

The Columbian Candidate

Nicholas Murray Butler served as Columbia's president for 44 years and during that time created the University in his own image. But there was another job he wanted, as we learn from Michael Rosenthal's new book, *Nicholas Miraculous: The Amazing Career of the Redoubtable Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler*.

Spring 2006

One of the fascinating things about Nicholas Murray Butler 1882CC, 1884PHD — who was not merely president of Columbia from 1902 until 1945 — is the rapidity with which he moved from being one of the most celebrated, decorated, quoted, honored, and reviled Americans of his day to being almost completely forgotten. His achieving instant obscurity is one of the things that struck Michael Rosenthal as he began to consider Butler as the subject of a biography.

"As I got into Butler's career, I had the feeling I had stumbled upon one of the best-kept cultural secrets of the last century," says Rosenthal '67GSAS, who is the Roberta and William Campbell Professor in Humanities and the author of books on Virginia Woolf and the origins of the Boy Scouts.

Called "the foremost American of his day" by Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby, Butler imposed himself on the culture of the first half of the 20th century as did few others. "The most lavishly decorated member of the human race," according to the *Philadelphia Record* in 1928, he could point to 38 honorary degrees, one *Time* magazine cover, and a two-part profile in the *New Yorker*. He was inducted into the Bricklayers, Masons, and Plasterers Union in 1923, elected president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 1925, president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1928, and chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Carnegie Corporation in 1937. He shared the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize with Jane Addams.

"There were," says Rosenthal, "also many reasons not to like Butler — his narcissism, his arrogance, his infatuation with the rich and powerful — and it is a fact that not everybody did like him. Ezra Pound, for example, considered him 'one

of the more loathsome figures of a time that has not been creditable even to humanity.’ The novelist Upton Sinclair branded him as ‘the representative, champion, and creator of . . . false and cruel ideals . . . whose influence must be destroyed, if America is to live as anything worthwhile, kindly, or beautiful.’”

H. L. Mencken saw him as embodying one of the two major strains of American thought — the “right thinker” (as opposed to “the forward looker”): “Butler is an absolute masterpiece of correct thought . . . he has not cherished a single fancy that might not have been voiced by a Fifth Avenue rector . . . But he has no vision, alas, alas! All the revolutionary inventions for lifting up humanity leave him cold.”

Mencken, who would later applaud Butler’s anti-Prohibition stand, was wrong about his lack of vision. “Butler was one of those men of power who are able to build empires and, in the process, create themselves into institutions,” says Rosenthal. “That’s largely what attracted me to him as a subject for a book. He was also at the right place at the right time, thrusting himself upon Columbia, New York City, and the country very much as the United States was thrusting itself upon the world. And while he successfully obscured the legitimate contributions of his predecessor, Seth Low, Butler undeniably made Columbia into a globally recognized university. In Butler’s mind, Columbia had a sacred mission: It would be a new Acropolis, generating a civilizing force and an intellectual power that would shape the modern world.”

Yet, for all that, Butler felt that the presidency of Columbia was only the second most important job in the world. In these excerpts from *Nicholas Miraculous*, Rosenthal explores Butler’s quest for the number one job — and the social crusade he undertook when he failed to get it.

It is impossible to locate the specific moment when Nicholas Murray Butler first began to think about the possibility that he might someday be the Republican presidential candidate. But the 1912 election could only have stimulated whatever dormant presidential impulses were already twitching within him. Butler’s being chosen to receive the electoral votes for vice president after the death of candidate James Sherman in November, although purely ceremonial, certainly had an impact. It meant, after all, that in some technical sense he had in fact been the vice-presidential candidate. The election of Woodrow Wilson was even more important: Butler had profound contempt for Wilson, seeing him as his intellectual and

administrative inferior in every way. His judgment that Wilson boded ill for the country must have suggested to him what a man of real distinction could achieve in the White House. It is hard to imagine that these normal promptings of a competitive ego, fostered by the reverential circle of admirers who were always paying homage to “the Sage,” didn’t affect his musings on his political future.

Butler himself revealed that thoughts of national leadership were not unknown to him long before the 1920 election. As early as 1913 his name began to appear in the newspapers as a possible candidate in 1916.

