



Letters to Bob Dole in the 1960s
From “Voices from the Big First: 1961-1968”
By Virgil W. Dean

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Hello, this is Virgil Dean, former editor of *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* and more recently, Dole Archives Curatorial Fellow.

I do not know about you, but some days I am overwhelmed by the magnitude and complexity of the issues and problems facing humanity. Sometimes I just tune it out. Other times an issue bothers me so much I simply must do something . . . so, I “take up my pen,” figuratively speaking, and write to an elected official. A practice that is at least as old as our Republic.

Too often, I think, we fail to recognize the fact that no matter how intractable our social and political problems might seem, they are probably not unique to our time and place. As a wise man once said about the so-called American farm problem, “the more things change, the more they remain the same.” Generally speaking, I agree; and the constituent correspondence from Robert J. Dole’s eight years in the U.S. House of Representatives (1961-1969) support that conclusion, while offering an invaluable window into the hopes and fears of a state and people confronting momentous change. And it serves as the basis for a new exhibit open now at the Dole Institute of Politics, “Voices from the Big First.”ⁱ

For better and for worse, things have changed since the tumultuous 1960s. But many of the issues that troubled Bob Dole’s Kansas, trouble us today: the proliferation of nuclear weapons and seemingly endless wars; the struggle for equal rights; violence in our cities; accelerated rural to urban migration; the increased awareness of environmental degradation; and the separation of church and state, to name just a few. By the thousands, concerned citizens of the 1960s wrote their congressmen to offer opinions, to vent, and to seek help in navigating their rapidly changing world.

These “voices” take the form of letters and telegrams from all kinds of folks: small and large farmers, political and religious leaders, local businesspeople, and “ordinary” women, men, and children.

One issue that elicited many of these “voices” during the middle 1960s, as it continues to do six decades later, was Civil Rights. Bob Dole’s Kansas, the old “Free State,” was not immune from the movement’s numerous implications and tensions. Thus, it is not surprising that western Kansans voiced their concerns for, frustrations about, fears of, support for, and opposition to this crusade for equality.ⁱⁱ

A Russell constituent wrote Dole in July 1963 and enclosed a petition, signed by more than thirty individuals, “pleading” that Kansas lawmakers “**vote for the proposed Civil Rights Legislation.**” Echoing a key theme in President John F. Kennedy’s June 1963 Civil Rights address, the writer insisted: “America cannot hope to win the free world to our side as long as we look upon people different than we are as inferior, and treat them as such. . . . We, as Kansans, want America to be safe for everyone, as it was ment [sic] to be!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Most Kansans seem to have agreed and favored, even if only reluctantly, the Civil Rights Act as finally passed and signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in July 1964. But support for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was more problematic for Congressman Dole and most of his constituents. Dole voted in the affirmative, but for many conservatives this was really a step too far in the direction of federal interference in state and local affairs. Be that as it may, it had become necessary, argued Congressman Dole, who “firmly believe[d] that if our form of government is to have any meaning, no qualified citizen should be deprived of the right to vote.”^{iv}

On March 12, 1965, a Hutchinson woman wrote to express her frustration with events in Selma and Jackson, Mississippi, considering the Civil Rights Act of the previous year. This law should be enforced so that “the Negro” will have “equal rights” in reality. “Why,” she asked, “are these people denied the right to vote?” In the fall, an Oakley man wrote to “commend” the congressman for his “aye” vote on the Voting Rights Act, which the correspondent thought was “socialistic” but necessary under the circumstances.^v

Efforts to strengthen and expand civil rights legislation soon followed.^{vi} Dole had “some grave doubts about sections” of the proposed Civil Rights Act of 1966—the so-called “Fair Housing Act.” He believed homeowners “should have the right to sell or not to sell or rent, to anyone for any reason [they] may have without intervention of the federal government.” And in August 1966, Dole voted “nay” because, he insisted, he feared “the rate at which individual liberty is slipping from our grasp, and unfortunately, there seems to be no end in sight.” It appears residents of the “Big First” overwhelmingly agreed.^{vii} Not Kansas state senator Curtis R. McClinton, an African American Democrat from Wichita, however. “This is one of the most important pieces of legislation in the history of America since the days of reconstruction,” insisted McClinton. “No longer can we be complacent and hold two standards of citizenship and call ourselves a democratic government in the eyes of the world.”^{viii}

For more “Voices from the Big First,” visit the exhibit at the Dole Institute of Politics through the fall of 2021.

Thanks for listening.

This transcript of “Letters to Bob Dole in the 1960s” is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.

