James B. Pearson on the campaign trail in the 1960s.
On a warm afternoon in June 1969, Senator James B. Pearson retreated to his office in the New Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill, taking a stack of papers and books with him. When he emerged two hours later, he had made up his mind to oppose one of President Richard M. Nixon’s most controversial national security programs, the Safeguard anti-ballistic missile system. A Republican senator from Kansas might be expected to go along with his president on such a matter. A moderate conservative, Pearson had served on the Armed Services Committee and was friendly with some of the Senate’s leading Cold War hawks. But Pearson was in the Senate because he had successfully challenged conventional thinking in his party back home. In the middle of his first full term he was about to step into a heated debate over President Nixon’s strategic arms policies, a debate in which most of his allies would be Democrats or liberal Republicans. He would try to persuade his constituents to agree with him that opposition to the construction and deployment of Safeguard was justified on the basis of “the necessity, the cost, the effect upon both the arms race and arms limitation negotiations.” He understood this would be difficult. The quiet, adopted Kansan did not rely on staff, consultants, or lobbyists to do his thinking for him, especially on an issue of this magnitude. He did it himself, weighing the political risks by his own lights.¹

James Blackwood Pearson was born May 7, 1920, in Nashville, Tennessee, the son and grandson of Methodist ministers. Both his father and mother came from prominent middle Tennessee families. The family followed his father’s assignments to churches in Missouri, Alabama, Virginia, and elsewhere in the South. These frequent moves notwithstanding, Pearson was reared in traditional southern fashion. As a child he had a black nanny, Caroline, who called him “honey chile” and refused to cut his long locks. Pearson was an independent-minded, enterprising youth, saving money from his newspaper route to buy model airplanes. He loved electric trains and built a HAM radio set that fascinated his family, according to his sister, Virginia.2

The family finally settled into a home of its own on a rural property near Lynchburg, Virginia. Later, as a United States Senator, Pearson recalled visits to his father’s study in the Lynchburg house by Virginia politicians, including Senator Carter Glass, who became secretary of the treasury under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Pearson attended Duke University but dropped out and joined the Navy. During World War II he flew transport aircraft, mostly DC-3s, from coast to coast, landing frequently at the Olathe Naval Air Station near Kansas City. He was discharged from the Naval Air Transport Service with the rank of lieutenant commander.3

Pearson was attracted to the openness of midwesterners, according to his son, Bill. The Navy flier met Martha Mitchell, the daughter of a prosperous Kansas City family, at a dance on the base. James Mitchell, Martha’s father, owned a string of grain elevators across the state. The young couple married and Pearson, after earning a bachelor’s degree at the College of Lynchburg and a law degree at the University of Virginia, settled down with his new family in suburban Johnson County, Kansas, where he opened a law practice in the growing town of Mission. Pearson was uncomfortable with his rather stiff and formal father-in-law, who tried to persuade Pearson to join the grain business. He refused and instead invested in property in Mission and pursued his law career.4

Pearson was thoughtful, enjoyed serious conversation, and had a quick sense of humor that helped make him popular among his colleagues. He was more interested in issues than party politics, but found he had a knack for the details of political campaigning. After serving as city attorney for three Johnson County towns, Westwood, Fairway, and Lenexa, and as a probate judge, Pearson was elected to the Kansas Senate in 1956, filling the seat left open by John Anderson, Jr., of Olathe, who had been appointed attorney general. As a state senator Pearson involved himself in issues related to cities and towns. He also followed his personal interests and took a seat on the Industrial Development and Aeronautics Committee. He served on the Judiciary and Municipalities committees and chaired the Savings and Loan Committee. Pearson supported reform of the process for selecting state supreme court justices and sponsored a bill to create a juvenile justice code. “Pearson was always a reformer,”

said Glee Smith, former Kansas Senate president who served with Pearson. Clifford Hope, Jr., of Garden City also served with Pearson and became a lifelong friend. “While the others went to the Jayhawk [Hotel] to drink,” Hope said, “we would go to the movies. Of course, we drank some, too.” When Anderson, a former Johnson County attorney, ran for Kansas attorney general in 1958, Pearson managed his campaign. When Anderson ran for governor in 1960, Pearson again managed his campaign, and personally flew the candidate in a private plane to events across the state.3

The two “young Turks” successfully challenged leaders of a Republican Party dominated by a generation of older, mostly rural political princes. Frederick Lee “Fred” Hall, an unorthodox progressive from Dodge City, had won the governor’s office in 1954 with support from Democrats, opening the way for change in the Grand Old Party. Among the long-time leaders challenged by Anderson and Pearson were former Governor Edward F. “Ed” Arn of Wichita, senator and former Speaker of the House Paul R. Wunsch of Kingman, state Senator Steadman Ball of Atchison, and newspaper publisher McDill “Huck” Boyd of Phillipsburg. Harry Darby, the GOP kingmaker in Kansas City, Kansas, was among them. Anderson and Pearson built a network of young, progressive activists such as state Representative John V. Glaes of Yates Center, Senator Hope, and Donald P. Schnacke of Topeka. By winning the governorship in 1960 from two-term Democrat George Docking, Anderson became a “giant killer” and Pearson got some of the credit. The traditional Republican Party was temporarily shaken by the success of the two young Turks; but it remained intact, providing both a political home and plenty of anxiety for Pearson during his career.6

