The Kansas Congressional Delegation and the Lend-Lease Act of 1941

by Philip A. Grant, Jr.

On January 6, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered his annual State of the Union message to a joint session of Congress. In this historic address the President urged the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate to approve an unprecedented program of lend-lease, designed to provide emergency assistance to Great Britain and other European countries resisting the military aggression of Nazi Germany. Specifically Roosevelt requested authority and funds “sufficient to manufacture additional munitions and war supplies of many kinds, to be turned over to those nations which are now in actual war with aggressor nations.” The Chief Executive, insisting that the United States must not acquiesce in the surrender of victimized countries “merely because of present inability to pay for the weapons which we know they must have,” climaxed his remarks as follows:

For what we send abroad, we shall be repaid within a reasonable time following the close of hostilities, in similar materials, or, at any option, in other goods of many kinds, which they can produce and which we need.

The Lend-Lease Bill, conforming to the President’s well-publicized State of the Union appeal, was introduced on January 10 by Rep. John W. McCormack of Massachusetts, the House majority leader. On the same day an identical measure was proposed in the Senate by Majority Leader Alben W. Barkley of Kentucky. During the ensuing two months the Lend-Lease Bill attracted enormous attention throughout the nation and became the sole issue of consequence facing the Congress.

Among the members of Congress vested with the responsibility of considering the merits of the Lend-Lease Bill were the two U.S. senators and seven members of the House of Representatives from Kansas. These nine gentlemen represented a state in the midst of the farm belt, located close to the geographic center of the nation and an area with strong convictions on foreign policy issues. The purpose of this article will be to examine the role played by the Kansas congressional delegation in the deliberations surrounding the fate of the Lend-Lease Bill.

The Lend-Lease Bill was promptly referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. This committee, chaired by Rep. Sol Bloom of New York, consisted of fifteen Democrats and ten Republicans. The committee’s twenty-five members did not include a single Kansan. On January 30, the Foreign Affairs Committee, by a majority of 17 to 8, agreed to report the Lend-Lease Bill to the House floor. Fifteen of the seventeen affirmative votes were cast by Democrats, indicating a remarkable degree of solidarity within the ranks of the Democratic party.

The House scheduled six days of general debate on the bill. Proponents argued that the bill’s passage was absolutely necessary to assure the survival of those nations threatened by Nazism, while its opponents maintained that the bill would greatly diminish the likelihood of continued American neutrality.

Five of the seven members of the House of Representatives from Kansas voiced unqualified opposition to the Lend-Lease Bill. These five, all of whom were Republicans, were destined to spend an aggregate total of 106 years on Capitol Hill. They were Congressmen William P. Lamberton of Fairview,...

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Lambertson, whose career in public life spanned portions of five decades, had previously served in both houses of the Kansas State Legislature and on the Kansas State Board of Agriculture. In a terse statement to his colleagues, Lambertson announced that he intended "to vote against every amendment and then vote against the bill." Convinced that the bill's "purposes are bad," the Kansan argued that no amendments or modifications could possibly justify passage of the measure.6

A future chairman of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, Edward Rees in January 1941 was beginning his third of twelve consecutive terms in Congress. Rees, stressing that the present time was "one of the most crucial periods in the history of our civilization," implored the House not to place "unprecedented and unnecessary power in the hands of one man [Roosevelt]." Rees insisted that "we must protect America first," and argued that

... if we do not determine just how far we expect our country to become involved and implicated in the terrible world crisis, it is my belief that you and I are going to be required to decide before very long whether or not we shall send our boys, unprepared as they are, to the slaughter fields of Europe.7

Winter, a lawyer by profession and a former county attorney of Crawford County, charged that the Lend-Lease Bill was the "most extraordinary, and in my opinion unconstitutional, delegation of legislative authority that has ever been proposed by any President in peacetime or in wartime." Assuming that Congress decided to approve the bill, Winter predicted that the American people would soon realize that "they have been stripped of their freedom and that they have been led as a blind-folded and deceived people step by step into war." The Kansan also maintained that the Lend-Lease Bill contained "a complete pattern for a military dictatorship in this country just as perverted and arbitrary as any dictatorship existing anywhere in the world today,"8

