

Vice Presidents of the United States Charles Curtis (1929-1933)

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Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.



His politics were always purely personal. Issues never bothered him.

—William Allen White

In the spring of 1932, George and Ira Gershwin's Broadway musical, "Of Thee I Sing," spoofed Washington politics, including a vice president named Alexander Throttlebottom, who could get inside the White House only on public tours. The tour guide, who failed to recognize Throttlebottom, at one point engaged him in a discussion of the vice-presidency:

Guide: Well, how did he come to be Vice President?

Throttlebottom: Well, they put a lot of names in a hat, and he lost.

Guide: What does he do all the time?

Throttlebottom: Well, he sits in the park and feeds the peanuts to the pigeons and the squirrels, and then he takes walks, and goes to the movies. Last week, he tried to join the library, but he needed two references, so he couldn't get in.¹

Audiences laughed heartily at these lines, in part because they could easily identify the hapless Throttlebottom with the incumbent vice president, Charles Curtis. Curtis was never close to President Herbert Hoover and played no significant role in his administration. Despite Curtis' many years of experience as a member of the House and Senate and as Senate majority leader, his counsel was rarely sought on legislative matters. His chief notoriety as vice president came as a result of a messy social squabble over protocol, which only made him appear ridiculous. Many Republicans hoped to dump Curtis from the ticket when Hoover ran for reelection. Given Curtis' Horatio Alger-style rise in life, and his long and successful career in Congress, how did he become such a Throttlebottom as vice president?

Formative Years on the Reservation

Although colorful in itself, Charles Curtis' actual life story often became obscured by its political mythology.² He began life in 1860 in North Topeka, Kansas, where he spent his earliest years partly in the white and partly in the Native American community. The son of Orren Curtis, a white man, and Ellen Pappan, who was one-quarter Kaw Indian, Charles Curtis on his mother's side was the great-great grandson of White Plume, a Kansa-Kaw chief who had offered assistance to the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1804. White Plume's daughter married Louis Gonville, a French-Canadian fur trader, and their daughter, Julie Gonville, married Louis Pappan. As a result of the Kansa-Kaw treaty of 1825, the tribe relinquished its claims to its traditional lands in Missouri and Kansas. A two-million-acre reservation was established west of Topeka for full-blooded Indians, while a series of fee-simple land grants along the Kansas river were set aside for "half-breeds"—those who had intermarried with whites. Curtis' grandmother Julie Gonville Pappan received "Half-Breed Reservation No. Four," directly across the river from the Kansas capital, where she and her husband ran a profitable ferry business.

Reflecting his mother's heritage, Charles Curtis spoke French and Kansa before he learned English. His mother died in 1863, about the time that his father left to fight in the Civil War. Soon thereafter, Orren Curtis remarried, divorced, remarried again, and was dishonorably discharged from the Union army. At the end of the war, Curtis was court martialled for having hanged three prisoners in his custody—or as the charges read for "executing the bushwakers." Sentenced to a year's hard labor at the Missouri State Penitentiary, he was pardoned a month later and returned to Kansas. Given Orren's unstable circumstances and roving nature, young Charley remained in the custody of his paternal grandparents. In 1865, his maternal grandparents, Louis and Julie Pappan Gonville, left North Topeka to return to the Kaw reservation at Council Grove, concerned that otherwise they might be excluded from future land settlements and compensation. The next year, young Charley went to live with them on the reservation.³

Since Charley could speak the Kaw language, he fit comfortably into the tribe. "I had my bows and arrows," he later recalled, "and joined the other boys in shooting arrows at nickles, dimes, and quarters which visitors would place in split sticks." In those still-frontier days, the Kaw reservation was frequently raided by nomadic Cheyenne Indians, and during one attack Charley was sent on a mission to inform Topeka. "I volunteered to make the trip," he later told audiences. "When we heard the Cheyennes were coming, the horses and ponies were driven to pasture, some distance from my grandpa's home, so there was no horse or pony to ride. I therefore, started out on foot, traveling during the night." The next day, he arrived in Topeka, some sixty miles away. Curtis' "cross-country run" made him a celebrity in North Topeka, but the incident also convinced his paternal grandparents, William and Permelia Curtis, that their grandson should be raised in the more "civilized" atmosphere of Topeka rather than return to the reservation.⁴

