

The American Mercury

GLEN TAYLOR: CROONER ON THE LEFT

BY

RICHARD L. NEUBERGER

MEMBERSHIP in the most exclusive club in the world does strange things to men. This club is the United States Senate. Only 96 individuals out of a national population of 145 million can enjoy its power and perquisites at any given time. These men are the legislative masters of America's exchequer, foreign policy and Federal personnel. They are also the occupants of sanctified leather-cushioned lounges where none except Senators may loiter.

The sumptuous environment of Senatorial life makes many members temperamentally unfit to go back to Elkhorn or Canyon City, where their political careers originated. Rare is

the ex-Senator who returns home. Washington is full of them, lingering pathetically at the scene of departed glory. The impact of the Senate affects different men in different ways. Some of them are carried away by their own importance. A few develop an abnormal craving for Bourbon and branch water. More than one has become the prisoner of a languorous mistress. Many are so exhilarated by the tension and drama of the capital that mere thought of exile to their home state is abhorrent.

Yet in all its turbulent history the Senate has had no more extraordinary influence on a new member than on Glen Hearst Taylor, the youngest

RICHARD L. NEUBERGER, a former member of the Oregon legislature, is a correspondent in the Northwest for the *New York Times* and a contributor to many national magazines. His profile of Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon appeared in the July 1947 *AMERICAN MERCURY*.

senior Senator ever to represent the sprawling state of Idaho.

The traditional effect of the Senate is to make a newcomer cautious and conservative. Power breeds conservatism, and Senators are powerful. Conservatism is also the well-worn path to salons, yachting invitations and to bank directorships after political retirement. But in A. D., 1948, a man unwilling to put in the long apprenticeship essential to Senatorial greatness might discover that a sensational and perhaps even reckless voicing of extreme left-wing opinions could be a short-cut to the prominence achieved by most Senators only after years of service. This discovery was made by 44-year-old Glen Taylor, Vice Presidential running mate with Henry A. Wallace on the national ticket of the "New Party."

Taylor entered the Senate in January of 1945. He had a reputation as a cowboy crooner, and he came from the shaky financial background of a small-time vaudeville performer in the frontier towns of Idaho and Montana. Indeed, not long before taking the Senatorial oath of office he had supplemented his skimpy income by working at a welder's bench for the Dohrmann Hotel Supply Company. The other Dohrmann workers refused to believe that "Glen," who had shared their sandwiches and hummed *Clementine* during lunch hours, was about to become a U. S. Senator.

Taylor arrived in Washington full of zeal to do something for the pioneer state which had honored him with its

highest public office. He would put over a Columbia Valley Authority modeled after the famous TVA. He told reporters his ambition was to emulate the career of the illustrious George W. Norris, who had come to the end of the political trail. "I hope to inherit the Norris tradition," he said. To prove these lofty intentions, he sponsored a bill for the Pacific Northwest almost identical with that Norris had innovated in the valley of the Tennessee. And he talked about the things Norris had talked about — public ownership of water power, the saving of timber and grass and scenery, restoration of exhausted crop lands.

Taylor had vowed his guitar would be stowed in mothballs the day he went on the Senate payroll. However, photographers convinced him that strumming an improvised bit of doggerel called *Give Me a Home 'Neath the Capitol Dome* would get the Taylors and their three small sons a place to live. After this front-page publicity in every newspaper in the land, the embryo Senator faded from the headlines.

The episode seems to have made a great impression on Taylor, even to the extent of shaping his subsequent career. He decided — perhaps not without some reason — that the press was more interested in comedy and sensationalism than in a Senator who wanted to be like Norris. He forgot, of course, that Norris had been in Congress at least a dozen years before he was accepted nationally as a leader

of liberalism, and that there was no magic formula for a hasty ascent to such leadership.

"If I play the guitar and croon sitting on a flight of granite steps, that's big news," Taylor complained to a newspaperwoman in Boise. "If I work in the Senate to protect Idaho's rivers and pine forests, that's barely worth a one-deck headline." A tendency to be obsessed by headlines was evident early in his Senatorial service.

In 1946 Taylor made another discovery. He found out that the Democratic party, which had elected him to the Senate on Franklin D. Roosevelt's coattails, was washed up for a good many years to come in Idaho. It failed to elect a single candidate.