Hope, who would later occupy the chairmanship of the Committee on Agriculture, was elected by his constituents to fifteen terms in the House and in the process established a record among Kansas representatives for longest continuous service. Emphasizing that the European conflict should not involve the United States, Hope explained that the European war "arose over matters concerning which we have heretofore assumed no responsibility and over which we have no control." Hope, expressing the view that the American people "do not want to make this our war," offered this assessment of the Lend-Lease Bill:

In the end the powers granted in this bill mean power to get us into the war. It is almost incomprehensible that such powers should be delegated by a legislative body in a democracy in peacetime.9

After completing six terms in the House, Carlson would serve four years as governor of Kansas and eighteen years in the U.S. Senate. Carlson, contending that the Lend-Lease Bill endorsed a policy "that approaches dangerously near to a dictatorship," asked why the duly elected members of Congress should "give the power to one man, without restriction, to declare war, to raise and support armies, to maintain a navy, and to spend

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the taxpayers' money?" Certain that the citizens of the nation would hold Congress "to a strict accountability" if the Lend-Lease Bill became law, Carlson argued:

It is the American people who will have to pay the bills incurred by this legislation. They will have to die on foreign soil and possibly on the battle fields of every continent if we are to police the entire world.  

The only Kansas Republican to refrain from directly commenting on the Lend-Lease Bill was Congressman Ulysses S. Guyer of Kansas City. Although Guyer did not publicly refer to the Lend-Lease Bill, his opposition to the thrust of Roosevelt's foreign policy was quite vociferous. In a speech delivered in October 1941, Guyer alleged that, since the outbreak of foreign hostilities, the Roosevelt Administration had been "taking steps that lead to war." Regretting the decision of the United States to enter World War I in 1917, Guyer felt that the nation's "experience in the last war should teach us that it is our destiny to keep out of European, African, and Asiatic wars and strictly attend to our own business." Guyer, recalling the foreign policy debates of the presidential contest of 1940, reminded his colleagues that in the campaign of the previous year he had "predicted that President Roosevelt, like President Wilson before him, would involve us in a war."  

The sole Kansan to advocate passage of the Lend-Lease Bill was Rep. John M. Houston of Wichita. Houston was the only Democrat elected to Congress from Kansas during the eventful fourteen-year period from 1938 to 1952. Although Houston represented a politically marginal district, he was a steadfast supporter of the policies of President Roosevelt.  

Denying that Kansas was overwhelmingly isolationist in sentiment, Houston sensed that most of the citizens of his state "favor enactment of the bill in its


present form and want it done quickly." Believing that the President would act "wisely" in exercising the authority granted under the Lend-Lease measure, Houston expressed confidence that Roosevelt would "not fail the United States, in the defense of which he was active long before his critics were alive to the need for it and who met every request for defense appropriations with the cry of warmonger." Accusing the opponents of the bill of being "inspired by a partisan distrust of the President of the United States," Houston analyzed the Lend-Lease measure:

It does give the United States a chance to aid Great Britain to the end that the brave people of that land may not be defeated and enslaved by Hitler, as the people of other crushed nations have been enslaved, by providing the machinery whereby the most effective use of our resources for our own needs and for the needs of those whom, in our own self-defense, we are determined to aid, may be realized.13

While the critics of the Lend-Lease Bill suspected that the measure would probably pass the House, they hoped to attract support for an alternative proposal which would call for limited financial assistance to Great Britain. After general debate ended and the speaker's gavel fell, Rep. Hamilton Fish of New York, an outspoken Republican isolationist, moved to recommit the Lend-Lease Bill to the Foreign Affairs Committee. The Fish motion instructed the Foreign Affairs panel to report a revised bill, the essential section of which was to read:

The President is authorized to grant credit to Great Britain in a total amount not to exceed $2,000,000,000, to be used for the purchase in the United States of defense articles, requiring collateral security if available.