Curtis had learned to ride Indian ponies bareback and won a reputation as a "good and fearless rider." Back in North Topeka, his grandfather William Curtis had built a race track, and in 1869 Charles Curtis rode in his first race. He soon became a full-fledged jockey and continued to ride until 1876. A fellow jockey described Curtis as "rather short and wiry" and "just another brush boy jockey," explaining that eastern riders "called us brush boys because we rode in what would be called the sticks." As a winning jockey, Curtis was known throughout Kansas as "The Indian Boy." His mounts made a lot of money for the local gamblers and prostitutes who bet on him, and he recalled that after one race a madam bought him "a new suit of clothes, boots, hat and all," and had a new jockey suit made for him; others bought him candy and presents. "I had never been so petted in my life and I liked it," Curtis reminisced.⁵ His family, however, had greater ambitions for the boy than horse racing. In 1871, grandfather William Curtis brought suit on behalf of Charley and his sister Elizabeth to establish their claim, over that of their father, for title to their mother's share of the Half-Breed Lands in North Topeka. When Curtis' father lost this suit, he left Topeka for good. Grandfather Curtis wanted Charley to stop racing and go back to school, but after his grandfather's death in 1873, the boy set out to join his other grandparents Louis and Julie Pappan, who were traveling with the Kaw Tribe from Kansas to the Indian Territory of Oklahoma. Still on the tribal roll, and "longing for the old life," he wanted to live on the reservation. Grandmother Julie talked him out of it. She invited him to her wagon and asked why he wanted to go to the Indian Territory. While she would have liked nothing better than to have him live with her, she told him that on the reservation he would end up "like most of the men on it," without an education or future

prospects. If Charley expected to make something of himself, he should return to Topeka and attend school. "I took her splendid advice and the next morning as the wagons pulled out for the south, bound for Indian Territory, I mounted my pony and with my belongings in a flour sack, returned to Topeka and school," Curtis recounted. "No man or boy ever received better advice, it was the turning point in my life."⁶

A Passion for Politics

In Topeka, Curtis lived with grandmother Permelia Hubbard Curtis, a decidedly strong-minded woman. "She brooked no opposition," recalled Charley's half-sister, Dolly. "I think she regarded being both a Methodist and a Republican as essential for anyone who expected to go to heaven." When Charley was offered a contract to race at the Philadelphia Centennial in 1876, Permelia Curtis put her foot down. Instead, he retired as a jockey and went to high school. After graduating, he studied law, supporting himself by working as a custodian in a law firm and by driving a hack. When he had no customers, he would stop under street lamps to read his law books. In 1881, at the age of twenty-one, Charles Curtis was admitted to the Kansas bar. Although his life appeared to be a rags-to-riches story, Curtis had in fact a considerable inheritance in land in North Topeka. The young lawyer plunged into real estate, selling lots and building houses. He also opened his own firm and practiced criminal law. In 1884, Charles Curtis married Anna Baird. They had three children and also took in his half-sister Dolly when her mother died.⁷ As a young man, Curtis showed a passion for politics. In 1880, during James Garfield's campaign for president, Curtis donned an oilcloth cap and carried a torch in a Republican parade through Topeka. It was only a matter of time before the popular "Indian jockey" ran for office himself. In 1884, after shaking every hand in the district, Curtis won election as Shawnee county attorney. Since both his father and grandfather Curtis had operated saloons in North Topeka, he was supported by the liquor interests, which had also retained his law firm. But once elected, Curtis insisted on enforcing the state's prohibition laws and closed down all of the saloons in the county. He won attention not only as a "dry," but as a law-and-order prosecutor.⁸ By a single vote in 1889, Curtis lost the nomination to fill a vacancy in the U.S. House of Representatives. It was a time of agrarian depression, when voters in the West were turning away from conservatives like Curtis in favor of the more radical solutions put forward by the Farmers' Alliance and its political offspring, the Populist party. In 1891, William Allen White, editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, first met the "young prince," Charles Curtis, and later provided this description:

He came down from Topeka to campaign the county, sent by the Republican state central committee. His job was to fight the Farmers' Alliance. He had a rabble-rousing speech with a good deal of Civil War in it, a lot of protective tariff, and a very carefully poised straddle on the currency question (which, I was satisfied then—and still think—that he knew little about, and cared nothing for). For his politics were always purely personal. Issues never bothered him. He was a handsome fellow, five feet ten, straight as his Kaw Indian grandfather must have been, with an olive skin that looked like old ivory, a silky, flowing, handlebar mustache, dark shoe-button eyes, beady, and in those days always gay, a mop of crow's wing hair, a gentle ingratiating voice, and what a smile!⁹

