ALFRED MOSSMAN LANDON

Independence (Republican), 9 January 1933–11 January 1937

Born 9 September 1887, West Middlesex (Lawrence County), Pennsylvania; son of John M. Landon, an Ohio oil company superintendent, and Anne Mossman Landon, 1 sister who died at age 7; educated at Marietta (Ohio) Academy and University of Kansas (graduated 1908); military experience in World War I, first lieutenant in chemical warfare service; married (1) Margaret Fleming, January 1915 (died June 1918), 1 son who died in infancy and 1 daughter, (2) Theo Cobb, January 1930, 1 daughter and 1 son; religious preference Methodist; died 12 October 1987, in Topeka; buried in Mount Hope Cemetery, Topeka.

As manager of Clyde M. Reed’s unsuccessful Republican primary race against Frank Haucke in 1930, Alf M. Landon’s fortunes in the Republican party fell briefly but were revived when Haucke was defeated in the general election. In 1932, with Frank Carlson as his campaign manager, Landon himself ran in the Republican primary for governor and won by accenting his role as a harmony candidate. The results were 160,345 votes for Landon, 59,326 for Lacey Simpson, and 28,456 for a belated entry, Joseph H. Brady. Landon had pounded the Republicans with his theme of harmony, and to general audiences he advocated cutting taxes and achieving material prosperity. He faced formidable opposition and was not helped by the nationwide deterioration of the Republican image. Neverthe-
less, Landon conducted a strenuous campaign and won in a fairly close general election race, carrying 278,581 votes to 272,944 for Woodring (Democrat), 244,607 for Brinkley (Independent) and 3,892 for H. M. Perkins (Socialist).

Alf Landon grew up in Marietta, Ohio, where his father was superintendent of an oil refinery. The family moved to the oil-boom and county-seat town of Independence, Kansas, in 1904, shortly after Alf graduated from Marietta Academy. John Landon had a fine job as manager of a gas company, and Alf attended the University of Kansas where he received a law degree in 1908. Instead of opening a law practice, Alf went to work as a bookkeeper at the Independence State Bank of Commerce, and later he moved to the First National Bank, just across the street. By 1910 Alf was investing in oil-drilling projects; in the next year he resigned from the bank to work full-time as an independent oil man, and he prospered modestly.

Landon was attracted by the actions of the progressive wing of the Republican party. His father served as one of the delegates-at-large to the Republican National Convention in 1912, endorsing Theodore Roosevelt. When Taft was renominated, both Alf and his father joined the Progressive party to get Roosevelt elected. Alf worked for the Progressive candidates in Montgomery County but also handled Republican Arthur Capper’s campaign for governor in the county. In 1914 Landon became chairman of the Montgomery County Progressive party, in its unsuccessful effort to win an election. Landon’s biographer says he struck a “political ‘dry hole’ ” in 1914, but he learned from it. Slowly, Landon moved back to the progressive faction of the Republican party when in 1918 he supported Capper for United States Senate and served gubernatorial candidate Henry J. Allen as chairman in southeast Kansas and with membership on his statewide committee. With Allen’s victory Landon gained a valued role as advisor of the governor, and for three months in 1922 he was Allen’s executive secretary.

Landon’s independent oil and gas businesses prospered in the 1920s, and he served as a director of important oil and gas associations. In 1924 Landon campaigned for Clyde Reed’s nomination for governor in the Republican primary, but conservative Ben Paulen won. Paulen’s silence on the Ku Klux Klan issue led to Landon’s
endorsement of William Allen White as an Independent candidate, but Paulen won anyway. Paulen’s four years as governor proved popular with Kansas voters, but in 1928 Landon’s chance to have a leading role in politics came again when he became Clyde Reed’s campaign manager during a successful race for governor. Landon greatly enlarged his acquaintance throughout Kansas during that race, and even though Reed was defeated two years later, Landon had paved the way for his emergence as the Republican candidate for governor in 1932.

The mood was austere at Landon’s inauguration in 1933: no parade, no invitations, a single small artillery piece in place of the seventeen-gun salute, and volunteer musicians. Neither would there be a new automobile for the governor nor new dishes for the Kansas Executive Mansion. In his inaugural address Landon said, “We have grown to expect a lot for nothing. We expected government to strew our paths with roses. We wanted to keep on taking out, hardly realizing that we have to pay in as well. This condition ‘built castles on the sand’ that crumbled.” But he was also optimistic: “We are on the frontier of a new world. . . . We have come a long way since governments were chiefly of a patriarchal nature over agricultural states.” Landon recognized that change was inevitable, but he was cautious: “We all wish for improvement, but we of Kansas must not direct our legislative theory to-day on this supposition alone.”

Landon’s four years as governor represented a mildly progressive, businesslike administration, unencumbered by commitments to pressure groups. Depression still gripped the state and nation, and Landon sought lower taxes and fees (for instance, a minimum vehicle registration fee of sixty cents instead of eight dollars), a reorganized state administration, and relief for farmers and the unemployed. State employee salaries were further reduced. He also asked for an agency that became the Legislative Council, paid for initially by a foundation grant, in an effort to free the state from nongovernmental tax experts. An income tax rate was set which lifted some tax burden from property. State limits were imposed on bank withdrawals and savings and trust companies just before the federal bank holiday in early March 1933. Landon also participated in the devel-
Governor Landon reading to his three-year-old daughter, Nancy Josephine. In 1978, Nancy Landon Kassebaum of Kansas became the first woman not a widow of a senator to be elected to the United States Senate. She was reelected in 1984.