But with the Democrats in solid control of the government and the Republicans in more or less complete disarray, 1916 was not the time to be other than flattered and elusive. By 1920, however, the political landscape was entirely changed. “A wooden man would have been elected president on the Republican ticket,” Butler later said. If he were ever going to give it a try, the time had come. On September 4, 1918, Butler’s good friend Henry Pritchett wrote from California to tell him how positively his August address on “The War and After the War” had been greeted by the Commercial Club of San Francisco: “You have made in your visit here a very marked impression on the more thoughtful and able men of this coast. A great number of them would like to do something to bring forward your name for the Presidency.”

Butler expressed his pleasure at the confidence shown him but stressed that what mattered was saving America from the dangers that beset it, fighting for the “preservation of the American form of Government, and against all forms of socialism, bolshevism and anarchism which threaten within and without.”

As Butler, doughty defender of the American way of life, became the campaign figure who, he hoped, would reach the White House, Butler the university president remained the inescapable identity that ensured he wouldn’t get there. Try as he might, he could never shed the label of “college professor,” a definition that spelled political doom in a country that was eager to get rid of Professor Woodrow Wilson.

The irony of Butler, the visible academic administrator, busily expunging all traces of the academic was lost on him. But he was correct in understanding the political liability conferred by his university affiliation. BUTLER MEANS BUSINESS, his campaign pin announced, speaking both to his seriousness and his preferred self-definition.

By the time Butler officially announced his candidacy in late December 1919 — his campaigners urging his fellow citizens to “Pick Nick for a picnic in November” — he had effectively been running a campaign for more than a year. Its low visibility expressed both deliberate political strategy and stylistic preference. The strategy was to avoid getting caught in the vicious exchanges that were bound to ensue among the camps of the front-runners: General Leonard Wood, Illinois governor Frank Lowden, California senator Hiram Johnson, and even, for a time, World War I hero General John J. Pershing. Standing aloof from all that was vulgarly “political,” Butler would instead focus on the issues through the articles and addresses he was in any case producing in his work at Columbia. Then, with all the frontrunners crippled by their mutual battering, he would walk into the convention as the proven business executive of impeccable integrity, known throughout America for his grasp of national and international problems, and come away with the nomination, leading the Republicans to a smashing victory in the fall. It could indeed be a picnic for Nick. Such were the tactical considerations that led Butler to run as what one observer called a “semi-dark horse” — visible enough to catch people’s interest, but not enough to merit their criticism.

What Butler hoped for was a Republican convention resembling a large-scale, popular version of an evening at the Knickerbocker or Lotos Club, where his educated, prosperous, prominent friends would meet for stimulating political conversation. A group of the best men, in short, of the sort Butler felt most comfortable with, free from any parochial interest and eager to take the right position on every subject. If there were enough of these, Butler reasoned, he would be a shoo-in. When the actual balloting began on Friday, June 11, the 75 or 80 New York first-ballot delegates whom Butler had counted on turned into only 68, and the vast support from the South and Midwest into one vote from Kentucky and one-half vote from Texas. Three more ballots would follow, but he was effectively finished.

With the convention closing for business on Friday evening at 7, no one was close to the required 493 votes: General Wood had 314 1/2, Governor Frank Lowden 289, and Senator Hiram Johnson 140 1/2. Some of Butler’s friends wanted him to withdraw officially to avoid embarrassment, but he refused. The fantasy of his victory on an early ballot had been shattered, but his strategic sense that the convention was deadlocked told him to stay in the running. If no one else emerged, might not the wheel of fortune turn to the trusty Republican wheelhorse, still available to be discovered?

The discussions that ensued that night and early into the morning in a 13th-floor suite of the Blackstone Hotel had nothing to do with Butler. Amidst much cigar smoke and the substantial consumption of scotch, influential Republican senators, assorted party hacks, and campaign managers drifted in and out of Suite 404, trying to decide on a workable scenario for the next day.

As the negotiations wore on, one name — that of Warren G. Harding — seemed to stay afloat as the others sank under a burden of negatives. It was not a name that inspired enthusiasm, but at least it seemed minimally plausible. Shortly after 1 a.m. the hard core of senators remaining in the room concluded that Harding should be nominated the next day. In response to a question from a reporter regarding Harding's qualifications, Connecticut senator Frank Brandegee testily responded, in language that would have appalled Butler, "There ain't any first-raters this year. This ain't 1880 or any 1904; we haven't got John Shermans or Theodore Roosevelts; we got a lot of second-raters and Warren Harding is the best of the second-raters."