For three days, White and Curtis toured the county together, with White making the introductions and Curtis making the speeches. Never had White met anyone who could charm a hostile audience as effectively as did Curtis, whose personality could overshadow whatever he was speaking about. This trait helped Curtis defeat the Populist and Democratic fusion candidate for a seat in the House in 1892—the same election that saw Kansas vote for the Populist presidential candidate and elect a Populist governor. Curtis' upset victory brought him to the attention of prominent easterners, such as House Republican leader Thomas B. Reed, who were delighted that someone who thought the way they did on tariff, railroad, and currency issues could win election in so Populist a state as Kansas. Reed took a particular liking to "the Indian," as he called Curtis, and made him one of his lieutenants.¹⁰

"Our Charley"

When Curtis first came to Washington, Democrats firmly controlled the federal government. Grover Cleveland had just been elected to his second term as president, and in the House Democrats held 218 seats, Republicans 124, and the Populists 14. Then in 1893 a severe economic depression dramatically reversed party fortunes. Campaigning against the Democrats as the party of the "empty dinner pail," Republicans won 254 seats in the next Congress, leaving the Democrats with 93 and the Populists with 10. Tom Reed, who had resumed the speakership with the

return of a Republican majority, trusted Curtis' political judgment. According to an often-repeated story, Curtis once entered Speaker Reed's office and found a group of Republicans discussing the restoration of the gold standard. "Indian, what would you do about this?" Reed asked. Curtis suggested taking the matter out of the hands of the standing committees that had been dealing with it, since it was apparent they would never agree. Instead, he recommended appointing a special committee to write a new bill. Reed liked the idea so much that he appointed Curtis as a member of the special committee that drafted the Gold Standard Act of 1900.¹¹

Curtis devoted most of his attention to his service on the Committee on Indian Affairs, where he drafted the "Curtis Act" in 1898. Entitled "An Act for the Protection of the People of the Indian Territory and for Other Purposes," the Curtis Act actually overturned many treaty rights by allocating federal lands, abolishing tribal courts, and giving the Interior Department control over mineral leases on Indian lands. Having reinstated his name on the Kaw tribal rolls in 1889, Curtis was able, through his position on the House Indian Affairs Committee, to calculate the benefits he might receive from government allotments to his tribe. In 1902, he drafted the Kaw Allotment Act under which he and his children received fee simple title to Kaw land in Oklahoma.¹²

Congressman Curtis, hailed throughout Kansas as "Our Charley," assiduously built his political base in the state. William Allen White recalled that Curtis carried with him little books containing the names of all the Republicans in each township and used to mumble these names "like a pious worshiper out of a prayer book" to commit them to memory. When Curtis greeted a voter, he could recall the man's name and ask about his wife, children, and business. He left voters convinced that they were intimates. In 1903, Curtis made a bid for a Senate seat, competing against fellow Republican Representative Chester Long. Both men had strong support from the railroads, Long being allied with the J. P. Morgan interests and Curtis identified with the Jay Gould railroads. Editor William Allen White grumbled that the money and influence in the election came from the railroads and "the people had nothing to do with it."¹³

When the Republicans deadlocked, Long and Curtis reached an agreement that Long would gain the nomination in 1903 and would then support Curtis for the next Senate opening—which occurred sooner than anyone anticipated. In 1904, Kansas Senator Joseph R. Burton was indicted by a federal grand jury in St. Louis, Missouri, for representing clients for a fee before the Post Office in violation of federal statutes. Although the U.S. Supreme Court overturned this conviction on the grounds that Missouri lacked jurisdiction, Burton was tried and convicted again in 1905. In May 1906, the Supreme Court upheld Burton's second conviction, and as the Senate prepared to expel him, Burton resigned on June 4, 1906.

