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Jackson College of Graduate Studies and Research

**“Winning the Peace” in Oklahoma: Governor Robert S. Kerr’s
Policies for Postwar Economic Progress**

A THESIS

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN HISTORY

By

Larry C. Floyd

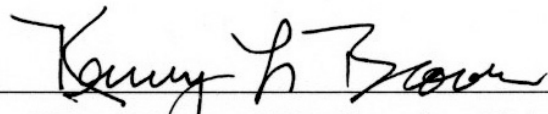
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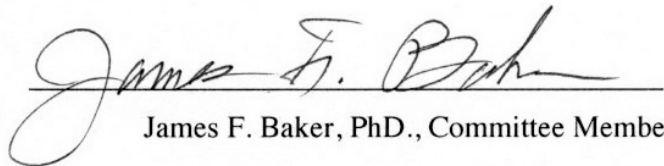
THESIS APPROVAL

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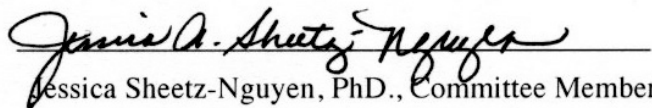
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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TITLE OF THESIS: “Winning the Peace” in Oklahoma: Governor Robert S. Kerr’s Policies for Postwar Economic Progress

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ABSTRACT: Elected governor just after the United States entered World War II, Robert S. Kerr focused his administration on economic progress for Oklahoma. With federal war expenditures curing most of the Great Depression’s ills, he capitalized on these gains and built a foundation to modernize the state’s economy with new industry.

Cooperation with the federal government and other states was stressed. The governor had witnessed the lost opportunities of his predecessor, who resisted the Roosevelt administration’s programs to aid the state. Kerr avidly courted these federal projects to boost the economy and provide better earnings for residents.

Conservation of the state’s neglected natural resources became an early priority for the administration, with soil and water conservation receiving special attention. Farmers had suffered from drought and the Depression during the 1930s, so rebuilding croplands, controlling floods, and providing irrigation was important to the agricultural state. Federal dollars were sought for these efforts.

Still, the changing nature of agriculture, often difficult even in better times, called for the development of a more modern economy and a restructuring of the state’s workforce. With a fledgling manufacturing base started during the war, Kerr promoted

industry to provide higher-earnings for displaced farm workers and returning veterans in the postwar years. This effort was aided by encouraging the processing of raw products in the state and creating an attractive business environment for outside investors.

To advise him on his policies for economic progress, Kerr reorganized the state's Planning and Resources Board and built a cadre of able administrators who volunteered their time and expertise. Mostly business leaders from the private sector, these board members provided strategies to improve the state's productivity and infrastructure.

By the war's end, Kerr had established himself as a national figure and one of the leaders of the Democratic Party. He used his political and personal connections to create a more attractive image for the state and to further its economic interests. The returning veterans and displaced war-industry workers found a state with new opportunities for earnings, both from federal projects and a growing number of businesses.

As the governor's term ended in January 1947, the state was leaving its dust bowl image behind. Progress could be seen in the construction of numerous water reservoirs, the beginnings of a navigation system on the Arkansas River, a federally funded program for improved roadways, and a more industry-attractive environment. Even the formerly rancorous politics of the state took on a more business-like demeanor.

Subsequent administrations built on the economic foundation established by the Kerr administration. In the 1950s and 1960s, Oklahoma made the transition from largely a producer of raw materials to a state with a more modern, diversified economy. As the agricultural workforce declined, other sectors of the changing economy provided better employment. The higher-earnings public and manufacturing sectors sharply increased in the decades following Kerr's administration.

Introduction

Many Oklahomans returned to rural areas after losing their jobs in the depressed economy of the early 1930s. In 1932, some 7,800 families of unemployed workers settled on previously abandoned farms in the state. Dust storms in western Oklahoma plagued many of these rural residents in January 1933 and continued through the summer. As a severe drought settled over the state, crops failed and gardens withered. Desperate farmers held a conference in Guymon to assess the situation and consider alternatives, and they resolved to ask for assistance from the federal government.¹

With much of the western United States suffering in drought conditions by 1934, the panhandle counties of Oklahoma were described in July as a desert of sand. Farmers throughout the state hauled water to save their thirsty stock. Crops failed again, and subsistence gardens cooked in the intense heat. In the eastern section of the state, W. L. Evans, who had farmed the same land in Muskogee County for forty-six years, worried that his cattle would starve in the coming winter. His normal hay crop of thirty tons had diminished to six that summer. Evans could have spoken for other Oklahoma farmers when he said that 1934 was “the first season that I had to call for help.”²

The drought, dust, and Depression of the 1930s broke down the self-reliance and faith in the marketplace of many Oklahomans. In desperation, farmers and unemployed workers looked to the federal government for relief. Especially in the more arid parts of

¹ C. Roger Lambert, “Dust, Farmers, and the Federal Government,” in *Hard Times in Oklahoma: The Depression Years*, ed. Kenneth D. Hendrickson, Jr. (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1983), 71-2.

² *Ibid.*, 73.

the country, those who earned their living from the land understood the need for governmental action to help mend their broken economies. Farmers in the Southwest sensed that the massive soil erosion and water problems required a centralized approach to these regional challenges. To address these problems, the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration's New Deal offered cash-strapped states both federal dollars for government projects and a focus on planning for future development and growth. Although many had reservations about this expanded governmental role, hard-pressed Oklahomans generally accepted this new federal intervention in their lives and communities.³

World War II shifted the focus of the Roosevelt administration away from the New Deal's goals of economic stability and social equality to those of producing the materials and services to win the war. Federal spending flowed even stronger throughout the nation and in Oklahoma. "Dr. New Deal" had been needed to bring confidence to a nation with a sick economy, Roosevelt analogized. "Dr. Win-the-War" would redirect American resources toward the great enterprise to defeat the Axis powers. Federal war expenditures rose from \$3.6 billion in 1940, or about 2 percent of the national product, to \$93.4 billion in 1944, nearly half the nation's economy. Military bases and wartime industries sprouted across the Oklahoma plain, and a strong measure of economic prosperity cured most of the Depression's ills.⁴

Assuming the state governorship in January 1943, businessman-politician Robert S. Kerr seized the opportunity of increased federal spending to expand and diversify the

³ Richard Lowitt, *The New Deal and the West* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 218-19.

⁴ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 623, 644-5, 783.

economy. Turning to politics after his success in the oil industry, he sensed the residents' openness to governmental leadership in a time of economic transition and believed Oklahoma politicians had wasted opportunities by battling with federal authorities and each other. Stressing the advantages of cooperation with Washington and other states, the Democratic national committeeman and wartime governor helped secure some of the twenty-eight army installations and thirteen naval bases in the state. With these came civilian jobs and local contracts.⁵ But Kerr looked beyond wartime spending as a solution, urging the state also to “win the peace” by developing a sound economy to provide employment opportunities for returning veterans.

Prominent state historians have credited Kerr's cooperation with Washington to bring federal spending to Oklahoma and his policies to put the state on a sound economic footing in the postwar years. None of their writings, however, provide a thorough narrative on the governor's actions and outcomes—what steps were taken for economic progress and with what measurable results. This research is intended to document Kerr's plans and actions to develop the state's economy and the outcomes of these efforts.

Background for this research can be found in Anne Hodges Morgan's *Robert S. Kerr: The Senate Years*, in which the author chronicled the wartime governor's federal cooperation as an opportunity to modernize and develop the state's economy with federal funding. She also credited Kerr with laying the groundwork for the state's industrial base in the postwar years through development of its natural resources and called him a “transitional leader” who brought Oklahoma into a more modern industrial era. While

⁵ David W. Baird and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma: A History* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 230-1.

her narrative lauds his economic policies as governor, it understandably lacks detail in this area with her work focused more on his years afterward in the U. S. Senate.⁶

In Leroy H. Fischer's edited work, *Oklahoma Governors, 1929-1955: Depression to Prosperity*, William P. Corbett contrasted Kerr's cooperation with Washington for federal projects with his predecessor Leon C. Phillips's resistance. Corbett also covered Kerr's austerity program to rid the state of debt and elaborated on the governor's efforts to gain authorization from Washington for the massive Arkansas River development plan. Like Morgan's, Corbett's brief narrative lacks details of the governor's plans, policies, and actions related to economic development.⁷

Other useful secondary sources on Kerr's years as governor included David Baird and Danney Goble's two texts, *Oklahoma: A History* and *Story of Oklahoma*. The latter informs on the Arkansas River navigation plan that Kerr so vigorously supported and the growth of the public sector in the state's postwar years. Also beneficial for background on Kerr's economic policies were: Edward E. Dale's *History of Oklahoma*; H. Wayne Morgan's and Anne Morgan's *Oklahoma: A History*; James R. Scale's and Danney Goble's *Oklahoma Politics: A History*; Arrell M. Gibson's *Oklahoma: A History of Five Centuries*, and *Oklahoma Politics and Policies: Governing the Sooner State* by David R. Morgan, et al. Economic analyses of the state before, during, and after the Kerr administration are available from John J. Klein's *The Oklahoma Economy* and *A Profile of Oklahoma Economic Development: 1950-1975*, by Gerald M. Lage, et al.

⁶ Anne H. Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr: The Senate Years* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), vii, 21-23.

⁷ William P. Corbett, "Robert Samuel Kerr," in *Oklahoma Governors, 1929-1955: Depression to Prosperity*, ed. Leroy H. Fischer (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1983), 119, 130, 143-44.

With these secondary sources providing background but little detail on Kerr's economic actions and their results, this research relied heavily on correspondence, speeches, documents, and reports from the Robert S. Kerr Collection at the Carl Albert Center for Congressional Research and Studies at the University of Oklahoma, and from records of the Industrial Development and Parks Department at the Oklahoma Department of Libraries in Oklahoma City. Kerr's correspondence files at the Carl Albert Center proved especially useful. Contemporary newspaper accounts provided more detail and much of the timeline for this narrative, with articles from *The Daily Oklahoman* used frequently.

Through examination and use of these primary sources, this research paper elucidates Kerr's economic policies beyond previous writings on his attempts to aid the economy through cooperation with Washington to bring federal spending to the state. The following narrative demonstrates Kerr's actions to modernize the state's economy through both the attraction of new industries and ties to the nation at large.⁸ Furthermore, his administration planned and developed the state's natural resources as an industrial base, using water projects for flood control, irrigation, hydroelectric power, recreation, and navigation. He championed a more industrialized economy through the encouragement of local processing of the state's raw materials.⁹ Capitalizing on the surge in federal spending in Oklahoma during and after the war, the opportunistic Kerr combined savvy politics, resource development, and industrial promotion to construct a sound foundation for postwar economic progress.

⁸ H. Wayne Morgan and Anne H. Morgan, *Oklahoma: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1977), 134.

⁹ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr: The Senate Years*, 21.

Chapter I: Dry Winds of Change

The Depression and drought of the 1930s had brought hardship to Oklahoma more severe than in most parts of the country. More lay at the heart of the state's problems, however, than an anemic national economy and an enduring curse of hot, dry weather. In 1939, the year World War II began in Europe, manufactured goods in the United States were valued at twice that of agricultural products and minerals combined. Yet in this same year, Oklahoma's agricultural and mineral production produced 80 percent of the state's income. With much of the state's workforce earning lower wages from the cultivation and extraction of raw materials, many carved out a subsistence living at best.

Historian Angie Debo later succinctly explained the state's social and economic woes of the 1930s. "This is the real story behind *Grapes of Wrath*. The cold fact is less moving than the imaginary sorrows of the *Joads*, but it has its pathos; people left Oklahoma—whether by jalopy or Pullman—to go where jobs were."¹

A lack of quality jobs was an old story in the agricultural state, understood by some of its leaders as far back as the relative prosperity of the late 1920s. Probably at his own expense, U. S. Senator William B. Pine, of Okmulgee, requested a New York engineering company to conduct a survey of the state's industrial resources in 1927 "to classify and review the resources that contribute to industrial opportunities in the State."²

In a report from February 1928, the consultants concluded that the amount of

¹ Angie Debo, *Oklahoma, Foot-Loose and Fancy-Free* (1949; repr., Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 100.

² "Report on the Industrial Resources of the State of Oklahoma," Lockwood, Greene & Co. Inc., February 1, 1928, Oklahoma Collection, Oklahoma City Metropolitan Library, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 13-4. [Collection and location hereafter cited as Oklahoma Collection at OKC Library]

manufacturing in the state compared unfavorably to the amount of raw materials produced. The group also found that the “foregoing discussion of fundamentals leads to the conclusion that there is a basis for new manufacturing enterprises and permanent industrial development in Oklahoma...”³ Little came from the survey, however.

With the Depression strangling progress across America in the early 1930s, the Roosevelt administration created the National Resources Board, renamed National Resources Planning Board in 1939, to aid federal and state planning and to provide solutions to many of the country’s economic and social problems. Under this board’s guidance, the administration of Oklahoma Democratic Governor E. W. Marland produced the inchoate “Preliminary Report of the Unofficial State Planning Board,” which summarized efforts to study and make recommendations on “conditions and problems within the state” through September 1934.⁴

An official State Planning Board was organized on April 30, 1935. This body issued a progress report in September 1936 for the previous twelve months’ activities, which described work on the gathering of “basic information essential to a long-term planning program.”⁵ These halting efforts produced in September 1937 the first monthly issue of “Plan-O-Gram” newsletter, disseminated by the Planning Board’s Division of State Planning, with a goal to “aid and coordinate plans among all State departments, Federal agencies, and throughout local governments.”⁶ Further progress by the board

³ “Report on the Industrial Resources of the State of Oklahoma,” Oklahoma Collection at OKC Library.

⁴ Introductory letter by Ed McDonald for “Preliminary Report of the Unofficial State Planning Board,” September 7, 1934, Oklahoma State Planning Board, Box 19, Industrial Development and Parks Department, State Agencies, Oklahoma Documents Collection, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. [Collection and location hereafter cited as ID&PD at ODL]

⁵ Annual Report 1935-1936, September 1, 1936, Oklahoma State Planning Board, Box 7, ID&PD at ODL.

⁶ “Plan-O-Gram” newsletter, September, 1937, Division of State Planning, Box 1, ID&PD at ODL.

produced an annual report from the new Division of State Parks for fiscal year ending June 30, 1938, which recounted the development of eight state areas of recreation in “the youngest State Parks system in the Nation.”⁷

These tentative steps to coordinate the planning efforts of local, state, and federal organizations and to develop Oklahoma’s resources foreshadowed similar but more productive efforts in the next decade. But these New Deal-inspired activities slowed under Democratic governor Leon C. Phillips, who took office in January 1939. Some state leaders had initially been reassured by the new leader’s inauguration speech, which foretold a program of governmental simplification and reduction in state spending.⁸

An editorial in the prominent journal of state events, *Harlow’s Weekly*, commented that Phillips’s speech demonstrated his “extraordinarily penetrating and detailed knowledge of the government,” and praised him for “the precision and definiteness with which remedies were proposed for the governmental difficulties which were emphasized.” This same article called attention to another recent news story that reported on the failure of Oklahoma industries to absorb the state’s surplus farm workers in the 1930s. Many residents were leaving for jobs elsewhere.⁹ In an insightful analysis, the *Harlow’s Weekly* editorial delineated what it believed to be at the core of the state’s economic woes:

The truth is that governmental operation in Oklahoma in recent years has not been actuated by an interest in the development of industry. In the attempt of those who have operated the government to take all the money possible away from industry, the state has reached the position where it is

⁷ First Annual Report of the Division of State Parks, June 30, 1938, Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, Box 7, ID&PD at ODL.

⁸ Baird and Goble, *Oklahoma*, 229.

⁹ Victor E. Harlow, “The Governor’s Message,” *Harlow’s Weekly*, January 14, 1939, 1-2.

about to kill the goose that laid the golden egg...Unless the state is to suffer a reverse of vast proportions, the attitude towards industry of the state must change. We must meet the competitive situation as we find it; we must convince individuals both in and out of Oklahoma that this state is friendly towards industry and will not seek every opportunity to hamper and penalize it once it becomes settled here. Otherwise, we shall continue to witness our wealth flowing from the state, and the sons and the daughters born within the state more and more will find it necessary to go elsewhere in the world in order to get a start and a secure footing in life.¹⁰

Early praise in *Harlow's Weekly* notwithstanding, Phillips soon directed more of his attention to opposing federal projects in Oklahoma than to furthering state industrialization and creation of jobs. As a candidate for governor the year before, he had appeared supportive of Roosevelt's progressive policies. His campaign brochure pledged "complete and constructive co-operation with President Roosevelt's administration..."¹¹ But after winning the Democratic nomination, he distanced himself from the New Deal. Easily winning the election in November 1938, he then openly announced his opposition to the administration in Washington.¹²

At his inauguration, Phillips denounced the Denison Dam, a large federal project on the Red River in southern Oklahoma. In a dispute over federal payment for flooded lands around the Grand River dam project in northeast Oklahoma, the contentious governor called out the National Guard in early 1940 to block construction. This action led to legal battles all the way to the U. S. Supreme Court before a settlement was reached in December 1941. Calling one proposed federal dam on the Arkansas River an

¹⁰ Harlow, "The Governor's Message," 2.

¹¹ Leon Phillips campaign brochure for 1938 gubernatorial election, Folder 7, Box 9, Leon C. Phillips Collection, Western History Collections, The University of Oklahoma Libraries, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

¹² Sara L. Bernson, "Leon Chase Phillips," in *Oklahoma Governors, 1929-1955: Depression to Prosperity*, ed. Leroy H. Fischer (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1983), 106-7.

“attempt to abrogate our rights to develop and control our natural resources,” Phillips sent a letter in mid-1941 to the U. S. House Flood Control Committee to protest two other planned dam projects in northeastern Oklahoma. Weary of their disputatious governor’s fights with Washington, state Democrats turned against Phillips in 1942, with Oklahoma governors then limited to one term in any event. The party chose Democratic national committeeman and ardent New Deal supporter Robert Samuel Kerr to oppose Enid Republican W. J. Otjen.¹³

An oil millionaire living in Oklahoma City, Kerr had raised funds for both Marland and Phillips in their gubernatorial bids.¹⁴ Born in a log cabin on a farm in Indian Territory in 1896, the Ada native was one of seven children and the first of five sons born to Texas emigrants William S. and Margaret E. Kerr. A founding pioneer of Ada, William Kerr served on the town’s nascent school board and city council, and after statehood served as the first county clerk of Pontotoc County.¹⁵ A religious teetotaler, the father served as a strong role model and imbued in his first-born son a calling for public service.

Robert Kerr attended Ada’s East Central Normal School and then taught in public school during his late teens in Beebee, Oklahoma. Heeding his father’s words that the practice of law could provide a quick avenue to public life, he enrolled at the University of Oklahoma in 1915. Needing money to further his education, Kerr sold magazines in Oklahoma and surrounding states. Impressed with his salesmanship, an attorney in Webb

¹³ Bernson, “Leon Chase Phillips,” 107-19.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 127.

¹⁵ “W. S. Kerr Dies, Funeral To Be Here Wednesday,” *Ada Evening News*, October 8, 1940, 1.

County, Missouri, gave him a position to study law as a clerk.¹⁶

Postponing his legal training at the onset of World War I, the Oklahoman served in France as a lieutenant in the field artillery.¹⁷ He benefited from his military experience when he began his political life as state commander of the American Legion in 1925.¹⁸ But Kerr never played the role of a battle-hardened war veteran. “The only powder I smelled was face powder,” he admitted of his non-combat service in France.¹⁹

Returning to Ada after the war, Kerr passed the bar examination in 1922. Following the death of his first wife in childbirth, he wed Grayce Breene of Tulsa, the youngest daughter of a wealthy Tulsa drilling contractor. This new family connection aided his business and political aspirations. In 1929, Kerr and his brother-in-law, James L. Anderson, bought a small oil-service business and began Anderson-Kerr Drilling Company. Three years later, the ambitious businessman moved to Oklahoma City, and his firm partnered with Continental Oil Company in a number of profitable oil leases.²⁰

After Kerr helped to win voter approval to extend the drilling zones in Oklahoma City, his company began lucrative drilling projects for Phillips Petroleum Company.²¹ Stumping for support for this extension, the businessman used an argument that he would advance as the state’s chief executive: when industry prospers, citizens benefit. “I believe that you owe it to the school children of this city to vote for this extension,” he

¹⁶ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 4-5.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁸ Robert S. Kerr to Edward Brown, telegram, May 19, 1944, Folder 15, Box 32, Gubernatorial, Robert S. Kerr Collection, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma. [Collection and location hereafter cited as Kerr Collection CAC]

¹⁹ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 6.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 7-9.

²¹ *Ibid*, 9.

asserted to Oklahoma City voters the day before the election.²² He reminded residents that teachers had recently received a 7-percent raise from revenues generated by production from wells already within the city limits.²³ With his partner's retirement in 1937, Kerr hired R. B. Lynn and Dean McGee from Phillips Petroleum. The trio formed Kerlyn Oil Company, which would be renamed Kerr-McGee Oil Industries in 1946.²⁴

Before Kerr turned to politics full-time with a run for the governorship in 1942, he had been known to state Democrats for his work as national committeeman and the chief fundraiser for Phillips's nomination in 1938. But differences between Phillips and Kerr had surfaced when the new Democratic primary winner snubbed his fundraiser's plans for a celebratory group outing at the oilman's lake house in Minnesota. Phillips was to have been the guest of honor, and the gathering of party supporters was naturally disappointed by the new nominee's failure to appear. Rumors spread that Phillips believed his affiliation with a rich oilman could hurt him politically.²⁵

The new governor remained aloof from Kerr following the November election, but the two later occasionally communicated about state and party matters. Appearances aside, Kerr never forgave Phillips for the snub, as the wealthy businessman detested disloyalty to or from a friend.²⁶ The split became final at the 1940 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, when the governor told Kerr, who then served as Oklahoma's

²² Kerr speech advocating oil drilling extension in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, circa 1937, Folder 11, Box 1, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 9.

²⁵ Malvina Stephenson interview with journalist Otis Sullivant, (undated), Folder 10, Box 6, Malvina Stephenson Collection, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, 1. [Hereafter cited as Sullivant interview by Malvina Stephenson] [Collection and location hereafter cited as Malvina Stephenson Collection CAC]

²⁶ Ibid.

new Democratic national committeeman, “If you support Roosevelt, I’ll break your back.”²⁷ Disregarding this threat, Kerr led a part of the Oklahoma delegation in a vote for the incumbent president.²⁸

Kerr launched his candidacy for the governorship in April 1942 in a lackluster speech to a hometown crowd in Ada, with the tepid reaction noted by his brother, veteran state politician Aubrey M. Kerr, and Oklahoma political journalist Otis Sullivant. Although the candidate had a good reputation as a toastmaster, Sullivant later said, he had not yet honed the oratorical skills that would soon become his trademark.²⁹

As the primary struggle ground on, Kerr took off his coat and showed his suspenders. The Oklahoma native countered efforts to characterize him as a wealthy elitist, telling the audiences, “I’m just like you, only I struck oil.” The crowds warmed to him.³⁰ The candidate made clear his and the governor’s opposing positions on federal cooperation: “Closer and more constructive cooperation with the national administration has unlimited possibilities for good to Oklahoma and the prosperity of our people.”³¹

Phillips made Kerr’s run for office more difficult by undermining him at every turn. He tried to persuade popular Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College president Henry G. Bennett, an avid New Deal supporter, to run for the Democratic nomination against Kerr, underscoring how deeply Phillips opposed the oilman. Bennett held a friendship with Vice President Henry A. Wallace, and the Roosevelt

²⁷ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 13.

²⁸ Corbett, “Robert Samuel Kerr,” 12.

²⁹ Sullivant interview by Malvina Stephenson, Malvina Stephenson Collection CAC, 2.

³⁰ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 15.

³¹ “Kerr Platform Speech,” Oklahoma gubernatorial campaign, 1942, Folder 18, Box 1, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC, 1.

administration appeared to endorse him. But the prominent educator declined to run against Kerr, who was a friend and fellow leader in the Baptist church.³²

Kerr won the July primary, which had degenerated into a vicious struggle among six candidates, including former Fifth District Congressman Gomer Smith.³³ An entourage of Democrats once again convened at the lake house in Minnesota to celebrate the victory, and this time the guest of honor joined the gathering. New nominee Kerr reminded the group, which included the powerful Oklahoma City business tycoon and publisher E. K. Gaylord, how Phillips had stood them up four years earlier.³⁴

Many Oklahomans took heart at Kerr's nomination, some sensing that the state might be entering a transitional period with an opportunity to use the federal war spending to develop the economy. In a congratulatory letter to the candidate shortly after the primary win, University of Oklahoma president Joseph A. Brandt expressed his optimism. "I want to tell you how happy I am at your nomination," Brandt wrote. "I am pleased indeed that Oklahoma is going to have a chance to elect a young and progressive Governor. There is so much to be done and it can be done during the war period, to put us on a sound footing, that you have an almost unique opportunity."³⁵

Marking a change in Oklahoma politics, Kerr courted the state's black vote with bold speeches that included the minority group in his platform. Booker Washington School principal J. E. Buford, of Sand Springs, pledged his support in an effusive letter praising the candidate's fair-mindedness toward Oklahoma's black citizens. The

³² Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 13-4.

³³ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 14.

³⁴ Sullivant interview by Malvina Stephenson, Malvina Stephenson Collection CAC, 3.

³⁵ Joseph A. Brandt to Robert S. Kerr, letter, July 22, 1942, Folder 26, Box 1, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

educator wrote Kerr to thank him for being the first major candidate in the South “to include the Negro” in his proposed policies and to let the nation know about it. “That portion of your platform which refers to my people is absolutely the best proof of justice and fair play offered us by a leader of the majority race since Lincoln,” Buford said, “and I want to thank you and congratulate you on having the manhood to do it.”³⁶

In desperate action against Kerr’s bid, Phillips ousted the candidate’s supporters from his administration and endorsed Republican contender W. J. Otjen the month before the election of November 2.³⁷ Undeterred by the lame-duck governor’s attacks, the Democratic candidate explained his “Program for Progress” in a radio address the day before the election, emphasizing his interest in industrializing Oklahoma. His address also revealed some of the challenges his administration would face in its attempts to develop manufacturing in the state:³⁸

Oklahoma is potentially one of the leading industrial states of the Union. Except for oil, however, these resources have hardly been scratched. Discriminatory freight rates against our state, the concentration of manufacturing in other centers, and now the denial of Oklahoma of a fair opportunity to develop defense industries because of a governor childishly uncooperative with and antagonistic toward the federal government have retarded our industrial development.³⁹

Otjen conceded defeat two days after the election, with Kerr leading by a meager 14,421 votes of the 356,159 counted.⁴⁰ In a biography of Kerr’s later political career, *Robert S. Kerr: The Senate Years*, historian Anne Hodges Morgan attributed his

³⁶ J. E. Buford to Robert S. Kerr, letter, April 14, 1942, Folder 1, Box 2, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

³⁷ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 13-4.