The House rejected Fish's recommittal motion on a 263 to 160 roll call, virtually guaranteeing that the Land-Lease Bill would be approved by a comfortable margin. Minutes later the House passed the bill on a tabulation of 260 to 15. The Kansas delegation in the House, obviously deviating from the prevailing sentiment of the membership, was aligned 6 to 1 in favor of recommittal and 6 to 1 against passage of the bill. Only Democrat Houston was recorded as against the Fish motion and in favor of the bill.14

Within hours after its House passage the Lend-Lease Bill was dispatched to the Senate. Immediately following its arrival in the Senate chamber, it was submitted to the Committee on Foreign Relations. The Foreign Relations panel, presided over by Sen. Walter F. George of Georgia, was comprised in 1941 of sixteen Democrats, six Republicans, and one Progressive.15 After conducting hearings for two weeks, the Foreign Relations Committee decided to endorse the Lend-Lease Bill. The bill, containing several amendments, was approved by a 15 to 8 margin; fourteen of the fifteen favorable committee votes were supplied by Democrats.16

Kansas' U.S. senators in 1941 were Arthur Capper of Topeka and Clyde M. Reed of Parsons, both of whom had served previously as governors of Kansas. Capper, serving his fourth of five terms in the Senate, was outranked in seniority by only five of his ninety-five colleagues and was a veteran member of the Foreign Relations Committee. Reed entered the Senate in January 1939 and was assigned to the Committee on Interstate Commerce.17

As a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, Capper had signed the sharply worded minority report on the Lend-Lease Bill which warned that the bill would authorize the President with too much power in offering aid to "any foreign nation."18 In the Senate, Capper had frequently spoken on foreign policy questions, and it had been expected that he would voice forceful opposition to the passage of the Lend-Lease measure. Reed, primarily concerned with railroad legislation, was one of the Senate's least vocal members. Indeed, during the entire length of the first session of the Seventy-seventh Congress, Reed delivered only one speech on the Senate floor.

16. The key paragraph of the Senate minority report on the Lend-Lease Bill reads:

What is the bill? It is a pure grant of power to the President to do as he pleases with any foreign nation; for any purpose, on any terms he may see fit, to make available to any nation or nations, any part, or the whole, of the military or naval power of the United States. It is a complete negation of a policy that has been ours in the past and an invitation to the President to take a hand in the game of power politics in every far-flung region of the earth. It would authorize him to say what nations shall receive, and for any reason at all to open to them our military and naval equipment, and our resources, and it is perfectly obvious that once commitments have been made, our men will have to guarantee the favored nation and undertake its war.
Two U.S. senators and seven U.S. representatives from Kansas were among the members of Congress in 1941 vested with the responsibility of considering the merits of the Lend-Lease Bill. Opposing America's intervention in a European war and fearing a policy that approached "dangerously near to dictatorship," all four political leaders depicted here initially voted against this unprecedented emergency assistance program. While Hope and Carlson eventually modified their positions and voted in favor of the bill with Senate amendments, Cooper and Lambertson remained adamant in their opposition.
Capper became one of the first members of Congress to pledge that he would vote against Lend-Lease. On January 14, declaring that he was "unequivocally opposed" to the bill, Capper flatly rejected "granting the unlimited dictatorial powers asked by President Roosevelt for himself." The Kansan, charging that the bill was being presented "under the guise" of providing assistance to democratic nations, contended that the measure "in reality gives to the President all-out, one-man control of our foreign relations." Capper sternly warned against American involvement in European wars and ridiculed the "grandiose idea that it is the destiny of the United States to police the world." 20

On January 31, Capper informed his colleagues that he had been receiving approximately two thousand letters a week from his constituents on the Lend-Lease issue. He estimated that his mail was "running close to ninety-five percent—certainly more than ninety percent—in opposition to this bill and in opposition to United States intervention in this European war." Capper perceived a general impression among Kansans that the ultimate purpose of the Lend-Lease Bill was "to give to the President power to intervene under the pretense that the powers are necessary to national defense." 21