At that time, state legislatures still elected U.S. senators, but since the Kansas legislature was not in session, the governor appointed Alfred W. Benson to fill the vacancy. When the legislature reconvened, Curtis and several other Republicans challenged Benson for the seat. Kansas progressives promoted the candidacy of Joseph L. Bristow, arguing that he would more faithfully support the reform legislation of President Theodore Roosevelt. Curtis turned for help to Roosevelt's chief conservative opponent, Rhode Island Senator Nelson W. Aldrich. As chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, Aldrich handled all tariff legislation and was able to channel considerable amounts of money from business interests to pro-tariff politicians. Aldrich supplied Curtis with funds to purchase newspapers that would support his senatorial candidacy. William Allen White, who supported Bristow, warned President Roosevelt that attorneys for every railroad in the state were for Curtis. "Two railroad attorneys when I asked them why they were for Curtis, frankly told me in confidence of friendship that orders came from higher up to be for Curtis and they are obeying orders," White wrote to the president. But Roosevelt seemed less concerned, assuring White that "so far my experience with Curtis has been rather more pleasant than with the average of his colleagues."¹⁴

A High-Tariff Man

The state legislature elected Charles Curtis senator on January 23, 1907, and he took his seat a week later. Just as he had worked closely with Tom Reed in the House, Curtis became a chief lieutenant for Senator Aldrich. Then in his last years in the Senate, and having outlasted his most powerful allies, Aldrich came to rely on a group of younger, high-tariff colleagues, including Curtis, W. Murray Crane of Massachusetts, Eugene Hale of Maine, and Reed

Smoot of Utah. In 1909, Curtis played an influential role in the passage of the Payne-Aldrich Tariff, which raised rates so high that it helped split the Republican party into warring conservative and progressive factions. Two years later, that split claimed Curtis as a victim, when he was defeated for renomination by a progressive Republican—who in turn was defeated by a Democrat.¹⁵

As a result of the ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment, the first direct popular elections of senators were held in 1914. Progressives were confident that the people would support their candidates, but with an economic recession at home and war in Europe, voters nationwide instead turned to conservative candidates. After defeating the progressive incumbent Joseph Bristow for the Republican Senate nomination, Charles Curtis went on to defeat both a Democratic and a Progressive party opponent that November.¹⁶

Curtis returned to the Senate in 1915 as a symbol of the rewards of party regularity and the defeat of insurgency. Following the pattern set by Senate Democrats, who had created the post of party whip in the previous Congress, Senate Republicans appointed New York Senator James Wadsworth as both conference secretary and whip. Then, within a week, the party decided to split these posts and elected Charles Curtis Republican whip. He served under the party leadership of New Hampshire Senator Jacob Gallinger from 1915 to 1918 and of Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge from 1918 to 1924. In 1918, when Republicans won back the majority in the Senate, Curtis' role as whip expanded, as he led much of the Republican opposition to the Wilson administration. "No one ever accused him of being a Progressive," wrote one Washington correspondent, "but the feminists nevertheless called him friend, and it is one of the proudest of his claims that he led the floor fight for the Nineteenth Amendment," granting women the right to vote.¹⁷

Senator Curtis went to the 1920 Republican convention in Chicago as head of the Kansas delegation. When the convention reached a stalemate between the presidential candidacies of General Leonard Wood and Illinois Governor Frank Lowden, Curtis was one of the senators who gathered in the famous "smoke-filled room" and anointed their colleague, Ohio Senator Warren G. Harding, as the party's nominee. Curtis then returned to the Kansas delegation and told them frankly, as William Allen White recalled, "that it had been decided (the phrase was his) to give Harding a play." The hot and tired delegates were glad to take orders and break the deadlock. Kansas switched from Wood to Harding, whose bandwagon began its roll toward the White House.¹⁸

Harding's election took Curtis into the inner circle of Washington power, where he remained a poker-playing adviser to Harding throughout that ill-fated presidency. In 1923, as Harding considered running for a second term, Curtis inquired about his intentions of keeping Vice President Calvin Coolidge on the ticket, perhaps hoping for the job himself. "We are not worrying about that little fellow in Massachusetts," Harding supposedly told him. "Charlie Dawes is the man!" Harding's sudden death elevated Coolidge to the presidency, and the following year it was indeed Dawes, not Curtis, who won the nomination for vice president.¹⁹