³⁸ “The Hour and the Man,” Kerr’s final 1942 gubernatorial campaign speech, Box 1, Folder 23, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC, 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ “Otjen Concedes Defeat by Kerr,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, November 5, 1942, 1.

gubernatorial election to years of careful planning to reach this goal and to his personal traits. The public-minded Oklahoman had cultivated supporters over the years from Baptist church members, the American Legion, and various business groups. He exuded a good-natured, common-man disposition that drew voters to him. “A zest for hard work, an enormous vitality, an earthy and subtle sense of humor, and [Kerr’s] obvious pride in being a native son reflected Oklahoma’s aspirations at the end of the bitter years of dust bowl and Depression,” Morgan wrote.⁴¹ Planning and personality contributed to the election of “Big Bob” Kerr to the state’s highest office. Yet, Morgan contended, the narrow margin of his victory over Otjen reflected the isolationist and growing anti-New Deal sentiments in the state.⁴²

The day after securing the win, the forty-six-year-old governor-elect called for Democratic House and Senate caucus meetings at the Capitol on December 12 to plan the upcoming legislative program. Symbolically, Kerr also announced that he would leave for Washington prior to these meetings “to confer with federal officials on various matters pertaining to Oklahoma ...”⁴³ No stranger to Washington since his selection as Democratic national committeeman in 1940, Kerr had become familiar with the personalities and politics of the nation’s capital and would hold this influential party position during his four years as governor. The governor-elect had cultivated a friendship with national Democratic Party chairman Edward J. Flynn, upstaging Phillips by playing host to the party leader when he visited the state in December 1941.⁴⁴ Earlier in the year,

⁴¹ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 17.

⁴² *Ibid*, 16-7.

⁴³ “Kerr to Seek More Liberal Pension Rules,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, November 6, 1942, 14.

⁴⁴ “Flynn Visit Will Influence Governor Race,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, November 23, 1941, 2-A.

the Oklahoma committeeman had requested Flynn's help to gain defense contracts.⁴⁵

By publicly denouncing Governor Phillips's anti-New Deal stance, Kerr had also curried favor with the Roosevelt administration.⁴⁶ Some observers of Oklahoma politics would later opine that Kerr's split with Phillips over Roosevelt and the New Deal had more to do with the oilman's own political future than any real affection for the president and his Depression-era policies.⁴⁷ Further strengthening his ties to the White House, Kerr had made speeches in support of Roosevelt's Lend-Lease supplies for Britain as the isolated nation struggled to survive following mainland Europe's fall to German military forces in spring 1940. "The struggle in Europe today will turn on the speed and efficiency with which America supplies England with materials," the future governor had stated in a Roosevelt-like speech.⁴⁸

Kerr's growing influence in Washington was not lost on Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce officials. They appealed to him in September 1941 to aid progress on the planned Midwest Air Depot, later renamed Tinker Field in honor of Oklahoma native Major General Clarence L. Tinker, and to push for federally financed expansion of Will Rogers Field for use by the Army Air Corps.⁴⁹ By late 1941, the bomber training facility, named after Oklahoma's beloved humorist, teemed with more than 2,300 military airmen

⁴⁵ Richard C. Durham to Robert S. Kerr, letter, April 1, 1941, Folder 15, Box 1, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁴⁶ "Flynn Visit Will Influence Governor Race," *The Daily Oklahoman*, November 23, 1941, 2-A.

⁴⁷ Morgan and Morgan, *Oklahoma*, 133.

⁴⁸ "Radio Speech Over KTOK Radio Station," Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, November 3, 1940, Folder 12, Box 1, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as Kerr's KTOK Radio Speech, November 3, 1940]

⁴⁹ Stanley Draper to Robert S. Kerr, letter and attachment, September 25, 1941, Folder 23, Box 1, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC; "City Is Ready for Tinker Field Day," *The Daily Oklahoman*, November 18, 1945, 1.

and resounded with construction.⁵⁰

Just after his gubernatorial win in November 1942, the governor-elect felt confident enough in his White House standing to send a personal telegram to Roosevelt praising Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes for his efforts as the administration's oil czar.⁵¹ With newly acquired influence in Washington and the reins of state government now in his hands, Robert S. Kerr was poised to implement the "Program for Progress" that he had outlined in his eleventh-hour campaign address.

⁵⁰ Keith Tolman, "Will Rogers Field: The Life and Death of a World War II Airbase," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 79, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 11.

⁵¹ Robert S. Kerr to Franklin D. Roosevelt, telegram, November 30, 1942, Folder 23, Box 1, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

Chapter II: War Governor

As the war increased in intensity in Europe and the western Pacific throughout 1943, Kerr worked closely with the new Oklahoma Legislature to implement his program for economic development. His revitalization of the Planning and Resources Board would prove key to his plans to modernize and expand the state's economy. The new chief executive readily sought federal war spending to bring industry to Oklahoma and adroitly used his personal and political skills to enhance his influence nationally. Kerr's first year in office brought newfound pride from within the state and respect from outside.

Even before the new governor took office in January 1943, the demand for goods and services to supply the war effort had energized the economies of the nation and Oklahoma. The U. S. military's "Victory Program," implemented in 1941, called for the expenditure of roughly \$150 billion to equip and supply Allied forces throughout the war effort. Ultimately, nearly double this amount would be spent on war materiel. This strategy of overwhelming superiority of armaments and supplies not only served as a design to military victory, but also revitalized U. S. industries and brought an end to the long, stubborn Depression. The diversion of underutilized agricultural workers into more productive employment brought higher earnings to these redeployed workers in farm states like Oklahoma. Even those still laboring in the fields saw a marked improvement in income and living standards, as farm prices improved throughout the war.¹

Through the first nine months of 1941, federal defense spending topped \$26

¹ Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 487, 619, 645-6.

million in central Oklahoma, with the Midwest Air Depot accounting for \$14 million of this. An additional \$11.4 million was expected in the last quarter.² Steadily mounting private employment had cut relief rolls in the state by a quarter in the twelve-month period ending in September 1941.³ During Kerr's first year as governor, Oklahoma workers would share in the nation's 107-percent income increase over 1939 earnings, with formerly desperate farmers experiencing even larger gains.⁴

Against this backdrop of international conflict and economic promise, the state's twelfth governor took the oath of office on the pleasant winter day of January 11, 1943, at an austere, war-curtailed ceremony in front of the Capitol. Governor Phillips had shaken hands with his successor in the chief executive's office before the ceremony, but no words passed between the two former Democratic allies. A reporter at the proceedings contrasted Kerr's "gum chewing" with Phillips's "cigar chewing," but their differences had been more substantive over the previous twelve months and would prove even more so in the years ahead.⁵

The following day, the new governor addressed the opening of the Nineteenth Legislature. Before the traditional expression of his own ideas and recommendations, Kerr began his speech by telling the legislators that they had "the freedom of the Executive Offices" and invited them to share their opinions. In recognition of the ongoing global struggle, the governor next pledged the state's maximum contribution to

² "City Has 26-Million Share of Defense Work," *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 21, 1941, 8-A.

³ "State Relief Rolls Fall One-Fourth," *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 24, 1941, 4.

⁴ Frederick Lewis Allen, "Who's Getting the Money?" *Harper's Magazine*, June 1944, 3.

⁵ "Governors Peaceful, Although Not Cordial," *The Daily Oklahoman*, January 17, 1943, A-13.

the war effort.⁶

The chief executive's first two recommendations to the legislature concerned taxes and expenditures. He called for a pledge not to raise taxes and made his own promise as governor to make every effort to pay off the state's nearly \$40 million public debt. He stressed his administration's commitment "to a program of puritanic economy" to ensure that expenses stayed below revenues.⁷ Maintaining tax levels and reducing expenditures were intended to help repay the state's debt and thereby attract industry. The better the finances of a state, the oilman believed, the less likely prospective businesses would fear future tax burdens.⁸ "Puritanic economy" would be the administration's watchwords until the debt was eliminated and industry reassured.

The new governor may have been one of the state's most outspoken supporters of the New Deal, with all its social-justice implications, but he was also a self-made millionaire and the owner of a large oil company. Even when speaking in support of the progressive Roosevelt in a 1940 radio address, Oklahoma's Democratic national committeeman had said, "...in fact, I glory at a system of private enterprise that enables vast industrial organizations to be built, operated and maintained ..."⁹ Under Kerr's direction, business would be relentlessly courted to marry into the state economy.

His administration would be aided in its efforts to limit spending by a balanced-budget amendment to the constitution, won by his predecessor in 1939. This legislation

⁶ "Message of Governor Robert S. Kerr of the State of Oklahoma," opening of Nineteenth Legislature, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, January 12, 1943, Folder 34, Box 1, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC, 2. [Hereafter cited as Governor's Address, January 12, 1943]

⁷ Ibid, 4-5.

⁸ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 19.

⁹ Kerr's KTOK Radio Speech, November 3, 1940, Kerr Collection CAC.

held spending at or below tax collections. Amended several times in later decades, the law would remain in the state constitution as a legacy of Leon Phillips.¹⁰

Agriculture followed in his address, as he pointed out that this was the state's primary industry at the time and pledged support to soil conservation.¹¹ The drought of the 1930s and scenes from the dust bowl still lingered in the minds of many Oklahomans. The administration's emphasis on conservation of the state's soil promised obvious benefit to the economy. Agriculture dominated employment statistics in the state just before the United States entered World War II, with nearly three-quarters of the population either actively engaged in the production of food and fiber, or largely dependent on it for their livelihood. Farms covered nearly 80 percent of the state's 44.3-million acres of land, with almost 16-million acres devoted to crops.¹² State agriculture would take on importance in the war effort, as the country would supply not only war materiel to its allies, but also food for troops and civilian populations.¹³

A soil conservation program had less glamour than bringing a new military air base to the state or building a massive dam, but the best use and preservation of Oklahoma's productive lands would directly improve the daily lives of many of its citizens and contribute to the overall economy. Although this program drew the administration's early attention, it would soon join a number of efforts under the general category of "resource development," with water conservation moving to the forefront.

¹⁰ Baird and Goble, *Oklahoma*, 229.

¹¹ Governor's Address, January 12, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC, 7.

¹² Minutes of agricultural committee of the Planning and Resources Board, September 30, 1943, Folder 14, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC, 5.

¹³ Governor's Address, January 12, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC, 7.

Next, Kerr decried the many years that “Oklahoma has been and now is terribly discriminated against by unfavorable freight rates,” urging effort in cooperation with the Oklahoma Corporation Commission and the federal government “to lift and remove this barrier to our agricultural and industrial welfare.”¹⁴ The governor’s reference to unfavorable freight rates concerned a decades-old burden on the industries of Oklahoma and other southern and western states, and his administration would end with this injustice near to being righted.

The common American expression “paying the freight” had its origins in the inequitable rail-freight charges associated with shipping finished goods from various regions in the country. A bale of cotton, for example, could be shipped between the North and the South at the same freight rate. If the cotton were made into oilcloth in Atlanta, however, its charges for the same weight jumped 54 percent when hauled to Boston. On the shipment of all finished products in the United States, the more industrialized North’s freight charges averaged 37 percent less than those in the South. An article in *The New Republic* in November 1944 explained the effects of this inequity: “Is it any wonder that the pace of industrialization [in the South] is so slow? The freight rates, so fatal in the past, loom as the great barrier to peacetime operation of the war-born plants. And it is on this point that not only Alabama but the whole South and West are exercised.”¹⁵

As an oilman, Kerr’s familiarity with burdensome freight charges extended back to the mid-1930s. He had fought for and eventually won a lowered rate from the

¹⁴ Governor’s Address, January 12, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC, 7-8.

¹⁵ A. G. Mezerik, “Journey in America: II,” *The New Republic*, November 20, 1944, 655.

Interstate Commerce Commission, which regulated freight charges throughout the country, for the shipment of crude oil from Gainesville, Texas, to the Oklahoma towns of Wynnewood and Pauls Valley. Even this minor concession by the federal commission in 1936 involved a difficult fight, with Anderson-Kerr Drilling Company allying with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Company to obtain the lower rate.¹⁶ These discriminatory freight rates so handicapped the state's economic development that the oilman planned even before his inauguration to address this issue at an Interstate Commerce Commission hearing in mid-January 1943 in Washington.¹⁷ Oklahoma would soon ally with other southern and western states in this protracted legal struggle, and Kerr would play a leading role in this important battle to provide a more industry-friendly environment.

The governor continued his address with recommendations for strengthening and increasing the scope of the Planning and Resources Board, which may have sounded curious to some legislators.¹⁸ This New Deal relic from E. W. Marland's administration had withered from neglect under Phillips's tenure. The businessman Kerr, however, was convinced that careful planning for the future and the development of Oklahoma's underutilized resources would be key to the state's economic progress. This board would be assigned to oversee these tasks. His first words to the legislature on this body's role in his administration intertwined Oklahoma's contribution to the war effort with its own economic struggle, a patriotic appeal to improve employment opportunities in the state:

¹⁶ T. L. Bothwell to Robert S. Kerr, letter, January 6, 1943, Folder 8, Box 13, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁷ "Kerr, Railroad Officials Confer On Lower State Freight Rates," *The Daily Oklahoman*, December 29, 1942, 4.

¹⁸ Governor's Address, January 12, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC, 8.

All of us are keenly aware, I am sure, that we have before us not only the problem of winning the war, but likewise the problem of *winning the peace* [emphasis added]. And to that end we must look ahead, plan ahead and work ahead. We must demonstrate to our brave men in the armed forces and to their parents that ours is a grateful government and that we will render every help in keeping secure an industrial and agricultural economy to which our men may victoriously return with confidence. We must not forget or fail in this solemn duty. In this connection I am convinced that the State Planning and Resources Board must be strengthened and assume increasing responsibility and a wider scope of activity.¹⁹

Kerr further recommended that the position of the board's director be enacted by law and gave notice that other legislation might be needed to increase the authority and power of this planning group.²⁰

The governor continued his address with suggestions on public education and other more usual concerns of state government.²¹ His first five recommendations—on taxes, expenditures, soil conservation, unfavorable freight rates, and the Planning and Resources Board—underscored the central focus for his governorship: economic development. His audience reacted favorably with frequent applause throughout the address, but legislators and the press said little about these plans at the time.²²

The legislative session brought few new laws during its sixty-three days of deliberation in the first quarter of 1943. The lawmakers, however, heatedly debated a ban on the sale of beer in dance halls and a restriction on purchase of the beverage at other locations between midnight to 7 a.m. on weekdays.²³

The governor's push to revitalize the Planning and Resources Board hit a

¹⁹ Governor's Address, January 12, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC, 8.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 9-12.

²² "Senator Balks, May Oppose Kerr Road Plan," *The Daily Oklahoman*, January 13, 1943, 1.

²³ "Short Session Is Concluded by Legislature," *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 4, 1943, A-17.

temporary roadblock in late February when senators balked at the proposed \$5,600 annual salary for the planning group's new chairman, E. W. Smartt, whom Phillips had forced to resign from the State Board of Affairs for his support of Kerr's candidacy. Still, the salary dispute served to inform the lawmakers more about the purposes of the newly reorganized Planning and Resources Board. President Pro Tempore Tom Anglin gained support for the chairman's position by stressing the board's importance to industrial development. The Senate approved the legislation, parsimoniously setting the chairman's salary at \$4,800 and budgeting \$2,700 for additional board expenditures.²⁴

The bill was poorly received when initially sent to the House in March. The concerned governor called for a meeting with all state representatives in the capitol Blue Room. About half the summoned lawmakers gathered. Kerr argued the Planning and Resources Board's importance to the development of industry and agriculture, and efforts to aid returning veterans. He stressed the need for better planning so that Oklahoma could cooperate with Washington's postwar programs and benefit from federal funds. Using the state of Kansas as an example, he told of how the bordering state's industrial board had compiled resource information for manufacturers of war products before the country's entry into the war. These progressive thinkers subsequently led the nation in defense contracts.²⁵

The governor won the needed support for the bill, and his method of developing a close relationship with legislators by meeting in private conferences became a hallmark

²⁴ "Senators Trim Salary Figure In New Planning Board Setup After Measure Is Explained," *The Daily Oklahoman*, February 26, 1943, 19.

²⁵ "Kerr Demands State Planning Board Action," *The Daily Oklahoman*, March 12, 1943, 13.

of his administration.²⁶ The poker-playing chief executive said that he believed in “laying his cards on the table” during frank discussions.²⁷ Foregoing the use of bluster or patronage to persuade lawmakers, Kerr’s business-like meetings would win cooperation from legislators on most issues during his administration.²⁸

With the legislative session adjourned and Kerr’s revamped Planning and Resources Board enacted into law, the governor received a telephone call the following month that abruptly changed his schedule for the next several days. He quickly left Oklahoma City on Sunday, April 18, and even his own secretaries knew nothing of his destination. Oklahoma’s governor met President Roosevelt as his train arrived at 9:30 the next morning at the Douglas aircraft plant in Tulsa. On his second secret tour of the country since the United States entered the war, the president had inspected troops of the U. S. Army’s 88th Division at Camp Gruber, southeast of Muskogee, upon his arrival in the state a day earlier.²⁹

Kerr and Douglas company officials rode with Roosevelt as he toured the plant and greeted employees. The Oklahoman informed the president on how readily the workers had received their training for their new duties at the bomber factory and pointed out that the state had never experienced a strike on a federal project during either of the two world wars. Trainable, cooperative employees were obviously what war-industry companies would want before locating a manufacturing plant in any state. Roosevelt and the governor spent several minutes in private conference before the president’s train

²⁶ Corbett, “Robert Samuel Kerr,” 129.

²⁷ “Kerr Demands State Planning Board Action,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, 13.

²⁸ Fischer, *Oklahoma Governors*, 129.

²⁹ Otis Sullivant, “President, Kerr Tour Factory,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 21, 1943, 1.

departed.³⁰

The commander-in-chief's inspections of the troops at Camp Gruber and the bomber factory in Tulsa brought the war closer to Oklahomans, and the front-page of *The Daily Oklahoman* newspaper on April 21 shared the account of Roosevelt's visit with even more news linking the state with the global conflict. The military had finally released the names of American airmen in the famous Doolittle bombing raid on Tokyo the year before, and Oklahomans read with pride that Sergeant Robert J. Stephens, of Hobart, Oklahoma, had served as a bombardier on the storied mission and received the Distinguished Flying Cross for bravery in action.³¹

As the administration began its fourth month, devastating floodwaters in northeastern Oklahoma and steps to prevent these disasters helped Kerr to envision the nearly limitless possibilities of developing the state's water resources to promote industry.³² Already adept at gaining war spending, the opportunistic politician would soon realize that federal funds could also be used to accomplish this. This insight would soon occupy much of the interest of the Planning and Resources Board and become an integral part of the Oklahoman's political efforts the rest of his life.

Over several days in mid-May 1943, more than seventeen inches of rain fell in Tulsa. More precipitation was measured in those few days than normally experienced by this part of the state in the first five months of the year. Flooding in the Arkansas River basin in eastern Oklahoma and western Arkansas took nineteen lives and destroyed

³⁰ Sullivant, "President, Kerr Tour Factory," 1.

³¹ "Hobart Gunner Bombed Japan," *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 21, 1943, 11.

³² Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 21.

livestock in the thousands.³³ More than one million acres were inundated, and damage to state crops, land, and property was estimated at \$54 million.³⁴

Built to mitigate this kind of flooding, the federally funded Pensacola Dam on the Grand River, whose construction Governor Phillips had so bitterly contested with Washington in 1940-41, proved inadequate for this level of rainfall in such a short period. Tulsa interests believed this flood damage gave a strong argument to move ahead with two previously proposed dams on the Grand River, one at Markham Ferry and the other further south at Fort Gibson. These projects would give additional protection from floodwaters and could also be used to generate hydroelectric power. U. S. Representative Wesley E. Disney, from Oklahoma's First Congressional District, had proposed the securing of funds from the federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation for these two projects in 1936, but a number of obstacles stalled progress.³⁵

While touring these storm-damaged areas in eastern Oklahoma and planning to prevent similar destruction in the future, Kerr conceived how a water conservation program could control floods as well as promote economic development through soil preservation, hydroelectric power, recreation, and navigation.³⁶ Contending first with the flood disaster, the Roosevelt supporter obtained for the state a \$15 million federal appropriation to help with some of the damages. The army also provided heavy equipment and manpower to begin repairs. Kerr publicly attributed this aid to his

³³ Richard Lowitt, "Developing the Grand River Dam Authority, Part 1, 1935-1944," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 87, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 155-6.

³⁴ Minutes of meeting of Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, July 7, 1943, Folder, 13, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC, 13.

³⁵ Lowitt, "Developing the Grand River Dam Authority Part 1," 138, 156.

³⁶ Morgan and Morgan, *Oklahoma*, 170.

administration's cooperation with the federal government and Congress.³⁷ Damages to the area aside, the flooding in eastern Oklahoma would be a catalyst for Kerr's ideas on conservation and development of the state's water resources. The administration's revamped Planning and Resources Board would play a key role in the integration of these ideas into a master plan.

Kerr was still selecting members for this board two months before its first meeting in early July. Bankers, newspaper editors, businessmen, and chamber of commerce officials were asked to serve in this planning group.³⁸ Kerr invited the venerable E. K. Gaylord to join them, but the media baron respectfully declined. He foresaw conflicts of interests with his newspapers, radio stations, and other interests.³⁹

The fifteen members had been determined by mid-June, and their names were made public. The new board included respected Altus attorney W. C. Austin, who had served on its predecessor under Governor Marland in the mid-1930s.⁴⁰ Two weeks before the initial meeting, an editorial in *The Daily Oklahoman* newspaper touted the group's "planning for the future" and its preparation "to participate in a vast postwar construction program if federal funds are made available in the state."⁴¹

On July 6, as final preparations were made for the meeting the next day, Kerr responded by letter to an inquiry from the International Statistics Bureau on Oklahoma's postwar planning. He specified the Planning and Resources Board's activities recently

³⁷ "Levee Repairs Approved for Federal Funds," *The Daily Oklahoman*, July 14, 1943, 4.

³⁸ "Five Names Are Added to Planning Board," *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 28, 1943, 9.

³⁹ E. K. Gaylord to Robert S. Kerr, letter, May 4, 1943, Folder 12, Box 4, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁴⁰ "Planning Board Places Filled," *The Daily Oklahoman*, June 19, 1943, 16.

⁴¹ "Oklahoma Planning for the Future," *The Daily Oklahoman*, June 20, 1943, 13.

authorized by the legislature and the four separate divisions it established: state and industrial planning, water resources, forestry and state parks, and the Postwar Planning Commission. The governor also described the activities of the board authorized by the legislators, which included steps to ensure employment for returning war veterans. The board's agenda also included intentions to cooperate with the federal government in the construction of a transcontinental highway system and other public projects, to develop the resources of the state, and to make other plans as required by the governor. In the letter, Kerr further explained that the state had about \$200 million in water-resources development projects ready for construction after the war in cooperation with the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation. "We believe that these projects will create new wealth for the state of Oklahoma," the governor added.⁴²

A news report in *The Daily Oklahoman* previewed the next day's initial meeting of the new Planning and Resources Board and revealed more of the governor's reasons for its reorganization and the work expected from it. This article may also have hinted at the fine line the governor walked while promoting industrial development in a state dominated by agricultural interests.⁴³ Since statehood, rural Oklahoma had held the reins of political power. Although urban centers had gained in population over these agricultural areas since statehood, the rural areas retained overrepresentation because lawmakers refused to adjust voting districts even as the federal censuses revealed a shift in population. This political reality was later summarized in a prominent history of Oklahoma: "A single voter in Cimarron County had as much influence on lawmaking as

⁴² Robert S. Kerr to A. W. Zelomek, letter, July 6, 1943, Folder 13, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁴³ "State to Push Farm Planning," *The Daily Oklahoman*, July 6, 1943, 11.

did ten in Oklahoma County or eight in Tulsa County.”⁴⁴ Thus, state politicians before the 1970s ignored farm interests at great peril.

Speaking with the reporter about the board’s impending meeting, Kerr initially stated, “Oklahoma has as much variety and as many resources for industrial development as any state in the union.”⁴⁵ Perhaps realizing he had emphasized industrial development without mentioning the farming community, he added, “The basic idea is to build Oklahoma’s agriculture and industry. I think we have as big a field in agriculture as in industry.... I am just as interested in developing more profitable and extensive agriculture as I am in industrial development.”⁴⁶ While understanding that improved cultivation of food and fiber would help the state’s economy, Kerr also knew that far greater earnings and opportunities could come to Oklahomans from the production of manufactured goods. The irony was probably not lost on the governor when he saw that the preview article on the meeting, published just one day before the first gathering of his new Planning and Resources Board, was entitled “State to Push Farm Planning.”⁴⁷

The Enid Morning News took a circumspect approach to the pending meeting. Its readers, largely Republican Party supporters, might have been wary of these proceedings from a Democratic administration at the statehouse. Still, an editorial in the newspaper hoped that some benefit could come from the new board, although it called the previous one a failure.⁴⁸

The planning group began its initial meeting at 10:30 a.m., July 7, in the Blue

⁴⁴ Baird and Goble, *Oklahoma*, 239.

⁴⁵ “State to Push Farm Planning,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, July 6, 1943, 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ “State Planning Board,” *The Enid Morning News*, July 7, 1943, 4.

Room of the Capitol. Governor Kerr, chairman Smartt, and twelve of the thirteen new members took oaths of allegiance and introduced themselves. Also present were the four members of the Postwar Planning Commission and several prominent Oklahomans, including educator Henry Bennett, who had served as chairman of the original board in the Marland administration and become close friends with Kerr. The governor gave an opening statement. “This board occupies a major place in my administration,” he explained. “We have represented on this Board, not every phase of Oklahoma industry and activity, but representatives who, in contemplation, will be able to work out a scope of Oklahoma living and Oklahoma industry.”⁴⁹

After these initial remarks, Kerr seemingly snubbed board chairman Smartt, turning instead to the head of the Postwar Planning Commission, K. S. Adams of Bartlesville, who had been named vice chairman of the board. Upon giving the floor to Adams, the governor said that Smartt would present the workings of the board “when called upon,” indicating that Adams, not the chairman, would be presiding at the planning group’s meetings. Adams, in conjunction with Smartt, then divided the board into seven committees: water resources, forestry and parks, oil and gas, mining, limestone, transportation, and agriculture.⁵⁰

At this point, Kerr interjected with a request. “I would like to add one more committee to this list—one pertaining to industry,” he said. “I don’t care what you call it, but it should be made to include both the bringing in of new industries and assistance to

⁴⁹ Planning Board meeting minutes, July 7, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC, 1-2.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 2-3.

small industries already in operation.”⁵¹ At the suggestion of Bennett, the eighth subgroup of the board was called the “industrial development committee.” The other seven chairmen would comprise the membership, giving it a more prestigious status than the others. B. D. Eddie of Oklahoma City was named chairman, but would soon be replaced by J. G. Puterbaugh of McAlester.⁵² The governor’s personal recommendation to add this committee may have indicated a disagreement over its importance with chairman Smartt, who had earlier failed to include this key group.