In 1960 a new generation of political leadership emerged in America. John F. Kennedy won the presidency and youth was suddenly a strength in politics. Pearson, then forty, showed a tendency to distance himself from the old guard that would characterize his later career in the Senate. Kansas City Star reporter Alvin S. McCoy described Pearson as “a friendly, gregarious type, who seldom irritates anyone.” McCoy went on to say “the older Republicans regarded him with affection, something in the manner of a wayward son who may vote against them on occasion when they become too conservative, but who is to be forgiven his aberrations as due to the impetuosity of youth.” This kind of tolerance on the part of the old guard was less evident when it came to Anderson, whose aggressive prosecutions and refusal to support powerful interests made him some enemies in Kansas City, Kansas, during his time as Johnson County attorney and later as attorney general. Along with his image as a courageous crime fighter, Anderson had a reputation for being unguarded and sometimes dilatory. These characteristics apparently showed themselves during his 1960 campaign. In a hint of the future relationship between the two allies, McCoy reported that Pearson said of Anderson, “If John Anderson wins this nomination, he won’t owe anything to anybody—not even himself.”7

Among the candidates Anderson defeated in the Republican primary that year was Huck Boyd, the politically active publisher of the Phillipsburg Review, a weekly newspaper in north central Kansas. Anderson and his “detail man” Pearson conducted a campaign that, according to McCoy, “confounded the old-line politicians with the refreshing naïveté of babes in the jungles of government.”8 The outcome put Anderson and Pearson in the lead of the progressive wing of the Kansas Republican Party, which included people such as former Governor Alfred M. “Alf” Landon and former Congressman Clifford R. Hope, Sr., of Garden City, who retired in 1957 after thirty years of service in the U.S. House of Representatives. Anderson and Pearson won the admiration of progressive Kansas newspaper editors and publishers. The newspaper people especially liked


8. McCoy, “Gold Dust Twins of Kansas Politics,” Kansas City Times, August 4, 1960; Secretary of State, State of Kansas, Election Statistics, 1960, Primary and General Elections (Topeka: Secretary of State, [1960]), 24. Anderson won with 48.7 percent of the vote; Boyd polled 44.4 percent; and William H. Addington, 6.9 percent.
whom he described as a politician “increasing in stature” who won “overwhelming” victories. Clyde M. Reed, Jr., publisher of the Parsons Sun, was Pearson’s political alter ego in southeast Kansas for two decades. Stuart Awbrey of the Hutchinson News and Whitley Austin of the Salina Journal were also strong Pearson supporters.

Following Anderson’s victory in 1960, Pearson was elected chairman of the state Republican Party. He relinquished the position within a few months, but used it to solidify his relationships with county GOP activists. When U.S. Senator Andrew Schoeppel died in late 1961, Anderson appointed Pearson to fill the seat. Rumors of a “barnyard deal,” in which Pearson would step aside later in 1962 to let Anderson seek election to the office, were false according to both men. Pearson was appointed “without any type of condition,” Anderson insisted. He told McCoy that he wanted to seek a second term as governor to carry out his programs and that his family did not want to move to Washington, DC. “There was no barnyard deal,” said Pearson.

When he was sworn in as a United States senator on February 5, 1962, Pearson was still a new face in the Kansas Republican Party. In August of that year he had to run for his seat in the Republican primary. Assigned as a freshman to lesser committees, Interior and Government Operations, Pearson voted as a midwestern conservative, following the leadership of his own minority party. Indeed, Pearson spent his whole Senate career in the minority. The young Kansan opposed much of President John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier legislation and President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty. Pearson voted for legislation supported by Democratic presidents less frequently than did Kansas’s senior Republican senator, Frank Carlson. When Soviet missiles were discovered in Cuba, Pearson criticized Kennedy for having let U.S. policy towards Cuba “wither on the vine.” Pearson voted against Medicare and said he would do it again. In addition to his floor duties, Pearson kept people’s droll, self-deprecating humor. He liked to tell the story, for example, of meeting a farmer in Bourbon County after a speech he had given on foreign policy. “I don’t know nothing about foreign policy,” said the farmer. “I don’t know anything about farming,” Pearson replied. “We got along fine.” An avid newspaper reader, Pearson courted the editors’ favor by taking their editorials seriously and calling them occasionally to discuss issues. Throughout his political career, Pearson enjoyed the support of most of the Kansas press. Ray Morgan of the Kansas City Star often wrote favorably about Pearson.

9. See, for example, Ray Morgan, “Pearson Says He is in Race,” Kansas City Star, January 27, 1966; Morgan, “GOP Cheers Pearson,” Kansas City Star, January 30, 1972; see also Bob Woody and other former members of Pearson’s Washington staff, interview by author, Washington, DC, April 10, 2005, author’s personal collection. Woody, a Pearson appointee to the staff of the Senate Commerce Committee, told the Bourbon County farmer story.


11. In 1962 both Pearson and Carlson voted with President Kennedy 42 percent of the time. In 1963 Pearson voted with Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson 36 percent of the time, while Carlson voted with them 46 percent of the time. Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 87th Congress, 2nd Session, Volume 18 (Washington, DC: Congressional
Pearson had keen political instincts but was not himself a natural politician. Richard D. Rogers, a Manhattan attorney who later became a federal district judge, told the story of driving Pearson to a small, north central Kansas town and letting him out to walk the business district. “You walk,” Pearson said, “I’ll drive.” Pearson liked to discuss issues with small groups, but when it came to door-to-door campaigning, he “would rather have a root canal,” said John Conard, his first administrative assistant. As a southerner Pearson “thought walking up to a stranger and shaking his hand was rude,” Conard said. Both Conard and Rogers believed Pearson was basically shy.  