Harding's nomination drew appropriate, good-soldierly support from Butler, though he had no illusions about Harding's abilities. But party loyalty (as well as self-interest) mandated happy satisfaction with the convention's wise choice: "It is a keen pleasure," he wrote to Harding on June 14, "once more to report my personal pride and satisfaction in your nomination, and to assure you with the utmost heartiness that during the campaign no effort of mine shall be spared to bring about your election, and once elected, to uphold your administration of the government."

The intensity of Butler's desire for the presidency was matched only by the intensity of his subsequent disavowals of any interest in it. Butler hated to lose — he almost never did — and he began several days after the convention to make clear that he never wanted the nomination in the first place. He admitted only to awkwardness in failing to suppress the outside enthusiasm for his candidacy until it was too late: "What I should have done was to put a stop to the matter at once, but not having done this then did not see just how to do it later on." And that fiction he would spend the rest of his life maintaining.

On December 5, 1933, at 5:32 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, Utah delegate S. R. Thurman cast the ballot that brought to the necessary three-quarters the number of states ratifying the 21st Amendment to the Constitution. Shortly thereafter, at 7 p.m., President Franklin Delano Roosevelt affixed his signature to the amendment. Thirteen years, 10 months, and 18 days after it began, Prohibition was

no more.

The prominent heroes of the wets in the struggle for repeal were numerous, including Governor Al Smith of New York, industrialist Pierre du Pont, the banker Charles Sabin, the philanthropist Edward S. Harkness, Democratic National Committee Chairman John Raskob, and late in the day (but not insignificantly), John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Among the less distinguished were the entrepreneurs who demonstrated that Prohibition generated vast amounts of crime while simultaneously depriving the government of much needed tax revenues — men like Dutch Schultz, Waxy Gordon, Legs Diamond, and Frankie Yale.

Of all of these players, legitimate and illegitimate alike, no one was so insistent and articulate a foe of the 18th Amendment as Butler. Arguing vociferously from every conceivable pulpit, Butler turned his hatred of Prohibition — “I regard Prohibition as a form of mental disease. . . . I feel about it as my father and grandfather felt about slavery”— into an urgent personal crusade.” So wet he wears a bathing suit when he walks down Fifth Avenue,” and “wetter than the high seas,” as several hostile editorial writers quipped, Butler deserved as much credit as anybody for bringing the case for repeal before the nation. The acknowledgment he received at a dinner in 1933 from the Association of Foreign Correspondents as the one man “most responsible for repeal” was a plausible assessment.

He did not begin actively battling until 1924, a fact he later attributed to his desire to see whether or not Prohibition would actually work. The explanation is only partly convincing. He was not about to address the politically vexed issue while seeking the Republican nomination in 1920, nor did he want to put at risk his close relationship with Harding for some time after that. But by 1924 he was resigned to the failure of his own presidential ambitions (with Coolidge in the White House) and disgusted enough with the ditherings of the Republican party to be willing, in his own words, “to take the risk of being unpopular for the sake of being right.” He fired his first full-scale salvo on April 29 at a dinner of the Missouri Society in New York’s Plaza Hotel. In a passionate address entitled “Prohibition Is Now a Moral Issue,” he denounced the 18th Amendment (and its enabling legislation, the Volstead Act) as responsible for the “shocking and immoral” conditions currently ravaging the country.

Soon Butler’s harangues made him the object of official Republican hostility. Idaho senator William Borah, Butler’s rhetorical equal and perhaps the most prominent

spokesman for the drys, demonized him as more dangerous than the “ragged, unshaven bolshevist.” Upstate New York Republicans accused Butler and former senator James Wadsworth of trying to impose their wet wills on a party that favored Prohibition. They were right, of course. Butler was explicitly committed to shifting the Republican position, despite the opposition of its leaders including, in 1927, President Calvin Coolidge. And as he was enjoying his notoriety as independent truth teller and national moral therapist, his party’s hostility could hardly deter him.