Senate Majority Leader

In 1923, Curtis became chairman of the Senate Rules Committee, and two years later he succeeded Lodge as majority leader—becoming the first Republican to hold the official title of party floor leader. He did not occupy the front-row desk that was subsequently reserved for the party's leaders but instead led from the back-row seat on the center aisle. As floor leader, Curtis limited his role to that of a legislative tactician who tried to keep his party united. "You boys tell me what you want, and I'll get it through," Curtis promised. He was said to know "every senator's feelings on any pending legislation so thoroughly that he can tell in advance how that senator is going to vote." Remarkably, Curtis maintained good relations with both the conservative and progressive wings of his party. The conservative Pennsylvania Senator George Wharton Pepper recorded that Curtis as majority leader "displayed a remarkable talent for accomplishing good results for his party by what in international parlance are termed 'conversations' with the other side. He was unusually adept at making deals." The progressive Nebraska Senator George Norris noted that, while he often disagreed with Curtis on legislative matters, he never knew Curtis to violate his word or fail to carry out an agreement. Idaho Senator William Borah acclaimed Curtis "a great reconciler, a walking political encyclopedia and one of the best political poker players in America."²⁰

Journalists described majority leader Curtis as one of the greatest "whisperers" in Congress. "Whenever he took his favorite pose, with a short fat arm coiled around another Senator's shoulders, the Press Gallery got busy," wrote one reporter. "It was a sure sign that something was doing. . . . 'Talk, talk, talk,' he would complain to the reporters about the endless Senate deliberations." Curtis believed "that everything can be fixed by friendly and confidential getting together." The press depicted Curtis as taciturn, not given to long speeches, and unhappy with the Senate's penchant for filibustering (Curtis had supported creating a cloture rule as early as 1911). He had a "poker face" that masked his feelings, which some attributed to his Indian ancestry.²¹

As majority leader, Curtis loyally supported the Coolidge administration, but as a farm-state senator he strongly advocated the kind of federal farm relief that the president opposed. He consistently voted for the McNary-Haugen bills that Coolidge vetoed. In May 1928, however, he shifted his vote to sustain—by a one-vote margin—Coolidge's veto. He explained that, regardless of his belief in the issue, he felt it was his duty as leader to stand by the president. This was not an easy vote for Curtis, who at the time was an announced candidate to succeed Coolidge in that year's presidential election, and who was counting on strong support from the farm states. Significantly, another senatorial candidate for the presidency, Indiana's "Sunny Jim" Watson (who later followed Curtis as majority leader), voted to override the veto.²²

Presidential Candidate

Curtis had harbored presidential ambitions for some time. In 1924 he had been widely mentioned as a vice-presidential candidate, but his wife, Anna, was seriously ill at the time. His sister Dolly volunteered to stay with her, so that Curtis could attend the convention and improve his chances for the vice-presidential nomination. "Dolly," he replied, "I would not leave Anna now to be President of the United States, and certainly not for the Vice Presidency." (Anna Curtis died on June 29, 1924.) In 1927 President Coolidge jolted the nation by announcing that he did not choose to run in 1928. Potential candidates and the press speculated endlessly about what Coolidge meant—whether he expected the convention to deadlock and then draft him or whether he would not run under any circumstances. Curtis assumed that Coolidge was out of the race and felt assured that Coolidge favored him for president. Even Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover privately conceded that Curtis "was a natural selection for Mr. Coolidge's type of mind."²³

Hoover was the frontrunner, but the farm states had remained strongly opposed to him ever since his service as "Food Czar" during the First World War, as well as because he opposed the McNary-Haugen bills. Curtis and Hoover had never been close. Recalling that Hoover had campaigned for Democratic candidates in 1918, Curtis had tried to prevent President Harding from appointing Hoover to the cabinet. Hoover saw Curtis as one of a half-dozen senators who were trying to stop his nomination by heaping attacks on him. "Their favorite name for me was 'Sir Herbert,' a reference to my periodic residence in England," Hoover recalled with some indignation.²⁴

After announcing for president, Curtis made no speeches and continued to devote his attention to his functions as Senate majority leader. The *New York Times* called his campaign "quieter than gumshoes." This was how Curtis wanted it. Serving as his own campaign manager, he planned to work the back rooms as he always had, hoping that if the convention frontrunners deadlocked, he would emerge as the compromise candidate—in the way the delegates had turned to Warren Harding in 1920. About the only publicity his campaign received occurred when a Senate page stamped the words "Curtis for President" in the snow around the Capitol. Not until Curtis reached the convention in Kansas City did he speak out against Hoover. He warned that the Republicans could not afford to nominate a candidate who would place the party "on the defensive from the day he is named." Despite caravans of farmers who protested against Hoover, the commerce secretary easily won the Republican nomination on the first ballot.²⁵