Development of the National Recovery Administration's Oil Code that went into effect in July 1933. Unemployment and drought were severe problems in 1933. Landon had only about two hundred jobs to fill but he interviewed as many as two hundred to three hundred applicants a day in an effort to provide hope for the unemployed. By 1934 Kansas was using more federal programs, and a bipartisan Kansas Emergency Relief Commission was replaced by other agencies. State funds for relief purposes were minimal, and reliance on federal moneys became necessary. Landon sought to combine job relief, agricultural relief, and conservation in one agency. In his first term, the Republicans had a bare majority in each house of the state legislature, so cooperation with the Democratic minority was evident. Two years later the Republicans gained much more control of the Kansas legislature.

Demanding a significant amount of Landon's time during his first
term was the Finney bond scandal. He promptly called in state troops to guard the statehouse. He also convened a special session of the legislature. The attorney general and state auditor were impeached but acquitted, while the state treasurer, who resigned, and Warren and Ronald Finney were all convicted of fraud and given long sentences in the penitentiary. Also dealt with in that special session were unemployment relief laws, whether beer could be sold in Kansas, and a prohibition repeal referendum. The beer bill was narrowly defeated, and the prohibition issue was passed on to the voters in 1934 where prohibition was retained by a substantial majority.

Landon was a candidate for reelection in 1934. John R. Brinkley, in a third try for the governorship, ran in the Republican primary against Landon, who defeated him 233,956 votes to 58,938. Landon then won in the general election by a sizable margin over Topeka Mayor Omar B. Ketchum, Democrat, 422,030 votes to 359,877, with George M. Whiteside, Socialist, receiving 6,744 votes. In his second inaugural address, Landon commented on unemployment and public debt:

Every right-thinking person prays that the need for relief to the unemployed may speedily pass away, but until it does pass it is entirely fair, in a complex, social and economic situation such as ours, that government exert all its powers to prevent suffering. We should, however, attempt to attain as nearly as possible a pay-as-you-go basis. We will then pay for our own mistakes, which is right and fair. We should not expect our children to pay for them. Certainly an increasing public debt will lessen the ability of our succeeding generations to meet their emergencies as they may arise.

By 1935, as Landon’s second term got under way, the intensity of the drouth led an Associated Press reporter to identify parts of Kansas and four other states as the Dust Bowl. Landon worked primarily for a law that would require uniform accounting and auditing in local government; perhaps this financial reform was his chief victory. The cash basis law was also put in operation, providing essential ser-
services at a greatly reduced cost with the result that per capita expenses of state government dropped during his years in office. (The cumulative effect of this law has left Kansas with the smallest debt of any state in the country.) With few other Republican governors in office after 1934, Landon was a logical contender for the presidency in 1936.

In 1936 Landon, in a campaign initiated by the press and bolstered by support from Republican rank-and-file, was nominated on the first ballot of the Republican National Convention as a presidential candidate. Landon became a full-time contender following the national convention, and Kansas affairs were handled by his assistants. However, Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt, running for a second term, turned out to be almost unbeatable in 1936, and Landon lost the presidential election. The popular vote was 27,478,945 for FDR, 16,674,665 for Landon. Landon received only the eight electoral votes of Vermont and Maine. Maine had always voted earlier than
other states, so the old saying, "As Maine goes, so goes the nation," was altered to "As Maine goes, so goes Vermont!" The Republican numbers in Congress were drastically reduced, and Landon’s executive secretary Will G. West lost the race for Kansas governor.

After his defeat in the presidential race, Landon established his home in Topeka and did not again seek or accept public office. His business, following his four years as governor, was primarily independent oil development and ownership of radio stations. He attended the Republican National Conventions of 1940, 1944, and 1948 as delegate-at-large, and he was a member of the Kansas commission on constitutional revision in 1957. He sought to avoid interference in Republican primary races, but his preference for certain candidates sometimes showed. He became the Grand Old Man of the Grand Old Party. His ninety-fifth birthday was celebrated by a visit from Pres. Ronald Reagan, who gave the address in the long-running Landon Lecture Series at Kansas State University; Reagan also visited Landon at his Topeka home shortly before his one-hundredth birthday. Landon’s name in Topeka was commemorated by the Landon Middle School, closed in 1986, and the Landon Arena of the Topeka
Expocentre. The Alf M. Landon State Office Building at Ninth and Jackson streets, formerly housing offices of the Santa Fe railroad, was refitted as a major state facility. Landon died one month and three days after his one-hundredth birthday. His body lay in state for a day under the rotunda of the State Capitol before his funeral.

REFERENCES: Bader, 1982; Carlin and Richmond, 1982; McCoy, 1966; Schruben, 1963; Schruben, 1969.