Coolidge’s unwillingness to take a strong position on the question, out of fear of driving a wedge in the Republicans between wets and drys, moved him squarely into Butler’s crosshairs. He was now an obstacle to be overcome rather than the party leader to be supported. In an inauspicious setting — the Riverside Republican Club in New York on the evening of February 6, 1927 — Butler burned many of his remaining Republican bridges before a small and unsuspecting audience. Conflating two separate issues — that of a possible third term for Coolidge and his refusal to take a decisive stand on Prohibition — Butler preempted Coolidge by announcing that the president had too much common sense to seek reelection. As if that weren’t sufficiently presumptuous, he went on: “In 1928 no candidate for President can escape making known with definiteness and decision his attitude towards Prohibition. . . . If he endeavors to avoid committing himself, to pussyfoot and to please all elements, he will be even worse beaten than if, like a brave man, he comes out for what I believe to be the wrong and immoral policy.”

Butler’s comments provoked the country. Republicans were incensed at his effrontery in injecting Prohibition into the forthcoming campaign and in effectively making the sitting president of his own party a lame duck before Coolidge could speak for himself. The attention he generated led the New York Times to wonder if he was again interested in the White House. But instead of a call to the presidency, he received a call of a quite different sort. Robert Washburn, president of the Roosevelt Club in Boston, offered the auspices of the Club to Butler and Senator Borah to debate the issue of Prohibition.

The anticipated showdown between the two Republican heavyweights on April 8 naturally gave rise to boxing metaphors. The Newark News hailed it as a bout between “Battling Borah and N. M. (Cyclone) Butler,” listing Borah as 5'7 ½" and 182 pounds, and Butler as 5'6 " and 185. The Seattle Post Intelligencer preferred “‘Kid’ Butler, the Columbia Catamount vs. ‘Wild Bill’ Borah, the Boise Bearcat.” The *Hartford Courant* saw it as a fight between “‘Tousled-headed’ Borah, the Nemesis of

Nullificationists and 'Talkative Nick' Butler, the Protector of Personal Privilege." Others less pugilistically inclined placed it in the tradition of America's great debates, like those between Lincoln and Douglas, Webster and Hayne.

Rhetorical pyrotechnics aside, the meeting on the same platform "of two of the most brilliant minds of the country" had no discernible effect on the public's understanding of the issue. Despite the boxing metaphors leading up to the debate, no real infighting occurred and no serious blows were struck. Instead of slugging it out, head to head, it was rather as if the two opponents were content to stand with their backs to each other, displaying their polished, carefully rehearsed combinations of lefts and rights to the spectators. Butler's terse analysis of their differences is perhaps the best summary of the debate: "He believes the Eighteenth Amendment to be as germane to the Constitution . . . as those that have preceded it. I believe that it contradicts them all."

But as it was technically a debate, the Boston Herald had assigned nine ringside judges to score it. A smattering of lawyers and civic leaders, four were ostensibly wet, four dry, and one neutral. All were Republicans. The verdict? A 6-3 decision for Borah, a judgment which seemed to accord with the majority of the audience, at least as indicated by their applause at the announcement.

Borah's victory hardly stopped Butler's campaign. Butler kept hectoring the country about the evils of Prohibition. At the Republican conventions of 1928 and 1932, he warned of the impending electoral disaster if the party didn't introduce a dry plank in its platform. Though he was wrong in 1928, public opinion finally caught up with him in 1932.

Roosevelt's trouncing of Hoover that November constituted a kind of personal triumph for Butler. From an "unrepentant old guardsman" of 20 years earlier, he had turned himself, in large part through his anti-Prohibition campaign, into "as sane and effectual a progressive spirit as may be found in the Republican party or in any party for the matter of that."

Prohibition still lingered on, but its death rattle could clearly be heard in Roosevelt's election. The driving issue behind his victory had been the Depression, not the saloon, but everybody knew that FDR had no particular sympathy for the 18th Amendment. The path to swift repeal lay open. One of Roosevelt's first decisions as president was to legalize the sale of 3.2 percent beer. Real beer followed shortly,

and in early December 1933, delegate Thurman did the rest. Almost six-and-a-half years after he first stepped into the ring against the Boise Bearcat, the irrevocable decision was rendered: Kid Butler had finally won.

Adapted from Nicholas Miraculous: The Amazing Career of the Redoubtable Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Copyright © 2006 by Michael Rosenthal.



[Guide to school abbreviations](#)

[All categories >](#)