

Joseph L. Bristow: The Editor's Road to Politics

A. BOWER SAGESER

THE YEAR 1908 was indeed a banner year in Kansas politics. A special session of the legislature had convened in January and passed a primary election law which provided for the nomination of all candidates including U. S. senators by ballot for the coming general election. The Populists held a convention in July at Topeka and decided not to enter a ticket in the state election.

In the August primary, two rising progressives won nominations for the key positions on the Republican ticket. One, William Roscoe Stubbs, was selected as a candidate for governor. The *New York Sun* described Stubbs as an "optimist run by [a] high power dynamo."¹ Few men in the history of the state had grown so as a political figure in so short a time. He had been elected to the state legislature in 1902. By 1908 he was the most potent single factor in state politics.² The other victor, Joseph L. Bristow, had defeated the incumbent U. S. senator, Chester I. Long. Bristow's primary victory was tantamount to election. Back of Bristow lay a long career as an owner and editor of Kansas newspapers and many years of experience in state politics. In addition, he had served over eight years as an appointed official in Washington and had won great public praise as an investigator of postal scandals and as a special commissioner to Panama. The November election was a walkaway for the supporters of William Howard Taft, and Republicans carried all the state offices. Furthermore, two former Kansans who had been reared in the same political ferment as Bristow became governors in other states: H. S. Hadley in Missouri, and James H. Brady in Idaho.

Scholars have written many interpretations of the rise of Mid-western progressivism in the early 1900's. Some agree with the aging ex-Sen. William A. Pepper, who declared in 1907 that the "country now hotly demands legislation it abused me for advocating."³ Some saw a nation-wide revolt against Aldrichism and

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1. *Iola Register*, August 12, 1908.

2. For accounts on Stubbs, see *ibid.*, July 25, 1908; *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 19, 1906; Raymond L. Florey, "Senator Chester I. Long," Ph. D. ms., University of Kansas, 1955, pp. 132, 133, 201-203.

3. *Ottawa Evening Herald*, June 27, 1907.

Cannonism. Others saw merely a sharp rift within the states' Republican organizations in which the liberal element won. Easterners thought they saw hair-trigger voters filled with emotionalism, voters whose only consistency was inconsistency. In Kansas, many attributed the victory in 1908 to the work of an effective bloc of newspaper editors, White, Murdock, Allen, Scott, Capper, Bristow, and others. Local writers felt that Bristow had won because of his violent attack on railroad abuses. On August 24, 1908, Cora Wellhouse Bullard, an amateur horticulturist and literary figure from Tonganoxie, wrote to Sen. Jonathan P. Dolliver of Iowa, who had supported Senator Long, that she was sorry Mr. Long would not be going back to Washington. "I have been wondering," wrote Mrs. Bullard, "if we Kansans are not too much given to emotional theories and subjective judgments. . . . However, in the defeat of Mr. Long, we have rendered William Allen White, our pet and hero, supremely happy, and that ought to be sufficient for us. Mr. Bristow's nomination being equivalent to an election, you will, therefore, have a new 'radical' in your ranks. Perhaps this may not be so bad for Kansas, after all."⁴ Mrs. Bullard then returned to the primary election and wrote that:

. . . generally speaking, we are greatly pleased with the first trial of our new primary law. Reading between the lines of the big print events, there seems to be a wonderful drawing of new powers all over the land. And in Kansas demagogic despotism is westering—falling towards eventide, without a bit of doubt. I am sufficiently optimistic to believe that through the "direct primary" a mighty ministry shall be wrought up into the proportion and music of things. And into the policy of statesmanship there shall enter a nobler spirit, the spirit of rectitude and honesty, equity and patriotism. With the direct primary vote, the political boss must come with penitential voice—with humiliation, restitution and amendment. And he will pray to be taken into cooperation with honest folks. Am I not right?⁵

Most observers would agree that Mrs. Bullard had struck a bit of poetic emotionalism in Bristow's victory.