Unlike the House, the Senate debated the Lend-Lease Bill in rather leisurely fashion over a period of three weeks. It was assumed that each of the ninety-six senators would be afforded an opportunity to deliver a speech regarding the bill and that numerous amendments would be advanced by the bill's adversaries. While it was likely that the Senate would modify some of the bill's provisions, there was a general expectation that the principle of Lend-Lease commanded majority support. 22

During the final stages of floor consideration Capper voted for several substantive amendments to the Lend-Lease Bill. These amendments, clearly designed to minimize the prospects of any future American involvement in the European war, were offered by Senators Hiram Johnson of California, David I. Walsh of Massachusetts, Robert R. Reynolds of North Carolina, and Robert A. Taft of Ohio. The Johnson Amendment forbade the use of funds for the maintenance of American armed forces outside the western hemisphere, while the Walsh Amendment prohibited the transfer of any property of the U.S. Navy to foreign nations. The Reynolds Amendment denied aid to the Soviet Union which by that time was at war with Germany, and the Taft Amendment, devised as a substitute for the entire bill, provided a loan of $2 billion to Great Britain. These amendments, strongly opposed by the Democratic leadership in the Senate, were rejected by margins ranging from 62 to 29 and 56 to 35. 23

The Senate brought the Lend-Lease Bill to a final vote on March 8. While it was virtually certain that the bill would pass, there was considerable doubt over the projected margin of victory. The official tabulation was 59 to 8 in favor of the bill. Forty-nine of the sixty affirmative votes were cast by Democrats. Capper, fulfilling his earlier promise, voted against the bill. Reed, who had remained silent since the bill's introduction on January 10, was thought to be in opposition to the Lend-Lease measure although he was not present to cast his vote. 24

The Senate immediately appointed seven of its members to a conference committee, presumably having the task of resolving the various differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill. The House leadership, however, decided that a conference committee might involve a time-consuming and somewhat complicated process. Instead, it was believed that it would be more prudent for the House merely to adopt the Senate amendments to the bill. 25

The Democratic majority in the Senate had agreed to a number of amendments in order to attract the support of those who otherwise might have been reluctant to vote for the bill. One such amendment stipulated that Congress must approve all future funding for Lend-Lease operations. Another amendment established June 30, 1946, as the official expiration date for the Lend-Lease program. A third amendment required that the valuation of any Lend-Lease defense articles be certified by the responsible head of the appropriate federal department or agency.

On March 11, the House assembled for the purpose of reviewing the Senate amendments. Sensing that the House was anxious to expedite the enactment of the bill, many of its previous critics opted to consent to the more palatable Senate amendments. The most dramatic aspect of the debate occurred when Rep. Joseph W. Martin of Massachusetts, House Republican leader, not only announced that he would accept the Senate amendments, but also strongly...

20. Congressional Record, 87:430.
21. Wichita Eagle, February 28-29, 28, March 2, 4, 6-8, 1941; Topeka Daily Capital, February 7, 23, March 2, 7, 8, 1941; New York Times, February 15, 1941, pp. 1, 6; February 18, 1941, pp. 1, 8; February 19, 1941, pp. 1, 3; February 20, 1941, pp. 1, 6; February 25, 1941, pp. 1, 6; February 26, 1941, pp. 1, 6; February 28, 1941, pp. 1, 6; March 1, 1941, pp. 1, 5; March 2, 1941, pp. 1, 19; March 3, 1941, pp. 1, 8; March 4, 1941, pp. 1, 5; March 5, 1941, pp. 1, 9; March 6, 1941, pp. 1, 10; March 7, 1941, pp. 1, 5; March 8, 1941, pp. 1, 6; March 9, 1941, pp. 1, 21.