When the governor insisted on the addition of the industrial development committee, he demonstrated his earlier emphasis on the importance of manufacturing to the state economy. Various leaders outside the state had encouraged him as well. Okmulgee Chamber of Commerce manager Roy Harding sent Kerr a letter before his inauguration, advising the governor-elect to create an official body to attract industry to the state. A native of Kansas, the chamber manager wrote that he had conferred with members of the Kansas Industrial Development Commission and been impressed with their success. Back in March, while pushing state legislators to approve his rejuvenated Planning and Resources Board, the governor had touted the defense-industry projects that Kansas had gained through its industrial commission.⁵³

Emphasizing his understanding of the need for manufacturing and processing in the state, Kerr would use the term “colonial economy” in a speech several years later to describe states with fledgling industrial economies. “Expanded liberally,” Kerr said,

⁵¹ Planning Board meeting minutes, July 7, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC, 4.

⁵² *Ibid*, 4-5.

⁵³ Roy Harding to Robert S. Kerr, letter, December 31, 1942, Folder 13, Box 22, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

“this term means simply that our states are producers of raw materials that are shipped elsewhere for processing....Any substantial increase in the utilization of our low value-high bulk natural resources can be achieved only by the establishment of local manufacturing industry in close proximity to the source of raw materials.”⁵⁴

Once these committees were decided and before the board recessed for lunch, Kerr made a lengthy statement that emphasized his view on the importance and urgency of future efforts. He included these remarks:

There is no limit to the amount of time and energy that I am willing and determined to devote on my account. I am going to be dynamic and if every man is capable of being a human dynamo, I know we can make a success of this program we outlined. *I do not have any phase of work to which I am going to devote my time in this administration where I feel the results are comparable with this board* [emphasis added]....I do not know just how I am going to be able to transmit enthusiasm to you Gentlemen, but you just as well make up your minds to either avoid me or get yourselves braced for a major effort. That is the basis I am going to be operating on, Mr. Chairman. If we do not have a tannery in operation in Oklahoma by Christmas time, I may have a slight stroke...⁵⁵

These comments were followed by members' concern over publicity for these efforts. Kerr replied that his office had “a fair-sized checking account” in the governor's contingency fund and that he would provide any necessary additional monies needed by the board to supplement the paltry \$2,700 appropriated by the legislature.⁵⁶ The governor was obviously resolved that the board succeed in its efforts to develop the state's economy.

During the board's recess for lunch, the members of the Postwar Planning

⁵⁴ Kerr address before business leaders from the South, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1948, Folder 70, Box 2, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC, 9-10.

⁵⁵ Planning Board meeting minutes, July 7, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC, 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 7.

Commission met and agreed on their policy and direction: promoting new and existing industries, planning for transcontinental highway construction, keeping federal air bases in Oklahoma after the war, eliminating discriminatory freight rates, and helping veterans and civilians readjust to “normal life.” The postwar commission also agreed to establish an advisory committee in each county to help with employment efforts after the war.⁵⁷

Some of these activities directly overlapped the purposes of their other affiliates on the whole Planning and Resources Board, especially the industrial planning committee. In the following year and as the war drew closer to an end, the commission’s efforts would narrow to those of establishing county and community veterans’ service committees, providing a directory of services and benefits, and aiding in retraining and employment.⁵⁸

When the board reconvened that afternoon, the Postwar Planning Commission reported their deliberations at their lunch meeting to the larger body. Commission chairman Adams, in recognition of the overlapping functions of his group and some of the other committees, stated that the postwar commission would try to avoid duplication of effort. After discussion of a number of mundane topics, Governor Kerr scheduled the next board meeting for early September in Oklahoma City. The board adjourned at 4 p.m.⁵⁹

The lengthy meeting formalized a remarkable union between the private and public sectors, and established that leaders of business and industry would guide the

⁵⁷ Planning Board meeting minutes, July 7, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC, 7-9.

⁵⁸ State Postwar Planning Commission report of accomplishments, circa January 1947, Folder 23, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC, 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 7-13.

development of the state's economy. These men were selected for their competence and professionalism, without consideration of their political party or campaign contributions.⁶⁰ The governor may still have publicly supported the New Deal's use of big government to solve economic problems in 1943, but his Planning and Resources Board resembled a large, private-sector corporation's board of directors. Throughout his career as a businessman and politician, Kerr surrounded himself with skilled, capable subordinates. Interviewed late in life, he attributed his success over the years to providing opportunities to those with certain abilities greater than his own.⁶¹ As governor, the businessman-politician would prove adept at both organizing skilled subordinates to administrate his policies and seizing the opportunity of federal funding for these efforts.

This board had significant opportunities to aid Oklahoma. Properly executed, comprehensive state planning identified and analyzed the options and problems for development, defined the goals and objectives, and clarified the policies necessary to achieve results.⁶² At the federal level, the National Resources Planning Board originated in the early years of the New Deal to plan public-works initiatives and guide states through this process, as evidenced by Oklahoma's halting attempts during the Marland administration. Ironically, just as the Kerr team began serious efforts to implement this federal initiative in the state, the national board, which was administered by the

⁶⁰ James R. Scales and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 233.

⁶¹ Malvina Stephenson to Joseph Kraft, memorandum, September 25, 1962, Folder 16, Box 5, Malvina Stephenson Collection CAC.

⁶² Harold F. Wise & Associates, Inc., "Program Design and Completion Report for the Development of a Comprehensive Policies Plan for the State of Oklahoma," December 1969, Box 3, ID&PD at ODL, 2.

president's uncle, Frederic A. Delano, was legislated out of existence by conservatives in Congress.⁶³ Despite this setback, Oklahoma's Planning and Resources Board continued on productively under Kerr's prodding hand.

The federal government may have been the progenitor of these planning efforts in Oklahoma and other states, but some argued that the implementation of these ideas should be limited to a local level. Kerr was among them. In a 1946 speech before a national chamber of commerce group, the governor said:

In the final analysis, however, all conservation and all utilization of natural resources takes place at the local level and experience has demonstrated that the best results can be obtained by and through the state and local governments. The federal government renders its greatest service, serves its highest usefulness, and obtains its most effective results through supporting and coordinating conservation by and through the states and their local units.⁶⁴

With the reorganized Planning and Resources Board firmly established, Kerr began to focus more on the development of the state's water resources. He sent an appeal to Roosevelt on July 8 for funding to continue work on a dam in southwestern Oklahoma. This effort formed a part of the Altus-Lugert reclamation project and would provide irrigation to area farmland.⁶⁵ The federal War Production Board, part of the war mobilization bureaucracy cobbled together by the Roosevelt administration to prioritize efforts and allocate production materials, had halted work on the project the year before.⁶⁶ Arguing that the crops enabled by completion of this project would provide

⁶³ Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 783.

⁶⁴ "State Interest in Natural Resources," Kerr speech before the Round Table Meeting of the National Chamber of Commerce, Atlantic City, New Jersey, May 2, 1946, Folder 38, Box 2, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC, 5.

⁶⁵ Robert S. Kerr to Franklin Roosevelt, letter, July 8, 1943, Folder 2, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁶⁶ "State Operated Farm to Guide First Irrigation Work in Area," *The Daily Oklahoman*, June 14, 1944, 10.

vital food for the war effort, Kerr asked the president to direct the War Production Board to release its “stop-order” and allow the construction to proceed.⁶⁷ Three weeks later, Roosevelt’s polite and personally signed letter advised that the project might be reauthorized later by the War Food Administrator if deemed important “on the basis of its agricultural value to the war.”⁶⁸ Without the president’s intercession, Kerr was left to fight this battle for the Altus-Lugert irrigation project at a later day.

A month after this disappointment, Kerr received a carefully written statement on the value of the state’s water resources by Altus attorney W. C. Austin. The veteran of the Marland administration submitted this analysis for consideration by the planning board’s water resources committee, of which he was chairman. Austin advised that the state should lead efforts to inform its citizens on the value of controlling, preserving and utilizing the water that passed through Oklahoma. In eastern Oklahoma, he suggested, controlling this resource could diminish the damages from flooding and also provide public parks and hydroelectric power for economic development. In the western parts of the state, these practices could provide needed irrigation. He concluded by advising the Planning and Resources Board to determine Oklahoma’s legal right to these waters as they flowed through the region and to generally cooperate with the federal government and surrounding states in the development of this valuable resource.⁶⁹ Perhaps Kerr and some members of the board were already thinking along these lines, but the governor saved this statement in his records and his future actions closely corresponded.

⁶⁷ Kerr to Roosevelt letter of July 8, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁶⁸ Franklin Roosevelt to Robert Kerr, letter, July 27, 1943, Folder 2, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁶⁹ W. C. Austin, “Suggestions for Consideration by Water Resources Committee” report, August 5, 1943, Folder 14, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

At the next meeting of the board's water resources committee in late September 1943, another important conservation effort was discussed outside the more usual topic of dams and reservoirs. Don McBride, head of the state's Division of Water Resources, reported on the progress of the farm-pond construction program.⁷⁰ The severe droughts of 1934 and 1936 had stimulated this work on agricultural lands. From 1939 to 1943, more than 23,000 small reservoirs were constructed. The program worked well in the state as the high clay content below the surface of the soil helped to prevent absorption of the pond water into the land around these reservoirs.⁷¹ McBride recommended to the committee that development of these ponds be continued.⁷² Through this program of the board's water resources committee, some 71,000 farm ponds were in use throughout the state by the end of 1946, with nearly 50,000 constructed in the last three years of the Kerr administration.⁷³

The farm-pond program underscored the varied nature of the board's work to develop the state's water resources. It also highlighted the overlapping nature of many of the committees' concerns. The water resources committee planned for and developed these small ponds, but the primary beneficiaries were the farm owners, whose interests were the bailiwick of the agricultural committee. These kinds of overlaps became commonplace as the board undertook the interrelated development of state resources.

At this same meeting, the water resources committee also reviewed a contract

⁷⁰ Minutes of the meeting of the water resources committee, September 30, 1943, Folder 14, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁷¹ Horace J. Harper and Orville Stout, "Waterline Recession in Farm Ponds," *Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Sciences* 24 (1944): 82.

⁷² Minutes of the water resources committee meeting, September 30, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁷³ "Oklahoma Lakes" report, Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, circa 1947, Box 6, ID&PD at ODL, 31.

between the Planning and Resources Board and the Bureau of Reclamation office in Denver, Colorado, for joint investigations of irrigation possibilities in the state. The contract had originated from the committee's meeting in early August, possibly related to Austin's paper recommending cooperation with the federal government.⁷⁴

The second meeting of the full planning board was held October 1 in Oklahoma City, nearly a month later than Kerr had announced at the end of the first. As at the initial meeting, vice chairman Adams presided instead of chairman Smartt.⁷⁵ The gathering followed Adams's earlier recommendation to bring in speakers who were experts in various areas of interest to the board's committees.⁷⁶ A speaker on motor transportation and another on the air-transportation industry were given top billing at the morning session of the gathering. A half-dozen or so private- and public-sector speakers with various areas of expertise lectured in the afternoon. This board meeting and some thereafter were conducted like speakers forums.⁷⁷

A day or so before the meeting, chairman Smartt had been interviewed by a news reporter. So, if not allowed to preside at the board meetings, he at least was permitted to speak to the media. "We look forward to a period of vast expansion of industry following the termination of the war and a prosperity unparalleled," Smartt was quoted in the news report. "This is going to offer to Oklahoma, which is very much undeveloped industrially, her greatest opportunity to start a real industrial development program." He added that the chambers of commerce throughout the state had been notified of the

⁷⁴ Minutes of the water resources committee meeting, September 30, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁷⁵ "State Planning Board Parley Is Set Friday," *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 26, 1943, 7.

⁷⁶ "State Planning Board Parley Set," *The Daily Oklahoman*; Planning Board meeting minutes, July 7, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC. 6.

⁷⁷ "State Planning Board Parley Set," *The Daily Oklahoman*.

board's willingness to assist them in the gathering of information on their respective areas' natural resources and potential industries. Smartt spoke pointedly of the economic developments from industry expected in Oklahoma after the war, with no mention of agriculture.⁷⁸ This may have indicated the board's stronger focus on manufacturing and processing, although production of food and fiber still held the group's attention.

Many Kerr administration efforts intended to promote the growth of industry in Oklahoma after the war, but by 1943 manufacturing plants producing for the worldwide conflict could already be found in many parts of the state. The largest of these included the two Douglas Aircraft Company bomber assembly plants, one in Tulsa and one at the Midwest Air Depot just east of Oklahoma City.⁷⁹ The air depot, unofficially called Tinker Field at the time, operated as the largest installation in the war for the Army Air Corps. Covering 3,600 acres and at a cost of \$100 million, the depot played an integral role in the repair of thousands of combat-damaged aircraft.⁸⁰ In summer 1945, workers at the facility would help to bring the war to a close with their modification of the B-29 bomber *Enola Gay*, which dropped the first atomic bomb at Hiroshima.⁸¹ Absorbing the Douglas plant after World War II, Tinker Air Force Base would stay active during the decades of the Cold War and make a significant contribution to Oklahoma's postwar economy.⁸²

Other major war-related industries brought jobs and prosperity to less-populated

⁷⁸ "State Planning Board Parley Set," *The Daily Oklahoman*.

⁷⁹ Debo, *Foot-Loose*, 101.

⁸⁰ Edward Everett Dale, *History of Oklahoma* (Edmond, Oklahoma: Thompson Book and Supply Company, 1969), 369.

⁸¹ James N. Easton, "Location and Growth of Tinker Air Force Base and Oklahoma City Air Materiel Center," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 50, no. 3 (Fall 1972): 345.

⁸² Baird and Goble, *Oklahoma*, 231.

areas of the state. In the southeast, McAlester benefited from a large naval ammunition depot, which also became a permanent federal installation after the war. Northeastern Oklahomans found good jobs at the E. I. Du Pont de Nemours smokeless powder plant at the Oklahoma Ordnance Works between Chouteau and Pryor, and at the B. F. Goodrich Company's synthetic rubber plant in Miami. Both were made possible by hydroelectric power generated at the Pensacola Dam on Grand River.⁸³ In addition, by early 1943 new military facilities in the state included expansion of the artillery center at Ft. Sill; enemy-alien internment camps at Alva, McAlester, and Tonkawa; flight training schools at Altus, Enid, and Frederick; and a hospital in Chickasha.⁸⁴ Other installations were in service, and more would follow.

Some of these federal projects were located in Oklahoma as part of the government's defensive strategy to locate war-industry plants away from the coastal areas. The state fared well in its share of these far-flung facilities.⁸⁵ Oklahoma ranked third among southern states in civilian war production for 1943, and more than \$105 million was spent that year on related construction.⁸⁶ The state experienced a 133.8-percent increase in the dollar value of its manufacturing facilities from 1939 to 1944, priced at \$389 million at the end of that year. This increase in factories boosted Oklahoma in this same period from thirty-third in the nation to twenty-ninth. The state ranked sixth for percentage increase in manufacturing facilities from 1939 to 1944.⁸⁷

⁸³ Debo, *Foot-Loose*, 102.

⁸⁴ Henry L. Stimson to Leon C. Phillips, letter, January 6, 1943, Folder 19, Box 31, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁸⁵ "Area Industry Expansion Set in U. S. Report," *The Daily Oklahoman*, August 12, 1945, 8.

⁸⁶ Robert S. Kerr to Manufacturers Record, letter, December 30, 1943, Folder 3, Box 4, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁸⁷ "Area Industry Expansion Set in U. S. Report," *The Daily Oklahoman*.

Yet, unless these plants' output could be converted into civilian products demanded by the market after the war, the economic gains by states like Oklahoma could be lost, government officials warned. Maury Maverick, national chairman of the federal Smaller War Plants Corporation, advised business leaders that "the energy and aggressiveness of the people of these areas will determine whether the south and west will be able to use this greatly expanded productive capacity for their future economic development."⁸⁸ The southern and western states had an ally with Roosevelt in the White House, as the president claimed he had been promoting decentralization of American industry since his first term. He hoped that Maverick's Smaller War Plants Corporation would speed these efforts. "As far as I am able, I intend to see the country economically and industrially self-sufficient after the war," he told a group of congressional visitors at a White House meeting early in 1944. "This isn't a promise. It's a pledge."⁸⁹

Kerr publicly attributed his cooperation with Washington and his good standing with the Roosevelt administration for the state's share of federal projects.⁹⁰ Although the governor's frequent requests for Roosevelt in 1943 were sometimes answered by a polite but noncommittal response, an incident in regard to a possible personnel change at the naval ammunition depot in McAlester provided evidence of Kerr's ability to gain favors from the president. When the governor heard of the potential transfer of a navy commander who had granted special privileges to workers at the installation, he appealed

⁸⁸ "Area Industry Expansion Set in U. S. Report," *The Daily Oklahoman*.

⁸⁹ Drew Pearson, "Washington Merry Go Round," *Tulsa Daily World*, February 12, 1944, 4.

⁹⁰ "Levee Repairs Approved for Federal Funds," *The Daily Oklahoman*, July 14, 1943, 4.

directly to Roosevelt to ensure the officer's continued service in the state.⁹¹ Even to this somewhat trivial matter, the president responded with a personal letter informing Kerr that he saw no reason for the officer's transfer. The Navy Department would so advise a local McAlester banker, whom Kerr had described as an influential Republican scheming to harass the naval commander.⁹²

The governor's frequent requests and visits to the White House, however, may have worn a bit thin on the harried president. In a session with Roosevelt in fall 1943, the Oklahoma chief executive apparently overstayed his allotted time, prompting the White House secretary, Major General Edwin Watson, to enter and pace nervously. Roosevelt laughed about the intrusion and asked the general to join the pair. "We're having a very interesting conversation," the president reportedly said.⁹³

Even though Roosevelt appeared to like Kerr, his frequent visits to the White House were apparently limited in 1944. In a letter to Kerr in August, the president's executive assistant, Eugene Casey, humorously chided Kerr for not having come to the White House in "well over two months," adding, "our diet here can never be sustained with less than an average of six visits per annum. It used to be six per cent per annum before Roosevelt reduced it to three or four per cent per annum!"⁹⁴

Kerr's cooperation with and good standing in Washington extended outside the White House. In a letter to the governor in April 1943, Oklahoma Fourth District

⁹¹ Robert S. Kerr to Franklin Roosevelt, letter, December 6, 1943, Folder 2, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁹² Franklin Roosevelt to Robert S. Kerr, letter, December 17, 1943, Folder 2, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁹³ Drew Pearson, "Washington Merry-Go-Round," *Tulsa Daily World*, October 23, 1943, 4.

⁹⁴ Eugene Casey to Robert S. Kerr, letter, August 25, 1944, Folder 2, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

Congressman Lyle H. Boren related a story that demonstrated just how far Kerr's circle extended around the nation's capital. When Boren summoned Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn off the floor to discuss a favor for the governor, Rayburn replied, "Tell Bob Kerr that anybody he wants appointed to the W.P.B. [War Production Board] to write Eugene Risser, Regional Director, Dallas, Texas, and then call me and I will get the job done because I am for Bob Kerr."⁹⁵

Explaining his ready cooperation with Washington in a letter to Georgia Governor Ellis Arnall in June 1943, Kerr lamented the South's lost opportunities and impoverishment, calling the region's past behavior negligent. "While too many of its leaders have worshipped the mummy of state's rights," Kerr asserted, "the big interests have, until the advent of President Roosevelt, manipulated the federal government to enrich the North, at the expense of the South." Perhaps to bolster his credibility with the Georgia governor, Kerr added toward the end of his letter that both his grandfathers had served in the Confederate army.⁹⁶

He met with Arnall and many other state chief executives at his first Governors' Conference early that summer in Ohio. While at this meeting, Kerr and New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey exchanged unfriendly words over state sectionalism, and the Oklahoman publicly stated his dislike for the prominent Republican.⁹⁷ These derogatory comments about the rival party's leader doubtless solidified the governor's reputation as a staunch Democrat and Roosevelt supporter in the upcoming 1944 presidential race.

⁹⁵ Lyle H. Boren to Robert S. Kerr, letter, April 12, 1943, Folder 23, Box 27, Gubernatorial, Robert S. Kerr Collection CAC.

⁹⁶ Robert S. Kerr to Ellis Arnall, letter, June 1, 1943, Folder 12, Box 2, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁹⁷ "Kerr Returns From Meeting Blasts Dewey," *The Daily Oklahoman*, June 26, 1943, 2.

While remaining a White House booster, the governor was nonetheless building political bridges with national leaders beyond Washington.

With his administration gaining favorable recognition outside Oklahoma, the amiable and energetic politician also received support within his state during his first year in office. In May, Oklahoma City Mayor Robert A. Hefner thanked the new governor for his “fine service“ as chief executive and for his cooperation with officials of the state’s capital city. “I appreciate the splendid cooperation your administration is giving our City Administration,” Hefner wrote. “It is fine to have a governor who will work with us. In fact you are the first Governor that we have had since I have lived in Oklahoma City who gave us cooperation.”⁹⁸

Contrasting Kerr’s friendly style with some of the past “raw boors” in the governor’s office, *The Daily Ardmoreite* editorialized: “For the first time in many moons there is general satisfaction expressed with the way the chief executive is conducting business...his smile and hearty handshake are always in evidence and whether he agrees with you or not, he will not insult you out of his office.”⁹⁹

The *Duncan Democrat* praised the new leader just as effusively:

In his first three months as governor of Oklahoma Bob Kerr has made just the kind of a chief executive his warmest supporters insisted he would be. Governor Bob has combined all the good qualities of his predecessor (and there were some) with a firm but friendly administration that is intent on maintaining its own identity but at the same time is cooperating 100 percent with the government....With the help of all of us he will give the state a progressive and at the same time a conservative government that is a vital need during wartime.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ R. A. Hefner to Robert S. Kerr, letter, May 24, 1943, Folder 13, Box 2, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁹⁹ “Present and Past Compared,” *The Daily Ardmoreite*, March 25, 1943, 4.

¹⁰⁰ “Just the Governor We Need,” *The Durant Democrat*, March 21, 1943, 2.

Of course, not all the new governor's press favored him his first year or in the years to come. Richard Lloyd Jones, general manager of *The Tulsa Tribune*, wrote Kerr a harsh letter in November 1943 that accused him of protecting corruption in the state. He also predicted that the governor would be judged by history for his administration's incompetence and weakness, warning, "I am just serving fair notice on you that *The Tulsa Tribune* is going to reveal you week in and week out, month in and month out, year in and year out, so long as you evade your duty as you do now."¹⁰¹

Jones's accusation of Kerr's protection of "rife corruption" referred to a textbook scandal being investigated at the time by Tulsa County grand jurors.¹⁰² The tax records of a number of prominent Oklahomans had been subpoenaed, but state Attorney General Randell Cobb blocked their release.¹⁰³ The jurors also wanted to examine Henry Bennett's telephone transcriptions back to July 1, 1941.¹⁰⁴

Related to this investigation, *The Tulsa Tribune* criticized the governor and the Democratic Party harshly in its editorials, and even its news stories disparaged him. "Governor Kerr appears to be either too stupid mentally to comprehend elemental dishonesties and corruption, or he is too cowardly to do his duty," one editorial charged.¹⁰⁵ Another accused the Democrats of "working for the destruction of the American Republic."¹⁰⁶ Although written more like an editorial, one news article portrayed Kerr as somewhat weak and even appeared to find fault with Kerr's reputation

¹⁰¹ Richard Lloyd Jones to Robert S. Kerr, letter, November 10, 1943, Folder 18, Box 3, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁰² "Jury to Probe Bennett Phone Transcriptions," *The Tulsa Tribune*, November 4, 1943, 1.

¹⁰³ "Burying 'Em Deep," November 4, 1943, *The Tulsa Tribune*, 22.

¹⁰⁴ "Jury to Probe Bennett Phone Transcriptions," *The Tulsa Tribune*.

¹⁰⁵ "A Don't-Give-A-Whoop Governor," *The Tulsa Tribune*, November 10, 1943, 20.

¹⁰⁶ "Grandpappy Was a Better Man," *The Tulsa Tribune*, November 6, 1943, 10.

of cordiality with other state officials: "...in avoiding a full share of the usual feuds of Oklahoma politics, he may fail to satisfy the typical Oklahoman's appetite for red-blooded, two-fisted political leadership."¹⁰⁷

In his last year in office, Kerr commented in a letter on his administration's treatment by both *The Tulsa Tribune* and the *Tulsa Daily World*, calling it "a little rough." Yet, in a tantalizing remark, he went on to express his gratitude for damaging information about him that the Tulsa papers had *not* printed. "In the first place, they could ferret out and speak some true things about me which could hurt me with my friends," Kerr wrote. "So far they have done neither."¹⁰⁸

Taking the initiative with the media in July 1943, the governor began the release of a weekly column, entitled "Governor Kerr Says," to numerous newspapers in Oklahoma. He said that the purpose was "to promote greater unity among our people, disseminate pertinent information about state government, and humanize the Governor's office by bringing it on a friendly basis to the people."¹⁰⁹ These missives received publication largely in small towns' weekly newspapers. They generated good public relations for Kerr and a voluminous record of his public disclosures about his actions and thoughts as governor.

In the last few months of 1943, Oklahoma City suddenly appeared to jump into the forefront of the burgeoning civilian aviation industry. In September, the city announced its decision to build a \$23-million combined freight and air terminal after the

¹⁰⁷ "Kerr 'Weak Sister'? Politicians Say No," *The Tulsa Tribune*, November 10, 1943, 11.

¹⁰⁸ Robert S. Kerr to William B. Steven, letter, February 2, 1946, Folder 5, Box 12, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁰⁹ Robert S. Kerr to state newspaper editors, letter, July 24, 1943, Folder 24, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

war.¹¹⁰ The nearly 1,890-acre facility, with six 11,000-foot main runways, was planned to become one of the major airports in the nation. The Midcontinent Airport's central location between the coasts and the site's favorable flying conditions would make an ideal location, the National Resources Planning Board reported late in 1943.¹¹¹

While these announcements about the mammoth airport greatly overstated future developments, the country's first national aviation clinic, held November 11-13 in Oklahoma City, lived up to its billing.¹¹² Given White House approval to bring leaders of the aviation industry together to plan for postwar domestic growth, the conference was led by Gill R. Wilson, president of the National Aeronautical Association.¹¹³ In December, Kerr received a personal note of congratulations from Roosevelt for the clinic's "constructive results" and for the governor's plans to make this conference an annual event in the state's capital city.¹¹⁴ Attempts to promote aviation in Oklahoma would receive more attention in the future from the Planning and Resources Board.

