conservative liberalism."

9. Editorial by R. C. Dunn, *Minneapolis Journal*, Apr. 5, 1892, clipping; Charles Whitney to Nelson, June 9, 1892; Charles Kittelson to Nelson, July 9, 1892; William Bickel to Nelson, Aug. 18, 1892; C. A. Gilman[?] to Nelson, July 9, 1892—all Nelson papers. For full coverage of the election, see Gieske and Keillor, *Norwegian Yankee*, 145–71. Newspaper clippings are filed chronologically with correspondence in the Nelson papers.

10. Dunn editorial, *Minneapolis Journal*, Apr. 5, 1892; *Duluth Herald*, May 2, 1892; *Duluth News*, May 3, 1892; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Apr. 5, 1892; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 29, 1892—all clippings in Nelson papers.

11. James A. Peterson to Nelson, May 20, 1892; Tams Bixby to Nelson, Aug. 16, 1892; Swan B. Molander to Nelson, Apr. 7, 1892; Søren Listoe to Nelson, Mar. 26, 1892; A. B. Lange to Nelson, June 16, 1892; Joshua T. Evans to Nelson, July 5, 1892—all Nelson papers. It is notable that support came from Listoe, who, 10 years earlier, had been a political foe; see Gieske and Keillor, *Norwegian Yankee*, 123, 398n46.

12. See, for example, P. W. Wildt to Nelson, May 23, 1892; Frank B. Fobes to Nelson, Aug. 20, 1892; F. L. Puffer to Nelson, Aug. 20, 1892; Bixby to Nelson, [1892, in "undated" folder]—all Nelson papers.

13. See, for example, Peter G. Peterson to Nelson, July 4, 1892; S. E. Olson to Nelson, July 9, 1892; C. O. Christianson to P. W[ilddt], May 5, 1892; S. Listoe to Nelson, July 6, 1892; Charles Kittelson to Nelson, July 9, 1892; Rev. L. G. Almen to Nelson, July 17, 1892; H. G. Stordock to Nelson, Mar. 19, 1892—all Nelson papers.

14. Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), 388–90; Chrislock, *Progressive Era*, 11–12. Historian George M. Stephenson contends that Nelson “played a shrewd game in his campaigns to ensnare the Scandinavian vote”; see “The John Lind Papers,” *Minnesota History* 17 (June 1936): 161.

15. *Minneapolis Journal*, May 18, 1893; *North-Western Chronicle* (St. Paul), May 26, 1893; *Scandinaven*, quoted in *Scandia* supplement, May 27, 1893, *Daily Globe* (St. Paul), Oct. 14, 1893—all clippings, Nelson papers.

16. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 12, 1894; transcript of Nelson’s speech at the Redwood County Fair, in *Redwood Gazette*, Sept. 28, 1893—clippings, Nelson papers.

17. O. C. Gregg, superintendent, State Farmers Institute of Minnesota, to Prescott Hall, Immigration Restriction League, Dec. 10, 1897, Prescott Hall Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.; A. W. Gutridge, Associated Charities of St. Paul, to Joseph Lee, Immigration Restriction League, Joseph Lee Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; *Endorsements of the Illiteracy Test*, Immigration Restriction League Publication No. 20 [ca. 1898], *Forcible Demand of the Press for the Further Restriction of Immigration*, League Publication No. 23 [ca. 1898–99], and *Digest of Immigration Statistics*, League Publication No. 30 [ca. 1901–02], all in Widener Library, Harvard University; Republican Party platforms, 1896, 1900, and 1912, in Edward Stanwood, *A History of the Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 1:536, 2:48, 252. On the politics of being chosen senator, see Gieske and Keillor, *Norwegian Yankee*, 199–220.

18. Gieske and Keillor, *Norwegian Yankee*, 136–37, 341. For background on the immigration debate, see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism* (New York: Atheneum, 1978); on Sabbath, see p. 303–04. On Barthold, see Robert F. Zeidel, “The Literacy Test for Immigrants: A Question of Progress” (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 1986), 85–91.