 appealed for national unity. Martin emphasized that "we stand united for liberty at home, and we share in a common desire to see liberty prevail in every part of the world," and concluded by saying that there was "no division in our loyalty to our country and our determination to protect the security of our people." 25

The House approved the Senate amendments by the emphatic majority of 317 to 71, thereby precluding the necessity for a conference committee and sending the Lend-Lease Bill to the White House for President Roosevelt's signature. Republicans agreed to the Senate amendments by the surprising margin of 94 to 54, contrasting sharply with the 134 to 25 negative result of the previous month. Within Kansas' House delegation the tally was 4 to 3 in favor of the Senate amendments. The three Kansans who remained intransigent in their opposition to the idea of Lend-Lease were Lambertson, Guyer, and Rees;

Three others, Carlson, Hope and Winter, who had been recorded against the House bill on February 8, modified their positions and, with Houston, supported the Senate amendments. 26

Lambertson, Guyer, and Rees explained why they opted not to accede to the Senate amendments to the Lend-Lease Bill. Complaining that he was victimized by the "parliamentary situation," Lambertson felt that a "vote against accepting the Senate amendments is the closest I can come to voting against the bill." According to Guyer, the Senate amendments did not "help the bill enough to justify my support." Calling the roll call on the Senate amendments the "last vote on the bill before it goes to the White House," Rees insisted that the Lend-Lease measure still vested "unnecessary power and authority to one man." 27


In contrast were Carlson, Hope, and Winter’s reasons for agreeing to the Senate amendments. Carlson was pleased that the amendments placed “some limitations on the grant of Congressional powers to the President.” Hope maintained that the Senate amendments made the Lend-Lease measure a “better bill.” Winter commented:

In a small measure the amendments made in the Senate restrict the powers of the President. I admit they only make a bad bill a little better than it was, but I wanted all the limitations we could get, so I voted for the Senate amendments."  

There are three basic explanations for the behavior of Kansas congressmen regarding the Lend-Lease Bill. They are the pervious record of House and Senate members from Kansas on foreign policy issues; the presence of such a substantial number of Republicans within the Kansas delegation; and the similarity between Kansas congressmen and their colleagues from the eleven other states of the Midwest and Great Plains.

During the second Roosevelt Administration (1937-1940) House and Senate members from Kansas certainly had been at odds with the President over foreign policy issues. They had predicated their attitudes on their avowed determination to maintain strict American isolationism. In 1938, the seven members of the House from Kansas, defying the wishes of Roosevelt, had supported the Ludlow Resolution, mandating a nationwide referendum as a precondition for a declaration of war. Later in the same year, the Kansas congressional delegation had voted 9 to 0 against the Naval Expansion (Vinson) Bill, a measure strongly advocated by the President. In 1939, Kansas congressmen had been aligned 7 to 1 in opposition to the Chief Executive’s urgent appeal to rescind the existing arms embargo provision of the Neutrality Act. Finally, in 1940, Kansas on Capitol Hill had ballotted 8 to 1 to defeat the Selective Service (Burke-Wadsworth) Bill, authorizing the first peacetime draft in American history. The well documented four-year record of Kansas congressmen on such significant measures as the Ludlow Resolution, the Naval Expansion Bill, the attempt to eliminate the arms embargo, and the Selective Service Bill is entirely consistent with the refusal of such a high proportion of the Kansas delegation to assent to the Lend-Lease Bill in February and March of 1941. 39


In 1941, Congress was firmly controlled by the Democratic party; Republicans were outnumbered 268 to 162 in the House and 66 to 28 in the Senate. The Democratic floor leaders, McCormack and Barkley, and the chairmen of the committees exercising jurisdiction over foreign policy legislation, Bloom and George, loyalty supported the Roosevelt Administration in its determination to pass the Lend-Lease Bill. In 1941, the Kansas congressional delegation consisted of eight Republicans and only one Democrat. All eight Republicans were initially united in their opposition to the Lend-Lease Bill.