As the governor's first year drew to a close, most state residents took pride in their energetic chief executive, and a new respect for Oklahoma was being shown from across the nation. At the end of Kerr's term in office, Ernest M. Black, adviser to the administration and director of research at the Oklahoma Tax Commission, compiled what he considered the more important accomplishments of the administration. In this lengthy summation, Black says early on, "Before going into specific achievements of this

¹¹⁰ "Great Postwar Airport Planned," *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 19, 1943, 1.

¹¹¹ "Oklahoma Plans Advanced Airport Facilities," *The American City*, July 1944, 62.

¹¹² "Aviation Clinic Charts Master Postwar Plan," *The Daily Oklahoman*, November 14, 1943, B-11.

¹¹³ "Aviation Clinic Plans Growing," *The Daily Oklahoman*, October 9, 1943, 2.

¹¹⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt to Robert S. Kerr, letter, December 18, 1943, Folder 23, Box 12, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

Administration in the State of Oklahoma, it might be well to call attention to the achievement of the present Governor as an ambassador of ‘good will’ among the other States.”¹¹⁵ He related how in meetings and discussions with representatives from various regions during the early part of the Kerr administration, he was frequently asked about Oklahoma’s gubernatorial impeachments and past disputes with other officials and governments. Oklahoma, Black said, was usually perceived as an “insurgent state” and little credibility was given to its representatives.¹¹⁶

The state’s tarnished image, however, had changed during the Kerr administration. Before the governor left office, Blake wrote, “this biased opinion has been overcome and Oklahoma now takes its place among the States as a leader in State affairs. No longer are we ridiculed but are respected by the other States of the Nation and by the Federal Administration as well.”¹¹⁷

By the end of 1943, the nation still remembered Oklahoma’s dust-choked scenes and its own representatives’ irascible, often embarrassing behavior. As recently as 1938, many across the nation probably had shaken their heads while reading a *Newsweek* magazine article on the state’s gubernatorial primary campaign. Candidate William “Alfalfa Bill” Murray, who had previously served as governor, was reported to have indirectly characterized a political opponent—probably Leon Phillips—as a “beer-bellied, red-whiskered, bloated-faced, whiskey-nosed, poker-playing liar.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Ernest Black, report on “Accomplishments of the Administration of the Honorable Robert S. Kerr, Governor of the State of Oklahoma,” circa January 1947, Folder 21, Box 34, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ “Oklahoma Circus: ‘Sooners’ Rename Thomas in Free-for-All Campaign,” *Newsweek*, July 25, 1938, 8-9.

Yet, the Sooner state seemed to be in transition. The war had brought a measure of prosperity, and “Bob” Kerr’s friendly visage replaced the scowls of the past. Perhaps heralding the state’s changing image, the Broadway musical “Oklahoma!” had opened March 31, 1943, beginning a record string of 2,212 performances over the next five and one-half years.¹¹⁹ Invited by New York City’s Theatre Guild president to a special performance of the musical to commemorate the state’s thirty-sixth birthday in November 1943, the governor was unable to attend. As representatives, he sent Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce president Fred Jones, his wife, and Lillian Edwards, whom Kerr designated as Miss Oklahoma for 1943. “I shall at the next session of our Legislature recommend that your song ‘Oklahoma’ be made the official song of the state, which it so melodically glorifies,” Kerr wrote to the Theatre Guild president.¹²⁰

Although lawmakers debated the adoption of the song as the state anthem in 1944, many resisted this action during wartime.¹²¹ “Oklahoma!” was not made the official state song until after McAlester state representative George P. Nigh reintroduced the bill in 1953. By then nearly 10 million people had seen the show on its national tour of 250 cities. Many believed this musical did more to improve the state’s image than any efforts by state leaders.¹²²

The end of Kerr’s first year in office was marked by a new sense of pride among its residents, much of this stemming from their governor’s abilities to generate good will

¹¹⁹ Diana Everett, “Oklahoma!” *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, Oklahoma Historical Society, <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/O/OK090.html> (accessed September 1, 2010).

¹²⁰ Robert S. Kerr to Lawrence Langner, telegram, November 15, 1943, Folder 18, Box 17, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹²¹ “’89er Thinks State’s Song Should Wait,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 20, 1944, 8.

¹²² Everett, “Oklahoma!”

inside and outside Oklahoma. Their new leader was proving equally skilled at visualizing economic opportunities and using politics to direct federal funds to the state. Occurrences in 1944 would further enhance the state's stature and its economy. Governor Robert Kerr would stand literally at center stage of one of these events.

Chapter III: Brand New State?

Oklahoma continued to prosper from the federal war spending throughout the Kerr administration's second year in office, and the governor increasingly used his influence in Washington to secure these funds. He also began to focus on the development of the state's natural resources to promote economic progress. Following his rise to national prominence as keynote speaker at the 1944 Democratic National Convention, Kerr cultivated an alliance with Missouri Senator Harry S. Truman that would prove important to the state's future development. With an ambitious eye on postwar government programs by late 1944, the governor began building cooperation in the state for participation in the massive federal spending projects expected after hostilities ceased.

Meantime, the national economy surged with unbridled exuberance in 1944. Despite higher taxes, war bond drives, rationing, and numerous regulations on business and industry, a wave of prosperity swept the country. Improved earnings reached every economic level, the rich and the poor alike, in large cities and small towns from coast to coast. Most of the income gains resulted from better compensation of wage and salary employees. Important to Oklahoma, farm owners saw the greatest gains in the nation. From 1939 to 1944, their cash income increased 216 percent across the nation, shared among even fewer producers.¹

The types of families who most often reported economic improvement since the war had begun were middle-class and blue-collar households. The glut of defense

¹ Allen, "Who's Getting the Money?" 1-3.

spending brought prosperity even to businesses not directly working under government contracts. Industries that exploited natural resources, like crude-oil producers in Oklahoma, and businesses that produced consumer goods unfettered by war priorities also shared in the robust economic times.²

Personal income in the state rose from \$800 million in 1939 to \$1.9 billion in 1944, an astounding 142-percent increase. This percentage gain in Oklahoma outpaced the national increase of 121 percent for this same period.³ With workers earning a good living across the state by early 1944, the short-term economy appeared solid. The postwar period still posed a challenge. Kerr addressed this issue early in the year.

In a series of radio interviews beginning in January 1944 and broadcast on Tulsa's KVOO radio station, the governor restated his plans for attracting postwar industry to provide jobs for returning veterans and released war-industry workers. To encourage these businesses, he explained, the state must reduce its taxes to the "irreducible minimum." He used the catch phrase "industry is going where well invited and stays where well treated" in the interview, which would become a frequent refrain of his.⁴ Paying off the state debt to ease taxes would be key to this, and legislation had been enacted to earmark surplus funds to purchase these government bonds.⁵ Oklahoma would be debt free by June 30, 1945, Kerr predicted.⁶

² Allen, "Who's Getting the Money?" 4-6.

³ U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, *State Personal Income: 1929-87*, (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1989), 4-5.

⁴ "Confidentially, Governor—Why?" Transcript of KVOO radio news program with interview of Robert S. Kerr, January 29, 1944, Folder 28, Box 34, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as "Confidentially, Governor," radio interview, January 29, 1944]

⁵ Transcript of interview with Frank Lynch on the Oklahoma Radio Network, January 11, 1944, Folder 56, Box 1, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁶ "Confidentially, Governor," radio interview, January 29, 1944, Kerr Collection CAC.

The governor said in a radio interview of January 29: “Then we must educate our own people as to the opportunities for development of our natural resources and also give the benefit of this information, which so much is available, to citizens of other states to encourage their participation in the development of Oklahoma’s natural resources.” His own office, the Planning and Resources Board, and the research division of the Oklahoma Tax Commission would provide information to the public on the state’s advantages. In a nod to agricultural interests, Kerr emphasized his administration’s intention to focus on a soil conservation and fertilization program to expand the farm industry.⁷

The governor’s plans varied little from those in his address to the opening of the Nineteenth Legislature one year earlier. With the radio interview, Kerr signaled that the administration intended to stay the course with its economic development plans, with an added emphasis on educating the public on Oklahoma’s advantages to industry.

The governor also took action early in 1944 on a couple of the state’s image problems, a lack of Oklahoma sorghum and the dearth of trees across the state. The year before, Kerr had received national media attention with his promotion of Oklahoma’s folksy, molasses product and gained the nickname “Sorghum Bob.” *The New York Times* had given news coverage of his personal delivery of a jug of the product to a Brooklyn woman who had written him for some.⁸ The governor never minded being self-deprecating to promote his home state.⁹ After all this, he was chagrined to find that this thick syrup was no longer being produced in Oklahoma. The Planning and Resources

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Governor Turns Up with a Jug of Sorghum,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 1943, 17.

⁹ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 18.

Board offered to investigate, and the governor said he hoped for the establishment of a large, commercial sorghum plant in the state.¹⁰

Although administered through the Planning and Resources Board, the tree-planting program probably resulted from Kerr's personal initiative. At any early January luncheon with board members and chamber of commerce directors, the governor outlined plans for one million new trees throughout the state by Arbor Day.¹¹ The program was intended for beautification, so it fit into the administration's efforts to improve the state's image. The campaign was widely supported, and an estimated 2.5 million trees were in the ground by late March. School children performed much of the work, planting dogwoods in city parks, magnolias in southeast Oklahoma cemeteries, and redbud trees in and around Oklahoma City.¹²

These plantings increased annually for several more years. Musing over his administration's accomplishments in his final weekly column of "Governor Kerr Says," he put the program near the top of the list of deeds for which he wished to be remembered. He hoped his legacy would be as "one who encouraged the planting of trees, millions of trees, fruit trees, nut trees, shade trees, flowering trees, all kinds of trees, either native or those easily adaptable to the soil of Oklahoma."¹³ An estimated 15 million trees were planted in the state from 1944 through 1946.¹⁴

Even if these new trees served only to improve the state's appearance, the value

¹⁰ "Iowa Blackstrap Steals Trade In Kerr's Own Sorghum State," *The Daily Oklahoman*, January 6, 1944, 1.

¹¹ "Officials Confer Today on Tree Campaign," *The Daily Oklahoman*, January 5, 1944, 13.

¹² "Tree Campaign Is Successful," *The Daily Oklahoman*, March 18, 1944, 9.

¹³ "Governor Kerr Says," January 8, 1947, Folder 27, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC, 1.

¹⁴ Report of activities, Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, September 9, 1946, Folder 20, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC, 15.

of the program to Kerr revealed much about his long-held belief in the importance of developing Oklahoma's natural resources as a key to economic development. While serving in the U. S. Senate in 1960, he published a book, entitled *Land, Wood and Water*, with a foreword written by his friend and colleague, Texas Senator Lyndon B. Johnson. This text could be interpreted as a kind of apologia for much of his efforts as a politician.¹⁵

As a child, Kerr explained in the book, he learned that his father had come to Indian Territory in search of "land, wood and water" to support his growing family. Before the Kerrs moved to a farm nearer to Ada, they had only a natural spring for all their water uses. When the household settled on the more developed farm, young Bob realized how the ability to draw water from their new well contributed much to the family's quality of life. As he grew to manhood, the native Oklahoman realized how important these kinds of natural resources were both for the prosperity and quality of living for all. These youthful experiences and remembrances appeared to have profoundly affected his approach to promoting economic development as governor, especially so through the conservation of water resources, which would be clearly manifested throughout his political years.¹⁶

The successful effort with the tree plantings aside, the governor's busy Planning and Resources Board appeared to have some internal problems throughout much of 1944. In early April, chairman E. W. Smartt, who may never have presided at any of the board

¹⁵ Robert S. Kerr. *Land, Wood and Water* (New York: Fleet Publishing Corporation, 1960).

¹⁶ Kerr, *Land, Wood and Water*, 13, 48.

meetings, resigned from his duties and accepted a banking position outside the state.¹⁷ Director of the state's Water Resources Division, Don McBride, an engineer who had worked at this agency since 1935, was chosen by Kerr to replace him.¹⁸ This selection of the veteran state employee would prove helpful with the administration's water-development efforts over the next several years.

Other indications of the board's internal problems surfaced in summer. In early August the governor announced plans to "appoint a statewide advisory committee to cooperate with other groups in helping Oklahoma's returning veterans, both men and women, to find jobs."¹⁹ With the Postwar Planning Commission already charged with this purpose, the governor may have become dissatisfied with the commission's progress.

At this same time, the board appointed a veterans' committee chaired by *Tulsa Tribune* editor Victor P. Barnett, who promptly announced plans to improve state-owned farmlands for sale to returning veterans after the war.²⁰ In a letter to Kerr on August 5, Barnett said that he hoped the governor would attend the board meeting on August 8 at Grand Lake in lieu of his previously planned speaking engagement in Oklahoma City. Kerr's scheduling of a talk on the day of the board's meeting raised questions, especially considering the importance of this group to the governor's administration. Barnett ended the letter with a somewhat surprising statement that may have revealed more about problems with the board. "I realize the board has been upset during most of its tenure of

¹⁷ "Smartt Resigns State Planning Board Position," *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 8, 1944, 14.

¹⁸ "Don McBride Chosen For Smartt's Job," *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 27, 1944, 11.

¹⁹ "Kerr to Name Veteran's Aides," *The Daily Oklahoman*, August 9, 1944, 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

office,” he wrote, “but I think now we should get down to business and do something.”²¹

Considering the *Tulsa Tribune*’s policy toward the Kerr administration, its editor’s statement about the board may have been merely a veiled criticism of the governor.

Despite this characterization of the board’s being “upset” most of the time, its agricultural committee moved ahead during 1944 with its plans to improve the state’s farming industry, with much of its efforts directed toward soil conservation. One of the few increased appropriations from the penurious Nineteenth Legislature in 1943 was the funding to enlarge the state’s soil conservation program. Kerr believed the success of these efforts depended on farmers’ awareness of the importance of rebuilding and improving the soil.²²

With Henry Bennett as chairman, the committee had developed a well-organized plan by fall 1943, putting soil and water conservation at the top of the list of suggested actions. These efforts included classifying farmland for best use, developing methods for growers to “revegetate” and better employ uncultivated fields, protecting the fertility of the soil through better plowing methods, and improving ponds, lakes, wells, and streams for irrigation.²³ In March 1944, a large soil conservation meeting was held in Oklahoma City with national authorities speaking to agricultural interests from across the state.²⁴

The importance of sowing grass on unused farmland was fundamental to much of these educational efforts, as this had a dual benefit of controlling the loss of valuable

²¹ Victor P. Barnett to Robert S. Kerr, letter, August 5, 1944, Folder 16, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

²² “Governor Kerr Says,” April 5, 1944, Folder 25, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

²³ Minutes of agricultural committee meeting, September 30, 1943, Folder 14, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

²⁴ “Governor Kerr Says,” April 5, 1944.

rainwater and the resultant soil erosion. The practice by some Oklahoma farmers of burning forest undergrowth and other unused vegetation nearly doubled the amount of runoff on cropland, studies showed. Much better use of these shallow fields of scrub oak could be made by converting them to pasture for livestock production.²⁵ Underscoring the extent of the state's soil concerns, in August 1944 a Wewoka senator threatened legislation to force growers in the state to comply with conservation measures that would be established by statute.²⁶

Kerr contributed to the agricultural committee's educational efforts when he addressed attendees at the inaugural Oklahoma Livestock Conservation and Production Clinic in late October in Oklahoma City. After first citing the state's new national reputation for holding conferences on special issues, the governor asserted that the promotion of the livestock industry followed closely behind soil conservation in importance to the state's agricultural community. The governor pointed out that most of the state's income was derived from oil and three agricultural interests—wheat, cotton, and livestock. The latter of the four income generators, largely cattle and poultry, alone produced more earnings in 1943 than the other three combined.²⁷

He then referred to the report of the soil conservation clinic earlier in March that advised the reseeded of more than two millions acres of agricultural land with native grasses for pasturage. This conversion of land would result in more income from cattle

²⁵ Harley A. Daniel, "Fewer Floods and More Food With Soil Conservation," *Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Sciences* 24 (1944): 76.

²⁶ "Forced Saving Of Soil Urged," *The Daily Oklahoman*, August 31, 1944, 1.

²⁷ "Statement of the Purpose of the Livestock Conservation and Production Clinic," Kerr address to attendees at clinic, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, October 20, 1944, Folder 16, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC, 1-3.

and poultry than currently earned from crops.²⁸ Livestock production would continue to be encouraged by the agricultural committee, but most of its future efforts would continue to be directed at saving and improving the state's soil.

The governor's political activities and affiliations frequently took him outside Oklahoma throughout 1944. Having been selected in June 1943 to serve on the executive committee of the national Governors' Conference, by early the next year Kerr also was rising in prominence with the Southern Governors' Conference.²⁹ At a dinner sponsored by this association of regional governors in January 1944 in Washington, D. C., the Oklahoman spoke to an assembly of 150 U. S. senators and representatives on the importance of eliminating the discriminatory freight rates in the South and West as a means to promote economic development in the postwar years.³⁰

Attending the Democratic National Committee meeting about this same time, Kerr gained stature when a revolt by midwestern Democratic leaders threatened both party unity and the Roosevelt administration with demands for the removal of Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard. In a *The Washington Post* column by journalist and political insider Drew Pearson, national committeeman Kerr received credit for quelling the uprising with his warning to the dissidents that they would be playing into Republican hands before the 1944 elections. "Our major conflict is with the Republican party," Kerr

²⁸ "Statement of the Purpose of the Livestock Conservation and Production Clinic," Kerr address to attendees at clinic, Kerr Collection CAC, 5.

²⁹ Frank Bane to Robert S. Kerr, letter, June 5, 1944, Folder 9, Box 16, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

³⁰ "The Post War Development of the West and South Is Dependent Upon Non-discriminatory Freight Rates," Kerr address at the Southern Governors' Conference congressional dinner, Washington, D. C., January 17, 1944, Folder 6, Box 6, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

proclaimed. “To win this year’s election we must present a solid front.”³¹

To pacify these party leaders, the Oklahoman proposed that Eugene Casey, Roosevelt’s executive assistant and a favorite of the midwestern committeemen, be named vice chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Kerr’s plan worked. The president soon heard of the Oklahoman’s peacekeeping efforts, raising his standing at the White House just months before his significant role at the Democratic National Convention in July.³²

The Oklahoma governor’s reputation as an outstanding speaker had spread in Democratic circles throughout the country even before 1944. After Kerr’s speech at a Wyoming Democratic dinner meeting in 1943, Governor Lester C. Hunt immediately invited him to be keynote speaker at the party’s state convention in the coming year.³³ Impressed both with the delivery and content of the address, Governor Hunt wrote to Kerr’s secretary, Ralph Trask, requesting a copy of this speech on the Democratic Party and its accomplishments through the years.³⁴ Trask wrote back that no copy of the speech was available, as the Oklahoma governor had spoken extemporaneously to the Wyoming dinner group.³⁵

State auditor for Wyoming, William Jack, wrote to Democratic National Committee chairman Frank H. Walker in fall 1943. “Certainly this man Kerr can preach the Democratic gospel,” Jack stated. “I said it immediately following our dinner, and

³¹ Drew Pearson, “The Washington Merry-Go-Round,” *Tulsa Daily World*, January 28, 1944, 10.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ William Jack to Frank H. Walker, letter, September 28, 1943, Folder 17, Box 3, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as Jack to Walker letter of September 28, 1943]

³⁴ Lester C. Hunt to Ralph Trask, letter, September 28, 1943, Box 3, Folder 15, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

³⁵ Ralph Trask to Lester C. Hunt, letter, October 5, 1943, Box 3, Folder 15, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

have said it many times since, that I wished all Democrats, both wavering and unwavering, could know and could hear Governor Kerr.”³⁶

The governor’s frequent speaking engagements outside Oklahoma would later draw criticism from some within the state, causing Kerr to balk at an invitation to speak at two Jefferson Day meetings in California early in 1945. In response to this, state Senator Bill Logan authored a resolution requesting Kerr to accept the California invitations, as the senator asserted that the governor had been Oklahoma’s greatest ambassador since Will Rogers. The resolution passed.³⁷

In an editorial on this brouhaha, *The Okmulgee Daily Times* defended the governor’s out-of-state speeches: “Bob Kerr has received more favorable national recognition than any other governor Oklahoma ever had and he has presented his state over the nation in a better light than any other governor ever did.... We have needed something to counteract Steinbeck’s libelous ‘Grapes of Wrath.’”³⁸ Kerr would log some 400,000 miles of travel outside of the state in his tenure as governor, paying for most of these expenses with his own money.³⁹

In March 1944, the governor worked hard to elect Democrat William G. Stigler in the special election to replace Second District Congressman Jack A. Nichols, who had resigned to work for Transcontinental and Western Air.⁴⁰ In a front-page story, *The New York Times* called Oklahoma a “battleground of national politics” and reported that many

³⁶ Jack to Walker letter of September 28, 1943, Kerr Collection CAC.

³⁷ “Keep Right on Governor,” *Okmulgee Daily Times*, March 23, 1945, 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 21.

⁴⁰ Corbett, “Robert Samuel Kerr,” 136-8; “To Resign Seat in House,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 1943, 22.

watched the outcome of this election as a harbinger of the general election in the fall.⁴¹ Stigler's eventual victory was even reported in the Russian media as an indicator of Roosevelt's popularity and probable reelection.⁴² Kerr's leading of an important rally and defending the administration in Washington helped to secure the win and raised the governor's standing in the White House even higher.⁴³

Following the March election, former Oklahoma Governor William J. Holloway sent a telegram from Washington to inform Kerr that he was nominating him as keynote speaker for the upcoming Democratic National Convention in Chicago.⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, Roosevelt approved Kerr's selection by the Democratic National Committee to give the address.⁴⁵ Holloway's recommendation may have helped, but Kerr's reputation as a speaker at state conventions and his warm support of a fourth term for the president weighed more heavily in the decision. The committee also hoped the Oklahoman's selection might keep in line some of the southern, anti-New Deal Democrats.⁴⁶ Rejecting the forty-page speech supplied by party officials, he and Henry Bennett retreated to his Minnesota lake house to write his address.⁴⁷

Arriving in Chicago in mid-July, Kerr heard speculation that Roosevelt might be considering him for vice president to replace Henry Wallace.⁴⁸ Kerr biographer Anne Hodges Morgan wrote that the Oklahoma governor probably realized he had little chance

⁴¹ "Vote in Oklahoma Today Major Test," *The New York Times*, March 28, 1944, 1.

⁴² "Russians Watch U. S. Vote," *The New York Times*, April 3, 1944, 4.

⁴³ Corbett, "Robert Samuel Kerr," 136-8.

⁴⁴ William J. Holloway to Robert S. Kerr, telegram, April 22, 1944, Folder 19, Box 6, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁴⁵ "Democrats Talk of Kerr as Keynoter," *The New York Times*, June 15, 1944, 34.

⁴⁶ "Democrats Name Kerr as Keynoter," *The New York Times*, June 16, 1944, 32.

⁴⁷ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 22.

⁴⁸ Corbett, "Robert Samuel Kerr," 138.

to win the vice presidential nomination. So he schemed beneath the speaker's platform with Democratic National Committee chairman Hannegan, Maryland Governor Herbert R. O'Connor, and Maryland Senator Millard Tydings to ensure that Missouri Senator Harry S. Truman won the selection.⁴⁹

Contradicting Kerr's biographer, the governor's brother, Aubrey, recalled that Kerr had "expected to be nominated" as vice president and was "quite disappointed" that he was not. Democratic Party chairman Robert Hannegan "pulled out" on Kerr, Aubrey said. Hannegan, who held a close friendship with the governor, explained to him that Roosevelt wanted Truman as his running mate and that the chairman could do nothing to change the president's mind.⁵⁰

With Kerr delivering his state's twenty-two votes, Truman won the nomination—and the Oklahoman won Truman's gratitude.⁵¹ The Missouri senator, who would become president less than a year after the convention, felt appreciative enough to visit Kerr's hotel suite the night after his nomination. He thanked the governor and his state's delegates for helping to break the deadlock with incumbent Vice President Henry Wallace.⁵²

Kerr's keynote address on July 19 before 25,000 Democrat loyalists created great enthusiasm among the party faithful and brought national recognition to him and his home state. His ringing endorsement of Roosevelt and the New Deal, and his attack on

⁴⁹ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 22.

⁵⁰ Aubrey Kerr, interview by Malvina Stephenson, (undated), Folder 11, Box 6, Malvina Stephenson Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as Aubrey Kerr interview by Malvina Stephenson]

⁵¹ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 23.

⁵² "Kerr, Truman Meeting Holds Big Questions," *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 29, 1945, A-19.

Republican tenets played well with the partisan crowd.⁵³ The speech, entitled “Aims and Purposes,” was delivered in the same hall where three weeks earlier the Republicans had nominated Thomas E. Dewey as their presidential candidate. “Do you remember the twelve long years from 1920 through 1932 when America ‘hardened’ under Harding, ‘cooled’ under Coolidge and ‘hungered’ under Hoover?” Kerr rhetorically asked the Democratic throng.⁵⁴ The governor devoted his entire July 27 column, “Governor Kerr Says,” to what he called his “Chicago Adventure,” which captured the excitement of the moment from Kerr’s perspective at the podium:⁵⁵

I was never as nervous or any more scared than when I stepped up to face the crowd...Then, in the midst of this group of bright and shining stars...was a banner on which was printed ‘Oklahoma’! It was with great joy that I reached for it and lifted it high above my head and the heads of the crowd. The reception that it received is something that I will always remember. The organ and the band were playing the ‘Oklahoma’ songs. The radio commentators were talking about Oklahoma. It was truly ‘Oklahoma’ night!⁵⁶

How far the man from Ada had come from his flat, poorly received speech announcing his candidacy for governor just a little more than two years earlier. And how far the often-ridiculed “insurgent” state of his birth had been carried with him. “The vice presidential lightning didn’t strike,” Kerr wrote a friend shortly after the convention, “but we Oklahomans put on a pretty good show, at that.”⁵⁷

Accepting his nomination as vice president, Truman spoke at the convention on

⁵³ Corbett, “Robert Samuel Kerr,” 138.

⁵⁴ Robert S. Kerr, “Aims and Purposes,” *Vital Speeches* 10 (August 1, 1944): 612.