Toward the end of 1947 Taylor, sifting the leaves in the political teacup, came upon a further revelation. He learned that by flirting with Henry Wallace's third party, by excelling Wallace himself in acceptance of prevailing left-wing doctrine, he could be headline material all the way across the nation. The young vaudeville entertainer, shoved around by sheriffs and booed by mining-camp audiences during much of his adult life, had become dissatisfied with the proportions of his sudden taste of fame. He wanted to drain the whole portion, regardless of its mixture. No longer could he wait to be like Norris. That took too much time.

Thus the Senator from the backwoods state of Idaho, where most voters have never seen a Communist, a dial telephone or a candidate for

Vice-President in the flesh, set out alongside Henry A. Wallace on a political adventure to defeat the Democratic party, which had sired them both, and to synchronize American foreign policy with that of the far-off Soviet Union.

II

Some Senators have been dazzled by wealth, others by liquor and high-living, a few by a coquettish glance above a tempting bosom. Glen Taylor succumbed to headlines. He found that by conducting an elaborate soliloquy as to whether or not he should join the new party under Wallace, he could linger on the front pages for weeks.

Not many people in Idaho ever doubted the eventual outcome of Taylor's spectacular consultation with himself. The letters he wrote home seeking counsel clearly invited a decision in the affirmative. "He was about as open-minded as a small boy asking if he should eat strawberry shortcake," said Sam J. Hyndman, chairman of the Democratic party in Boise, who had been one of Taylor's most devoted adherents. Hyndman told Taylor not to run with Wallace. So did practically all other friends of Taylor in Idaho, including some of his relatives.

Taylor did not welcome this advice. Already he was publicly reprimanding Truman for such misdeeds as the dismissal of James M. Landis and the demotion of Marriner Eccles. Of course, the President received

scant credit on the Taylor handicap sheet for his indorsement of a Columbia Valley Authority in his annual message on the State of the Union. In fact, Taylor was now far beyond the CVA stage of his political career. He did not refurbish this vehicle which he had ridden to office when tragic floods on the Columbia's mountain tributaries in northern Idaho demonstrated the need for its immediate enactment.

The young man brought up at Kooskia (pop. 490), where from his father's homestead he could see the wilderness path Lewis and Clark had trod to Oregon, was interested in things with greater dramatic potential than an Idaho village hip-deep in glacial runoff. A demand for head-water dams to choke off future floods meant sharing the flood — and headlines — with other Senators. But forcing one's way into the Negro-only entrance of an Alabama church, with some bruises on his shinbone to show for the experience — this could be Taylor's show alone. Indeed, he knew the newspapers would eat it up.

Glen Taylor is on an excitement jag. The adventure of running with Henry Wallace, particularly inasmuch as his utterances often are more startling than those of the senior member of this curious political partnership, provides him with a generous measure of excitement. Taylor's office is crowded with stimulating intellectuals and attractive young women. His first secretary, plodding, horny-handed George Curtis, who helped

make a troubador a U. S. Senator, has gone home to teach in an Idaho rural school. Taylor now requires more diverting companionship. He is the lion of cocktail parties bursting with movie, literary and Broadway names that a small-time vaudeville entertainer never ventured to dream of meeting in person. He seldom wants for an audience, and far more appreciative audiences, too, than those which watched a nervous musician and his slim wife trying to amuse miners from the creeks of the Coeur d'Alene.

Taylor is determined to get into the headlines, no matter what the cost. He confessed as much when he told the Senate:

My reason for riding a saddle horse to Washington in opposition to the Marshall Plan was simply this: In order to rate attention in the press, a thing must either be sensational, sexy or represent conflict.

Taylor also has discovered that intemperate language applied to the President offers a route to the front pages. This has resulted in references to "Hairbreadth Harry," and to "Truman's well-known mulishness." Even Senator William F. Knowland of California, a conservative Republican, has protested Taylor's slurs on the Democratic occupant of the White House. The protest was of considerable satisfaction to Taylor, for it resulted in further publicity.

Incidentally, the 44-year-old politician, who became Idaho's senior Senator following the death of John Thomas in 1945, seems concerned

about the quantity rather than the quality of his press notices. Prominence for him has meant notoriety rather than distinction. For example, the liberal St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, which hailed Taylor when he sought to protect the resources of the Columbia's mountain valleys, now scathingly refers to him as "a Bilbo in reverse."