Eating Bitter Words

To balance the ticket, Republicans sought a farm-state man for vice president and chose Charles Curtis of Kansas. Insisting that he had never sought the vice-presidency, Curtis agreed to run because of his loyalty to the party. Reporters viewed the choice of Curtis as "the perfect touch of irony" for the convention, given his earlier opposition

to Hoover. "I can see him yet as he stood before the convention gulping at his pride under the klieg lights," recalled reporter Thomas L. Stokes:

He had eaten his bitter words, but he was suffering from indigestion, you could see. His bald head gleamed, as if still feverish under the indignity of second place on the ticket. His mustache twitched in pain, as he tried to smile. It was only a contorted grin that creased his swarthy face. In the press section we nudged each other and chuckled cruelly.²⁶ During the campaign, Curtis visited the incumbent vice president, Charles Dawes. Sympathetically, Dawes noted that Curtis looked pretty worn out, his hand was in a sling because a car door had slammed on his fingers, and he had not much voice left. Later, however, listening to Curtis speak on the radio, Dawes bristled when Curtis referred to the vice-presidency as amounting to nothing. Although he recognized that the remark was intended to sound modest and was made in jest, Dawes recorded in his journal, "But when I find him tired, with a husky voice and bandaged arm, resting after a five thousand-mile trip and preparing to start on ten thousand miles more, I am inclined to think that he places quite a high value on the office."²⁷

The Hoover-Curtis ticket rode to victory that November over the Democratic ticket of Alfred Smith and Joseph T. Robinson. Each of the vice-presidential candidates served as his party's floor leader in the Senate, and, despite their political differences, the two were known as "chums." Curtis was celebrated as a "stand pater," the most regular of Republicans, and yet a man who could always bargain with his party's progressives and with senators from across the center aisle. Newspapers claimed that Curtis knew the Senate rules better than any other senator and declared him "the most competent man in Congress to look after the legislative program of the administration."²⁸

This was not to be. Hoover and Curtis remained alienated after the strains of campaigning against each other for the nomination. Since their ticket had been a marriage of convenience, there was little love to lose over the next four years. Neither man mentioned the other in his inaugural address, and except for formal occasions they seem to have had as little to do with each other as possible. A politico not identified with issues or ideas, Curtis could never measure up to Hoover's standards and never became an inside player. Although Curtis attended some cabinet meetings, his advice was neither sought nor followed. He spent his vice-presidency presiding over the Senate, and on a few occasions casting tie-breaking votes. Sixty-nine years old when he took office, Curtis was no longer the vigorous politician of his youth.²⁹

A Subtle Transformation

Curtis enjoyed the status of the vice-presidency and made much of his rise "from Kaw tepee to Capitol." As the first American of Indian ancestry to reach high office, he decorated his office with Native American artifacts and posed for pictures wearing Indian headdresses. But the press who covered him noted that Charles Curtis had changed in many ways, both subtle and conspicuous. As a senator, he had always been a "placid, humble, unchanging, decent fellow," but when he began to harbor presidential ambitions "his humility turned inside out." Curtis grew pompous, demanding that past intimates address him as the vice president of the United States and giving the impression that he felt that he, rather than Herbert Hoover, should be occupying the White House. Perhaps sensing that resentment, the Hoover White House never trusted Curtis as a legislative lieutenant. Reporters who watched him believed that the frustrated Curtis, having been so busy and influential as majority leader, "just had to have something to do" as vice president. He found his outlet as "a stern and unbending disciplinarian in the Senate and a defiant defender of vice presidential rank and precedent there and elsewhere, particularly at dinner tables." Or, as one Washington hostess noted archly, "Mr. Curtis openly exulted in the ephemeral effulgence of the limelight which shone upon him."³⁰

Curtis' search for status revived the issue of an official vice-presidential residence. The wealthy widow of Missouri Senator John B. Henderson lived in a brownstone castle on 16th Street, on a hillside several blocks north of the White House. For years Mrs. Henderson had lobbied to rechristen 16th Street as the Avenue of the Presidents and had persuaded many embassies to locate along the street—by selling them inexpensive parcels of land. Mrs. Henderson became convinced that the street would be the perfect location for a permanent vice-presidential dwelling, suitable for entertaining, and she offered to give the government a house overlooking Meridian Hill Park, whose land she had also contributed to the city. Earlier, Vice President Calvin Coolidge had declined a similar offer,

but Curtis was much more receptive, and sent his sister Dolly Curtis Gann out to inspect the property. She pronounced the house "lovely" and appropriate for its purposes, arguing that a vice president "should not have the social duties now incumbent upon him unless he is to be in a position to fulfill them properly and comfortably." But a member of the Henderson family objected to the elderly Mrs. Henderson's penchant for giving away her property, and the deal fell through. Not for another half century would vice presidents have an official residence.³¹