⁵⁵ “Governor Kerr Says,” July 27, 1944, Folder 25, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Robert S. Kerr to Guy B. Massey, letter, August 9, 1944, Folder 2, Box 34, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

the problem of industry reconversion at war's end.⁵⁸ Earlier that year, the U. S. Senate Special Committee on Postwar Economic Policy and Planning had recommended in a report a goal of full employment after the war. Congress, the committee stated, should help with the orderly disposal of war surplus materials, take steps to ensure the availability of materials for private construction, and consider the preparation of "a portfolio of useful public works."⁵⁹ The ideas that Truman articulated for the postwar economy at his convention address followed the Senate committee's recommendations and aligned closely with those of Kerr and his Planning and Resources Board:

We cannot go back to our pre-war status, for it is impossible to reshuffle our people into the old pattern. Nor can we throw into junk heaps twenty billions worth of new plants and equipment. Only by using them can we hope to provide good jobs for our brave fighting men when they return, and for our splendid war workers. With those plants we shall make more and better goods. We shall combine full employment with an even higher standard of living.⁶⁰

The governor's backing of Truman at the convention would soon pay dividends with help from the vice president, and later president, with the state's reconversion efforts and, especially, with its water projects.

The year before, Postwar Planning Commission chairman K. S. Adams had explained some of his group's economic plans for the returning veterans at an address to the Oklahoma Municipal League in December 1943. Adams urged communities to organize their own planning commissions to ensure jobs for the veterans, while the state

⁵⁸ Truman vice presidential nomination acceptance speech, "Official Proceedings of the 1944 Democratic National Convention," Folder 70, Box 1, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC, 282. [Hereafter cited as Truman vice presidential nomination acceptance speech, July 1944]

⁵⁹ Senate Special Committee on Postwar Economic Policy and Planning, *The Problem of Postwar Employment and the Role of Congress in Solving It*, 78th Cong., 2d sess., 1944, S. Rep. 539, pt. 4, 4-7.

⁶⁰ Truman vice presidential nomination acceptance speech, July 1944, Kerr Collection CAC, 282.

commission would act “in a *liaison* [emphasis his] capacity, coordinate, render service, make plans, and perform certain research activities.”⁶¹ The commission also appealed to University of Oklahoma president George L. Cross in April 1944 for use of his faculty’s expertise to help produce an industrial survey of state communities to provide to businesses.⁶²

Returning from his speech at the national convention, where Truman had promised “full employment” after the war, Kerr stated his belief in the federal government’s role to ensure jobs for everyone to boost the economy when hostilities ended. “Let private industry have first jobs,” he wrote to a friend, “but if private industry hasn’t jobs enough, Uncle Sam must step in, or [we] will have another economic collapse.”⁶³

With postwar planning in mind, the now well-known governor and new Planning and Resources Board chairman Don McBride went to Washington in September 1944 to confer with Will Clayton, administrator of the federal Surplus Commodities Corporation. Kerr and McBride wanted to discuss the conversion of some of the war-industry plants to commercial use, especially the electric-generation facility at the smokeless powder factory near Chouteau. While in the capital, the two Oklahomans also scheduled meetings with J. A. Krug, chairman of the War Production Board, to discuss the release of materials to finish a dam project in the state and with Major General Eugene Reybold,

⁶¹ “A Municipal Guide for State Post War Planning,” K. S. Adams address, Oklahoma Municipal League, December 13, 1943, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Folder 23, Box 17, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁶² Loyd Judd to G. L. Cross, letter, April 5, 1944, Folder 15, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁶³ Robert S. Kerr to Carl L. McCafferty, letter, August 9, 1944, Folder 2, Box 34, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

chief army engineer, to confer on other water projects.⁶⁴

The month following the Oklahomans' meeting with Clayton at the Surplus Commodities Corporation, which was later supplanted by the Surplus Property Administration, the agency was charged with the disposal of an estimated \$100 billion in unneeded war goods.⁶⁵ The state would soon work to obtain some of these surplus materials in Oklahoma as part of its postwar development plans.

Roosevelt and the Democrats swept to victory in November, a win for which Governor Kerr received some credit. Oklahoma Senator Elmer Thomas, with whom Kerr conferred closely on matters important to the state, wrote after the election to express his appreciation for the management of the campaign and to congratulate the governor on his role. "It was the universal verdict before and after the election that you rendered the Democratic cause the greatest possible service," Thomas wrote, "and I am duly appreciative of your efforts on behalf of the ticket."⁶⁶

Kerr received another congratulatory letter from a relatively unknown Minnesota college professor and political organizer, Hubert H. Humphrey, who had been impressed by the Oklahoman's campaigning in the northern state. The future vice president, who would be elected mayor of Minneapolis in 1945, wrote that he was encouraged that the Democratic Party had men of Kerr's stature. "The future will demand men of real leadership and integrity, and I have the feeling...that you are one of those few men in America who is capable through training and through personal character to give the type

⁶⁴ "Kerr to Discuss War Plant Use in Washington," *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 17, 1944, 12.

⁶⁵ "President Signs Bill Providing Reconversion," *The Daily Oklahoman*, October 4, 1944, 1.

⁶⁶ Elmer Thomas to Robert S. Kerr, letter, December 1, 1944, Folder 6, Box 34, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

of leadership which the future will so greatly demand.”⁶⁷

Kerr may have been held in high regard by many nationally, but the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce showed him little respect with its sponsoring of the second annual Oklahoma Industrial Conference in December 1944, an event organized locally and with no apparent coordination with the governor’s Planning and Resources Board. This seemed to confirm the dispute between the governor and factions in Tulsa who seemed reluctant to cooperate with official state efforts for economic development. The *Tulsa Tribune*’s sniping probably exacerbated this rift. Regardless, Kerr released a proclamation letter “to the people of Oklahoma” urging attendance at the industrial conference “because of the unquestioned benefit to our State as a whole.” The three-day meeting featured discussions, lectures, exhibits, and a clinic on the new industry of plastics.⁶⁸

At this same time, the planning board released its first comprehensive plan for the state’s development, in booklet form and entitled “Your Oklahoma.” Explained in the foreword as “a plan for the development of the state of Oklahoma through intelligent action by the people of the state and the efficient utilization of the State’s Natural Resources,” the publication contained general objectives and attractive photographs of state scenery. It appeared to be a thoughtful analysis in an appealing format, possibly for distribution to prospective businesses outside the state. Much of the information in this presentation came from an earlier, more comprehensive report on the Arkansas River

⁶⁷ Hubert H. Humphrey to Robert S. Kerr, letter, November 28, 1944, Folder 6, Box 34, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁶⁸ Robert S. Kerr to the people of Oklahoma, proclamation letter, November 18, 1944, Folder 15, Box 7, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

watershed by the National Resources Planning Board.⁶⁹

A careful reading revealed that the plan lacked a detailed, systematic approach for the state's development, but it did for the first time clarify most of the major changes necessary to restructure Oklahoma's agriculture-dependent economy. In a lengthy introduction, the publication emphasized the importance of the state's utilization of the wartime stimulation as "the first step—the lever—" to the development of a sound postwar economy.⁷⁰

The booklet's most substantive section, entitled "A Plan for Oklahoma," asserted that plentiful jobs and full utilization of the state's resources would primarily depend on "adjustments" in the state's agricultural and manufacturing industries. These changes in agriculture would require an increased efficiency in the size and practices of farms and result in the displacement of agricultural workers who would, hopefully, move into more productive areas of the economy. The adjustments to the manufacturing industry would entail growth, encouraged by research into more ways of processing the state's raw materials and implementing these methods.⁷¹ Essentially, much of this echoed the findings of the study conducted for Senator Pine in 1928: Oklahoma needed to process more of the raw materials it so bountifully produced.

The planning board's publication made little mention of Oklahoma's deteriorated roadways, misleadingly reporting that the state was "well served" by its highways and

⁶⁹ "Your Oklahoma," Planning and Resources Board, 1945, Oklahoma Collection at OKC Library. [Hereafter cited as "Your Oklahoma," Planning and Resources Board, 1945]

⁷⁰ Ibid, 9.

⁷¹ Ibid, 10-5.

that “it is extremely likely that this situation will continue.”⁷² Candidly, the state’s roads and highways had grown obsolete, and the governor faced a challenge just to begin the improvement of this dilapidated system.⁷³ To start this work, the Kerr administration would need support from the legislature for participation in the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944. This act authorized \$1.5 billion in matching funds for roadway development throughout America after the wartime emergency ended.⁷⁴ Kerr planned for Oklahoma to be in a financial position to match its share of this federal money.⁷⁵

The state had spent approximately \$300 million on the improvement and maintenance of its highway system from 1919 to 1944, but most of this work had not kept pace with usage. The heavy freight carried over the roads during World War II added to the damage. The war effort also caused a shortage of manpower and materials, so few repairs had been made. A report by the Oklahoma State Highway Commission in 1944 estimated that \$210 million was needed to bring the system up to the standards required for modern roadway traffic.⁷⁶ Another report by the commission later that year warned that an inadequate system caused an uneconomical distribution of goods and services, thus having an adverse impact on the economies of the areas served.⁷⁷ The state would need the federal funds to begin this upgrade to its roadways, both to provide construction work for the veterans and to aid postwar economic development.

⁷² “Your Oklahoma,” Planning and Resources Board, 1945, Oklahoma Collection at OKC Library, 17.

⁷³ “Statement of Highway Needs of the State of Oklahoma,” The Oklahoma State Highway Commission, March 11, 1944, Folder 9, Box 22, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as “Statement of Highway Needs,” March 11, 1944]

⁷⁴ “Large Problems of Postwar America Are Laid Before Congress by President in Message,” *The New York Times*, September 7, 1945, 16-18.

⁷⁵ “Your Oklahoma,” Planning and Resources Board, 1945, Oklahoma Collection at OKC Library, 2.

⁷⁶ “Statement of Highway Needs,” March 11, 1944, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁷⁷ “Biennial Report of the Oklahoma State Highway Commission,” Oklahoma State Highway Commission, December 1, 1944, Folder 6, Box 22, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

In fall 1944, Kerr began to build support for participation in the federal matching program. Following a Saturday night radio broadcast about Oklahoma's postwar highway program, the governor used his weekly newspaper columns to generate more public interest. "Adequate highway transportation is one of the pillars on which a future prosperous Oklahoma can and will be built," he wrote. He called for better highways connecting Oklahoma to other states, improved roads between cities and towns, and an adequate system of farm-to-market roads. The governor warned against politics playing a role in these plans for better roadways and hinged the future prosperity of the state on these improvements.⁷⁸

While provisions of the federal highway bill were being written late in 1944, Kerr and State Highway Commission chairman Ben T. Childers pressed Oklahoma's congressional delegation for changes in the legislation. The governor sent each a telegram in late November urging them to insist on a 75-percent-federal and 25-percent-state match of funds. In no case should they settle for less than a two-to-one federal-to-state participation, he told them.⁷⁹ Childers called attention to certain provisions of the pending legislation that could handicap the state for its past diversion of gasoline and automobile taxes from highway maintenance to schools. He urged the delegation to ensure that these punitive sections of the bill were removed.⁸⁰

Before the Twentieth Legislature began deliberation on financing the state

⁷⁸ Robert S. Kerr, "Governor Kerr Says," September 21, 1944, Folder 25, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁷⁹ Robert S. Kerr to Oklahoma congressional delegation, telegram, November 21, 1944, Folder 7, Box 28, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁸⁰ Ben T. Childers to Oklahoma congressional delegation, telegram, December 5, 1944, Folder 17, Box 21, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

matching funds, the governor made a plea in January 1945 for support of this initiative in a radio broadcast. He began by stating that the roadways vitally affected all Oklahomans. The public roads “will not only provide opportunity for employment to thousands of our returning service men and women and war workers, but will also become a vast artery through which will flow an ever expanding life stream of agricultural and industrial vitality and growth,” he said.⁸¹

In an appeal for support in the countryside, Kerr stressed the opportunity that the federal funds would provide for an adequate system of farm-to-market roads. These rural roads would provide more than commercial value; they would also ensure access to schools and hospitals by farm families, he said. He recommended that some of the money being sent to the counties be instead transferred to the federal matching-fund account. To allay concerns that rural areas would be deprived of these temporarily diverted roadway funds, the governor explained: “The purpose is to bring in and spend more money for farm-to-market roads in each county, than is now being brought in or spent for this purpose.”⁸²

At about the same time the governor built support for participation in the federal highway program, the Planning and Resources Board’s industrial committee, chaired by McAlester businessman J. G. Puterbaugh, began a series of weekly press releases. The articles were intended further to underscore the importance of the state’s industrialization,

⁸¹ “Report to the People of Oklahoma,” Kerr statewide radio broadcast, January 15, 1945, Box 1, Folder 96, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as Report to the People radio broadcast of January 15, 1945]

⁸² Ibid.

primarily through increased manufacturing.⁸³ The first of these six releases, previously approved by Kerr, began on November 27 and opened with this statement:

Oklahoma stands today at the crossroads in its economic life. We can choose to continue as a producer of raw materials, permitting industries in other states to skim off the cream of our production in the form of value added by manufacture, or we can refuse to remain a colony of eastern industry and keep those additional millions of dollars—these thousands of good paying jobs, here where by every right they belong.⁸⁴

The subsequent articles, entitled “Oklahoma at the Crossroads,” appealed to the new legislature to help the industrialization of the state by appropriating more funds for the Planning and Resources Board, changing tax laws, and adjusting workmen’s compensation rates.⁸⁵ Besides addressing these lawmakers, the news releases spoke directly to the citizens of the state.

With federal war spending reaching a peak during 1944, Kerr’s second year in office had brought relative prosperity to the state. The year’s political events also propelled the governor into national prominence, a position that he proved skilled at using to his own and the state’s advantage. His administration formalized a plan during the year for the development of the state’s natural resources as a key to economic progress, and the focus on capitalizing on postwar federal spending had begun with Kerr’s push for state matching funds for the national highway program.

⁸³ Don McBride to Robert S. Kerr, letter, November 25, 1944, with attachment, Folder 16, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Press release series entitled “Oklahoma at the Crossroads,” Planning and Resources Board, November and December 1944, Folder: Planning and Resources Board, Box 2, ID&PD at ODL.

Chapter IV: Outside Liaisons, In-State Development

Efforts by Oklahoma and the nation would turn in 1945 from winning the war to “winning the peace,” giving impetus to providing an economy with jobs for returning veterans. To further these developments in the state, the Kerr administration continued the struggle for freight equity, worked for improvement of the highway system, and emphasized conservation of water resources. Kerr would also turn to his friend Harry Truman, who became president with the death of Roosevelt in April 1945, for help with an ambitious water project along the Arkansas River. These efforts to improve Oklahoma’s economy relied heavily on the governor’s liaisons outside the state, his opportunistic actions, and his political skills—all of which would prove up to the task.

Early in Governor Kerr’s opening address to the Twentieth Legislature on January 2, 1945, he announced that both his proposed “rigid and puritanic” economy at the start of his administration and subsequent legislation had created funds to pay off the outstanding debt by June 30.⁸⁶ In special session the previous spring, the lawmakers had earmarked the budget surplus for debt retirement.⁸⁷ “This fortunate condition makes it possible for you to give consideration, FIRST TO A REDUCTION OF STATE TAXES [emphasis his], and, second, to making additional provisions for the services maintained by the State for the general welfare,” Kerr said. After the tax reduction, higher appropriations for public schools took priority on the governor’s list of recommendations

⁸⁶ “Message of Governor Robert S. Kerr of the State of Oklahoma,” opening of the Twentieth Legislature, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, January 2, 1945, Folder 15, Box 24, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as Kerr message to Twentieth Legislature, January 2, 1945]

⁸⁷ “Special Session Impeachment Article Fails,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 23, 1944, B-11.

for the state's estimated \$11 million surplus.⁸⁸ His goal of eliminating public debt, by which he intended to make the state more attractive to industry, would be reached in his third year in office.⁸⁹

The governor also recommended additional funding for the development and expansion of the system of county roads and state highways. He suggested that the one-cent gasoline tax that would be used to retire the public debt be transferred to the highway department, which he also requested be given any surplus remaining in the general revenue fund on June 30. This money would enable the state to share in the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944, which would match federal funds with state spending on roadways. With the state unable to take advantage of this until its debt was retired, some \$6 million was already backlogged in Washington for use on Oklahoma roads and highways.⁹⁰

In his address under the heading "Agriculture and Conservation and Development of Natural Resources," the governor asked for legislative action in two areas. He first called for additional funding for soil conservation efforts, and thanked those who had organized the state into districts to administer this program. The second area under this heading related to the estimated hundreds of millions of barrels of crude oil in the state that could be recovered only through secondary production methods. The diversified ownership of these wells made it difficult to obtain agreements for this process, and Kerr requested legislation for an equitable legal procedure to more readily produce this oil. As the principal owner of a large petroleum company, Kerr could benefit from this, but

⁸⁸ Kerr message to Twentieth Legislature, January 2, 1945, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁸⁹ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 19.

⁹⁰ Report to the People radio broadcast of January 15, 1945, Kerr Collection CAC, 1-2.

undoubtedly the state as a whole would also share.⁹¹

The governor addressed several other areas related to economic development. With the country's first two national aviation clinics in Oklahoma City in late 1943 and 1944, Kerr recommended that the legislature create a five-member aviation commission. This body would aid planning for the expected growth of airborne passengers and freight after the war, and coordinate federal assistance to the state to aid this expanding industry. Kerr also called for legislation to authorize the acquisition of surplus property from the federal government after the war. With passage of the Surplus Property Act in 1944, Congress had provided for the disposition of this accumulation of war materiel.⁹²

The legislature swiftly enacted most of Kerr's economic program into law, including an important bill that exempted manufacturing machinery and equipment from sales and use taxes.⁹³ After this exemption had been approved by committee, it passed without debate.⁹⁴ Industrial committee chairman Puterbaugh touted this in a press release, saying that it gave to industry the confidence to grow and prosper in the state. "Oklahoma is gradually coming to a realization of the fact (Kansas and Texas have already learned) that jobs and payrolls ultimately produce more tax revenue than high imposts on industry," the release stated.⁹⁵

The legislature had also passed a community property tax law, which Kerr had strongly advocated. A previous version of this legislation had been passed in 1939, but

⁹¹ Kerr message to Twentieth Legislature, January 2, 1945, Kerr Collection CAC, 26-8.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 19, 21.

⁹³ "Kerr, Truman Meeting Holds Big Questions," *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 29, 1945, A-19; "Senate Passes Industry Tax Aid Approved," *The Daily Oklahoman*, March 23, 1945, 4.

⁹⁴ "Senate Passes Industry Tax Aid Approved," *The Daily Oklahoman*, March 23, 1945, 4.

⁹⁵ J. Puterbaugh, press release entitled "The Improved Tax Structure for Industry in Oklahoma," 1945, Press releases from Planning and Resources, Folder: Planning and Resources Board, Box 2, ID&PD at ODL.

was declared invalid by the U. S. Supreme Court in 1944. The governor told legislators that this new legislation, which would put Oklahoma on par with Texas, New Mexico, Louisiana, and other community property states, would save individual taxpayers a minimum of \$25 million annually in federal income taxes. Kerr hailed the law as a spur to industrial expansion, and the Internal Revenue Service would ultimately approve it.⁹⁶

Illustrating the governor's effectiveness in advancing his economic development policies, the Planning and Resources Board passed a special resolution in spring to show its appreciation to the governor for his "splendid and highly effective work in connection with the passage of Legislation, beneficial to the State of Oklahoma," in particular the secondary production of oil. "We fully realize and appreciate the fact that our good state is highly blessed at having at the head of its affairs a man whose interest is co-extensive with her boundaries," the resolution continued.⁹⁷ If the board had shown disharmony in 1944, it at least appeared appreciative of Kerr's efforts after the adjournment of the Twentieth Legislature early in 1945.

Kerr's growing respect from governors outside Oklahoma would also prove important to the state's development in 1945. In addition to his being named to the executive committee of the Governors' Conference in June 1944, the Oklahoman had been elected chairman of the Southern Governors' Conference later in the year.⁹⁸ The Oklahoman had addressed this eleven-state assembly at a late November 1944 meeting in

⁹⁶ Kerr address on WKY radio program, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, December 29, 1945, Box 2, Folder 14, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁹⁷ Resolution by the Planning and Resources Board honoring Robert S. Kerr, June 8, 1945, Folder 18, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁹⁸ Minutes of the Southern Governor's Conference, Miami Beach, Florida, December 5-7, 1946, Box 16, Folder 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC, 44; "Equal Freight Rates Pushed," *The Daily Oklahoman*, November 28, 1944, 4.

Biloxi, Mississippi, where he stressed the importance of state economic development to ensure postwar employment opportunities. The federal government had spent more than \$11 billion on war production in the South since 1940, he told the governors, and for the first time in history these states had the capital to finance their industrial development. “Today we live in a new South,” he said, “with all of the raw products, natural resources, transportation facilities, [and] industrial opportunities that we have ever known, together with the experience gained in the mighty throes of war, and together with the capital that has come to us...”⁹⁹ Yet with all this new potential, the structure of discriminatory freight rates denied the region’s access to markets for its products, Kerr reminded his fellow governors.¹⁰⁰

Returning to Oklahoma after this conference, where Kerr had been elected chairman, the governor emphasized to the media his commitment to resolving the freight problem: “Reduction in freight rates will continue to be the primary objective of the [Southern Governors’] conference.”¹⁰¹ As leader of this association until December 1946, he would oversee this battle. This ultimately successful struggle, along with the future development of the Arkansas River, would stand out as an exemplar of Kerr’s achievements through cooperation with other state and national leaders.

In the southern states’ battle against discriminatory freight rates, they appeared to have the Roosevelt administration’s support. At a White House meeting with a group of senators and congressmen early in 1943, the president had said that railroads were

⁹⁹ “In Time of War Prepare for Peace,” Kerr address to Southern Governors’ Conference, Biloxi, Mississippi, November 25, 1944, Folder 84, Box 1, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ “Equal Freight Rates Pushed,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, November 28, 1944, 4.

opposed to his plans to abolish the freight-rate differentials, which he believed were imposing hardships on the South.¹⁰² In spring 1943, the president sent to the House Committee on Military Affairs a report by the Tennessee Valley Authority, entitled “Regionalized Freight Rates: Barrier to National Productiveness,” which called for the elimination of the freight-rate handicap in the South and West as an aid to expand the nation’s employment and production. This lengthy report detailed the regional variations in freight charges and policy, which applied especially to manufactured goods.¹⁰³

In an Associated Press news story a few months later, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes was said to be sympathetic to complaints about the freight-rate structure and its impediment to decentralized industrial development. In a letter to a southern Democratic senator, Ickes said: “...there is no more excuse for granting rate favoritism to one section of the country than for granting gasoline favoritism to another. Equalization of industrial opportunity for all sections of the country requires a re-examination and revision of the freight rate structure.”¹⁰⁴

Following his address on this inequity to the 150 or so senators and congressmen at the Southern Governors’ Conference dinner program early in 1944, the governor had devoted most of his weekly “Governor Kerr Says” column to this ongoing battle. In this address, Kerr told his readers that nothing could contribute as much to postwar prosperity in the state as winning this struggle. “If the existing discriminatory freight rates in force against Oklahoma products can be removed,” he wrote, “Oklahoma should offer a

¹⁰² Drew Pearson, “Washington Merry-Go-Round,” *Tulsa Daily World*, February 12, 1944, 4.

¹⁰³ Tennessee Valley Authority, *Regionalized Freight Rates: Barrier to National Productiveness*, report prepared for the president of the United States and forwarded by president to the House Committee on Military Affairs, 78th Cong., 1st sess., 1943, H. Doc. 137.

¹⁰⁴ Associated Press release of August 6, 1943, Folder 18, Box 13, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

wonderful field for future manufacturing developments and its growths and opportunities should no longer be retarded.”¹⁰⁵ Kerr somewhat presciently predicted that substantial progress would be made on this problem “certainly not later than early next year.”¹⁰⁶

With the arrival of 1945 and still without a ruling on the freight rates by the Interstate Commerce Commission, the governor took the opportunity to address this issue in early May while speaking to the chamber of commerce in Amarillo, Texas. The railroads, Kerr told the audience, had been both a boon and a barrier to the development of the region. The discriminatory pricing of these carriers had prevented Texas and Oklahoma from becoming processors of their raw materials, rather than just producers.¹⁰⁷

He lamented that the great cotton-producing states of Texas and Oklahoma did not have sufficient textile facilities to manufacture clothing for the city of Amarillo alone. Kerr asserted that the protectionist federal Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act of June 1930, “...with all of its terror and all of its tragedy, did no more to prevent the industrial trade and commerce between this and other nations than the system of discriminatory freight rates has done to prevent the industrial development of Oklahoma and Texas and Kansas and, in fact, the entire west and south.” A favorable ruling on the case for the southern states currently before the Interstate Commerce Commission, however, should provide relief “before the year is over,” the governor told the Amarillo gathering.¹⁰⁸

Oklahoma and the entire South received this relief just two weeks after the

¹⁰⁵ Robert S. Kerr, “Governor Kerr Says,” February 17, 1944, Folder 25, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Untitled address by Robert S. Kerr before the Amarillo Chamber of Commerce, May 5, 1945, Folder 107, Box 1, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

governor spoke to the Texas group. On May 20, the Interstate Commerce Commission held the system of interstate freight classification “unreasonable and unduly prejudicial” and ordered the eventual equality of shipping rates for all areas east of the Rocky Mountains. Interim adjustments were provided with a 10 percent reduction in rates in the South and a 10 percent increase for those in the North.¹⁰⁹

In a subsequent public address, Kerr called the decision an “Emancipation Proclamation” for southerners. This discriminatory policy had resulted in 95 percent of finished products in Oklahoma being purchased from outside the state, he said. This ruling by the commission would change this. The governor credited the Oklahoma Corporation Commission for providing much of the factual information upon which the federal commission’s decision was based. “The economic soil of Oklahoma has received its greatest cultivation and its greatest fertilization by this promise of equality of freight rates and equality of opportunity for industrial development,” the governor proclaimed.¹¹⁰ He may have chosen this agricultural metaphor better to include the farming community in a ruling that actually would more directly benefit state manufacturing.

The commission’s decree had come while a committee of the southern states met in Birmingham, Alabama. As chairman of the Southern Governors’ Conference, Kerr had called this gathering of representatives to set up a planning committee for the upcoming meeting of governors in July in Mobile, Alabama. The preliminary conference in mid-May was primarily intended to lay the groundwork for coordinated action by the

¹⁰⁹ “Shippers in South, West Win Freight Rate Parity; Old Scale ‘Unreasonable,’” *The New York Times*, May 20, 1945, 1.