One of Taylor's claims is that his constituents in Idaho look with some favor on his present behavior. The accuracy of this may be judged by an episode which occurred shortly before Wallace and Taylor himself chose Taylor to be second in command of the "10 million loyal supporters of the New Party." Taylor asked for a standing vote of approval from all in a Boise audience who "want me to continue my fight for world peace." Under such conditions it was obviously embarrassing to remain seated; one might be taken for a war-monger. The audience rose. A few weeks later Taylor told a Wallace-for-President meeting in the East that the Boise crowd had unanimously indorsed his opposition to the Marshall Plan.

One of the tragedies of Glen Taylor's excitement jag is that it has rendered him unfit for the legislative spadework expected of a conscientious Senator. It also has made him scorn the genuine opportunities for public good available to a member of the Senate. In fact, he has practically stopped attending Senate sessions. On issue after issue of alleged importance to the leaders of the New Party — oleomargarine, cost of living, social

security — Henry Wallace's running mate has not been present to cast a vote. He has been too busy promoting the New Party by word of mouth.

Displaced persons claim the verbal sympathy of the Wallace-for-President crusade. Rollcalls in the Senate were narrowly decided as the bill to admit 400,000 refugees to the United States was whittled in half, amended and hedged about with restrictions. Yet as these votes were taken, Glen Taylor was not to be found. He was absent during all of them. The Senate seat so laboriously won through the efforts of hundreds of volunteer doorbell-pushers in Idaho was of no value to the liberal cause in the hour of need.

Of course, Taylor was in his seat when the Marshall Plan came to a vote, for opposition to this scheme for bolstering hungry Europe is the hallmark of the Wallace cause. One only can wonder whether, in that moment, the young man who came to the Senate to be like Norris was slightly uneasy over the fact that he was voting in perfect harmony with Pappy O'Daniel.

III

Vaudeville may not prepare a man for the substantive work of politics, but it gives him the voice, finesse and stage presence so helpful to election.

"I've dodged enough vegetables in my time," says Glen Taylor, "not to be afraid of a few political brickbats."

On the hustings he is completely at ease. He answers questions adroitly.

Vardis Fisher, the Idaho novelist who wrote *Children of God*, has political views not too far apart from those of Westbrook Pegler, yet he has remarked, "I imagine Glen Taylor must be one of the great public speakers of our time."

Taylor can well-nigh take command of a town with a sound-truck. He has a rich, mellifluous voice which he softens to hushed and muted tones as he describes the peace and prosperity sure to follow the arrival of Henry Wallace at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Again, he can pour forth a booming tenor, like the Phantom of the Opera drowning out Paris street sounds, as he urges his Republican adversaries on to war against Truman, whom he detests even more:

If the Republican Party would inform the American people of all the crooked things going on in this government, how militaristic it is and how fascistic it is, why, good Lord, this administration would not have any more chance of being reelected than a snowball has in the hot place!

Sex appeal has had a part in the ascent of this singing troubadour from the floorboards of run-down theatres to the unparalleled forum which is the United States Senate. Women frequently dominate his Idaho audiences. College girls send for his picture. Taylor has large, luminous eyes which effectively express his emotion at any moment. A Francis X. Bushman profile and a wavy black pompadour give him a Roman Senator appearance. His gestures are suave and polished. Gossip hints that the pompadour is rooted to

a toupee rather than to Taylor's scalp, but this slur has not snuffed out the rapture of his female admirers.

If his own youth and intensity help him with Idaho's long-legged and athletic distaff voters, the dark prettiness of Mrs. Taylor attracts support from the opposite side of the family line. Dora Taylor, who was the other half of the Glendora Players during the lean years on the stage, is said to be opposed to her husband's frolic with the third party. She is a member of his office staff, but has not been able to restrain his appetite for headlines, notoriety and cheering crowds.

Taylor's native political shrewdness was shown in the manner Mrs. Taylor went on the government payroll. Had this been done in silence and secrecy, it would have been nepotism, ultimately to be ferreted out with trumpets and fanfare by his political opponents. Instead, he made political capital of the situation in a letter to a newspaperwoman in Salt Lake City.