ⁱ [“Voices from the Big First, 1961-1968”](#) in the Elizabeth Dole Gallery and Reading Room of the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics at the University of Kansas opened on February 11, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Just two months into his first term, Dole received a letter from the Reverend Ray B. Bressler of Oberlin’s First Methodist Church warning of “trouble right here in America with the black man” who had understandably gotten “impatient, because of their past treatment.” He encouraged Dole to be an “ambassador of good will in instructing our Southern friends that progress must be made quickly in human relations.” Dole wrote that he had not had time yet to develop relationships with his southern colleagues, but he “hope[d] to find out reasons for their resistance. They do indicate that [President John F.] Kennedy may have some effect on integration in the south because the [sic] continues to woo the negro voters and has, of course, been very successful.” Bessler to Dole, March 8, 1961, and Dole to Bessler, March 13, 1961, box 47, folder 1, Dole Archives. [Appears to be only letter on this subject from 1961. **Copied, PDF folder “house_047_009_001.”**]

ⁱⁱⁱ President Kennedy addressed the nation on TV the night of June 11, 1963, in which he called for the passage of far-reaching civil rights legislation likely helped spur these northwest Kansans to action. Don Colhour, Russell, to Dole (Pearson and Carlson), **July 23, 1963**, plus informal petition signed by over thirty others, box 153, folder 2, Dole Archive. [**Copied, PDF folder “house_153_002_063_d.”**]

^{iv} Dole to L. G. DeLay, Oakley, October 30, 1965, and DeLay to Dole, October 25, 1965, box 153, folder 1, Dole Archives. Dole wrote: “I firmly believe that if our form of government is to have any meaning, no qualified citizen should be deprived of the right to vote,” but he also thought “that far too much has been made of the obligations some feel our country owes Negroes.” **Copied, PDF folder “house_153_001_007.”** Some began advocating for the Voting Rights Act in reaction to events in Selma, Alabama, and elsewhere in the South. In a letter to Dole on March 8, 1965, Rev. David P. Birch, First Presby, Dodge City, wrote “I was absolutely appalled yesterday at the treatment given to my fellow American citizens in Selma Alabama.” On March 15, 1965, Quinter representative Benjamin G. Morris, wrote to “urge you [Dole] to support the proposed legislation on voter registration.” Nothing worse for America’s image abroad than racial problems and conflict as broke out in Selma. Correspondence, box 153, folder 2, Dole Archives.

^v Dole to L. G. DeLay, Oakley, October 30, 1965, and DeLay to Dole, October 25. [Good (short, two-page, handwritten) letter; but DeLay does use “**N**” word. **Copied, PDF folder “house_153_001_007.”**] Dole to Mrs. Ernest Dewey, Hutchinson, March 18, 1965, and Dewey to Dole, March 12, 1965, box 153, folder 2, Dole Archive. **Copied, PDF folder “house_153_002_030.”**

^{vi} Dole to Jasper E. Myler, Tribune, April 9, 1966. Myler sent a completed questionnaire and brief letter, which essentially blamed “the colored people” for “racial problems.” Dole replied that he found Myler’s comments “interesting,” but “**I must state it is difficult for us in western Kansas to fully appreciate the problem of the Negro in some of the southern areas.** The percentage of Negroes in western Kansas is so small that many of us have really never understood the problem. I certainly agree with you, however, that regardless of race, color or creed, people should have every opportunity to earn their way and they should be rewarded for working and not reward for refusing to work.” **Copied, PDF folder “house_047_010_059.”**

^{vii} Dole to Hon. Curtis R. McClinton, Wichita, June 21, 1966, and McClinton to Dole, June 15, 1966, box 47, folder 11, Dole Archives (**Copied, PDF folder “house_047_011_065**); Dole to Rev. David P. Birch, First Presbyterian, Dodge City, June 24, 1966, box 47, folder 10, Dole Archives (**Copied, PDF folder “house_047_010_082”**); Dole to Clelland Cole, News Publishers, St. John, August 29, 1966, box 47, folder 10, Dole Archives. Letters in opposition to H.R. 14765, Title IV of the proposed Civil Rights Act of 1966, were numerous during May-August; see, for example: E. W. Yockers, Salina, to Dole, July 21, 1966; Roberta Payne, Wichita, to Dole, July 31, 1966; Mrs. Dean Barnes, Emporia, to Dole, August 2, 1966; Dole to Elvin Zane, Ashland, August 27, 1966, box 47, folder 10, Dole Archives.

^{viii} Dole to Hon. **Curtis R. McClinton**, Wichita, June 21, 1966; Curtis R. McClinton to Dole, June 15, 1966, box 47, folder 11, Dole Archives [**Copied, PDF folder “house_047_011_065.”**]. [McClinton, Sr.](#), was born in Oklahoma on March 22, 1913, and died on June 27, 2012. In Wichita he was a real estate broker, among other business activities, and served as a Democrat in the Kansas House from 1957-1960 and the state senate 1965-1968.