19. For a debate on the literacy test, see *Congressional Record*, 54th Cong., 2d sess., 1897, vol. 29, pt. 2: 1225–28; George M. Stephenson, *John Lind of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1935), 75–77. On Minnesota congressmen, see Bruce M. White et al., comps., *Minnesota Votes: Election Returns by County for Presidents, Senators, Congressmen, and Governors* (St. Paul: MHS, 1977), especially 222–23, 225.

20. Here and below, *Congressional Record*, 54th Cong., 1st sess. 1896, vol. 18, pt. 6: 5221–26, and 2d sess. 1896, vol. 29, pt. 1: 241–42.

21. Here and three paragraphs below, *Congressional Record*, 1896, vol. 28, pt. 6: 5221–26 (quotes, 5221, 5223). On the A.P.A. see, for example, *Duluth News Tribune*, May 15, 16, 1896, p. 1; *Minneapolis Times*, May 16, 17, 1896, p. 1; Lowell W. Soike,

Norwegian Americans and the Politics of Dissent, 1880–1924 (Northfield, Minn.: Norwegian-American Historical Assn., 1991), 56–62, 82–83. There is no evidence that Nelson embraced the A.P.A.’s message, and he did worry about a “Know Nothing” backlash.

22. *Alexandria Post News*, May 21, 1896, p. 4; *Duluth News Tribune*, May 18, 1896, p. 2; *Weekly Globe*, May 21, 1896, p. 2.

23. Steven J. Keillor, “Scandinavian Americans Seek a Usable Past: Scandinavian Experiences as Public Arguments for American Acts,” paper presented at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, Bismarck, No. Dak., Oct. 1997, copy in author’s possession. Keillor and others have suggested that Nelson “shrewdly” planned the timing of his speech, but this seems unlikely. The bill came out of committee in February, and Henry Cabot Lodge, its principal author, gave the inaugural endorsement speech on March 16. The Senate took no other action until Marylander Charles Gibson gave the first rebuttal on May 14; only then did Nelson take the floor. Given the bill’s contentious nature, it is doubtful that Nelson could have influenced this timing for his own political gain. See *Congressional Record*, 54th Cong., 1st sess. 1896, vol. 28, pt. 2: 1827, vol. 28, pt. 3: 2817–20, vol. 28, pt. 6: 5213–20.

24. O. C. Gregg to Prescott Hall, Dec. 10, 1897, Hall papers.

25. Nelson, speech on Norwegian immigration delivered to the Ninth Annual Festival of the Norwegian Old Peoples Home Society, Chicago, Apr. 13, 1905, typescript, quotes, p. 6, 8, Nelson papers.

26. *Congressional Record*, 59th Cong., 1st sess., 1906, vol. 40, pt. 8: 7284.

27. Here and below, *Congressional Record*, 64th Cong. 1st sess., 1916, vol. 53, pt. 13: 12,775–76.

28. Carl H. Chrislock, *Ethnicity Challenged: The Upper Midwest Norwegian-American Experience in World War I* (Northfield, Minn.: Norwegian-American Historical Assn., 1981), 24, 47, 68–70, 99–105. For detailed coverage of the commission, see Carl H. Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War I* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1991).

29. *Congressional Record*, 67th Cong., 1st sess., 1921, vol. 61, pt. 1: 928–30, 968.

30. *Congressional Record*, 62d Cong., 2d sess., 1912, vol. 48, pt. 2: 1760; Chrislock, *Ethnicity Challenged*, 116, 163n106; Odland, *Knute Nelson*, 304–05.

31. Nelson to Grevstad, Oct. 21, 1920, quoted in Chrislock, *Ethnicity Challenged*, 116.

32. Nelson, Norwegian immigration speech, 20.

33. Francis E. Warren, “Memorial Address,” in 68th Cong., *Memorial Addresses Delivered in the United States Senate in Memory of Knute Nelson, Late a Senator from Minnesota* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1925), 18.

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