With Cliff Hope, Jr., managing his campaign, Pearson won the Republican nomination in August 1962, defeating former Governor Arn, a conservative of the old guard, with 62.3 percent of the vote. Pearson’s decisive victory sent a signal to Kansas voters that a new generation of moderate, pragmatic Republicans had taken charge. In the general election Pearson defeated Democrat Paul Aylward of Ellsworth with 56.9 percent of the vote. Defeating Arn put Pearson in a strong position to deal with any dissatisfaction that might arise within the Kansas GOP as he sought his first full term in office. It also gave him confidence to assert himself as a United State senator.

As Pearson was establishing his position in Kansas, Republican politics were moving to the right nationally. Rogers, Pearson’s close ally and state party chairman, attended the 1964 Republican National Convention as a Kansas delegate and ultimately supported Pennsylvania Governor William Scranton, a liberal who stepped up after Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York dropped out. The nomination eventually went to Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, who had emerged at the head of the conservative movement that was already winning over many party activists in Kansas. After Goldwater lost to the incumbent president, Lyndon Johnson, Pearson went on the offensive for his vision of a balanced political party reminiscent of President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s “middle way.” In a speech in Mission, Kansas, Pearson said the Republican Party “cannot fly on one wing. Our party must have the breadth and tolerance to encompass both a left and a right arm.”

This declaration of independence by a junior Republican senator in a conservative state was less dramatic than it might seem today. Rockefeller, with whom Pearson had become identified, was a respected figure in the national Republican leadership. That leadership included voices ranging from Goldwater and California Governor Ronald Reagan on the right to Rockefeller, Connard, and Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon on the left. Although he started his Senate career voting as a partisan conservative, Pearson by the end of 1964 had moved to a more moderate position. Pearson’s call for tolerance was in tune with the demand for unity in the Kansas GOP. Such unity was needed to respond to the rising strength of the Democrats at the polls, strength evidenced by the election of Democratic Governor George Docking in both 1956 and 1958 and his son Robert Docking in 1966.

Following the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963, civil rights became the overriding issue in the Senate. Pearson voted in favor of the 1964 Civil Rights Act—as did every member of the Kansas House delegation and the state’s senior senator, Frank Carlson. In correspondence with his constituents, Pearson defended Title VII of the bill, which expanded the powers of the attorney general to intervene in alleged cases of  


Pearson stood firm in favor of the final bill, voting to end debate on it after fifty-seven days. “I believe the principles embodied in this bill are morally right,” he wrote to constituents. “We are confronted with a national problem and Federal action is justified because we are dealing with rights guaranteed under the Federal Constitution.” Later, in a column headlined “Civil Rights Tests Senate Procedures,” Pearson expressed to readers of weekly newspapers in Kansas his reservations about the rules that allowed extended filibusters such as the one led by Senator Richard Russell of Georgia against the Civil Rights Act. The act passed June 19, 1964, and became law.16

Pearson was guarded in his public comments on equal rights for black Americans and apparently made no major speech on the subject in Kansas or in the Senate. But he was outspoken against the influence of racial prejudice in the policy-making process. “It would be a sad commentary on American politics,” he wrote in a weekly newspaper column, “if the decisive votes were cast out of fear, bigotry, or ignorance rather than based upon the capabilities of the candidates and the issues involved.”17 The Kansan who grew up in the South may have understood that actions spoke louder than words when it came to race. Pearson later joined a bipartisan civil rights caucus that backed fair housing legislation. He remained part of that informal group into the 1970s.18

In 1966 Pearson was up for election to his first full term, with the prospect of establishing himself in the Senate for years. Somewhat surprisingly, three-term Congressman Robert F. Ellsworth of Lawrence decided to challenge Pearson in the Republican primary. Although he and Pearson shared positions on many issues, Ellsworth had the backing of some of the old guard in the Kansas GOP. Cliff Hope, Jr., who had been Pearson’s close companion in the Kansas Senate, saw the influence of what he called “the Goldwater people” in Ellsworth’s decision.19 Ellsworth was a member of the liberal Wednesday Club in the House but kept close ties with conservatives at home; he had always resisted any “moderate” label. While the conservative movement may have prompted the Ellsworth challenge, it was driven as well by Ellsworth’s own ambition to move up and a desire for payback on the part of the old guard for the progressive sweep of 1960 that Pearson and Anderson had led in Kansas.20

According to Hope, Huck Boyd’s protégé, Congressman Robert J. “Bob” Dole of Russell, encouraged Ellsworth to run. But Dole did not campaign for Ellsworth. In the end Pearson defeated Ellsworth by 54 to 45


19. Hope, Jr., interview.
When Senator Pearson stood for reelection in 1966, he faced a somewhat surprising challenge in the Republican primary from three-term Congressman Robert Ellsworth of Lawrence, drawn at left in a campaign brochure. The Ellsworth campaign emphasized the senator’s poor 1965 attendance rating, despite the fact that it was largely the result of family illness, and ran “Missing Pearson Bureau” ads on the radio. The overriding issue of the campaign would be “activism versus absenteeism,” and Ellsworth asserted that Pearson had “the worst attendance record of any Republican in the United States Senate.” Pearson handily won the primary, nevertheless, and went on to defeat former Democratic Congressman J. Floyd Breeding of Rolla in November by 52 to 45 percent of the vote.

Pearson defeated former Democratic Congressman J. Floyd Breeding of Rolla in southwest Kansas by 52 to 45 percent of the vote.22

The contest with Ellsworth became personal for Pearson, who was hurt by radio ads Ellsworth launched in which a search for the senator was put out by a


“Missing Pearson Bureau” after he had missed a number of votes. Senator Pearson had missed roll calls in 1965 when he returned to Kansas to help with his teenage son, Thomas, who had suffered an emotional disturbance and was treated at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka. According to John Conard, Ellsworth had been helpful to Pearson when he first came to the Senate. Now Ellsworth knew about “Tommy,” Pearson told his staff, but aired the ads anyway. The overriding issue of the campaign would be “activism versus absenteeism,” Ellsworth’s ads asserted, and Pearson had “the worst attendance record of any Republican in the United States Senate.” Pearson believed there were some lines that should not be crossed even in the heat of a political campaign. Despite a prolonged public attempt at reconciliation, the once-cordial relationship between Pearson and Ellsworth was lost.  