¹¹⁰ Untitled address by Robert S. Kerr to citizens of Oklahoma, May 26, 1945, Folder 20, Box 13, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

states in the reconversion of industry in the postwar period.¹¹¹ Kerr's Planning and Resources Board chairman Don McBride accompanied the governor to the Birmingham meeting, which a Louisiana attendee called "a turning point in the history of the South" in light of the welcome news on the freight-rate decision.¹¹²

The Kerr administration wasted little time using this ruling to attract industry to the state. In a personal letter sent on June 9 to Watco Engineering, an Ohio manufacturer of fluorescent lighting and steel furniture, the governor touted the newly lowered rates for Oklahoma-based companies. "With the recent Inter State [sic] Commerce Commission freight rate decision to add to our other advantages, it occurs to me that you might consider the location of your plant in the State of Oklahoma," Kerr wrote to Frank W. Watkins, operator of the company, who at the time was considering opening a new assembly plant in Kansas City, Missouri. Adding a personal note to this solicitation, the governor mentioned that his daughter and Watkins's were personally acquainted through their musical interests.¹¹³ His use of this ruling by the Interstate Commerce Commission within a month of its announcement underscored the importance Kerr placed on freight-rate equity for the attraction of business.

Returning from the Southern Governors' Conference in Mobile, Kerr devoted nearly all his weekly column of July 26 to the rate struggle. The initial euphoria in the South over the ruling in May had subsided with the realization that the northern states

¹¹¹ "Group Favors State Controls," *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 11, 1945, 4.

¹¹² Caye A. Nelson to Robert S. Kerr, letter, May 22, 1945, Folder 20, Box 8, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹¹³ Robert S. Kerr to Frank W. Watkins, letter, June 9, 1945, Folder 18, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

would not give up their advantage without a legal battle, Kerr reported.¹¹⁴ Nine states successfully petitioned a federal court in New York for a stay on the rate adjustments, which were to have taken effect January 1, 1946.¹¹⁵ Led by Kerr as chairman, the Southern Governors' Conference "united as never before" in their determination to continue the struggle for equitable shipping costs. The regional association invited many of the western states to join them in the court battle. An increase in manufacturing must occur in Oklahoma in the postwar period to replace lost wartime projects, Kerr wrote, and when "it becomes apparent that we are certain to win this fight for freight rate equality this industrial expansion will certainly take place."¹¹⁶

To help him answer inquiries on what the rate adjustments would ultimately mean to the Oklahoma economy, the governor turned in summer 1945 to C. B. Bee, special counsel for the Oklahoma Corporation Commission. In a lengthy, carefully worded analysis, Bee stated that the favorable shipping costs would help bring industrial expansion to the South. Expressing concern over the governor's past irritation at his "verbosity," the counselor summarized his response to the question of whether the recent events had created a more favorable manufacturing environment in the state: "The answer is, Yes." As to when Oklahoma might see these benefits, he responded, "My answer to this would be that the start of the expansion would be noticed almost immediately." The demand for civilian consumer goods should rise after the war, he added, and industrialists will start plans for expansion as soon as they are convinced that

¹¹⁴ Robert S. Kerr, "Governor Kerr Says," July 26, 1945, Folder 26, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹¹⁵ "Freight Rates Change Balked," *The Daily Oklahoman*, December 22, 1945, 1.

¹¹⁶ "Governor Kerr Says," July 26, 1945.

freight equity will be accomplished in the near future.¹¹⁷ This was exactly the result Kerr and his administration wanted.

Although the Interstate Commerce Commission's ruling offered much promise to the southern states, the legal injunction's suspension of the recommended interim adjustments tempered tangible benefits in 1945. Ultimately fifteen northern states would join in a petition for a rehearing on the rates before the commission.¹¹⁸ The Southern Governors' Conference, of course, rallied in opposition to this. Upon the advice of their longtime legal counsel, Kentucky lawyer J. Van Dyke Norman, the governors separated their case from their allies in the West. Norman contended that the states in the South were more clearly discriminated against than other regions, and thus had a stronger argument by themselves.¹¹⁹

The case eventually went before the Supreme Court. In this protracted struggle, the states were requested by the Southern Governors' Conference to contribute an additional \$2,000 each to Norman for his firm's legal work early in 1946. A recent decision by the Oklahoma Supreme Court prevented Kerr from using state funds for these purposes, so he paid the attorney with a check from Kerr-McGee Oil Industries. Impressed by this act, the attorney Norman reluctantly accepted this payment. "One seldom finds a man in public life who would go so far as to put up his personal funds to

¹¹⁷ C. B. Bee to Ben Dwight, letter, August 13, 1945, Folder 23, Box 16, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹¹⁸ "Nine States Lose Freight Rate Case," *The New York Times*, May 10, 1946, 29.

¹¹⁹ J. V. Norman to Southern Governors Conference, letter, June 12, 1947, Folder 26, Box 16, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as J. V. Norman to Southern Governors letter of June 12, 1947]

carry out his commitments made in an official capacity,” the lawyer wrote to Kerr.¹²⁰

In May 1947, the Supreme Court would deny the northern states’ petition for rehearing by a seven-to-two vote. The decades long struggle for freight-rate equity would finally and officially be won, but not until Kerr had left office.¹²¹ His leadership of the Southern Governors’ Conference in this effort, his public speeches to the public and national lawmakers advocating change, and his newly won political clout all had helped pressure the Interstate Commerce Commission’s ruling in May 1945. Reford Bond, chairman of the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, called the Supreme Court’s landmark decision to uphold the equalization of freight rates the most important of its kind decreed by any U. S. commission or court. “This is a long step forward in the removal of artificial freight barriers that have long retarded industrial activities of this region,” the commissioner said.¹²²

As a member of the executive committee of the national Governors’ Conference, Kerr’s respect may have stood as high with this group as with the smaller conference of southern states. Certainly many in upper echelons of government recognized and appreciated his communication and management skills. In response to the Oklahoman’s request to speak at the meeting of the nation’s governors in Chicago in July 1945, Kerr was invited to chair a prestigious executive luncheon held by the conference for Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall and Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King. Both were revered military leaders throughout World War II, and with the surrender of Germany in May

¹²⁰ J. V. Norman to Robert S. Kerr, letter, April 30, 1946, Folder 24, Box 16, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹²¹ J. V. Norman to Southern Governors letter of June 12, 1947, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹²² “Rail Rate Cut Hailed in State,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 13, 1947, 1.

probably found more time for social gatherings. “There is no one in our opinion who could do a better job presiding and running this meeting than you could,” the secretary-treasurer of the Governors’ Conference wrote to Kerr, “and it has occurred to us that you might enjoy this assignment.”¹²³

The governor’s ties with Washington had been strengthened with his efforts in the 1944 election, and the death of Franklin Roosevelt in April 1945 probably provided the Oklahoma governor with even better access to the White House. Soon after Truman had won the office of vice president in November 1944, Kerr requested a meeting with him in Washington. The vice president responded in writing that he would be happy to see the governor in early December, signing the letter with an informal “Harry.”¹²⁴

The two had earlier become well acquainted during several visits to Oklahoma by the Missouri senator prior to the 1944 election and before the Oklahoma governor helped secure his vice presidential nomination.¹²⁵ “In view of the fact that providence saw fit to remove Franklin D. Roosevelt from the Presidency[,] I am tremendously grateful that a great man from Missouri was available to take his place,” Kerr said shortly after Truman moved into the White House.¹²⁶ Less than two weeks after Roosevelt’s death, the Oklahoman requested an appointment with his friend from Missouri, who was then the undisputed leader of the free world. Truman agreed to the meeting, which was scheduled

¹²³ Frank Bane to Robert S. Kerr, letter, May 25, 1945, Folder 10, Box 16, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹²⁴ Harry Truman to Robert S. Kerr, letter, November 21, 1944, Folder 18, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹²⁵ Aubrey Kerr interview by Malvina Stephenson, Malvina Stephenson Collection CAC.

¹²⁶ Robert S. Kerr, “Governor Kerr Says,” May 10, 1945, Folder 26, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

for May 1.¹²⁷

A political reporter at *The Daily Oklahoman* speculated that the visit to Truman would be more significant than the governor's officially announced purpose of "paying respects" to the new president. The Oklahoma politician had risen to national prominence and influence a little more than two years after assuming the governorship. Some suggested that a cabinet position in the new administration might be in store for the governor, who was already considered a formidable candidate for the Senate in 1948. He now possessed real power to influence federal action in his home state.¹²⁸

Kerr's trip to see the new president in Washington was packed with meetings with important federal bureaucrats. Accompanied by Planning and Resources Board chairman Don McBride, the governor first received assurances from Veterans Administration officials that regional offices would be established in Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Lawton, Enid, and Ada to provide services for returning war veterans. Visiting the Surplus War Commodities Board, the governor insisted that Oklahoma receive an equal opportunity with other states in the purchase of materials no longer needed by the federal government. A meeting with Nevada Senator Pat McCarran, chairman of the committee for reconversion of war industries, provided heartening news for the state. Accompanied by Fifth District Representative Almer S. "Mike" Monroney, Kerr and McBride elicited a promise from Soil Conservation Service officials to survey Oklahoma's North Canadian and Canadian rivers' watersheds as soon as war conditions allowed. A conference with the Internal Revenue Service commissioner brought reassurance of a quick decision on

¹²⁷ Robert S. Kerr to Harry Truman, telegram, April 23, 1945, Folder 3, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹²⁸ "Kerr, Truman Meeting Holds Big Questions," *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 29, 1945, A-19.

Oklahoma's new community property law, which would end speculation on its legality.¹²⁹

Kerr's political *tour de force* also included two visits with the president, the first of which included the governors of Maryland and Rhode Island. After this meeting, Kerr reported that Truman was "tremendously interested" in cooperation between the federal and state governments.¹³⁰

The Oklahoman requested and received a private meeting with Truman the next day. The topic concerned "the development of soil conservation and flood control on the watersheds of the Arkansas and Red Rivers [sic] and their tributaries," Kerr told his readers in his column a week later. The governor said no more about the substance of this meeting, but praised the president as an able leader who knew the problems of America and "at first hand is especially familiar with, sympathetic toward and interested, in our welfare here in Oklahoma." He closed his weekly address with a statement that presaged the support that the state would receive from the president: "We have great cause to be grateful indeed that our neighbor and friend, Harry S. Truman, is President of the United States of America."¹³¹ The aid that the Truman administration would provide for Kerr's large-scale, comprehensive plan for the Arkansas River would cause Oklahomans "to be grateful indeed" that they had a governor with such lucrative White House connections.

Help with water projects from the new administration in Washington would

¹²⁹ Robert S. Kerr, "Governor Kerr Says," May 10, 1945, Folder 26, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

contrast sharply with the relatively meager aid during the Roosevelt years. Kerr had obtained \$15 million from the Roosevelt administration to repair flood control works that had been damaged by the ruinous rains in eastern Oklahoma in spring 1943, but his request for more federal funding for development of the Arkansas River basin had met disappointment. In an urgent letter to the White House in early August 1944, he had asked the president to pressure the army's chief of engineers, Major General Eugene Reybold, to expedite the favorable and promising Army Corps of Engineers' survey on the Arkansas River drainage system. The findings of the corps supported Kerr's hopes not just for flood control, but also for the development of hydroelectric power, recreation, and navigation along the course of the waterway.¹³²

Increasing the availability of electrical power and connecting the state by waterway to the Mississippi would undoubtedly promote the growth of industry. The governor wanted this report, which was then being studied by the Board of Review for Rivers and Harbors, sent to Congress promptly so that funding authorization might begin on this ambitious project. "Frankly, I am disturbed by rumor that this report, which has been in the making for more than ten years, might be sent back to the district office for further study," Kerr wrote to Roosevelt, "...If at all possible, this report should go forward. I therefore earnestly request your help."¹³³

With his letter to the president, the governor attached a confidential memorandum from his Committee on Arkansas River Development. This three-man body had been formed by Kerr to coordinate efforts with the state of Arkansas to present a uniform case

¹³² Robert S. Kerr to Franklin Roosevelt, letter with attachment, August 7, 1944, Folder 2, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as Kerr to Roosevelt letter of August 7, 1944]

¹³³ Ibid.

to federal officials for the development of the river basin. The Oklahomans named to the committee were Planning and Resources Board chairman Don McBride, T. E. Harbour, and Newton R. Graham.¹³⁴ Graham had been appointed to the water resources committee on the governor's reorganized Planning and Resources Board in July 1943.¹³⁵ The Tulsa banker had been a proponent of navigation on the Arkansas River since the 1920s, long before most considered it feasible. Scoffers suggested that Graham could better serve the state's transportation system by putting his efforts into the paving of the waterway. Supporters, however, respectfully called him "the Admiral of the Arkansas."¹³⁶

Over many years, Graham made numerous trips to Washington before members of Congress and their committees to support navigation on the river. Graham had spearheaded early efforts to promote development of the waterway, and Kerr would work for its funding, first as governor and later as a U. S. senator. The Tulsan would die of a heart attack in 1957, before completion of the navigation system and after spending the day at a meeting of the Planning and Resources Board, which by then had played a key role in the project's approval.¹³⁷

The committee's confidential memorandum attached to Kerr's letter to Roosevelt had warned the governor of the possibility that the corps' survey of the Arkansas might be returned for further analysis. This comprehensive report on the uses of the waterway had been completed in December 1943 and forwarded to the Arkansas River Survey Board, which had endorsed it as economically feasible and justifiable. It had next been

¹³⁴ Kerr to Roosevelt letter of August 7, 1944, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹³⁵ Planning Board meeting minutes, July 7, 1943, 4, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹³⁶ Edward R. McManus, "Dream Nearing Reality for 'Admiral of the Arkansas,'" *The Daily Oklahoman*, October 14, 1962, 6A. [Hereafter cited as "Dream Nearing Reality," *The Daily Oklahoman*]

¹³⁷ "Dream Nearing Reality," *The Daily Oklahoman*.

sent to the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors, where it languished when Kerr wrote Roosevelt.¹³⁸

The report, which had first been authorized by the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1935 and consumed millions of dollars in its eight years of compilation, had several key features of prime importance to the governor and to Oklahoma's economic development. First, the study found navigation on the Arkansas economically justifiable and physically feasible with the proposed series of locks and dams, which would allow use of the waterway without conflict between the upper and lower basins. The report also recommended the further development of hydroelectric power at some of the proposed dams in northeast Oklahoma. Finally, the project's completion would allow for complete flood control of the river and all its tributaries in Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arkansas, which would preclude economic losses like those suffered by the northeast part of the state in spring 1943.¹³⁹ The development of the comprehensive plan was estimated at the time to cost a staggering \$419 million.¹⁴⁰

Kerr's urgent request to Roosevelt in August 1944 for expedition of the corps' study prompted a personally signed, polite response from the president—but no real help. In a two-page letter that began "My dear Governor Kerr," the chief executive reviewed the comprehensive report, but then informed Kerr of potential flood-control funds from a bill that had been approved by the House of Representatives and was before the Senate. As to the complex Arkansas River project, the president waxed bureaucratic with the statement: "A project of such magnitude as that contained in the pending report requires

¹³⁸ Kerr to Roosevelt letter of August 7, 1944, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ "22 Millions Asked for U. S. Flood, River Work in State," *The Daily Oklahoman*, March 23, 1942, 1.

exhaustive study, thorough engineering and economic analysis and careful review as well as coordination with such agencies as the Federal Power Commission, the Department of the Interior...”¹⁴¹ The report would be submitted to Congress “as soon as such coordination can be accomplished,” Roosevelt closed in his response, which doubtless deflated the hopeful governor.¹⁴² The next month, perhaps to console his Oklahoma supporter, the president urged Congress to move ahead with the development of the Missouri River and to consider similar improvements on the Arkansas River after the war.¹⁴³

This disappointment aside, Kerr had won a concession from the Roosevelt administration earlier in 1944 to restart a much smaller water project on the opposite side of the state from the Arkansas River. The Altus-Lugert reclamation project, with its construction of a large dam for farmland irrigation in southwest Oklahoma, had been halted by the War Production Board in 1942. At a breakfast meeting in Washington in January 1944, the governor and Senator Elmer Thomas convinced board director Donald Nelson to review this earlier decision.¹⁴⁴ Kerr’s Planning and Resources Board received approval in June to continue this work as a model farm and part of a \$5.6 million pilot project. Board members and local participants signed a contract with the federal Bureau of Reclamation to share maintenance expenses, making the project a cooperative effort among local, state, and federal governments.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Franklin Roosevelt to Robert S. Kerr, letter, August 23, 1944, Folder 2, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ “Roosevelt Urges a Missouri ‘TVA,’” *The New York Times*, September 22, 1944, 1.

¹⁴⁴ “Altus-Lugert Restudy Set,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, January 20, 1944, 16.

¹⁴⁵ “State Operated Farm to Guide First Irrigation Work in Area,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, June 14, 1944, 10.

Waters from the North Fork of the Red River would produce a reservoir for the irrigation of some 500 farms over 70,000 acres in Greer, Kiowa, and Jackson counties.¹⁴⁶ By late 1945, the dam had been completed and the lake was expected to cover more than ten square miles when filled.¹⁴⁷

The Washita Valley flood-control project, another water-related undertaking in the western and central part of the state, was proposed by the Planning and Resources Board and chaperoned by Oklahoma's congressional delegation early in 1944 before the House Flood Control Committee. These representatives urged adoption of a survey by the board, which called for the building of twenty small dams in the Washita River watershed. The project was designed to control floodwaters, which would prevent property damage as well as alleviate the runoff of valuable soil from croplands.¹⁴⁸ By late 1944, however, Congress had eliminated the construction of dams in the Washita Valley project, and instead emphasized soil conservation through conversion of eroded lands to pasture and the planting of shelterbelts.¹⁴⁹

The Kerr administration was determined to develop the state's water resources as a catalyst for economic growth, but not everyone agreed with this plethora of reservoirs in what had largely been cropland and pasturage. Entitled "One Big Fishing Hole," an editorial in May 1944 in the *Oklahoma City Times* decried the \$77 million federal appropriation for lakes and dams in Oklahoma and warned that much of the fertile

¹⁴⁶ "State Operated Farm to Guide First Irrigation Work in Area," *The Daily Oklahoman*.

¹⁴⁷ "Altus Project Hailed by Kerr as 'Stabilizer,'" *The Daily Oklahoman*, January 31, 1946, 1.

¹⁴⁸ "Washita Flood Control Urged," *The Daily Oklahoman*, February 26, 1944, 14.

¹⁴⁹ "Washita Flood Control Plan Set by Department of Agriculture," *The Daily Oklahoman*, November 26, 1944, 18.

bottomland would be inundated.¹⁵⁰

The article asserted that the best use of these expenditures would be on soil conservation: “The biggest problem before the people of Oklahoma is that of rebuilding the farm soil that has been worn out by continuous overcropping and restoring the fertility that has washed or blown away as a result of 50 years of neglect.”¹⁵¹ Calling the proposed lakes and reservoirs “nice playthings” and “excellent recreation grounds,” the article went on to reveal the persistent agricultural mindset of many in the state at the time. “Oklahoma’s future is tied to the farm land where its basic industry exists. Our people will be too busy to go fishing until the land is built back up to its original productiveness.”¹⁵²

Ignoring this criticism and with a friend and benefactor in the White House, the Kerr administration increased efforts in spring 1945 to win approval for the comprehensive Arkansas River development plan, a goal that had proved elusive with Roosevelt in power. Nature provided some additional justification for the project. In April, heavy rainstorms once again brought devastating floodwaters to the Arkansas River watershed in northeastern Oklahoma. Nearly 200 farmhouses were destroyed and 450,000 acres of cropland inundated. Two thousand hogs and some 440 head of cattle drowned. Damages to fields and crops were estimated at \$35 million, with an additional \$3.5 million in washed-out roadways. Human loss was minimal, as the 1943 floods had made residents more alert and reduced the number of farm families living in the

¹⁵⁰ “One Big Fishing Hole,” *Oklahoma City Times*, May 26, 1944, 34.

¹⁵¹ “One Big Fishing Hole,” *Oklahoma City Times*.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

bottomlands.¹⁵³ To fund emergency repairs from the overflows on both the Arkansas and Red rivers, the House Flood Control Committee appropriated \$12 million in May.¹⁵⁴

In the midst of these spring storms and the resultant recovery efforts, plans were underway for a public hearing on the Arkansas River study before the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors on May 4-5 in Tulsa, a city surrounded by graphic evidence of the recent flood damage. These reviews were the final step before the Army Corps of Engineers pronounced on the advisability of these kinds of improvements to the nation's rivers or harbors. If so recommended by this board, the plans were submitted to Congress for funding consideration. Interested parties were invited to these hearings to argue the economic justification of the projects.¹⁵⁵

The joint Oklahoma-Arkansas committee on the development of the waterway, led by Tulsan Newton Graham, voiced its support of the report at the two-day hearing. Although the corps' plan called for "deferred installation" of hydroelectric generators on the proposed dams in the project, one speaker made a plea not only to include them, but to add even more. A rural electric cooperative representative told the board that additional power generation was needed as "four-fifths of the state's farms do not have electricity now."¹⁵⁶ The hearings adjourned the day before German armed forces surrendered, ending the war in Europe. Thousands of job-seeking veterans would soon return to Oklahoma.

¹⁵³ Don McBride to Robert S. Kerr, letter, April 20, 1945, Folder 18, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁵⁴ "Flood Repair Fund Favored," *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 18, 1945, 18.

¹⁵⁵ "Notice of Public Hearings for Arkansas River and Tributaries," Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors, February 17, 1945, Folder 18, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁵⁶ "River Control Hearings End," *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 6, 1945, 7.

On his political *tour de force* in Washington and meeting with President Truman, Kerr was unable to attend the Tulsa hearing. He did, however, send a letter to the board afterward, making the most of the recent flood damage. On his return to Oklahoma from Washington, he had flown over northeast Oklahoma. The governor dramatically told the board what he had seen from above. “The destruction of property is appalling,” he wrote. “I shudder at the evidence of human suffering. We must control the floods that are sapping the very life blood of our State.”¹⁵⁷ He told the panel that Oklahoma had suffered more economic damage since 1940 than the estimated cost of construction for dams to prevent these floods. Kerr pushed for the board to recommend the navigation plan for the river to “compensate for the losses heretofore sustained.”¹⁵⁸

While awaiting the board’s decision following the hearing, the governor acted to regain control of the Grand River Dam Authority, the state agency that operated in the Arkansas River basin. The federal government had taken control of this authority for war purposes under the Phillips administration in December 1941. The governor sent a telegram to Truman in June 1945 requesting that control of the projects of the Grand River Dam Authority be restored to Oklahoma. Revenues from the hydroelectric generator at the Pensacola Dam more than covered expenses for the operation by 1945, so the governor was eager to convert this profitable enterprise to peacetime commercial use.¹⁵⁹

Kerr also wanted the return of the Grand River Dam Authority to position the

¹⁵⁷ Robert S. Kerr to the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors, letter, May 9, 1945, Folder 18, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Robert S. Kerr to President Harry Truman, telegram, June 11, 1945, Folder 3, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

state for industrial reconversion in the postwar years.¹⁶⁰ His administration negotiated to purchase the Oklahoma Ordnance Works from the War Assets Corporation and to operate its steam generation plant under the authority. This operation between Chouteau and Pryor was already connected to the hydroelectric generator at the Pensacola Dam, so these two systems could be combined to provide low-cost energy for domestic and industrial use. Plans to purchase the steam generator failed, however.¹⁶¹

With no decision on the Arkansas plan from the board of engineers by July, Kerr's lead man on his Committee on Arkansas River Development, Newton Graham, recommended political action by the governor. In a "personal and confidential" letter to Kerr, the Tulsan recounted the history of the events leading to the approval of improved navigation on the Missouri River in 1933. Graham pointed out that this project's recommendation by the chief of engineers occurred only after Roosevelt "had expressed his interest and hope that such development would be included in the forthcoming public works program."¹⁶² The current chief of engineers, recently promoted Lieutenant General Eugene Reybold, "knows more about the Arkansas River and the feasibility of its development than any living person," he wrote, and warned that the veteran officer was approaching retirement.¹⁶³

The Tulsan believed that the time had come for Truman, who supported the comprehensive Arkansas River plan, to inform Reybold of his desire to see the project

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Richard Lowitt, "Power for the People: Developing the Grand River Dam Authority, Part 2, 1945-1964," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 87, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 262-3.

¹⁶² N. R. Graham to Robert S. Kerr, letter, July 28, 1945, Folder 19, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as Graham to Kerr letter of July 28, 1945]

¹⁶³ Ibid.

expedited. “We believe that the best interests of the State of Oklahoma will be served if you find it possible to present this matter to the President within the next month or so,” Graham told the governor in late July.¹⁶⁴ Just a few weeks later, Kerr would arrange to meet with Truman to ask the president to discuss with Reybold the approval and forwarding of the comprehensive Arkansas River development plan.

Before the two would discuss the matter, however, global events intervened. With the surrender of Japan in mid-August 1945, the War Department cut procurement of armaments by nearly 100 percent. The military would continue a large expenditure on food but planned a reduction as rapidly as demobilization of troops allowed. By September, the army was returning 170,000 soldiers per month to civilian life. These releases were expected to accelerate rapidly, with 7-million men and women to be discharged in the twelve-month period ending in September 1946.¹⁶⁵

With hostilities over, responsibility for the reconversion of the nation’s economy lay with the Office of War Mobilization and Reconversion, directed by John W. Snyder. The office had been overseen by White House insider James F. Byrnes until his appointment as secretary of state by Truman in July 1945. On August 15, director Snyder issued a report, entitled “From War to Peace: A Challenge,” which stated overall federal policy for postwar reconversion and listed four major economic objectives: “(1) Jobs for all those willing and able to work, (2) A steadily rising standard of living, (3) Stabilization of our economy to avoid disastrous inflation or deflation, (4) Increased

¹⁶⁴ Graham to Kerr letter of July 28, 1945, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁶⁵ *Washington Legislative Bulletin* 28, August 29, 1945, The Council of State Governments, Folder 3, Box 16, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

opportunities for farms and businessmen.”¹⁶⁶

Congress curtailed its vacation after the Japanese surrender, hurrying back to Washington to face the challenges of postwar America. In a lengthy address to a joint session of Congress on September 7, President Truman described the federal role in the process of economic reconversion.¹⁶⁷

“The general line of approach to the problem is to achieve as full peacetime production and employment as possible in the most efficient and speedy manner,” the president told the assembly.¹⁶⁸ Asking Congress for full-employment legislation, he asserted that the government must give confidence to private industry by directing its policies and programs to promote production and to stimulate employment. The president recommended that any federal projects delayed by the necessities of wartime production now be funded, including the development of the Arkansas River. Along these lines, Truman called for the release of funds under the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944, which authorized \$500 million for three successive years to be matched by the states for roadway construction.¹⁶⁹

The Arkansas River project may have held promise for Oklahoma’s industrial development, but its construction would also provide immediate employment opportunities. With Oklahoma’s veterans streaming back into the state in need of jobs, the postwar economy had arrived. The war had energized the country to an extent almost unthinkable in the previous decade. As the president had outlined in his address to the

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ “Large Problems of Postwar America Are Laid Before Congress by President in Message,” *The New York Times*, September 7, 1945, 1, 16-8.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

joint session of Congress, America's peacetime goals would now be individual prosperity and unceasing economic growth.¹⁷⁰

With equitable freight rates and an improved system of roadways, Oklahoma could better attract manufacturing and share in these good economic times to come. A navigation system on the Arkansas River and additional hydroelectric power would further enhance the business environment. Kerr had positioned himself and the state to fully capitalize on the opportunities provided by a federal government poised to spend vast sums to ensure a sound economy. The opportunities were ripe, and he was not the kind of politician to miss this chance to use governmental largesse to help Oklahoma.