Kansas had elected a strong man to the senate. A contemporary evaluation by Sen. Albert J. Beveridge bears this out. On July 14, 1910, Beveridge wrote Bristow: "You cannot imagine, Joe, how you are growing in the country. . . . You have strangely captured the imagination and conscience of the people. I know only one man that has captured it more in the last twelve months and that is Dolliver. But of course Dolliver is the Mirabeau of our cause. LaFollette and Cummins have been establishing their hold for years and years, but you have blazed suddenly athwart the

4. "Jonathan P. Dolliver Papers," State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

5. *Ibid.*

public conscience and public mind."⁶ On August 9, 1910, Beveridge again wrote: "Your industry, your intensive earnestness, your careful and studious investigations have made you one of the most effective men on the American political platform."⁷

When Bristow entered the senate, the editor of the *Washington Post* declared that the new senator from Kansas ought to be an insurgent, "for his has been a most strenuous career."⁸ One could not contend that Bristow went to the senate solely because he was an editor. However, it was in the capacity of a newspaper owner and editor that Bristow not only advanced his political ambitions but also helped to lead Kansans to support new political issues.

Bristow was born near Hazelgreen, Ky., on July 22, 1861, the day following the disastrous rout of Union troops at Bull Run. Although his father served over three years in the Union army, Bristow was too young to remember the war. He grew up surrounded by stories of the war, Republican accomplishments, and deep religious influences. Both his father and grandfather had served as circuit riders in the Methodist church. After the death of his mother in 1868, Bristow lived with his paternal grandparents on a farm. His father, William Bristow, was transferred to the Methodist conference in Kansas in 1871. While at Fredonia, he married a second time. The father has often been described as a genuine builder, a frank out-spoken man, intolerant of wrong doing, and incorruptible. Young Joe patterned his life after his father's. Joe set foot on Kansas soil at the age of 11; in approximately three years he returned to Kentucky. When he was 18, he married Margaret Hendrix and returned to Kansas where he purchased an equity in a homestead near Howard City. In later years Bristow declared that at the age of 18 he was old enough to comprehend the "responsibilities of matrimony and to understand the limitations of Kentucky."⁹

During his brief stay on the farm, Bristow took an active part in a local literary society. Here he learned, as did another great progressive, George Norris, that he had many interests besides farming, and he enjoyed debating. Bristow was restless, and after long consultations with his father, who urged him to seek an education, he entered the preparatory department at Baker Uni-

6. "Albert J. Beveridge Papers," manuscript division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Washington Post*, March 4, 1909.

9. Biographical sketch of Bristow in "Bristow Papers," archives division, Kansas State Historical Society. Sketch is in ms. form. Interviewed by James B. Murrow in the St. Louis (Mo.) *Globe Democrat*, March 21, 1909, reproduced in the *Salina Journal*, March 30, 1909.

versity, a married man, 21 years of age, enrolling in the classical curriculum to prepare for the ministry. He took a prominent part in the university's literary societies, where he received elementary training in political caucuses, campus warfare, and the parliamentary rules of order and disorder. During the silver anniversary of the university in 1883, the literary societies staged a week-long program. Henry M. Mayo and Joseph L. Bristow were the main debaters and William A. Quayle, later a bishop in the Methodist church, and Edwin M. Randall were among the orators.¹⁰

During his college career, Bristow helped to edit the college paper, the *Baldwin Index*. At first he handled reviews of leading articles and important books. His dry humor is shown in one entry when he wrote that "quite a number of our reviews are not original but probably they are almost as good as if we had written them."¹¹ In his senior year he wrote an essay on "The Two Republics." This was a comparative study of the governments of France and the United States. One conclusion might be questioned today, for Bristow felt that good "moral principles" helped to make the American system stronger.¹² While at Baker University, Bristow purchased two small weekly papers, the *Visitor* and the *Criterion*, and combined them into the *Baldwin Ledger*. This was only one of the many ventures Bristow entered to finance his education. As a young editor he tried to give the southern half of Douglas county a strong Republican paper, "as we everyday become more convinced that the prosperity of our country depends on the principles of the Republican party." When he sold his press at a small profit he told his readers that he had tried to give them a Republican and Prohibitionist paper.¹³

When Bristow was graduated from Baker University in 1886, he made his decision to drop the idea of entering the ministry and chose to enter public life instead. It was a decision that lost a good man to the cloth and won one to politics. The rural southern half of Douglas county elected Bristow clerk of the district court in 1886. According to the editor of the *Baldwin Ledger*¹⁴ he was "a very worthy young man [and] . . . a rabid republican." While clerk of the court he organized the young men's Republican club at Lawrence, campaigned extensively for Harrison in 1888, and read law under the direction of lawyers in Lawrence

10. Homer K. Ebeight, *The History of Baker University* (Baldwin, 1951), p. 109.

11. *Baldwin Index* (published monthly by Baker University), January, 1886, p. 14.