Pearson’s relationship with another Kansas politician, Bob Dole, developed into a carefully veiled, but intense rivalry. The styles of the two Republicans were altogether different. Pearson disliked campaigning. Dole loved and was very good at it. Dole was intensely loyal to the Republican Party, while Pearson seemed at times only to tolerate its demands. When Pearson went to the Senate, Dole was finishing his first term in the U.S. House of Representatives. The two got along well enough, according to Conard, but when Dole won a seat in the Senate in 1968, following Senator Frank Carlson’s retirement, the press spotlight shifted to the colorful, badly wounded veteran of the Allied invasion of Italy in World War II.  

Pearson, the senior senator, was shaded further by Dole’s loyalty to President Nixon, a loyalty Pearson had rarely demonstrated. 

In March 1968 Pearson dramatically displayed his distance from the rising conservatism in the Republican Party in Kansas when he introduced his classmate from the University of Virginia Law School, Democratic Senator Robert F. Kennedy, to a crowd of cheering students at a Landon Lecture at Kansas State University in Manhattan, only two days after Kennedy’s announcement that he was running for president. Kennedy went on to the University of Kansas at Lawrence, where he called for negotiations on Vietnam. “I don’t accept the idea that this is just [an American] military effort,” he told students.  


Many Republicans in the state were stunned by Pearson’s boldness, but this courtesy to the charismatic Kennedy gave Pearson new credibility among young voters.

During the period of Nixon’s first term, from 1969 to 1973, Pearson’s independence as a legislator became fully apparent. Early in the Nixon years Pearson joined the Wednesday Club in the Senate, a group of some sixteen moderate and liberal Republicans who met each Wednesday to discuss issues. Senator Jacob Javits of New York was the informal leader. While they occasionally invited representatives of the Nixon administration to join them, the group, which had no official standing within the GOP caucus, often brought in outside experts. The Wednesday Club focused on foreign policy, a subject of genuine interest to Pearson. During his campaign against Ellsworth, Pearson had voiced his concern about rapidly changing conditions in the world. “Failure to adjust our policy,” he said, “will destine us to indecision and reflex reactions to new challenges,” as he believed had happened in Cuba and was happening in Vietnam.26 Pearson joined many of his Wednesday Club colleagues in seeking to restrain the president’s expansion of the Vietnam War. This effort peaked with an amendment offered by Democrat Frank Church of Idaho and Republican John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky to stop the bombing of Laos and Cambodia.

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Pearson cosponsored the amendment and voted for it. He also questioned the Supersonic Transport System proposed by the administration, and voted against authorizing several new weapons systems, including the Safeguard anti-ballistic missile system. He showed his independence on domestic issues by cosponsoring legislation on transportation, campaign finance, and consumer rights with liberal Democrats. In August 1970 Pearson voiced his opposition to the Vietnam War, even as Dole was becoming the Nixon administration’s leading spokesman on the Senate floor for its war policies. The two Kansas senators differed sharply on foreign policy issues, and on some key domestic issues, such as the nomination by President Nixon of Earl Butz as secretary of agriculture (Pearson voted against the confirmation; Dole voted in favor). But the two Kansans nearly always voted in tandem on matters directly affecting their state, such as maintaining farm support programs, building of the Vietnam War. He had campaigned in support of the war in 1966 and continued to support it, with some reservations. “Address by Senator James B. Pearson,” Cooperative Urban Teacher Education Banquet, Wichita, Kansas, August 30, 1970, Administrative Series, box 360, folder 46, Schedules and Speeches, Pearson Papers. The Cooper-Church amendment passed the Senate by a vote of 58 to 37. “The 92nd Congress,” Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report 29 (January 15, 1971): 116–17.

During the early years of Richard Nixon’s administration, Pearson joined the Wednesday Club in the Senate, a group of some sixteen moderate and liberal Republicans who met each Wednesday to discuss various issues. Senator Jacob Javits, a New York Republican first elected to the U.S. Senate in 1956 and pictured serving with Pearson on the Foreign Relations Committee in May 1973, was the informal leader. Over the years Pearson pursued many opportunities to work “across the aisle” and with his more liberal Republican colleagues, such as Senator Javits, who once called Pearson “an enlightened conservative who played a very useful role in reviewing policy matters from a Middle Western point of view.” After nearly a quarter-century in the Senate and with his Republican Party moving further and further to the political right, Javits was denied renomination in 1980, two years after his Kansas colleague took voluntary retirement. Photograph courtesy of Mrs. James B. Pearson.

27. In a speech to a teachers’ banquet in Wichita, Pearson said the United States “should continue the Nixon policy of disengagement and withdrawal from the war in Indochina at the earliest possible time.” This was Pearson’s first public statement urging an early end

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flood control reservoirs, and bringing urban renewal to small cities.  

One of the most politically costly of Pearson’s legislative stands was his opposition to Nixon’s Safeguard antiballistic missile system (ABM) in the summer of 1969. The president proposed a system of defensive missiles and radar to protect the nation’s long-range, offensive Minuteman nuclear missiles. After studying Safeguard, Pearson found it technically unsound and feared it would provoke a Soviet offensive buildup; he decided to oppose its deployment. “For one in the Senate to make a contribution to the solution to the difficult problems affecting our national security . . . each Senator must exercise his own best judgment in accordance with the quiet turning of his conscience,” Pearson reasoned on the Senate floor. “Not only is this the responsible role for a Senator but it is also the one by which public policy can be defined and understood in our democratic process.”

