



PROFILES IN COURAGE

Teacher's Guide

GEORGE NORRIS

CREDITS:

Starring Tom Bosley, Torn Thatcher, Peter Whitney, George Mitchell, and Dan Tobin. Written by Don M. Mankiewicz. Directed by Stuart Rosenberg. Associate producer, Michael Ritchie. Produced by Gordon Oliver and Robert Saudek Associates. Inspired by John F. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book. **50 minutes.** Guide prepared for Social Studies School Service by Robert D. Barnes, 1983.

OBJECTIVES:

- To understand the difference between loyalty to constituency and loyalty to conscience.
- To examine the issues of neutrality, isolationism, and war.
- To discuss the roles of the president and Congress in making foreign policy decisions.
- To understand the meaning of moral courage.

BACKGROUND AND SYNOPSIS:

For 40 years, George W. Norris served the people of Nebraska, first in the House of Representatives and then in the Senate.

Fresh from the plains of Nebraska, he had first come to Washington in 1903, a staunch conservative Republican, "sure of my position," as he wrote later, "unreasonable in my convictions, and unbending in my opposition to any other political party or political thought except my own." But "one by one I saw my favorite heroes wither... I discovered that my party...was guilty of virtually all the evils that I had charged against the opposition."

Progressive and independent thought, concern for the underdog, and a willingness and ability to change—these were part of George Norris's character. John F. Kennedy, in his book *Profiles in Courage*, identified other Norris qualities when he quoted from a 1932 Franklin D. Roosevelt tribute to Norris:

"History asks, 'Did the man have integrity? Did the man have unselfishness? Did the man have courage? Did the man have consistency?'" Kennedy said, "There are few statesmen in America who so definitely and clearly measure up to an affirmative answer to those four questions as does George W. Norris."

Our episode begins in Lincoln, Nebraska, on March 26, 1917. Norris prepares to speak to 2,400 constituents. He has been called a traitor for filibustering in the Senate against President Wilson's Armed Ships Bill.

In a series of flashbacks, we see Norris first in 1902, as an outspoken district court judge, as a candidate for the United States House of Representatives, and as he fights the power of House Speaker Joe Cannon in Congress. It is a later controversy that has prompted Norris to address his angry and disappointed Nebraskans. In 1917, Germans are sinking American merchant ships, though America is still officially neutral. Wilson proposes that American merchant ships be armed. The House enthusiastically supports his bill by a vote of 403 to 13. Now a Senator, Norris objects: "This is just an indirect declaration of war. Now I'm against war, but if we have to have it, should we slide into it, back into it, drift into it, or should we enter it in a straightforward way with our eyes wide open?"

Norris insists that Wilson's plan be debated by the new Congress, not railroaded through a "lame duck" session with three days left to run. The tactic is filibuster. Twelve Senators hold off 82. Norris quips that his mail is equally divided: "50% abusive, 50% threatening."

The 12 are vilified by their colleagues. President Wilson arms the ships and calls the actions of the 12 "contemptible." It is the "traitor" charge that cuts Norris to the heart. Ready to resign, he returns to Nebraska to explain his actions. His constituents are supportive.

VOCABULARY:

The following words and phrases appear in the program. Teachers may wish to check for student understanding:

filibuster	held at bay
traitor	Benedict Arnold
franked	Burr
sauced the goose/ leave the gander dry	reactionary
anarchy	radical
chaos	despotism
tyrannical	recall
embargo	"a dry"
lame duck congress	Al Smith
obstructionist	New Deal
resolution	T.V.A.
subterfuge	epitaph

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. The filibustering against the Armed Ships Bill is characterized by as many as 12 men against 82. Norris calls it "12 against 100 million." Why are so many Americans outraged at the filibuster against Wilson's bill? Can you think of several reasons?
2. What Norris qualities appealed to Nebraska voters when they first sent him to the House of Representatives? What were his limitations or liabilities?
3. What annoys and frustrates Norris about the Way "business" is conducted in the House of Representatives? Consider what you learned about the function of the Congressional Record.
4. Defeated on the motion limiting his power, Speaker Joe Cannon offers his resignation. There is a move to accept it. What does Norris say? Is this consistent with his character? Explain.
5. Is it the responsibility of an elected representative to do what the majority of his constituents want, or is he/she responsible, as La Follette said, "to speak his own mind" for the length of his term, no matter what the views of those he represents? Give examples or reasons to support your position.

6. "Fool, radical, reactionary, stupid, tool of the interests, unscrupulous," these were "political" terms according to Norris. What did Norris say about the word "traitor"? Does this explain actions on his part that otherwise might be characterized as "thin skinned"? Explain.

ACTIVITY:

A filibuster is a stalling tactic, an attempt to "talk a bill to death." It is a process in which a minority of Senators seeks to delay or prevent Senate action on a measure. The current filibuster record was set in 1957, by Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina. He held the Senate floor for 24 hours and 18 minutes in an unsuccessful attempt to stop what later became the Civil Rights Act of 1957.

Assign three of your classmates the "chore" of planning and executing a period long filibuster. Give them several days to find out what Senators talk about during a filibuster. Have several other class members find out what, if anything, the rest of you can do to stop them. On the day after the filibuster, discuss your feelings during the filibuster and your reactions to the experience. Does the right to filibuster have a place in a democratic society? Explain.

FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION:

1. Norris's move against Speaker Joe Cannon brought reform to the House of Representatives. Find out about power and leadership in the Senate and House. How are the speaker and the majority and minority leaders chosen? How are committee members chosen? What power can committee leaders and members exercise? Can you identify any changes or reforms in the rules that govern our Congress?
2. Is it right for an important decision to be settled by a "lame duck Congress"? Do research to find out what last minute decisions, appointments, and laws have been made by governors, legislators, and even presidents after being vetoed out of office.
3. Examine the U.S. Constitution. Who is empowered to "declare" war? Who, in practice, is most likely to "make" war? Why? Does the system appear to work? Find out how American involvement in Korea and Vietnam began. How was it sustained? What is the recent War Powers Act?