12. *Ibid.*, June, 1886, pp. 5-7.

13. *Baldwin Ledger*, May 1, July 31, 1885.

14. *Ibid.*, September 4, November 6, 1886.

and Topeka. His law studies were nearly completed when he returned to the newspaper business. In September, 1890, he bought the *Salina Daily Republican* from J. L. Brady.¹⁵ This purchase was made at a time when newspapers were solid gold securities, if properly managed. Bristow bought the *Salina Journal* in 1893 from C. B. Kirtland and combined it with the *Republican*. He owned this press until July 2, 1894.¹⁶

These were indeed testing years for the young editor, especially when he espoused the Republican cause. In 1890 there were 2,886 Farmer's Alliance organizations with 140,000 members in Kansas. The Alliance was capturing seats in both the state and national legislatures. Jerry Simpson was on the rise. Some women were soon to be engaged in the extracurricular activity of breaking glassware in saloons, and local sheriffs, with restraint, were arresting druggists by the buggy load for the illegal sale of demon rum. In 1892 a few Republican leaders, mostly editors, held the first Kansas Day club banquet at Topeka. Bristow attended the affair, which was described as "mostly social."¹⁷ From his editorial chair, he hammered at the rising Populist tide, at times almost to the point of slander. When only three persons remained on the floor of the U. S. senate to listen to Senator Pepper's tariff speech, Bristow compared the "rush out" to the famous "rush ins" when Sen. John J. Ingalls had occupied the floor. He concluded that these were surely the "days of mediocrity" so far as Kansas' representation on the floors of congress was concerned. He chided Pepper for his inactivity. It had been a long time, according to Bristow, "since that modern knight-errant . . . , 'the light and mirror of Manchegan chivalry' has tackled a wind-mill." Bristow had expected thrusts on the Hawaiian question, tariff, or silver. During Coxey's march, Bristow rejoiced over the the small number of followers from Kansas. And when the march failed, Bristow wrote that the movement was "now known as the 'Coxey movement (limited).'"¹⁸

But Bristow was not always critical of the new political actions. He supported Pepper's stand on the income tax and urged him to investigate the sugar industry which enjoyed a monopolistic position under the high protective tariff. He was remarkably tolerant with President Cleveland's handling of the Hawaiian question. Bristow

15. *Lawrence Journal-Tribune*, September 22, 1890; *Salina Daily Republican*, September 21, 1890.

16. *Ibid.*, July 2, 1894.

17. *Topeka Daily Capital*, January 29, 1892.

18. *Salina Daily Republican*, especially March 9, April 14, May 28, June 26, July 2, 1894.

avored the idea of a national tariff commission. He gave more than ample space to the support of woman's suffrage, the income tax, better banking laws, and the need for party primaries. He recorded in his later years that his treatment of the Populists had been costly. Many business men in Salina withdrew their advertisements for fear that the farmers would boycott them for using Bristow's paper.¹⁹ However, his political efforts were not unrewarded. Although he lost his bid for the Republican nomination to the house of representatives to W. A. Calderhead of Marysville in 1894, he became secretary of the Republican state central committee and also served as a private secretary to Gov. Edmund Morrill for two years. Both positions greatly strengthened his political position as a Republican.

It was during Bristow's first stay in Salina that he started a small monthly paper called *The Irrigation Farmer*. Although it was published only from February, 1894, until November, 1896, it made a major contribution to the irrigation revival that spread throughout the Midwest in the early 1890's. The journal was devoted wholly to arguing the need for and discussing the best means to be used in the irrigation of the Great Plains. Through this editorship, Bristow became well acquainted with national leaders in conservation and irrigation practices. He played a major role in establishing both state and regional organizations devoted to the cause of irrigation. One critic wrote that Joe was trying to "sail into Congress" on the irrigation issue but that he "was grounded on a sand-bar" in 1894 when he lost his party's nomination to congress. An able supporter replied that if Bristow would continue his "irrigation racket" he "will be of more service" to his country than two-thirds of all the congressmen who ever lived.²⁰ Bristow's own defense was "we have an abiding faith that in the future the West will be reclaimed; that those who have been struggling and battling with the hot winds for the last fifteen years will overcome these obstacles, and prosperity will reward their labors in the end, and the great west will produce enough of the products of the soil to sustain an enormous population."²¹ Many of Bristow's articles were devoted to the windmill revival that swept the West in 1894 and 1895. Bristow also stressed the need for a greater variety of products which could be produced by irrigation—garden products,

19. *Salina Journal*, March 25, 1909.