In explaining his stance against Safeguard, Pearson had stated his fundamental idea of what it meant to be a United State senator.

His position on the ABM was well received by the Wednesday Club, if not altogether in the Republican cloakroom. Along with Pearson’s other stands against Nixon’s national security policies, this one caused Pearson problems with Republican Party regulars in Kansas. “How can you know more about this than the president does?,” one constituent asked. In the end deployment of Safeguard was authorized and Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, took it to Moscow and used it as diplomatic leverage to negotiate the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I). This followed an agreement with the Soviets limiting anti-ballistic missile systems to one per nation. After consultation with the White House, Pearson determined the president’s purpose was sensible and changed his position, voting in 1970 to oppose efforts to limit funding for Safeguard. Certainly there were political considerations in Pearson’s reversal. Although a run for reelection was two years away, he was concerned about “stretching the rubber band too far” between his legislative record and pro-Nixon Republicans back home. Pearson was said to be in trouble by some in Kansas; but he continued to be, in the words of Tom Korlogos, Senate liaison for the Nixon White House, “a tough vote to get.”

It was during this period that Pearson began to be looked at by his Republican Senate colleagues as a leader. His humor was celebrated in the GOP cloakroom. When a young staffer with two children said his wife was pregnant, Pearson’s quick response was, “Still, or again?” When the Republican Party caucus reorganized in the fall of 1969 in preparation for the opening of the second session of the Ninety-first Congress, Pearson was persuaded to offer himself for the whip position. He received some national press attention and at one point thought he had enough votes to win. But when the closed-door balloting was over on September 7, 1969, Pearson had lost by one vote to Senator Robert P. Griffin of Michigan. Griffin had made a name for himself in 1968

during the battle to defeat the confirmation of Associate Justice Abe Fortas, President Johnson’s nominee for chief justice of the Supreme Court. This was the first and last time Pearson would try for a leadership position in his party. In a sense his defeat by Griffin was the high-water mark of his influence and that of the Wednesday Club within the Senate Republican caucus.

It was almost as if Pearson’s qualities were best appreciated in the Democratic caucus. His bipartisan voting record was the second highest among Senate Republicans. Pearson had made allies among Democrats, principally through his work on the Commerce Committee. Russell Long of Louisiana, son of the legendary Governor Huey Long, was one of them. Affable and powerful, Russell Long chaired the Finance Committee, the real insiders’ panel in the Senate. Long once offered Pearson a seat on his committee, suggesting it would be good for Pearson at reelection time. “On Finance, you can make people happy,” Long said. When Pearson replied he was thinking of a seat on the Foreign Relations Committee, Long was appalled. Determined to pursue his interest in foreign policy and to try to deal with “the great issues of the day,” Pearson took a seat on Foreign Relations, the committee chaired by J. William Fulbright, the Democrat from Arkansas who split with President Johnson on Vietnam. Interestingly, Dole later took a seat on the Finance Committee and used it as the platform for his successful bid to become minority leader.

As Pearson asserted his independence in the Senate, disaster hit Wichita, Kansas. On October 2, 1970, a plane crash in the Rocky Mountains killed thirty members of the Wichita State University football team along with some of their fans, coaches, and school administrators. As an ally of Wichita aviation manufacturers and the ranking Republican on the aviation subcommittee of the Senate Commerce Committee, Pearson felt responsible for bringing to bear the full authority of the federal government to determine the cause of the crash. He sent Joe Dennis, his administrative assistant in Kansas, to the crash site near the base of Loveland Pass, which stood at 11,990 feet. Pearson also sent Bob Woody, his Commerce Committee staff aide, to hearings in Wichita held by the National Transportation Safety Board. Pearson himself did not go to Wichita, perhaps out of concern about appearing to exploit the tragedy. He was also engaged at that time in final negotiations on financing for the Airport and Airways Development Act, his principal legislative achievement to that time. His junior colleague, Bob Dole, did attend the hearings, underlining Pearson’s absence.

On another front Pearson was having trouble with the Nixon administration, trouble that came from back home. When U.S. Chief District Judge Arthur Stanley, Jr., of Kansas City, Kansas, announced he would retire in 1971, John Anderson sought to succeed Stanley and was on the short list of candidates. However, Anderson had alienated Stanley and his allies in the 1950s by supporting efforts by the city of Kansas City, Kansas, to annex the Fairfax Industrial District. Stanley and his family had sold land for the district to the Union Pacific Railroad. Stanley himself was for a time the lead attorney representing the forty-one industries in the district, companies that included General Motors, the National Biscuit Company, and North American Aviation, which manufactured the B-25 bomber. At one point twenty-five thousand people were employed in the district. When Stanley’s clients lost their bid to reverse the annexation in the state supreme court, Anderson as attorney general refused to appeal the court’s decision. The case eventually went to the U.S. Supreme Court and was decided in favor of the city. Anderson had stood up to powerful interests and burnished his reputation for courage and independence—but made lifelong enemies of Stanley and his allies.

A renowned veteran of two world wars and a powerful former state senator, Stanley swore Anderson would never get a federal judgeship. Stanley had a

32. Pearson, who had also voted against Fortas, believed Dole had not voted for him at the critical moment, but since the balloting was secret, this could not be confirmed. Senator James B. Pearson, personal communication with author, Washington, DC, September 7, 1969, author’s personal collection; Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 90th Congress, 2nd Session, 1968, Volume 24 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Service, 1968), 54–5.