¹⁷⁰ Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 786.

Chapter V: A Postwar Economy

By late summer 1945, Kerr had less than a year and a half left in office, but much could be done for Oklahoma's economic progress with the war's end and Washington pledged to an expanding economy. The governor moved quickly to use his friendship with the president to expedite his cherished Arkansas River project. He also positioned the state to maximize its share of the new federal highway funds and to keep federal war-industry investments. Much of his final year as governor would also be spent showcasing the state to the nation and recruiting industry.

With America still celebrating the news of Japan's surrender, Governor Kerr arranged to meet with the president on August 16 in Washington to discuss the Army Corps of Engineers' study on the development of the Arkansas River. He and other members of the executive committee of the Governors' Conference had seen Truman the day before to discuss the reconversion of the states' economies to a peacetime footing. The group of governors wanted the federal government to begin the postwar road-building program and other public-works projects as soon as possible. The reality of millions of returning veterans needing employment naturally concerned these state leaders.¹

As he met with the president, Kerr must have known that the close of the war and Truman's intention to use government projects to create jobs strengthened his bid for support of the Arkansas plan. In line with Roosevelt's earlier suggestion once the war

¹ Robert S. Kerr, "Governor Kerr Says," August 23, 1945, Folder 26, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as "Governor Kerr Says," August 23, 1945]

had ended, the governor requested that the proposed river project begin in conjunction with navigation improvements already underway on the Missouri River. To expedite this, Kerr reminded the president, General Reybold would need to approve and forward these plans to the White House for the chief executive's signature.²

Addressing this issue in his weekly newspaper column shortly afterward, the governor assured his readers that the president "is intimately acquainted with this problem and in complete sympathy with its proper and adequate solution." The work needed on the Arkansas River closely paralleled that already being done on the Missouri, he told his constituents. The president is "strongly in favor of developing the watershed of the Arkansas River for flood control, soil conservation, reclamation, and with due consideration to the recreational facilities and hydroelectric power that can be developed in connection with it."³ Kerr made no mention of Truman being "strongly in favor" of navigation on the river, so the governor's water channel still hung in the balance. While on the trip to Washington, the governor conferred with influential Oklahoma Senator Elmer Thomas, whom Kerr touted as in position to render "valuable service" to his home state and in support of the Arkansas River development.⁴

The governor wrote Truman a little more than a week after their meeting in mid-August, ostensibly to thank him for the courtesy of their meeting. He also expressed gratitude to the president for his "interest in expediting the report by the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors on their study of the Arkansas River development

² Robert S. Kerr to Harry S. Truman, letter, August 25, 1945, Folder 3, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as Kerr to Truman letter of August 25, 1945]

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Governor Kerr Says," August 23, 1945, Kerr Collection CAC.

program.” He closed his letter with a reminder to the nation’s chief executive: “I hope that you have had time to discuss with General Reybold the possibility of the report being forwarded, with its approval, to your office for submission to the Congress as soon as the necessary limitations will permit.”⁵ These “necessary limitations” were somewhat vague, but Kerr’s admonishment to the president of the United States to expedite the Arkansas River plan seemed clear enough.

While awaiting news from Washington, the governor used his political and public relations skills to build support for the project. In mid-September, Kerr acted as host for Texas Democratic Governor Coke Stevenson, Kansas Republican Governor Andrew Schoepel, and Tulsa army district engineer F. J. Wilson during an overnight boat trip on Lake Texoma. While on this supposed inspection tour of the newly completed flood-control work on the Red River, Kerr pointed out to the media that the cordial meeting of the three governors on the boat outing and their mutual support of this federal government program demonstrated the apolitical merit of these projects. He also made note that President Truman had recommended a similar development—the Arkansas River plan promulgated by the Army Corps of Engineers.⁶

In late September, Truman’s military aide, Brigadier General Harry H. Vaughan, wrote Kerr that the officer had at the president’s behest “requested action” from Reybold on the project. Vaughan added that all he had received related to his request was a memorandum from the secretary of war, which he had enclosed with his letter to Kerr.⁷

⁵ Kerr to Truman letter of August 25, 1945, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁶ “River Program Wins Approval,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 11, 1945, 6.

⁷ Brigadier General Harry H. Vaughan to Robert S. Kerr, letter, September 25, 1945, Folder 19, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

Apparently unaware to Vaughan, both the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors and General Reybold had already made their recommendations. They disagreed. The board had estimated the cost-benefit of the project based on an assumption of nine million tons of shipping on the proposed nine-foot navigation channel. The cost savings from using this waterway for the transportation of commodities barely offset the expense of its construction.⁸ On September 11, the board of engineers sent their report to Reybold, concurring with the overall Arkansas plan *only as a guide for future development*. The board did not believe “that the benefits to be derived from the navigation project warrant its construction at the time.”⁹

In an unprecedented action, Chief Engineer Reybold overruled the recommendation of his board of engineers.¹⁰ In a report on September 20, the general stated his belief that commodities shipped on the river would exceed the estimates of the board and that the benefits would prove more substantial. He concluded: “I am therefore convinced that the construction of the navigation features is fully warranted and should be authorized at this time.”¹¹

By the time the letter from Truman’s aide reached Kerr, he had already received the report from Reybold that recommended the navigation channel. Moving quickly to solidify his gains with an exuberant letter to the chief engineer, the governor wrote: “I quite agree with your opinion that public benefits, especially from navigation, will greatly

⁸ S. Charles Bolton, *25 Years Later: A History of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System in Arkansas* (Little Rock, Arkansas: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1995), 14.

⁹ House Committee on Rivers and Harbors, *Arkansas River and Tributaries: Arkansas and Oklahoma*, 79th Cong., 2d sess., 1946, H. Doc. 758, 18. [Hereafter cited as *Arkansas River and Tributaries*, H. Doc. 758]

¹⁰ Bolton, *A History of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River*, 14.

¹¹ *Arkansas River and Tributaries*, H. Doc. 758, 2-3.

exceed the estimate of the report.”¹² Five months after Oklahoma’s “neighbor and friend” assumed the presidency, the army’s chief of engineers, in a unique directive, had overruled his staff and sent the comprehensive Arkansas River plan on a pathway to congressional approval. This action probably could be attributed to Kerr’s forcefulness and political skills in his dealings with Truman.

To generate support for the Arkansas plan in the central and western parts of the state, Kerr began to speak in late October 1945 on the feasibility of connecting Oklahoma City to the water navigation system. *The Daily Oklahoman* newspaper reported in a front-page story that the governor believed the waterway to central Oklahoma could be accomplished, but only after construction of the Eufaula Dam, which was part of the Arkansas River navigation plan. After this project was completed, the water route to Oklahoma City could become a reality via the North Canadian, the Canadian, or the Deep Fork rivers. A fourth possibility could be the construction of a canal. Kerr said that an economic study by the joint Oklahoma-Arkansas committee that was presented to the Army Corps of Engineers “contains sufficient information to indicate not only the economic soundness of that program but the certainty that a project into central Oklahoma would be practical...”¹³

On November 1, the governor received the unwelcome news that a survey on flood control on the Grand River and its tributaries had received only a “partially favorable” report from the corps of engineers and had been forwarded to “higher authority.” A system of only four reservoirs on the Grand River had been approved, all

¹² Ibid, XI.

¹³ “City Waterway Plan Is Sound, Governor Says,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, October 21, 1945, 1.

upstream of Oklahoma in Kansas. Fort Gibson in northeast Oklahoma had been excluded.¹⁴ Later the same month, Kerr telegraphed his friend Sam Rayburn, speaker of the House of Representatives, requesting him to include the Fort Gibson project in a flood-control bill currently before Congress, and to add three others—Hulah and Wister, both in the Arkansas River watershed, and Canton, in the western part of the state,¹⁵

In December, Speaker Rayburn wrote Kerr that his four requested projects had been put in the House flood-control bill.¹⁶ Later the same month, Congress approved the deficiency appropriation bill with these dam works, setting aside \$4 million for the Canton Reservoir and Fort Gibson projects, and \$2 million for those at Hulah and Wister.¹⁷

By early 1946 and in his final year as governor, Kerr knew he had little time left to gain approval by Congress for the comprehensive Arkansas River plan. After a trip to Washington in February, he announced that Lieutenant General Raymond A. Wheeler, the new chief of army engineers, planned a four-day visit to Oklahoma in mid-April “to inspect existing flood controls and water projects and the other proposals.” Enthusiasm in central Oklahoma for the governor’s Arkansas navigation plan had waned as a result of the large expenditures involved and the uncertainty of congressional support. Kerr appeared frustrated with this apathy in the state’s capital city: “If Oklahoma City does nothing or opposes it, it will find that neither indifference or opposition by Oklahoma

¹⁴ Brigadier General E. H. Marks to Robert S. Kerr, letter, November 1, 1945, Folder 19, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁵ Robert S. Kerr to Sam Rayburn, telegraph, November 28, 1945, Folder 2, Box 28, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁶ Sam Rayburn to Robert S. Kerr, letter, December 6, 1943, Folder 2, Box 28, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁷ “Flood Control Progress Seen,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, December 22, 1945, 14.

City can prevent water transportation coming up...the Arkansas River to Tulsa.”¹⁸

The governor continued discussions with Truman on the plan, and in late March the president requested a memorandum from Kerr on the status of the corps’ report. In a response to the White House in early April, the governor informed Truman that Chief Engineer Wheeler had sent the report to the Bureau of the Budget. He ended this letter with the following:

In conformity with our prior conferences relative to the development of the Arkansas River and its tributaries, I sincerely solicit your aid in expediting the Report with the Budget [sic] and would further suggest that you request Congressman Mansfield, Chairman of the Rivers and Harbors Committee, to include the Arkansas River Report in a Rivers and Harbors bill this Session of the Congress.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude for your past actions in expediting and advancing the status of the Arkansas River project.¹⁹

Following the visit to Oklahoma by the new army chief of engineers just two weeks later, Kerr seemed pleased. “He is a staunch advocate of the program to develop Oklahoma’s natural resources,” the governor wrote in his weekly column in late April. “We want General Wheeler and his Division Engineer, Colonel Hutchins, of Dallas, both to come back to Oklahoma often.”²⁰

At about this same time, Kerr proposed a letter to the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce for support of the Arkansas River development plan. “I have reason to believe that President Truman will request its inclusion in a Rivers and Harbors bill this

¹⁸ “City’s Support for Navigation Urged by Kerr,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, February 12, 1946, 1.

¹⁹ Robert S. Kerr to Harry S. Truman, letter, April 2, 1946, Folder 3, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

²⁰ Robert S. Kerr, “Governor Kerr Says,” April 24, 1946, Folder 27, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

session of Congress,” he wrote.²¹ Shortly afterward, the governor announced he would leave for Washington to appear May 8-9 before the House Rivers and Harbors Committee in behalf of the Arkansas River plan and then to meet with President Truman for further discussion on the project.²²

Some 100 residents of Oklahoma and Arkansas gathered in Washington in early May to support the Arkansas River plan, and many of them presented before the Rivers and Harbors Committee.²³ In his testimony, Kerr forecast a growth in the state’s population of several million from water transportation on the Arkansas.²⁴ The governor wanted the development for flood control, recreation, and hydroelectric power, but he clearly emphasized the stronger value he placed on the river’s transportation potential in the second sentence of his presentation. “This project has many collateral benefits,” he said, “but as General Reybold so well said in his report to you: ‘The navigation features comprise the principal part of the plan of improvement and will provide the greatest benefit to the area.’”²⁵

In his weekly column a week later, the governor wrote that members of the committee stated the Oklahoma-Arkansas group had made the best presentation ever witnessed by the congressmen. Following this hearing, the committee promptly voted to recommend authorization and funding for the plan. Before leaving Washington, Kerr met again with Truman to thank him for his help with the Arkansas project and to complete

²¹ Proposed letter from Robert S. Kerr to directors of Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce, circa March 1946, Folder 17, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

²² “42 Governors Expected Here,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 6, 1946, 12.

²³ “Water Project to Get Boost,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 2, 1946, 16.

²⁴ “Spur to State Growth Seen,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 10, 1946, 2.

²⁵ “Speech Before the House Committee on Rivers and Harbors,” Kerr presentation, Washington, D. C., May 9, 1946, Box 1, Folder 45, Speeches, Kerr Collection CAC.

arrangements for the president's upcoming visit to Oklahoma City at the end of May for the annual Governors' Conference.²⁶

When the full Rivers and Harbors Committee bill was sent to Congress, the part recommending the Arkansas River plan drew opposition from one of Oklahoma's own representatives, Fifth District Congressman Mike Monroney. The Oklahoma politician stated in early June before the House of Representatives that the army engineers had given only *tacit approval* to the \$435 million project.²⁷ He also charged that Congress was being asked to vote money for the Arkansas plan under the guise of flood control, yet this would lead to the expenditure of \$435 million with a principal aim of river navigation and hydroelectric power. "The whole plan is to extend the channel of the Arkansas 530 miles upstream to Tulsa over some of the driest land in the middle west," Monroney stated.²⁸ The goods moved on the channel, he said, would primarily be oil and petroleum products.²⁹

Arkansas Congressman Fadjo Cravens accused Monroney of succumbing to the rivalry between Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Few Democrats in the House opposed the Arkansas River plan, and the Oklahoman's amendment to remove it from the bill failed.³⁰

The House passed the legislation in early June and included funds for the initial step in the overall Arkansas River development plan, the \$55-million Eufaula Dam project.³¹ Oklahoma Second District Congressman W. G. Stigler, of Muskogee, received

²⁶ Robert S. Kerr, "Governor Kerr Says," May 15, 1946, Folder 27, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

²⁷ "Arkansas River Project Start Voted by House," *The Daily Oklahoman*, June 5, 1946, 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

credit from Kerr for his efforts. In a letter to Kerr, Stigler said he doubted that most Oklahomans understood the significance, but he considered it the “dawn of a new day” in the industrialization of eastern Oklahoma.³²

In June, Governor Kerr spoke in support of the House bill before the Senate Commerce Committee. Conceding that the present measure restricted authorization to the Eufaula Dam, he told the committee that the “preponderance of benefits” from the river’s development would ultimately come from navigation.³³ The Senate readily agreed to the House legislation on the Arkansas plan and added even more funding, authorizing a total of \$150 million. House members, however, refused to vote for this additional \$95 million. Arkansas Senator John McClellan, who had made the motion for Senate approval of the increased amount, expressed disappointment but vowed future action for the funding of the waterway. In a statement that foretold of the long-term political struggles in the years ahead, McClellan said: “Sooner or later we will get authorization for the navigation channel.”³⁴

On the morning of July 4, President Truman signed the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1946, using a pen supplied by Oklahoma Senator Elmer Thomas. Both Thomas and Congressman Stigler attended the White House signing ceremony.³⁵ Later that month, the governor sent Truman a letter of gratitude for his support of the legislation, which authorized the Arkansas River development plan, even if it failed at the time to fund most

³² W. G. Stigler to Robert S. Kerr, letter, June 17, 1946, Folder 30, Box 27, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

³³ “Statement of Robert S. Kerr Before Senate Commerce Committee,” Kerr presentation, Washington, D. C., June 12, 1946, Folder 14, Box 16, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

³⁴ “Arkansas River Funds Chopped,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, July 10, 1946, 24.

³⁵ Robert S. Kerr to W. G. Stigler, letter, July 30, 1946, Folder 30, Box 27, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

of the project. These finances would ultimately come over many years of effort by Oklahoma's congressional delegation, which by 1949 would include Kerr. In the letter to Truman, the future senator lauded both the legislation's potential for Oklahoma and the president's support of it, leaving little doubt as to the key role played by the state's "neighbor and friend" in the White House:

You have again rendered our people a great service. May I take this opportunity to express my deepest and most personal, sincere, gratitude to you for your interest and assistance in stressing this legislation, which is so important to our section of the country, through to final culmination. No single act has, in my opinion, ever meant so much to the future development of our industrial and agricultural economy. The projects resulting from this Authorization Act will become great moments to your foresight and courage.³⁶

With the Arkansas River project underway, Kerr directed his efforts at ensuring Oklahoma receive its share of federal highway funds. While requesting appropriations for large projects like the Arkansas plan, Truman had also asked the joint session of Congress in September to fund the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944.³⁷ This program authorized \$1.5 billion in matching funds to states for roadway development throughout America. Governor Kerr's request that the Oklahoma Legislature authorize matching funds for the anticipated federal financing of the highway program had been met by legislation passed in the spring. The state's matching funds would come from anticipated budget surpluses for fiscal years ending June 30 in 1945 and 1946, plus an additional tax on gasoline through December 1946.³⁸ Still, not all the collections from the additional two-cent levy per gallon would be used to match federal money as Kerr had hoped. The

³⁶ Robert S. Kerr to Harry S. Truman, letter, July 25, 1946, Folder 3, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

³⁷ "Large Problems of Postwar America," *The New York Times*, September 7, 1945, 1, 16-8.

³⁸ Black report, circa January 1947, Kerr Collection CAC.

legislature chose to divide the additional tax on gasoline equally between the state highway system and the counties' farm-to-market roads. The funds sent directly to these counties would be under the control of the commissioners and ineligible for the federal match.³⁹

Although the governor said that this legislation would be the beginning of “an Emancipation Proclamation” for state farm families, he clearly had wanted all the new money to be paired with federal funds. He called the limited match a “great start in the right direction,” but added that this “money can never be spent on the basis of providing the most good to the greatest number until the system is changed to a state-wide program on a state-wide basis.”⁴⁰ He predicted that someday Oklahoma’s rural areas would have “all-weather farm-to-market roads” and experience “their greatest economic ‘Emancipation Proclamation.’” But the governor predicted that this day would never come to rural areas “until farm-to-market roads are built and maintained on a state-wide basis instead of a county-wide basis.”⁴¹ Matching funds aside, Kerr’s uneasiness over some of this money being funneled directly to the local governments may have portended the state’s county commissioner scandal of the early 1980s.

By summer 1945, chief engineer at the state highway department, H. E. Bailey, had begun preliminary planning with federal Public Roads Administration officials on parts of an interstate highway system across Oklahoma. Bailey, a former city manager of Oklahoma City, reviewed proposed routes that would roughly follow U. S. Highway 77

³⁹ Black report, circa January 1947, Kerr Collection CAC, 5.

⁴⁰ Robert S. Kerr, “Governor Kerr Says,” May 31, 1945, Folder 26, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁴¹ Ibid.

north and south across the state, and U. S. Highway 66 from the Texas Panhandle east to Oklahoma City then northeast toward the Kansas state line. Upon completion in the 1960s, a section of interstate highway in the southwest part of the state would be a turnpike named in his honor.⁴²

While awaiting congressional approval of funds for the new highway program, the state's excitement over the anticipated federal dollars to upgrade the state's roadways was dampened somewhat by public charges of cronyism in the Kerr administration. More than half of the first \$5.6 million from the program was allotted to the home counties of the governor and two of his three highway commissioners. An early summer editorial in *The Daily Oklahoman* criticized this apportionment:

Of every \$1.00 allotted by this program, more than 51 cents is allotted to the home counties of the governor and two of his appointees. If this program was (sic) the last and the only one for the current year, its terms would be utterly inexcusable. For on its face, it cuts to pieces the argument presented to the late Legislature that unless the gasoline tax was increased radically and the long-neglected highways of the state repaired, the state would lose a large part of the millions of dollars it had invested in highways. The argument was conceded and the highest gasoline tax in America was imposed...⁴³

Certainly not all the publicity on the state's postwar highway program embarrassed the governor's administration. An editorial in the *Muskogee Daily Phoenix* extolled the benefits of maintenance work on U. S. Highway 69 from Muskogee northward to Wagoner. Area residents celebrated the improvements along this route, especially in light of the "attention that had been denied it—seemingly studiously denied

⁴² H. E. Bailey to Childers, Clemens and Paris, letter with attachment, June 29, 1945, Folder 18, Box 21, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁴³ "Just a Beginning," *The Daily Oklahoman*, June 30, 1945, 4.

it—under many previous administrations.”⁴⁴ The locals were gratified by the governor’s visit to the site of the roadwork in early October and his endorsement of the Muskogee residents’ suggestion to rename U. S. Highway 69 the “Truman Highway.”⁴⁵

In fall 1945, Congress proceeded with the funding of the federal highway program, with Oklahoma eligible for \$30.4 million over the next three years. This required a state match of approximately \$27 million.⁴⁶ After repayment of the debt in summer 1945, a budget surplus of \$11 million was forecast for fiscal year 1946. With funds from budget surpluses and the additional penny from the increased gas levy, the state appeared poised to generate the required matching funds for its full share of the federal highway aid.⁴⁷

Just after news of Congress’s funding of the highway program reached the state, Oklahoma City received notice of its selection by the American Association of State Highway Officials for the group’s annual meeting January 29 through February 1, 1946.⁴⁸ Some 800 officials from all forty-eight states attended, many visiting Oklahoma City for the first time. The executive secretary of the association commended Kerr and staff from the State Highway Commission for their role as hosts. The official made special mention of the “generous hospitality and thoughtfulness” shown by the governor’s wife.⁴⁹

By spring 1946, the roadway program started by the Kerr administration had

⁴⁴ “U. S. Highway 69’s Bright Future,” *Muskogee Daily Phoenix*, October 9, 1945, 8.

⁴⁵ “U. S. Highway 69’s Bright Future,” *Muskogee Daily Phoenix*, October 9, 1945, 8.

⁴⁶ Report to Governor Robert S. Kerr, Activities of the State Highway Commission 1943 to 1946, State Highway Commission, December 12, 1946, Folder 25, Box 21, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as Activities of the State Highway Commission 1943 to 1946]

⁴⁷ Kerr message to Twentieth Legislature, January 2, 1945, 7-8, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁴⁸ Hal H. Hale to Ben T. Childers, letter, October 31, 1945, Folder 21, Box 21, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁴⁹ Hale H. Hale to Robert S. Kerr, letter, February 5, 1946, Folder 26, Box 13, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

construction either underway or projected in every county in the state. In his weekly column, the governor, then with less than eight months left in office, said that he hoped his successor would note that the state's "2,250,000 people are determined" to see the program that he had begun "continued through the next four years on a basis that will provide Oklahoma and her citizens with the roads which are so badly needed and to which the state and its people are so richly entitled."⁵⁰

Seventy-six farm-to-market road projects were underway or under contract by late June, and thirty more had been approved by the following month. After July, the highway department expected to complete around forty per month, averaging five miles in length. By mid-summer, more than sixty counties throughout the state had farm-to-market roadwork underway. "In my opinion," Kerr said, "this is the most constructive road program in the history of Oklahoma."⁵¹

By the last month of Kerr's administration, more than \$23 million in highway contracts had been awarded and were either in construction or awaiting final processing. The state's surface-maintenance rating for its roadways had been forty-seventh in the nation when the governor's term began. When he left office in January 1947, the state had soared to eighth place among the forty-eight states.⁵²

Before leaving office, Kerr claimed that his roads program would provide a strong foundation for more efficient farming, industrial expansion, and development of the state's cities. He made another assertion about the improvement of state roadways: "It

⁵⁰ Robert S. Kerr, "Governor Kerr Says," April 24, 1946, Folder 27, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁵¹ Robert S. Kerr, "Governor Kerr Says," June 26, 1946, Folder 27, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁵² Activities of the State Highway Commission 1943 to 1946, Kerr Collection CAC.

will insure for Oklahomans an ever increasing percentage of the nation's tourist and recreational business, which very shortly will be the greatest industry in the nation."⁵³

Federal funding of highway construction and water projects were not the only largesse from Washington that the Kerr administration hoped to attract during the postwar period. In February 1944, a Roosevelt executive order had created the Surplus War Property Administration as part of the Office of War Mobilization. In addition, Congress passed in October of the same year the Surplus Property Act to prepare for the orderly disposal of unneeded war materiel and properties. The War Assets Administration eventually became the federal agency overseeing this task.⁵⁴ Along with earmarking the matching funds for the anticipated federal highway program, Oklahoma's Twentieth Legislature had authorized a state surplus property agent early in 1945 to aid the state and local governments in the acquisition of these federal holdings.⁵⁵

The state received valuable donations from the War Assets Administration after Japan's surrender. The largest of these were the machinery, mechanical equipment, and tools from the Douglas aircraft plants in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. With estimated value of \$2.5 million, these properties were distributed to some 400 educational institutions across the state. Another \$1 million in similar surplus materials was obtained from Tinker Field and also given to schools.⁵⁶

Oklahoma became the first state in the country to request and receive mounted

⁵³ Robert S. Kerr, "Governor Kerr Says," July 31, 1946, Folder 27, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁵⁴ Louis Cain and George Neumann, "Planning for Peace: The Surplus Property Act of 1944," *The Journal of Economic History* 41, no. 1 (March 1981): 130.

⁵⁵ Brief Narrative Summary of the State Surplus Property Department of Oklahoma, circa, December 1946, Folder 21, Box 34, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC. [Hereafter cited as Brief Narrative Summary of State Surplus Property, circa, December 1946]

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

decontamination units, valued at \$1 million and used in a program directed by the State Board of Agriculture. Glennan Hospital at Okmulgee, which was transferred to Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, became one of the most valuable of the state's real property acquisitions from the federal government, with estimated worth around \$3 million.⁵⁷ The Planning and Resources Board worked to acquire the navy's satellite landing field at Goldsby, gunnery school at Lexington, and bases in Norman. The transfer of the two bases to the University of Oklahoma more than doubled the value of the school's properties.⁵⁸

The Kerr administration also worked to keep wartime military installations in the state after hostilities ended, including the valuable air depot that was formally dedicated Tinker Field in November 1945.⁵⁹ Several months before this ceremony, the army may have seriously considered moving the mechanical and technical work at the installation to Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio. While stationed at this Ohio airbase, an army officer from Oklahoma uncovered these plans by chance and passed this information in strict confidence to officials in Oklahoma City. The city's chamber of commerce secretary, Stanley Draper, sent a confidential memo by special delivery to Kerr in mid-July, calling this alarming news to his attention and requesting a meeting to discuss how "to block this move before it gets too far along."⁶⁰ One would assume the governor took this matter seriously and acted preemptively.

⁵⁷ Brief Narrative Summary of State Surplus Property, circa, December 1946, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁵⁸ Report to Robert S. Kerr from the Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, September 9, 1946, Folder 2, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁵⁹ "City Is Ready for Tinker Field Day," *The Daily Oklahoma*, November 18, 1945, 1.