20. *Lawrence Journal*, May 18, 1894. Reproduced in the *Salina Daily Republican*, May 25, 1894.

21. *Ibid.*, May 25, July 2, 1894.

nuts, and fruits—which would greatly enrich the diet of the people. At the same time he championed a drive for the forestation of the West.

These editorial accomplishments soon drew Bristow into the numerous organizations that developed to demand state and federal assistance for irrigation. The irrigation congress at Los Angeles in 1893 signaled the national movement. Bristow was the prime mover for the Interstate Irrigation Association which was formed at Salina in September, 1893. E. R. Moses became the president of the organization and Bristow was selected as secretary.²² Bristow planned the interstate meeting at North Platte, Neb., in December, 1893. About 400 delegates attended the meeting and Bristow was one of the main speakers along with E. R. Moses, James S. Emery, and John W. Powell.²³ He assisted at the Omaha convention in March, 1894, where he made a forceful speech on the need for an interstate organization. He also served on the committee on resolutions.²⁴ In 1894 he attended the national irrigation congress at Denver, Colo. Following the meeting, Bristow and Emery toured the irrigated area at Greeley and returned to the Finney county fair in October, 1894.²⁵ Here Bristow saw one of the greatest displays of pumping plants ever shown in Kansas. He assisted in the establishment of nearly 40 local irrigation societies. In the August, 1894, issue of *The Irrigation Farmer* he wrote that the drought had not only destroyed the corn and burned up the pasture, but it also destroyed the rainmaker. "We are sorry," wrote Bristow, "to lose the corn and have the pastures dry up so badly, but if the rainmaker is effectually squelched the drought has not been without its advantages." As private secretary to Governor Morrill, he helped to secure the first board of irrigation survey and experiment for his state in 1895.

Bristow sold his Salina paper in 1894 but he was not out of the newspaper business for long. Early in 1895 he and Henry Allen purchased the *Ottawa Herald* and they continued to publish *The Irrigation Farmer* until late fall of 1896.

However, the Kansas editor was now on his way to prominence in national politics. Bristow met William McKinley in 1894 when the latter visited Kansas. After McKinley's victory in 1896, Bristow

22. *The Irrigation Age*, Chicago, v. 5 (October, 1893), p. 117.

23. *Ibid.*, v. 6 (February, 1894), p. 75.

24. *The Irrigation Farmer*, Salina, April, 1894; *Salina Daily Republican*, March 23, 1894.

25. *Irrigation Farmer*, September, 1894; *The Irrigation Age*, October and November, 1894; see *Garden City Herald*, October 6, 1894, for a description of the pumping display.

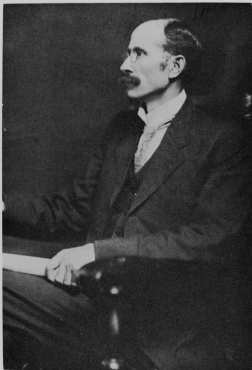
was appointed fourth assistant postmaster general, a post he held until January, 1905. In this eight-year period he won fame for his investigations of the Cuban postal scandals under President McKinley and the postal scandals under Pres. Theodore Roosevelt. When William Allen White visited President McKinley to learn how McKinley was able to choose honest men, White said to the President: "You sent my old friend Joe Bristow to Cuba, the one man in the post office department who could clean up the Cuban mess. How did you know Joe was a bulldog? He looks like a setter."²⁶ White received an evasive answer from behind the political mask so often worn by McKinley. White's prejudice never allowed him to see the real McKinley, but Bristow penetrated the mask and saw the real man whom he respected. Bristow's evaluation of McKinley is close to that given in Margaret Leech's *In The Days of McKinley*.²⁷ And students of the era must remember that even Robert M. La Follette believed that McKinley was never given a chance to carry out his program.²⁸ The postal investigations under President Roosevelt made many congressmen unhappy and they brought political pressure and abuse against Bristow. When Roosevelt yielded to the pressure, Bristow resigned. After a short trip to Panama to investigate the working of the Panama railroad company, he returned to Salina. During his stay in Washington, Bristow often sent short notes to his newspaper associates in Kansas. Thus White, Allen, Capper, Scott, and others could sometimes scoop the Washington press on news items.