36. Rogers interviews, September 3, 2006, and November 3, 2009. Large law firms in Kansas City, Kansas, and Olathe, as well as the Wyandotte County Bar Association, backed Justice Earl O’Connor rather than Anderson. The executive committee of the Johnson County Bar Association compromised and endorsed both O’Connor
Pearson navigated his way through the Anderson affair with a minimum of political damage, but his distance from Nixon and differences with Dole left him looking vulnerable as his reelection approached in 1972. Some members of his party thought Pearson “was not Republican enough.” There were rumors that Kansas Governor Robert Docking, a popular, pro-business Democrat, would challenge Pearson. For over a year Pearson traveled home nearly every weekend to mend fences. When it came time for him to announce his intentions, Pearson and several of his Washington staff braved snow, ice, and congested airports to arrive just in time at the annual Kansas Day Celebration in Topeka on January 29. “I want to go on because I believe in Kansas; I believe in the Republican Party; [and] I believe in myself,” Pearson told an anxious audience of Republican stalwarts. By the end of his brief announcement, the crowd was applauding loudly. The Docking threat did not materialize, and Dole agreed to chair Pearson’s campaign. Pearson went on to defeat Harlan Dale House, a farmer from Goodland, in the primary with 82 percent of the vote, and the Democratic nominee Arch Tetzlaf, a former German Luftwaffe pilot, in the general election. Pearson won that election with 73 percent of the vote.

These victories served to enhance Pearson’s stature as a serious, bipartisan lawmaker. A Kansas City Star editorial was highly complimentary: “Pearson is not a rubber stamp. He takes time to think issues through. When he speaks or acts, you can be sure he knows the subject.” The “man in the middle” had earned a second full term.

Not really comfortable as a politician, Pearson devoted himself to legislating. Among his most notable legislative achievements was passage of the Airport and Airways Development Act of 1970. Pearson had earned the respect of his majority Democratic colleagues on the Commerce Committee by supporting, and sticking with, a number of their initiatives including nationwide unit pricing for groceries. As the ranking minority member


38. Jerry Waters, Pearson’s administrative assistant, personal communication with author and other former members of Pearson’s Washington staff, Washington, DC, April 10, 2005, author’s personal collection.


41. John Kirtland to the author, July 5, 2010, author’s personal collection. Kirtland was also Pearson’s appointee to the Commerce Committee staff.
An important piece of legislation championed by Pearson, in collaboration with Democrats, was a bill to deregulate the wellhead price of “new” natural gas. Louisiana was the leading producer of natural gas and that state’s low-level price controls stymied the growth of a national market. Pearson teamed with fellow Commerce Committee member Lloyd Bentsen of Texas to carve out a compromise that lifted price controls from newly drilled wells, while leaving controls on existing wells. Again, it was Long, Pearson’s frequent ally, who suggested the compromise. The Pearson-Bentsen bill was introduced in 1974 and passed the Senate but failed in the House. In late December 1977 a conference report in which the Pearson-Bentsen bill had been incorporated was adopted and sent to President Jimmy Carter, who

favored deregulation and signed it. With modifications in subsequent years, the act made natural gas available as a relatively clean and inexpensive fuel nationwide.  

Pearson also devoted much time and effort to rural development. His concern for the overcrowding of America’s cities and the depletion of the rural population was real, and it led Pearson to become the principal Republican contributor to federal agricultural policies aimed at trying to balance economic growth. In July 1967 Pearson teamed with Robert Kennedy to back a bill creating incentives for industry to bring jobs to inner cities. Later that year Pearson joined Democratic Senator Fred Harris of Oklahoma to introduce the Rural Jobs Development Act, which created incentives for the location of industry in rural communities. This bill was introduced in revised form many times. In addition Pearson sponsored bills to create a Rural Development Bank and a Rural Development Center. Along with his speeches, articles, and statements on the Senate floor, Pearson’s legislative initiatives in this area helped bring about the Rural Development program that today is an integral part of the mission of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The program’s loans and grants for housing, infrastructure, and business start-ups owe their origin to the ideas put forward by Pearson and his colleagues.

Pearson’s other notable legislative initiatives included several bills to limit campaign spending and legislation to establish a newsman’s privilege for protecting confidential sources. Few of these bills became law, but each contributed to further consideration of policy changes. In the mid-1970s Pearson took a strong interest in the deregulation of major transportation industries. During the Carter administration, Pearson joined his colleagues on the Commerce Committee, Democrats and Republicans, to fashion the Air Transportation Regulatory Reform Act of 1978, which the president signed into law. That legislation opened the way, for better or worse, for the hub-and-spoke airline system we have today, with its relatively low airfares and huge passenger numbers. Pearson also led a successful legislative effort to speed the Interstate Commerce Commission’s handling of railroad track abandonments. Always a believer in the benefits to the nation of private enterprise, Pearson still showed his willingness to intervene in the private sector by supporting expanded service by Amtrak, the government-backed rail passenger corporation.

As he demonstrated during the civil rights debate, Pearson took an interest from early in his Senate career in modifying the rules surrounding the filibuster. Political science professor H. Edward Flentje, who worked on Pearson’s Washington, DC, staff in 1968, recalled one of his first research assignments was on Rule XXII, the cloture rule, which can be used to end a filibuster. Pearson loved to debate issues, but understood the importance of modifying the cloture rule so a Senate majority could act on the people’s business. He lent his name to several efforts to reduce the requirement that a two-thirds majority, or sixty-six votes, was needed to end debate. One effort in particular, led by Senator Javits in 1969, came close to succeeding, but did not. At that time Pearson was the principal Republican cosponsor, with Senator Church, of the modification resolution that failed on the Senate floor.