"Mrs. Taylor is working in the office with me," he wrote. "She always has worked with me, as everyone in Idaho knows, so I am making no bones about the matter. In fact, if she weren't working, too, I would despair of making ends meet. There are a certain number of formal affairs which we must attend, and of course practically all of them call for a new gown, so Mrs. Taylor really is just paying her own way."

What generally has been political dynamite was suddenly a political asset. Instead of being assailed for add-

ing his wife to the Federal salary register, Taylor had succeeded in putting over the fact that although he was as poor as a church mouse, his wife nevertheless was toiling six days a week so that she might represent the great state of Idaho with style and distinction.

No exaggeration was required to indicate the Taylors' financial position. Glen's father was an itinerant minister named Pleasant John Taylor, who put on minstrel shows to keep his large family in groceries. At the age of fifteen Glen, who never had a formal education, was playing bit parts with nomadic stock companies. His first rôle, with hair thickly powdered, was that of a grim banker supposed to be at least 65.

Glen was eighteen when he owned a half interest in a theatrical troupe which went broke in the depression of 1922. A decade later, Glen and his bride of less than a year found themselves with a stage company but without money. The great depression had caught up with them. Glen read a book by Stuart Chase called *A New Deal*. Over the radio he heard a speech by President-elect Roosevelt. "I decided," he recalls, "that I could do a better job than the politicians who had let things get into such a fearful mess."

Taylor ran for Congress, then for the Senate. He was defeated twice for the Senate, but each time he ran stronger. A strange circumstance worked to help him. As the reputation of the late William E. Borah di-

minished, Taylor's formidability increased. He was the only man in Idaho politics not charitable toward the memory of the Senator who had been Idaho's dominant public figure for nearly half a century. Death usually adds luster, but a vast sum of cash had been found in Borah's safe-deposit box after his death. Furthermore, Borah had prophesied no war in Europe and he had sabotaged the League of Nations, but Idaho boys were dying in Normandy and over the Ploesti oil fields. Angry parents were saying it was "Borah's war."

As the standing of Borah, the isolationist, ebbed in the state where the highest mountain peak still bears his name, the fortunes of the young cowboy singer who advocated world government improved. In 1940 he had not been far enough forward to get a firm clutch on FDR's magic clothing. But in 1944 he had hold for all he was worth. Roosevelt carried Idaho by 7,262 votes. Taylor's majority for the Senate was almost exactly the same.

Despite the presence of Roosevelt at the head of the ticket, no one who lacked superb skill as a campaigner ever could have been elected Senator from Idaho under the circumstances which confronted Glen Taylor. His own party looked upon him as an interloper and crackpot. O'Daniel in Texas had at least been a hillbilly with funds. Taylor was broke. Most of the press opposed him ferociously. Democrats as well as Republicans circulated a set of lascivious letters, os-

tensibly from Taylor to his divorced first wife. Police denied him street permits for his sound truck and cow-boy band. Winning merely the nomination was a feat of considerable magnitude.

Idaho is a feudal state, held in absentee bondage by railroads, sawmills and mining companies owned far afield. The local representatives of the absentees had ironclad orders to work against this eloquent crooner who, between renditions of *Allouette* and *Roundup Time*, wedged in remarks about exorbitant freight rates and the looting of Idaho's timber.

But the people came out to hear Taylor. The very virulence of the campaign against him proved a boomerang; it assured him of large audiences. He was disarming in manner and appearance. Voters could not believe that this good-looking young man with the resonant voice, whether raised in song or oratory, was the monster described in the newspapers. When police hostility kept him out of towns, he parked his truck beyond the city limits and attracted a bigger crowd than he would have otherwise. The Lewiston *Tribune*, one of the few moderate dailies during the bitter campaign, shrewdly saw that Taylor's opponents were actually building him up.

The tragedy of Glen Taylor is that he has dissipated the victory which was won against these crushing odds. Few states ever needed a liberal Senator more than Idaho—a Senator such as Taylor originally hoped to be,

a Senator like Norris. This sort of Senator might end Idaho's absentee feudalism. The case has ample documentation available to an indefatigable man with a Senator's influence. Unfortunately for Idaho, Taylor lacked the patience and humility to construct his career in this fashion. The Wallace candidacy offered too inviting a shortcut to prominence. Taylor could not resist it.

