Light on the Brinkley Issue in Kansas: Letters of William A. White to Dan D. Casement

JAMES C. CAREY and VERLIN R. EASTERLING

TWO examples of an older generation of men who lived their lives in Kansas but knew intimately the great and near-great and were vitally concerned with public issues are W. A. White of Emporia and Dan D. Casement of Manhattan. Their range of interests and their intense feeling for the welfare of the American man in contemporary society often led them to resort to the power of the pen both for publication and in letters where some inmost thoughts were bared. Both men were extremely effective in the use of the now near-gone art of writing personal letters on public issues.

White’s reputation for free, frank expression stands out on the record. His close friend, and intimate correspondent, Casement, is in his own words, “the last Viking of the Plains.” Former rancher of the open range, breeder of nationally famous Herefords and quarter horses, vitriolic critic of the New Deal farm program, he remains among the most rugged of the remaining exponents of rugged individualism. By pen and voice he has entered state and national political discussion whenever he felt the dignity of the individual was imperiled. Casement, described as an “educated roughneck” by George Clammer, Manhattan lawyer, loathed the public official who valued constituents’ votes above honest expression of opinion. His “fearless pronouncements” against his congressmen gained attention far beyond the limits of Kansas.

It is our purpose here to look at one incident in Kansas history. That is the action of these two men concerning one aspect of the gubernatorial race in 1932. Prior to examining White’s letters to Casement on this point, it is important to note one interpretation Casement made of his friend’s character. White was characterized by Casement in a letter to Dr. Harold Willis Dodds, president of Princeton University, as follows:

DR. JAMES C. CAREY and DR. VERLIN ROBERT EASTERLING are associate professors in the history, government and philosophy department at Kansas State College, Manhattan.

1. William Allen White, known as the “Sage of Emporia,” died in 1944. Dan D. Casement, 84 years old at this writing (1952), is a very active citizen of Manhattan.

2. From “back home” he wrote to his congressman as follows: “If the vote represents your sincere convictions, it gives conclusive proof of an inferior mentality. I ask you, how long can America hope to survive if the people’s chosen representatives persist in the shameless display of either (1) such a low order of intelligence, or (2) such a dearth of courage and honor as your vote in this instance has evidenced.”—An editorial from the New York Sun reprinted in The Watch Dog, New York, published by the National Economy League, July, 1939.
P. S. I have sent your speech to my dear friend, Bill White in Emporia, who believes profoundly in democracy but who is so damned patient and tolerant and forgiving of human weaknesses that he seems able to see little threat to liberty in the present political scene and sometimes appears to be almost incapable of righteous anger even against demagogues, be they ever so contemptible.³

It would appear that at times White needed to be pushed into a fight. The “Sage of Emporia” who had helped to whip the Klan in Kansas could not make up his mind to pronounce against the political neophyte from Milford, Dr. John R. Brinkley, who was making a second serious bid for the office of governor.

“The trouble with Brinkley,” editorialized White in the Emporia Gazette on October 7, 1932, “is his inexperience. He is not a political crook. He just doesn’t know any better.”⁴ The editor claimed that the “weird wizard,” Brinkley, who promised anything for votes, would, if elected, not only regain his medical license but would “wreck Kansas.” On September 23, 1932, White wrote as follows:

Dear Dan:

You and I agree exactly on the Brinkley situation. Brinkley is going to carry this state if Landon and the State Committee doesn’t make an aggressive, two-fisted fight.

The reason why I don’t do it is that my fight would of course be linked up inevitably with Landon in spite of my protest and if Landon was licked they would point the finger of scorn at me. And blame me for the defeat of Hoover in Kansas also. Until they get some guts I cannot begin to fight. But Lord I would like to start! I am not afraid of a libel suit!

If you have any suggestions to make how I can proceed, please let me know. Sincerely yours,

W. A. White ⁵

The next few days, late in September of an interesting election year, must have been a time of decision. Just five days later, on September 28, there followed a brief but revealing letter:

Dear Dan:

I’ve crossed the Rubicon.

I am not going to take my Brinkley licking lying down. I enclose an editorial and I am going to shoot more of them. This may not please Alf and may not please anyone, but it satisfies my conscience. I think as you say we have let this fellow get away with murder because we are afraid of offending his poor half-witted dupes, and I am going to go to it.

³. Draft of a letter, Casement to Dodds, dated April 24, 1937, in “Casement Manuscripts.”
⁴. The Emporia Gazette, October 7, 1932.
⁵. Letter from White to Casement dated September 23, 1932, in “Casement Mans.” Neither the original nor carbon copies of Casement’s letters to White have been found at this writing (1952).
Take this around to Fay Seaton and tell him I dare him to print it.  