A Tempest in a Teapot

When the stock market crashed in 1929, the nation began to slip into the worst economic depression in its history. At a moment when people wanted positive action from their political leaders, poor Curtis became embarrassingly embroiled in a "tempest in a teapot." His sister Dolly openly feuded with Alice Roosevelt Longworth, the daughter of Theodore Roosevelt and wife of House Speaker Nicholas Longworth, over their relative positions in protocol. "Princess Alice" admitted making a "little mischief" over the affair. After Curtis' wife died, Dolly had invited him to live at her Washington home and had acted as his official hostess. Dolly Gann asserted that as hostess for the vice president she should be seated ahead of the congressional and diplomatic wives at Washington dinners. "At that there was a cackle of excited discussion about the propriety of designating any one not a wife to hold the rank of one," observed Alice Longworth. Alice raised the issue with her husband Nick, who disapproved of Dolly Gann's pretensions and used the controversy as an excuse to avoid going to Prohibition-era "dry" dinner parties that he hated to attend. All this caused a "torrent of newspaper publicity," predominantly negative. William Allen White's *Emporia Gazette* proclaimed:

If Washington does not do right by our Dolly, there will be a terrible ruckus in Kansas. We will be satisfied with nothing less than that she be borne into the dinner on the shoulders of Mrs. Nick Longworth, seated in the center of the table as an ornament with a candelabra in each hand and fed her soup with a long-handled spoon by the wife of the Secretary of State.³²

Bad press dogged Curtis and he assumed the public image of a Throttlebottom, especially as a result of his panicky response to the bonus marchers in 1932. World War I veterans had marched on Washington to demand that Congress pass legislation enabling them to receive early payment of their promised bonus for wartime service. As a senator, Curtis had sponsored an earlier bonus bill and, although he himself had never served in the military, he frequently cited his father's Civil War service in seeking veterans' support for his campaigns. But when the marchers camped around Washington and paraded to the Capitol, Curtis urged President Hoover to call out the troops. The president, however, tried to keep calm and maintain the peace.³³

The Depression Sinks the Ticket

In July 1932, some four hundred men marched to the Capitol grounds. When the architect of the Capitol had the lawn sprinklers turned on, the marchers gave up their idea of camping on the grounds and instead began a single-file march around the Capitol Building. A nervous Vice President Curtis announced that "Neither Speaker [John Nance] Garner nor I issued any permits to parade inside Capitol Grounds, and for this reason I believe they should be kept off." The vice president had a "stormy session" with the District of Columbia's police chief, Pelham Glassford, who informed him that only the president could call out the army. Curtis then contacted the U.S. Marines to have them stand ready for an emergency. But the marines took the vice president too literally and sent two companies wearing trench helmets to the Capitol, riding on the city trollies. Curtis claimed to have been misunderstood, but his calling out the marines made him even more the subject of national jokes.³⁴

As the depression worsened and the presidential election approached, many Republicans talked of dumping Curtis from the ticket in favor of a stronger candidate who might help Hoover's chance of reelection. Curtis himself recognized his vulnerability and talked of running for the Senate seat from Kansas instead. But with his sister Dolly rallying support among the delegates, Curtis was renominated on the Hoover ticket to face Franklin D. Roosevelt and John Nance Garner. In the depth of the depression, the Hoover-Curtis campaign never stood a chance. Hecklers challenged Curtis when he spoke. Why had he not fed the veterans in Washington? they yelled at one stop. "I've fed

more than you have, you dirty cowards!" Curtis shouted back at the crowd. "I'm not afraid of you!" The crowd chanted "Hurrah for Roosevelt!"³⁵

A landslide defeat in November 1932 retired Charles Curtis from a political career that had begun almost fifty years earlier when he ran for Shawnee County district attorney. Now, to the surprise of many Kansans, Curtis seemed to have "lost interest in Kansas." Having spent so much of his life in the nation's capital, he remained in Washington, where he practiced law and talked politics. In 1935 he became chairman of the Republican senatorial campaign committee, hoping the party could win back the Senate majority the next year, but he died in February 1936 at his sister Dolly's home. A party regular—"one-eighth Kaw Indian and a one-hundred per cent Republican" as he liked to tell audiences—he had been yoked to one of the most intellectual and least political of all American presidents, and the incompatibility of the team made his vice-presidency a dismal failure.³⁶