As support continued to grow for modifying Rule XXII, the Democrats in 1975 turned to Pearson to help carry a resolution on the floor. In January of that year Pearson cosponsored with Senator Walter Mondale of Minnesota a resolution that reduced to three-fifths, or sixty, the number of votes required to end debate. Mondale was frustrated by the use of the filibuster to block bills he had introduced on housing and to aid desegregating school districts. As Mondale put it, he and Pearson respected the right of individual senators “to debate—to speak, to ventilate, to delay, to be heard,” but both saw the high bar of the cloture rule as an impediment to reasoned decision making. “There is a time for debate,” Pearson said, “and there is a time to act.”

43. Kirtland to the author, July 5, 2010. Senator Bentsen was the Democratic nominee for vice president in 1988 on the Michael Dukakis ticket.


46. H. Edward Flentje was Pearson’s staff appointee to the Commerce Committee from 1968 to 1970. The resolution to reduce the number of votes needed for cloture to two-thirds (sixty-six) won a test vote, 51–47, but Vice President Hubert Humphrey’s ruling that the Senate could change its rules at the beginning of a new Congress by a simple majority was immediately overturned. Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1969, 2-S.

47. Pearson offered the motion that a simple majority could end debate on the resolution he and Mondale had introduced. The parliamentarian advised Rockefeller to rule in favor of Pearson’s motion. Sarah A. Truel, “Walter F. Mondale and the Filibuster: The Evolution of Agenda Control in the U.S. Senate,” paper prepared...
Despite resistance led by “rules wizard” James B. Allen, Democrat of Alabama, the Mondale-Pearson resolution passed. Allen managed to soften it, however. In search of a compromise, Russell Long suggested sixty votes be required to end debate regardless how many senators were present and voting. Mondale and Pearson had wanted three-fifths of senators present and voting, a number that might not always have amounted to sixty. Rockefeller, then vice president, was presiding. On the advice of the parliamentarian, Rockefeller ruled that the Senate could, as it organized in a new session of Congress, change its rules, including Rule XXII, by a simple majority. On February 24, 1975, the Senate acted to modify Rule XXII and require sixty votes for cloture. This was the most significant change in the cloture rule since it was first invoked under President Woodrow Wilson. Unfortunately, the Mondale-Pearson modification of the rule has not helped in the long run. The battle lines on Rule XXII are drawn almost entirely along party lines today, and the filibuster is used not to protect a region’s customs but to stymie the majority’s legislative agenda. With the bar for cloture at sixty votes, regardless how many senators are present and voting, the number of threatened filibusters has grown exponentially, especially in recent years.48

When in 1975 it was time to seek a successor for U.S. District Judge George Templar, Anderson again entered the fray. The situation unfolded in much the same way it did in 1971. Anderson could not muster enough support among members of the Kansas bar. Even after state District Judge Albert B. Fletcher of Junction City, a leading candidate, took an appointment to the U.S. Military Court of Appeals, Anderson remained only one of a number of candidates. Pearson again held out for a time for Anderson, but he did not make much headway. Pearson and Dole finally got together and agreed on Richard Rogers, who had previously served as Pearson’s campaign manager, a state senator, and chairman of the Kansas Republican Party. Anderson continued to blame Pearson for not trying hard enough to obtain a federal judgeship for him.49

From an early stage of his Senate career, Pearson took an interest in what was going on in the world. He made many official trips abroad to Europe, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. He agreed with Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana that the number of U.S. troops in Europe should be drawn down, and pursued this policy as a member of the Armed Services Committee. Pearson twice served as a delegate to the United Nations General Assembly, first in 1973 as a representative of the Nixon administration and again in 1978 as a representative of the Senate.

Pearson had an abiding interest in institutional reform. In 1962, following a visit to former President Herbert Hoover at his home in Iowa, Pearson joined Senator Abraham Ribicoff, Democrat of Connecticut, to propose a new Hoover Commission to reorganize the federal bureaucracy. Early in his Senate career Pearson proposed a study of the way foreign policy was made. As an early proponent of campaign finance reform, Pearson sponsored a bill in 1970 with Senator John Pastore, Democrat of Rhode Island, to limit spending on broadcast campaign ads. The legislation was passed by Congress but vetoed by President Nixon. Pearson’s several bipartisan efforts to reform campaign finance were very much part of the process that led to later initiatives such as the McCain-Feingold bill of 2007. As is the case with his efforts to reform Rule XXII, Pearson’s campaign finance reforms efforts have been pushed aside by subsequent changes, including the shift to the right in our political system and the rise of partisanship.50

As a man in the middle, James B. Pearson made a difference in the fields of transportation, rural development, and foreign policy. The success of his efforts such as the one with Mondale to modify Rule XXII would not have come if Pearson had not been willing to lend his name, and his hand, to enterprises championed by the most liberal

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49. John Anderson, Jr., interview with author, Overland Park, Kansas, June 14, 2006; see also Rogers interviews, September 3, 2006, and November 3, 2009; Beatty, “For the Benefit of the People.”
members of the Senate. Even before his own Republican Party began to divide between “Goldwater” and “Rockefeller” factions in 1964, Pearson found he could be most effective working across the political aisle. But sixteen years later the Senate had changed, and bipartisan collaboration was more difficult to achieve. By November 1977 Pearson had decided he would not seek reelection. He announced this early so candidates for his seat would have time to raise money and campaign the following year.

Much had changed in the Senate that was not to Pearson’s liking. After the Watergate scandal of 1973 and 1974, Pearson’s son, Bill, observed, “My father didn’t like the atmosphere. It wasn’t fun anymore.”