Sincerely yours,

WILL

On November 9, 1932, during the evident flush of victory in a battle furiously fought and won, Casement received the following unique letter:

DEAR DAN:

I owe a lot to you. Your letter prodded me up and I decided not to take my licking lying down. I wrote a letter to start with, to all my friends in the daily newspaper business, thirty of them, and asked them to join me. Then I wrote this editorial “Save Kansas” and sent it out and they all printed it. I didn't consult with the State Central Committee, nor with Landon, nor with Mulvane on behalf of the National Committee. I just went to it hog wild and plumb loco which I believe is my best technique. Then I got a list of Republican weekly newspapers and wrote to them and soon had a hundred editors with whom I was corresponding and to whom I was sending editorials every week and to the dailies two or three times a week. And we shot the old goat’s guts full of holes and there he lies today belly up.

And you did it and I thank you.

Always cordially yours,

W. A. WHITE

Three more days passed during which the Emporian could evaluate the recent political campaign. On November 12, 1932, this note was penned:

DEAR DAN:

I had the same fun fighting Brinkley that I had fighting the Klan and it was the same outfit, the organized moron minority, plus the despairing and the disgruntled who knew better. Generally both outfits divide in the ballot box, but this year they got together and two years ago they got together. But it is a comfort to think Brinkley did not get a larger per cent of the vote this year than he got last year.

Come down and see us some time.

Sincerely yours,

W. A. WHITE

The “despairing and the disgruntled” in the above letter reminds one of White's early impressions of the social elements which comprised the Populist movement and provoked his “What's the Matter With Kansas.” Still there was a difference, but in the light of what has happened at the level of state government and politics, the public-spirited citizen had a duty to perform. The editor of the Emporia Gazette could turn crusader and help to save the people from what he considered folly and poor judgment. There was an era of

6. This editorial, entitled “Save Kansas,” was printed in the Manhattan Mercury, October 8, 1932.

7. Letter from White to Casement dated September 28, 1932, in “Casement Misc.”

8. Letter from White to Casement dated November 9, 1932, ibid.

9. Letter from White to Casement dated November 12, 1932, ibid.
"Governors' trouble": Jim and Ma Ferguson in Texas, and Walton and Johnston in Oklahoma. There have been characters who graced or disgraced the office of chief executive of states such as "Alfalfa Bill" Murray of Oklahoma, "Kingfish" Long and "You Are My Sunshine" Davis of Louisiana, and "Pass the Biscuits Pappy" O'Daniel of Texas. On the other hand, presidential timber came out of the West in 1936, Alf Landon of Kansas. Depression and disillusionment brought some strange political manifestations. So it is not surprising that Kansas narrowly missed having a unique "medicine-man" as governor in 1932.

Everett Rich of Emporia State Teachers College has elicited a fine collection of letters from White's friends in connection with the opening of the new William Allen White Memorial Library at Emporia. The following is an excerpt from the letter by H. J. Haskell of the Kansas City Star:

When "Old Doc Brinkley" made such an astonishing showing in the Kansas governorship race Mr. White sent a brief comment to The Kansas City Star. "In every age and clime," he said in effect, "there is a great seething moronic underworld. Its denizens are literate. They can read and write, but they can't think. They live on the level of their emotions and vote their prejudices. Usually they are divided between the two great political parties, but occasionally some man or issue comes along that stirs them and they boil up and hold a Scopes trial in Tennessee, or elect a Big Bill Thompson mayor of Chicago and almost put in Doc Brinkley as governor of Kansas."

At once Brinkley voters deluged him with letters of protest. They didn't know what "moronic" meant, but they knew "underworld" had bad associations. They weren't wicked, they wrote. They were good Christian people.

"Dear Brinkley voters," he replied, "you got me wrong. I didn't mean that you were wicked. I only meant that you were dumb." 10

The contemporary nature of the Kansas political campaign of 1932 no doubt accounts for the fact that no adequate attempt has been made to diagnose the Brinkley political appeal from the standpoint of historical analysis. 11 While this has not been done here, the above letters have shed some interesting light on "why" and "how" one fight was made on the Milford man. W. A. White sensed not only a shirt-sleeve fight but the need to do battle. It is quite evident that the impetus (push) came from his good friend in Manhattan, the "Deever," Dan D. Casement.

10. The Kansas City Star, April 6, 1932, p. 8D.
11. There is, of course, the interesting, exploratory work of W. C. Chappell, Rascals on Democracy (New York, 1940), which gives considerable attention to the Brinkley election efforts.