Notes:

1. Quoted in Chalmers Roberts, *First Rough Draft: A Journalist's Journal of Our Times* (New York, 1973), p. 268.
2. For an especially egregious example, see Don C. Seitz, *From Kaw Teepee to Capitol: The Life Story of Charles Curtis, Indian, Who Has Risen to High Estate* (New York, 1928).
3. William E. Unrau, "The Mixed-Blood Connection: Charles Curtis and Kaw Detribalization," in *Kansas and the West: Bicentennial Essays in Honor of Nyle H. Miller*, ed. Forrest R. Blackburn, et al. (Topeka, KS, 1976), pp. 151-61; William E. Unrau, *Mixed-Bloods and Tribal Dissolution: Charles Curtis and the Quest for Indian Identity* (Lawrence, KS, 1989), pp. 9-10, 58, 64-65; Marvin Ewy, "Charles Curtis of Kansas: Vice President of the United States, 1929-1933," *Emporia State Research Studies* 10 (December 1961): 6-9.
4. Unrau, *Mixed-Bloods and Tribal Dissolution*, pp. 70-75.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62, 81-82; *New York Times* June 17, 1928; Seitz, p. 128.
6. Unrau, *Mixed-Bloods and Tribal Dissolution*, pp. 92-93; Ewy, p. 11.
7. Dolly Gann, *Dolly Gann's Book* (Garden City, NY, 1933), pp. 1, 4-5; Unrau, *Mixed-Bloods and Tribal Dissolution*, pp. 97-98.
8. Unrau, *Mixed-Bloods and Tribal Dissolution*, pp. 99-101; Ewy, pp. 15-17.
9. William Allen White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York, 1946), p. 196.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 196-97.
11. Seitz, pp. 161-62; Ewy, p. 23.
12. Unrau, *Mixed-Bloods and Tribal Dissolution*, pp. 119-23; Unrau, "The Mixed-Blood Connection," p. 159.
13. White, pp. 304, 352, 366.
14. Horace Samuel Merrill and Marion Galbraith Merrill, *The Republican Command, 1897-1913* (Lexington, KY, 1971), pp. 26, 288.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 295.
16. Ewy, pp. 27-29.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31; "Heap Big Chief," *American Mercury* 17 (August 1929): 401.
18. Andrew Sinclair, *The Available Man: The Life Behind the Masks of Warren Gamaliel Harding* (New York, 1965), pp. 143-49; White, p. 546.
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21. "Heap Big Chief," p. 410; Seitz, pp. 172-73.
22. *New York Times*, May 26, 1928.
23. Gann, p. 74; Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency, 1920-1933* (New York, 1952), p. 194.
24. John D. Hicks, *Republican Ascendancy, 1921-1933* (New York, 1960), p. 201; Sinclair, p. 184; Russell, p. 433; Hoover, p. 192.
25. *New York Times*, February 3, April 26, June 11-15, 1928; Ewy, pp. 38-39.
26. Thomas L. Stokes, *Chip Off My Shoulder* (Princeton, NJ, 1940), pp. 230-31.

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28. *New York Times*, September 2, November 11, 1928.
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30. "Heap Big Chief," pp. 401-6, 411; Gene Smith, *The Shattered Dream: Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression*. (New York, 1970), p. 185; Frances Parkinson Keyes, *Capital Kaleidoscope: The Story of a Washington Hostess* (New York, 1937), p. 245.
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32. Alice Roosevelt Longworth, *Crowded Hours* (New York, 1933) pp. 73, 330-33; David Burner, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life* (New York, 1979), p. 291.
33. Daniel J. Lisio, *The President and Protest: Hoover, Conspiracy, and The Bonus Riot* (Columbia, MO, 1974), p. 218.
34. Fleta Campbell Springe, "Glassford and the Siege of Washington," *Harpers* 165 (November 1932): 649-51; Smith, p. 149.
35. Williams, p. 147; Ewy, pp. 51-52; Lisio, p. 244.
36. Unrau, *Mixed-Blood and Tribal Dissolution*, p. 112.