Kansas Republicans certainly were not operating in a vacuum but were indeed reflecting the views of their Republican colleagues on Capitol Hill. In February 1941, House Republicans opposed the Lend-Lease Bill by a 134 to 25 majority (84.3 percent), while in the following month Senate Republicans voted 18 to 10 (64.2 percent) against the bill. Such illustrious Republicans as Rep. Hamilton Fish and Senators Arthur H. Vandenberg of Michigan and Robert A. Taft wielded influence over their party on foreign policy matters. Fish, Vandenberg, and Taft frequently failed to distinguish between their sincere espousal of isolationism and their legitimate partisan criticism of the Roosevelt Administration. Accordingly, it should not have been especially surprising that the eight GOP congressmen from Kansas were skeptical about the merits of an unprecedented plan urged by a Democratic chief executive who a few months earlier had been rebuffed by the voters of their state. Notwithstanding the fact that Congressman Martin had publicly embraced the Lend-Lease Bill on March 11, 1941, fifty-four House Republicans, including three of the six from Kansas, held out against the bill's final passage.

The bulk of isolationist congressmen represented constituencies in the Midwest. These individuals, including eight of the nine members of the Kansas delegation, at the outset were not inclined to favor the Lend-Lease Bill. In February and March of 1941, midwesterners opposed the Lend-Lease Bill 94 to 39 (70.7 percent) in the House and 14 to 8 (63.7 percent) in the Senate. In addition to Vandenberg and Taft, midwestern isolationists included Senators Gerald P. Nye of North Dakota, Henrik Shipstead of Minnesota, Bennett Champ Clark of Missouri, and Robert M. La Follette, Jr., of Wisconsin and Representatives Martin L. Sweeney and John M. Vorys of Ohio, Charles A. Halleck, and Louis Ludlow of Indiana, Everett M. Dirksen of Illinois, Clare E. Hoffman of Michigan, Dewey Short of Missouri, and Usher Burdick of North Dakota. Kansas congressmen in early 1941 compiled voting records which to a remarkable degree conformed to the longstanding tradition of midwestern isolationism, a phenomenon which lingered until the years immediately following World War II. While most midwestern congressmen were willing to concur in the Senate amendments to the Lend-Lease Bill, it was quite revealing that fifty-four of the seventy-one dissenting House votes (76.1 percent) emanated from the Midwest.

Between January 10 and March 11, 1941, the nine members of the Kansas congressional delegation, like their colleagues from other parts of the nation, were preoccupied with the Lend-Lease Bill. Since Kansas was not a populous or diverse state, there were only minimal differences of opinion on whether the Lend-Lease Bill was really beneficial to the country. In voicing their convictions and casting their votes as members of the House and Senate, these nine gentlemen were articulating what they perceived to be the wishes of their constituents and their fellow Americans on a foreign policy issue of the utmost consequence.

30. In the presidential election of 1940, Kansas had provided Republican Wendell Willkie with his highest proportion of any state in the nation. In 1940, Willkie had outpolled Roosevelt in Kansas by a margin of 489,169 (57.5 percent) to 365,725 (42.7 percent). Willkie had carried all seven of Kansas' congressional districts and 100 of the state's 105 counties. Richard M. Scammon, comp., America at the Polls: A Handbook of American Presidential Election Statistics, 1920-1964 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1965), 167-68.

31. In the congressional elections of 1942, Senator Capper, who had vigorously opposed the Lend-Lease Bill, was reelected to his fifth term, and the six Republican members of the House from Kansas, all of whom had been aligned against the Lend-Lease Bill in its original form, were also victorious in their reelection bids. Because Kansas lost a House seat in the aftermath of the U.S. Census of 1940, Republican Rees and Democrat Houston were forced to compete against one another in a reapportioned district in 1942. Rees, who had been uncompromising in his opposition to the Lend-Lease Bill, defeated Houston, an ardent supporter of the bill, 55,612 to 44,318. Guide to U.S. Elections, 617, 953.

LEND-LEASE ACT