In 1903 Bristow and Allen purchased the *Salina Evening Journal*. Bristow became sole owner in 1907. From September, 1905, to March, 1909, when he entered the United States senate, Bristow made one of his best contributions to journalism. He settled down to revamp the *Evening Journal*, making it one of the leading small city papers in the state. New presses were purchased and the format of the paper was greatly improved. The published circulation in October, 1905, was 1,659. Bristow had a keen sense of business values. He made wise investments in real estate in Salina and saw his newspaper business increase to almost fairy-story values. On January 22, 1917, Bristow wrote to Aubrey Harwell of the *New York Times* that the *Journal* had been the leading newspaper in Salina for over 25 years. "It is established, has the

26. William Allen White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York, 1946), p. 334.

27. For Bristow's evaluation of McKinley, see Joseph L. Bristow (editors Joseph O. and Frank B. Bristow), *Fraud and Politics at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1952); Margaret Leech, *In the Days of McKinley* (New York, 1959).

28. Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette's Autobiography* (Madison, 1913), p. 133.



JOSEPH LITTLE BRISTOW
(1861-1944)

Kansas editor, who served as an assistant postmaster general,
and United States senator.



Finney Co. Fair. 1894

Bristow, who became nationally known for his advocacy of irrigation, believed in the use of windmills. Above is a windmill display at the Finney county fair in October, 1894, which he visited, and below is shown part of an irrigation plant in operation near Garden City.



J. J. Jones' Irrigation Plant
Garden City, Kan.

prestige which age and success give it and is paying me an annual income of 6% or more on \$100,000. During the last ten years, it has doubled its value every five years, and I have not the slightest doubt that it will double its value again within the next ten years." Much of this later increase in value must be credited to the work of Roy F. Bailey, who served as manager, editor, and part owner after Bristow went to the senate. Bristow told Harwell of the great increase in values which Kansas newspapers had experienced. He said he was offered the *Wichita Beacon* in 1907 for \$100,000. Henry Allen bought it for approximately \$90,000. He later refused \$250,000, and in 1917 Allen was afraid to place the price of one-half million dollars on the *Beacon* for fear he would lose it.²⁹

The *Evening Journal* gave wide coverage to international and national news. It was excellent in its handling of local and state news, especially in support of churches, public schools, and colleges. Bristow served the community well, both as an editor and a citizen.

On September 20, 1905, he wrote a penetrating editorial on the need for greater material rewards for teachers in order that the brighter young people would be encouraged to enter the profession. He also stressed the dangers of "deadwood" in the faculties. Bristow was an enthusiastic supporter of the local Chautauqua. He declared that Senator Dolliver's visit to Salina in 1905 was one of the highlights of the season. Bristow worked hard to bring liberal Republican speakers to the state and these speakers in turn certainly exerted an influence on the voters.

Daily, through news releases and editorials in the *Evening Journal*, Bristow spread the liberal doctrines of the day. Frequently, his short observations were clipped by other editors. Thus his views were disseminated across the land. Over and over he hit at railroad abuses. He held that Kansas did not want socialism, but unless the railway commission was freed from railroad control, it would force Kansas citizens to welcome "Socialists and Demagogues" as preferable to a "continued and determined" injustice. In his position on railroad rate control he endorsed President Roosevelt's program. Among other issues which Bristow laid before his readers were the merits of conservation, the need for primary elections, rural free delivery, government operation of the Panama canal, corrupt practices of insurance companies, and the need for

29. "Bristow Papers," *loc. cit.*

the control of corporation contributions to campaign funds.³⁰ The readers of the *Evening Journal* could put Bristow clearly on the liberal and insurgent side of his party, if ever there was such a need.

If Joe Bristow had a political future in 1908, it lay along the path to progressivism. His opposition to corruption had been demonstrated as a civil servant, and he had trod the editorial road of reform as had many of his contemporaries throughout the Midwest. Certainly Kansas voters knew in 1908 that they had chosen a liberal.

30. For some of the editorials, see especially *Salina Evening Journal*, September 4, 29, October 13, 16, 19, 1905.