On his return from a conference in Europe in 1973, Pearson told the author he thought a global shift to

51. William Pearson interview.
the right was coming, and that it would be profound.\footnote{52} Always prescient about political trends, Pearson seemed to doubt there would be a place for him in the future. He was well aware of himself as a man in the middle. In the run-up to the 1978 elections a young conservative Republican, Howard Wilkins, Jr., was surfacing in Kansas with backing from some oil and gas moguls in Wichita. This insurgency may have hoped to scare Pearson into not running for reelection. But it had the opposite effect. Pearson made it clear to allies such as Bob Williams, a long-time supporter among Wichita oilmen, that he would not leave the field under fire. Relying on relationships he had forged in seeking the deregulation of natural gas, Pearson succeeded in isolating the would-be challengers. It was they who withdrew from the field, leaving Pearson to decide his future on his own terms, according to Pearson’s long-time administrative assistant in Washington, Jerry Waters.\footnote{53}

As his son Bill recalled, Pearson was the kind of person who would remain deeply engaged in his professional life, whether it was law or politics. The senator’s preoccupation with his work may have contributed to the decision made in 1966 by his wife Martha, who did not like the political life in Washington, to move back to the family’s suburban home in Prairie Village, Kansas. Her concern was with raising the Pearson’s four children. With half a continent between them, the couple grew apart and, after Pearson retired from the Senate, they divorced. Pearson remarried in December 1980 to Margaret Lynch, a long-time Capitol Hill staffer. She had worked for Senator Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, the successor in the role of Republican minority leader to Everett Dirksen of Illinois, and then later for Pearson. The couple lived in a house in Georgetown and at Pearson’s rural home near Baldwin City, where both Margaret and James Pearson served as trustees of Baker University, a small liberal arts college with historical ties to the Methodist Church.\footnote{54}

After his retirement from the Senate, Pearson practiced law with the Washington, DC, office of LeBoeuf, Lamb, Lieby and MacRae. He and former Democratic Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut cochaired a commission to study the structure and procedures of the Senate. Their recommendations included reducing the number of committees on which senators served, and that recommendation was acted upon.\footnote{55} Pearson and his wife traveled several times to Japan and Southeast Asia, and he served as a director of the East-West Center based in Honolulu, Hawaii. In 2004 the U.S. Post Office in Prairie Village, Kansas, was named the James B. Pearson Post Office. Representative Dennis Moore, a Democrat from Johnson County, was instrumental in securing the designation.

In failing health, Pearson retired to Margaret’s family home in Gloucester, Massachusetts, keeping in touch with former Senate colleagues, mostly by telephone. Among those colleagues were Edward Brooke, Howard Baker, and Walter Mondale. In his later years Pearson used a wheelchair and was reluctant to appear in public. His contact with former Senate colleagues diminished over time, according to several sources. Democratic Senator John Culver of Iowa, a favorite traveling companion of Pearson’s, observed this in an interview, and traveled to Gloucester for one last meeting with his old friend. Culver reported that he and Pearson “shared many memorable moments and previous times together.” Baker, who was best man in Pearson’s 1980 wedding and called him his “best friend in the Senate,” eventually lost contact with Pearson. Daryl Schuster, an aide who spent many hours driving Pearson to events in Kansas, said he thought Pearson did not want to be dependent on anyone and was inclined to distance himself from those who had helped him. “Jim Pearson was harder on his friends than his enemies,” Schuster said. Many members of Pearson’s staff shared the sense that the senator could turn on and off of those who worked for him.\footnote{56} This inclination toward independence may have played a part in Pearson’s handling of John Anderson’s ambition for a federal judgeship. It certainly showed itself in Pearson’s on-again, off-again relationship with the Kansas Republican Party, and in his response to many of the Cold War policies of President Richard Nixon. Independence seemed to suit Pearson, personally and politically.

After several years of kidney dialysis in Gloucester, Pearson died on January 13, 2009, at the age of eighty-eight; he was buried in Oak Hill Cemetery in Washinton, DC. A memorial service for him was held at the First

53 Jerry Waters, personal communication with author, January 15, 2009, author’s personal collection.  
55 Secretary of the Senate, Historical Office, personal communication with the author, April 2008, author’s personal collection.  
United Methodist Church in Baldwin City on April 3, 2009. His legacy is carried on by the James B. Pearson Fellowship for graduates of Kansas colleges and universities to study abroad. The fellowship was created in 1978 with an endowment of $100,000 from Pearson’s unused campaign fund. It is administered by the Kansas Board of Regents. Over one hundred Kansas students have benefited from the fellowship. In addition Pearson’s name is on a fellowship in Washington to allow foreign service officers to spend time working in state and local government. Pearson believed U.S. diplomats needed to learn more about what was going on at home. “What this country needs,” Pearson often said, “is a Secretary of State named Smith.”


This adopted son of Kansas made his mark quietly. He analyzed issues himself. He worked in his deliberate way with people of very different persuasions to reach his goals. As a United States senator from Kansas, Pearson was an effective educator of his constituents, constantly encouraging them to consider complex issues on their merits. He stood for his principles, even when a political price had to be paid. Never the grandstanding politician, he was nonetheless a formidable campaign organizer and one of the most astute politicians Kansas has seen. He knew how to use issues to his benefit and make himself the “man in the white hat.” He won his seat in three elections by substantial margins. He was a man for his times, who likely would not have done well today. He was a man in the middle when the middle was where you could get things done. His example is available to young people who are interested in pursuing political leadership that puts governing ahead of ideology or partisan advantage. [KH]