

Arizona Statehood and the Presidential Election of 1912

Charles B. Schudson

With the Treaty of Guadalupe, February 2, 1848, the Mexican War ended and Mexico lost nearly half its land, including most of New Mexico and all of Arizona north of the Gila River. Arizona then became part of the New Mexico Territory. But feeling isolated and all too far from the territorial capital in Santa Fe, Arizonans soon started seeking independent status. Political feuds followed, including those during the Civil War years when both the Union and the Confederacy claimed Arizona.

In 1863, Arizona became a separate, official United States Territory. But, as Marshall Trimble writes in *Arizona / A Panoramic History of a Frontier State* (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), "Arizonans would soon learn that statehood would be a much more difficult plum to achieve than territorial status." Indeed, statehood remained almost fifty years away.

Several issues blocked any smooth road to statehood. At times, national partisan interests pitted Arizona and its prevailing Populist-Democrats against New Mexico and its controlling Conservative Republicans. Ultimately, the statehood debate devolved into a dispute over whether the New Mexico and Arizona territories would produce one state or two. In *Arizona / A History* (The University of Arizona Press, 1995), Thomas E. Sheridan explains:

[A] ... coalition of populists, progressives, and labor leaders ... joined the statehood crusade. The coalition had to defeat many powerful enemies. Many Republicans in the U.S. Senate feared that the predominantly Democratic territory [of Arizona] would send two Democratic senators to Washington. Other opponents argued that neither "the desert sands of Arizona" nor "the humble Spanish-speaking people of New Mexico" were ready for statehood. But the pressure for statehood was too great, so Republican Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana, chairman of the Senate committee on territories, proposed an ingenious solution to the dilemma: to admit Arizona and New Mexico as one state, just as they had been one territory until 1863. New Mexico was larger, with a population of 195,310 people compared to Arizona's 122,931. More to the point, it usually voted Republican. By joining the two territories, Republicans hoped to keep control of the Senate by creating one huge state in the Southwest.

Arizonans reacted with an indignation that was as much racist as righteous – an indignation the newspapers controlled by the railroads and copper companies carefully stoked. The majority of New Mexico's population was Hispanic, and an entrenched Hispanic oligarchy wielded considerable power. Arizona, on the other hand, had fewer Hispanics, and they were practically disenfranchised except in a few

strongholds like Tucson and Florence. As one senator from South Carolina proclaimed, Arizona's opposition to joint statehood was "a cry of a pure blooded white community against the domination of a mixed breed aggregation of citizens of New Mexico, who are Spaniards, Indians, Greasers, Mexicans, and everything else."

Organized labor shared this racist revulsion to joint statehood and viewed individual statehood as a chance to prohibit "alien" labor in Arizona. In November 1906 the two territories voted on the issue. New Mexicans strongly supported joint statehood Arizonans overwhelmingly renounced it by an even greater margin Joint statehood died with that vote. From then on, the battle was to shape the kind of state Arizona would inevitably become.

In 1910, in preparation for statehood, an Arizona constitutional convention, dominated by Democrats, drafted a state constitution that featured three classically progressive provisions: the *initiative* (allowing voters to bypass the legislative process in order to make laws directly), the *referendum* (allowing voters to approve or reject laws passed by the legislature), and the *recall* (allowing voters to remove public officials, including judges, from elective office). Arizonans overwhelmingly approved the constitution and, in 1911, Congress voted to admit both New Mexico and Arizona – as separate states. But a big speed bump still stood on the road to statehood. President William Howard Taft vetoed statehood for Arizona.

Becoming president in 1909, Taft – President Theodore Roosevelt's chosen successor – proved less "progressive" than his mentor and opposed the Arizona constitution's progressive provisions. As a former judge, Taft was particularly opposed to the recall of judges, quite reasonably believing that recall threatened judicial independence. He declared that he would continue to veto statehood for Arizona as long as its constitution allowed for judicial recall, though he knew that Arizona, upon gaining statehood, could enact such a constitutional provision once again.

And so Republican President Taft and Arizona Democrats danced their dance, each knowing the other's steps. Following the Taft veto, Arizona revised its constitution by eliminating the recall. Then Congress again voted to admit Arizona and, on February 14, 1912, President Taft signed the proclamation making Arizona our forty-eighth state. Then, no surprise, Arizona reinstated the recall in its state constitution. And just months later, in a final, fascinating footnote, Teddy Roosevelt, after failing to wrest away the nomination from Taft, bolted from the Republican Convention and founded the Progressive "Bull Moose" Party. Roosevelt, finishing second in both the popular and electoral vote, took enough votes away from Taft's re-election bid to enable Woodrow Wilson to win an overwhelming Electoral College majority, including the three electoral votes of ... Arizona.

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