Today, although his term has nearly three years to run and he is the state's Senior Senator, Taylor is utterly without influence in Idaho. The state has no left wing, and he is anathema to conservatives and liberals alike. Democrats see in him a stalking horse for the Republicans, who, in turn, regard him as a tool of the Communists. Worst of all, memory of this experience will crouch on the shoulders of any future progressive in Idaho politics like the Old Man of the Sea on Sinbad the sailor. People inevitably will recall the apostasy of Glen Taylor, who pushed aside riches in solid opportunities in his home state for the will-o'-the-wisp flitting before him in the hands of Henry Wallace.

IV

Glen Taylor denies he is an apostate. He insists that the Democratic party has abandoned him, rather than that he deserted the Democratic party.

Yet, to say the least, his fixed principles have been modified since he exchanged the hazardous living of a troubador for the majestic atmosphere

of the Senate. The Columbia Valley Authority no longer is a sufficiently glamorous issue to demand his frequent attention. Far from being an advocate of internationalism, he now finds himself voting on crucial questions of foreign policy with such men as O'Daniel, Wherry, Brooks and Kem.

Is Taylor a Communist? This question is frequently asked by people who have heard him denounce the United States for aggression or call Secretary Forrestal "a potential Hitler." What else can be inferred from the conduct of a man who blames Truman and Marshall for the Russian conquest of Czechoslovakia? People in Idaho, however, believe the issue is not that simple. They doubt that their Senator is a Communist. They think he is more interested in promoting Taylor than in advancing Communism. Many of them claim he has joined the Wallace movement because it offers not only a quick if dubious fame, but also because it might be in a position to come to power nationally should an industrial depression grip the United States.

The last depression affected Glen Taylor deeply. He suffered through it. Once or twice he and his wife traded wilted vegetables, which had been pelted at their act, for coffee and doughnuts at a wayside diner.

Taylor's friends insist he believes implicitly that the American people will turn sharply to the left or to the right the next time they are the victims of widespread unemployment.

If the people veer left, the Wallace-Taylor crusade may be the political beneficiary of the swing. Under such circumstances, it could be that the pupil would become greater than the master. Henry Wallace is 60, Glen Taylor only 44. Youth is an important asset in the grim intensity of national politics.

It seems fairly certain now that Taylor regards his future as brighter elsewhere than in Idaho. He is becoming increasingly disdainful about keeping up his correspondence with the home folks. He often exhibits a fretful impatience toward visitors who feel, in the best American tradition, that their Senator owes them a bowl of bean soup in the famous Senate Restaurant when they tour the capital. Taylor also is fully aware of the fact that his bolt of the party has ended what slight chance Idaho Democrats had this year to retire the state's other U. S. Senator, an arch-conservative named Henry C. Dworshak.

In fact, there are veteran Democrats in Idaho who insist Taylor would rather sit alongside Dworshak, who is a convenient foil for him, than with a Democratic liberal who might challenge his mounting lack of interest in problems barren of headline-appeal yet of crucial concern in Idaho.

Politicians in Birmingham, Alabama, rarely state profound truths. Yet men and women in distant Idaho nodded approvingly when City Commissioner Eugene (Bull) Connor of Birmingham asked Senator Glen Tay-

lor, who had just spectacularly invaded Alabama to end discrimination against Negroes, whether he ever intended to do anything about the Idaho constitutional provision barring Chinese, Japanese and American Indians from jury duty and civil office.

Just where Taylor's meandering and dubious course will end him is not easy to say. But surely the groups he claims to speak for — the people of Idaho specifically and American liberals generally — are not going to be benefited by it.

RESPITE

BY MARY ATWATER TAYLOR

I hung a wreath upon my door,
The neighbors asked, "Who's dead?"
I peered out through the shuttered blinds,
"I am, you fools," I said.

"For only thus and only so
Can I ever be alone,
So weep your tears and trim your grief
And make your proper moan.

Come to my little funeral
And smell the pretty flowers,
And when you leave, in sleek black gloves,
I'll snatch my waited hours."

The undertaker folds the chairs,
The hearse has rolled away,
I wrap myself in solitude
And there, kind friends, I'll stay.