⁶⁰ Stanley Draper to Robert S. Kerr, memo, July 11, 1945, Folder 21, Box 17, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

A similar situation emerged with Enid Army Air Field late in 1946, when Kerr received news that the War Department planned to move personnel and equipment from the northwest Oklahoma installation to bases at Shreveport, Louisiana, and Las Vegas, Nevada. The governor wrote Senator Thomas and asked him to meet with two Enid officials in Washington and to render assistance to prevent the Enid base's closing.⁶¹ The senator, the Enid officials, and Eighth District Congressman Roscoe "Ross" Rizley quickly arranged a meeting in the Pentagon Building with Major General Charles C. Chauncey, not coincidentally a former resident of the governor's hometown of Ada. The general assured the Oklahoma delegation that the Enid installation, later renamed Vance Air Force Base, would be retained as a permanent facility at its location in Oklahoma.⁶²

As his time as governor grew short, Kerr predicted that Oklahoma's improved roadways would contribute to the future growth of tourism and recreation. This forecast probably stemmed from belief by his Planning and Resources Board that these leisure activities would become a significant industry. Released in 1945, the board's plan for the development of state resources called for the construction of recreational facilities along the shores of some of the state's water projects.⁶³ In spring 1946, the board began to consider the development of these facilities within the existing state parks and planned to request \$100,000 for this in their 1947 budget.⁶⁴

The Oklahoma Division of State Parks had been established in March 1935 as a

⁶¹ Robert S. Kerr to Elmer Thomas, letter, November 21, 1946, Folder 9, Box 28, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁶² Elmer Thomas to Robert S. Kerr, letter, of November 25, 1946, Folder 9, Box 28, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁶³ "Your Oklahoma," Planning and Resources Board, 1945, Oklahoma Collection at OKC Library.

⁶⁴ "State Plans Board Budget Is Up \$185,000," *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 19, 1946, 13.

part of the State Game and Fish Department, until moved under the aegis of the fledgling Planning and Resources Board in April 1937.⁶⁵ With guidance from the National Park Service, the board prepared a long-term plan in 1938.⁶⁶ This strategy established eight state parks for “large-scale recreation” and “preservation of natural beauty,” with the locations distributed to ensure that 60 percent of the population lived within seventy-five miles of a site.⁶⁷ The Civilian Conservation Corps, a New Deal program, built numerous facilities at these parks before the war began.⁶⁸ During the war, the army used the scenic areas for maneuvers, camouflage training, and redeployment camps. Considerable construction was completed at Lake Murray and Beavers Bend, but overall development of these parks lagged until late in the Kerr administration.⁶⁹

In September 1946, the Planning and Resources Board recommended the construction of recreational facilities in the park system, using \$1 million in revenue bonds for this work. Retiring board chairman Don McBride said that these funds would be used to build cabins, boat docks, and lodges. The board believed that user fees at the new facilities would generate enough revenue to retire the bonds.⁷⁰

Meeting again in October with Clarence Burch as the new chairman, the planning group discussed requesting \$100,000 per year from the legislature for construction of the recreational facilities over the next decade in lieu of the \$1 million revenue bonds. The

⁶⁵ “First Annual Report of the Division of State Parks,” Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, June 30, 1938, Box 7, ID&PD at ODL.

⁶⁶ “Annual Report of the Division of State Planning 1937-1938,” Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, September 1, 1938, Box 7, ID&PD at ODL.

⁶⁷ “First Annual Report of the Division of State Parks,” Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, ID&PD at ODL.

⁶⁸ Baird and Goble, *Oklahoma: A History*, 298.

⁶⁹ Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board report of activities to the governor, Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, September 9, 1946, Folder 20, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC, 13-4.

⁷⁰ “Burch Begins Work as Plans Board Chief,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 7, 1946, 2.

board's tenure, however, was uncertain with a new governor soon to take office. With that in mind, the board passed a resolution requesting that the Postwar Planning Commission ask the upcoming legislature for authority to issue the revenue bonds. The commission would remain intact at least until the end of the war emergency was declared.⁷¹ Plans for development of the state park system came late in the Kerr administration, but under his guidance, proposals began for the buildup of much of the recreational facilities and sites in the decade afterward.

After Germany's surrender in May 1945 and with the postwar economy looming, the Kerr administration had stepped up efforts to increase manufacturing in the state by leveraging Oklahoma's gains from war-industry production and federal projects. In June, the Planning and Resources Board held a two-day meeting to emphasize industrial development. Agricultural and industrial representatives of major railroad companies were invited to this conference to discuss reconversion to a peacetime economy.⁷² In July, board chairman Don McBride announced that community surveys were being compiled to assess the needs of residents. Staff members from the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College had helped to design and conduct the surveys, which would be used to help business planning efforts.⁷³

The week after Japan surrendered, McBride announced that full employment for every Oklahoman, including returning veterans and released war-industry workers, would hold at least through 1948. Public projects and the expansion of private industry would provide these jobs. Authorized federal projects included \$200 million in the flood control

⁷¹ "\$100,000 Park Fund Proposed," *The Daily Oklahoman*, October 29, 1946, 8.

⁷² "State's Planners To Meet Today," *The Daily Oklahoman*, June 5, 1945, 16.

⁷³ "New Cars Lead State's Desires Following War," *The Daily Oklahoman*, July 19, 1945, 3.

program, \$75 million in highway projects, and \$8 million in construction of public buildings. Another \$10 million was projected for work on municipal infrastructure in the state. Private businesses in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, primarily industrial, planned to spend \$15 million on expansion projects.⁷⁴

“Surveys have shown that since war began, Oklahoma has risen from thirty-third to twenty-ninth as a manufacturing state,” McBride told a news reporter. “We want to keep up the impetus we’ve got started and profit by the advantages we’ve won as a result of the war.”⁷⁵ The widespread postwar unemployment that had concerned the Kerr administration would be averted.

The value of the Planning and Resources Board must have risen in the eyes of the legislators, whom Kerr had been forced to lobby for the group’s reorganization in 1943. The board’s budget, set at \$126,000 for each of its beginning two years, was more than doubled when funded by the legislature for fiscal years 1945 and 1946.⁷⁶ The group would ask for annual funding of \$460,000 before Kerr’s time in office expired.⁷⁷

Industrial engineer Oscar Monrad, who served the governor and Oklahoma City as a business-development consultant after the war, told Kerr that Oklahoma had made an excellent start in the attraction of industry. After conferring with business groups and public officials in the East in fall 1945, he said that the Planning and Resources Board and other state agencies were doing an effective “selling job.” While meeting with executives from East Coast industries, “we find that their reception is more and more

⁷⁴ “State Forecasts Work for All,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, August 14, 1945, 1.

⁷⁵ “State Forecasts Work for All,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, August 14, 1945, 1.

⁷⁶ R. R. Owens, Comparative Budgets for the Division of State Planning and Resources, circa January, 1945, Folder 17, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁷⁷ “State Plans Board Budget Is Up \$185,000,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 19, 1946, 13.

cordial,” Monrad wrote Kerr. “Apparently the program is having a very definite effect and a good one.”⁷⁸ The consultant also credited the governor for the state’s more favorable image, calling him a “splendid ambassador.” Monrad advised Kerr to put more funds and staffing into representatives outside the state and industrial research within.⁷⁹

The governor continued his personal efforts to bring industry to Oklahoma by again calling on his friend in the White House, Harry Truman. When Kerr heard that the Smaller War Plants Corporation, which provided aid to hundreds of small manufacturers in the Southwest during the war, might be absorbed by the Commerce Department late in 1945, he wrote the president to intervene. “When we consider the capacity of the Smaller War Plants Corporation to serve and the need for that service,” he wrote, “we naturally become disturbed at any thought of eliminating an Agency whose militancy has provided an inspiration to the small business man...”⁸⁰

Soon afterward, U. S. Attorney General Thomas C. Clark advised the president in a confidential memo that the Smaller War Plants Corporation could not be merged into the Commerce Department by executive order. This could only be accomplished by an act of Congress. Morton Harrison, regional director for the corporation in the Southwest, credited Kerr’s efforts with helping to save the Smaller War Plants Corporation. “This good letter, I know, and some others like it were a strong factor in changing the course of things in Washington,” he wrote Kerr.⁸¹ Maury Maverick, chairman of the Smaller War

⁷⁸ Oscar Monrad to Robert S. Kerr, letter, November 2, 1945, Folder 21, Box 17, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Robert S. Kerr to Harry S. Truman, letter, November 13, 1945, Folder 30, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁸¹ Morton Harrison to Robert S. Kerr, letter, November 16, 1945, Folder 30, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

Plants Corporation, wrote Kerr to commend him on his plea to Truman. Maverick added that he would try to assist small businesses in Oklahoma.⁸²

The governor continued his promotion of the state to outside business interests in a speech to the Sales Executive Club in New York City in April 1946. The prestigious group was composed of numerous representatives from major industries. Understanding this prime opportunity to promote Oklahoma as a business location, the governor spoke about the state's war-industry trained workers and rich resources. "I reminded them that Oklahoma has a very favorable tax structure for industry, very cheap industrial fuel, and while our power cost is above the national average it is far below most areas of the industrial northeast," Kerr reported. He invited the businessmen to visit the state and take advantage of the opportunities.⁸³

Providing the governor with a textbook example of the economic benefits that could accrue to Oklahomans through industrialization, the first Peanut Festival Day in the town of Konawa was held May 20, 1946. The town's new peanut processing plant had shelled some 6,000 tons of this local produce that season. The governor attended the festival and ballyhooed this business venture in his weekly news column. Paying \$1 million for the peanut crop, the Konawa plant gave to local farmers as much or more for their produce than out-of-state buyers. The local processing of the peanuts added at least one-third more to the value of this small-town industry, "which means wages for Oklahoma workers, retirement of Oklahoma investment, and profit to Oklahoma

⁸² Maury Maverick to Robert S. Kerr, letter, November 15, 1945, Folder 30, Box 29, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁸³ Robert S. Kerr, "Governor Kerr Says," May 8, 1946, Folder 27, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

operators,” the governor explained to his readers.⁸⁴

“I predict a very bright future for this peanut mill, and suggest that other communities take a look at this fine project at Konawa,” he wrote.⁸⁵ Admittedly on a small scale, the processing plant still iterated the findings of the study made for Senator Pine in 1928 and exemplified a tenet of Kerr and his Planning and Resources Board: Oklahomans could progress economically by processing more of their own raw products.

Some of the efforts at industrial development after the war would be directed much like an advertising campaign to showcase the state’s natural resources and improved business climate. In summer 1946, the Planning and Resources Board issued a colorful brochure promoting Oklahoma as an ideal location for the glass industry. The advertising piece listed the state’s multiple advantages, including the necessary raw materials, moderate energy costs, temperate climate, and ready workforce. Interviewed by media about this innovative promotional effort, board chairman McBride explained that the brochure was produced for glass manufacturers across the nation to inform them of Oklahoma’s natural advantages for their industry.⁸⁶ These kinds of brochures would become commonplace as later administrations promoted the state to the nation’s business community.⁸⁷

The effectiveness of the glass brochure may have been demonstrated with the opening of a Corning Glass Works plant in Muskogee early in 1948. The New York-

⁸⁴ Robert S. Kerr, “Governor Kerr Says,” May 29, 1946, Folder 27, Box 36, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ “State Seeking Glass Firms,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 9, 1946, 15.

⁸⁷ “Oklahoma in Transition,” Department of Commerce and Industry, September 1956, Box 2, ID&PD at ODL.

based company chose Oklahoma for their new Pyrex glassware factory over several other states. Capitalizing on this news, the Planning and Resources Board advertised the glass company's decision to expand in the state in several national publications. These efforts were part of a larger campaign by the board that used print media to promote Oklahoma across the country.⁸⁸

Another project in this campaign involved the production of a documentary film in 1946, initially entitled "Soil and Water Resources of Oklahoma," which was made in cooperation with the Planning and Resources Board, Phillips 66 Oil Company, and Griffith Theaters. Kerr had a short speaking role in the documentary, where he stated that the purpose of the project was to "acquaint the people of Oklahoma with the development of our natural resources." The governor explained that the state led the nation in conservation and development of its natural resources, and that the construction of reservoirs would enable the best use of its water resources.⁸⁹ As the governor stated, the production's message was directed at Oklahomans, which must have indicated some concern by the administration that state residents needed more education on the development of their own natural resources.

A press release, which was sent to newspapers at the time of the documentary's debut in early-January 1947, announced that the "motion picture" would soon appear at approximately 400 theaters in the state. The release added that the production, finally entitled "The Development of the Soil and Water Resources of Oklahoma," was intended

⁸⁸ *Industrial News of Oklahoma*, Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, March 1948, Box 2, ID&PD at ODL.

⁸⁹ Clarence Burch to Robert S. Kerr, letter with attachment, September 3, 1946, Folder 20, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

as a public service to show Oklahoma's "great opportunity for potential development of its future resources."⁹⁰ State residents initially viewed the documentary the first week of January at Oklahoma City's Midwest and Criterion theaters.⁹¹

At about this same time, another film on the development of Oklahoma's resources was produced and released. Entitled "Oklahoma and Its Natural Resources," the documentary was financed by an undisclosed "major petroleum company" and produced under the direction of the U. S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Mines, a press release announced in March 1947. This production took a historical view of Oklahoma's progress, from its past as part of the Louisiana Purchase to its position then as the fifth-ranking state in the production of mineral products in the twentieth century. A special showing was given to the state's congressional delegation and legislators. The film was to be kept in the Bureau of Mines film library and available at no charge for viewing by schools and civic groups.⁹²

Kerr personally supported the making of this documentary, writing a letter of recommendation for Bureau of Mines engineer Morton F. Leopold, who came to Oklahoma in 1946 to produce the film. In this letter, the governor described the project as "a motion picture film that will tell the story of Oklahoma and its array of natural resources," adding that "it will give us an opportunity to show audiences throughout the

⁹⁰ "Movie of Oklahoma's Resources," press release by Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, circa January 1947, Folder 21, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁹¹ "Movies on Oklahoma Development Shown," *The Daily Oklahoman*, January 8, 1947, 5.

⁹² "Bureau of Mines Releases Film on Oklahoma," press release by Department of the Interior Information Service, March 16, 1947, Folder 42, Box 21, Subject, Elmer Thomas Collection, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

world our jewels.”⁹³ Kerr’s own corporation may have been the undisclosed “major petroleum company” that financed the documentary, perhaps with the governor using his political connections in Washington to persuade the Bureau of Mines to oversee the production.

This marketing by the Kerr administration in 1946 may have prompted a significant promotional effort in summer 1947 by the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce, which sponsored a four-car train industrial tour of cities in the Midwest and northeast parts of the country. The effort was intended to gain an audience from manufacturers to promote the state’s attractive business climate. Once again indicating the lack of cooperation with Kerr by some leaders in the Tulsa community, the tour was planned in the final months of the governor’s term and without coordination with the Planning and Resources Board.⁹⁴

Kerr’s aide while in office, Ben Dwight, received a form letter and press release about the event just after the administration ended. This information apparently was forwarded to the former governor with a handwritten notation from Dwight: “This is form letter. But do you want to participate in any way with the industrial tour?”⁹⁵ The legislature, now with new Governor Roy J. Turner in office, commended the planned tour with a resolution in March 1947 and directed the Planning and Resources Board and other state agencies to render assistance.⁹⁶

⁹³ Robert S. Kerr to “Whom It May Concern,” letter, April 10, 1946, Folder 20, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁹⁴ Victor Barnett and John Duncan to “Dear Friend,” letter, undated and on Tulsa Chamber of Commerce letterhead with attached press release dated March 11, 1947, Folder 15, Box 12, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ “State Industry Tour Wins Support,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, March 14, 1947, 10.

Kerr's invitation to various groups and key individuals to visit the state also did much to promote and showcase Oklahoma to the nation. Probably most prestigious of these visiting parties was the gathering at the thirty-eighth annual Governors' Conference, held May 26-29, 1946, in Oklahoma City. Serving on the group's executive council probably enabled Kerr to bring this meeting to the state. With a national railroad strike limiting travel, twenty-six governors drove or flew into Oklahoma City. With consideration for party affiliations and personalities, the politicians were quartered in the Skirvin, Skirvin Tower or Biltmore hotels.⁹⁷ President Truman was scheduled to address the assembled state leaders, but the strike kept him in Washington. The visitors were feted on the first night with a reception and buffet dinner at the spacious home of Frank Buttram in Nichols Hills.⁹⁸

Possibly illustrating how times had changed, New York Republican Governor Thomas Dewey had quickly announced his cancellation as Kerr prepared for the gathering of governors and the president. Sounding more like Oklahoma's "Alfalfa Bill" Murray than the leader of New York, Dewey criticized the federal government's weak response to the rail strike, considered declaring a state of emergency in his state, and threatened to call out the state guard.⁹⁹

Democrat Roy J. Turner took the oath of office January 13, 1947, on the same Capitol steps as had his predecessor four years earlier. Kerr left the inaugural ceremonies to retrieve his hat and coat from his former office, accompanied by his wife, mother, and several other family members. He was besieged by a swarm of young autograph seekers

⁹⁷ "Kid Glove Treatment Helped Keep Peace Among Governors," *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 31, 1946, 3.

⁹⁸ "Truman Cancels Speech in City," *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 25, 1947, 1.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

on the second-floor stairway. Appearing surprised, he warmly accommodated the crowd.¹⁰⁰

Kerr's departure from office contrasted with that of his own predecessor, Leon Phillips, whose leaving was welcomed by many in his own party. As the oilman had cleaned out his office on his last official day as governor, he received a delegation from the small town of Washington. The group visited the governor to thank him for a McClain County road project just underway and for keeping several other promises he had made to them earlier. Their spokesman, Purcell state senator James C. Nance, announced to Kerr, "We don't want to ask for anything, but want to thank you for what has been done."¹⁰¹

Returning to his office at the recently renamed Kerr-McGee Building in Oklahoma City, the former governor received numerous letters of congratulations and praise for his leadership as the state's chief executive. University of Oklahoma president George L. Cross had particularly laudatory words. "You are leaving the governorship with the best record and the best feeling on the part of the people of any governor in the history of the state," the educator wrote.¹⁰²

In late February, Kerr received a "Resolution of Appreciation" signed by members of the Planning and Resources Board at their meeting on January 7, the last time the group gathered under his tenure. Board chairman Burch waited more than a

¹⁰⁰ "Turner Tax Program Goes to Legislature," *The Daily Oklahoman*, January 14, 1947, 1.

¹⁰¹ "Kerr Not Only Cleans Desk—He Moves It," *The Daily Oklahoman*, January 11, 1947, 5.

¹⁰² G. L. Cross to Robert S. Kerr, letter, January 13, 1947, Box 12, Folder 14, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

month after the governor had left office before sending it.¹⁰³ The last lines from the half-page resolution may have meant more to the oilman than all the previous letters of praise combined:

His [Kerr's] help has often been at the expense of his own personal funds and has involved time and effort far beyond the call of his office. Moreover, his confidence in our program and our knowledge that he did not only help but knew how to help, inspired us with strength and encouraged us to further effort. *In the years to come the people of Oklahoma will reap rich reward in better living because Bob Kerr passed through the office of Governor.* [emphasis added]¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Clarence Burch to Robert S. Kerr, letter with attached "Resolution of Appreciation," February 20, 1947, Folder 21, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Chapter VI: Passing the Torch

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Governor Turner and subsequent state chief executives added to Kerr's praise by largely continuing or expanding on the former governor's programs to promote economic progress. The results showed. Numerous national companies invested in Oklahoma for several decades afterward, bringing new opportunities and increased earnings to state workers.

Like Kerr, Turner recruited industry through tax reduction, use of the Planning and Resources Board, and personal visitations.¹⁰⁵ In 1947, the Twenty-first Legislature cut income taxes by one-third and made adjustments in exemptions for sales and use taxes. In addition, a new corporation code was adopted to encourage the organization of businesses in Oklahoma.¹⁰⁶ Reappointing Burch as chairman of the Planning and Resources Board, the new governor pared the group's membership to nine members, retaining N. R. Graham and Loyd Judd.¹⁰⁷ Under the new administration, the board would take on additional duties for the development of state parks and recreational sites.¹⁰⁸

To further increase the expansion of industry in the state, a director in each of the seventy-seven counties was appointed to select and oversee area projects in conjunction with the board.¹⁰⁹ This new Industrial Advisory Council would increase efforts to

¹⁰⁵ Arrell M. Gibson, *Oklahoma: A History of Five Centuries* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 235.

¹⁰⁶ "Legislative Tax Aid to Industry Highlights Bills," *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 11, 1947, 1.

¹⁰⁷ "Turner Selects Five Planning Board Officials," *The Daily Oklahoman*, June 21, 1947, 12.

¹⁰⁸ "Turner Action On State Jobs Is Likely Soon," *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 25, 1947, 2.

¹⁰⁹ "Turner Picks 58 Advisors On Industry," *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 11, 1947, 19.

industrialize the state with surveys, directories, advertising, and publicity. The board kept Kerr informed of their new responsibilities in recognition of his interest in the state's industrial expansion.¹¹⁰

Turner stepped up plans to promote tourism in 1947 with a bill that authorized the board to issue self-liquidating bonds to develop recreational facilities at state parks.¹¹¹ The Twenty-first Legislature also approved \$200,000 for other park improvements that were ineligible for financing by bond issues. A lodge and up to fifty cabins were planned at Lake Murray. Group camps at Quartz Mountain, Beavers Bend, and Robbers Cave were expected to be ready by spring 1948.¹¹² Late in 1947, the governor appointed fourteen members to a citizens advisory committee to aid the construction and expansion of facilities at the state parks.¹¹³ The development of the tourism and recreation industry that was begun under the Kerr administration would increase dramatically under Turner and in the decade to come.

In July 1947, the Planning and Resources Board approved the expenditure of \$75,000 for a national advertising campaign to attract industry to the state, the first large-scale effort of its kind. After the state's parks and recreational facilities were improved, the campaign would also be used to promote tourism. The funds were spent on promotions in a variety of national publications, including *The New York Times*, *Fortune* magazine, and *The Wall Street Journal*.¹¹⁴ In the 1950s, state marketers would distribute

¹¹⁰ Clarence Burch to Robert S. Kerr, letter, September 12, 1947, Folder 21, Box 25, Gubernatorial, Kerr Collection CAC.

¹¹¹ "Senate Passes Bill to Entice Tourist Trade," *The Daily Oklahoman*, February 20, 1947, 3.

¹¹² "State Planning Board to Map Park Program," *The Daily Oklahoman*, October 19, 1947, 8.

¹¹³ "Turner Names Advisory Board To Plan Parks," *The Daily Oklahoman*, December 30, 1947, 6.

¹¹⁴ "\$75,000 Advertising Drive Started to Attract Industry," *The Daily Oklahoman*, July 19, 1947, 1.

well-designed brochures that featured favorable testimonials from officials of national companies.¹¹⁵

By the mid-1950s, the Planning and Resources Board had become primarily an agency to operate the state's expanding parks and recreational programs, including a system of lodges. To reemphasize economic development, the administration of Governor Raymond D. Gary created the Department of Commerce and Industry in 1955. Industrialization efforts were transferred from the board to this new department. This legislative act also established an advisory board, the Governor's Economic Development Commission, composed of twenty-five state residents from diverse business backgrounds. This act was amended by the legislature in 1961, creating the Economic Development Commission and dropping the word "Governor's" from the title. This streamlined commission was composed of six advisers, one from each of the state's congressional districts.¹¹⁶

Later administrations' promotion of industry continued to pay dividends in the decades after the Kerr administration. By the end of the Gary administration in January, 1959, some of the nation's largest companies had invested heavily in the state, including B. F. Goodrich in Miami, American Airlines in Tulsa, and Western Electric in Oklahoma City. Large public-sector investments included the Civil Aeronautics Administration headquarters in Oklahoma City and continued expansions of Tinker Field. Numerous other nationally known corporations had established plants across Oklahoma by the end

¹¹⁵ "Oklahoma...State of Industry," Oklahoma Department of Commerce and Industry, 1955, Oklahoma Collection at OKC Library.

¹¹⁶ "Recommendations for Strengthening Oklahoma's Industrial Development Program," John Brice Committee for Governor Henry Bellmon, January 15, 1963, Box 15, ID&PD at ODL.

of the 1950s, including Flint Steel, Tulsa; Aero Design and Engineering, Oklahoma City; Seamprufe, McAlester; Munsingwear, Vinita; Ideal Cement Company, Ada; Jonco Aircraft Corporation, Shawnee; and Callery Chemical Company, Muskogee.¹¹⁷

The state took an important step to attract smaller industries to the state with a constitutional amendment in 1959 that established the Oklahoma Industrial Finance Authority. This agency was authorized to sell general obligation bonds to finance its industrial programs, mostly loans at favorable rates to small businesses locating or expanding in the state. With most large corporations able to finance their own operations, the authority directed its attention to less established companies and hoped thereby to aid smaller towns and cities in the state. The agency issued \$15 million in bonds during its first ten years.¹¹⁸

By 1960, earnings to Oklahomans from manufacturing had risen to \$442 million, a seven-fold increase from 1940 and the third leading source of income in the state.¹¹⁹ By 1981, this sector would be the leading producer of earnings.¹²⁰

The growth of local, state, and federal government during and after the Depression also had a profound impact on the state's economy. The amount of personal earnings contributed by government to Oklahomans more than doubled during the Depression and continued to grow with the defense-oriented activities in the first half of the 1940s. An increased demand for local and state governmental services after the war

¹¹⁷ Raymond Gary State of the State address, January 6, 1959, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, <http://www.odl.state.ok.us/oar/governors/addresses/gary1959.pdf> (accessed September 10, 2010).

¹¹⁸ Harold F. Wise & Associates report, ID&PD at ODL.

¹¹⁹ John J. Klein, *The Oklahoma Economy* (Stillwater, Oklahoma: Oklahoma State University, 1963), 38.

¹²⁰ U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, *State Personal Income: 1929-87* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1989), 209. [Hereafter cited as Bureau of Economic Analysis, *State Personal Income: 1929-87*]

continued the expansion and importance of the public sector. Local, state, or federal government was the second largest source of income in Oklahoma by 1960.¹²¹

¹²¹ Klein, *The Oklahoma Economy*, 38-40.

Chapter VII: An Analysis of Oklahoma's Postwar Economic Progress

Robert Kerr's policies to "win the peace" in Oklahoma helped to restructure the economy and bring better employment opportunities to the state. In the decades following the war, this resulted in a measurable increase in the average earnings of workers and the standard of living.

Related to this, two important studies of Oklahoma's economic progress in the postwar era were published several decades after the Kerr administration. The first was John Klein's *The Oklahoma Economy*, published in 1963, which examined the period 1929 to 1960. The second was *A Profile of Oklahoma Economic Development: 1950-1975*, by Gerald Lage, et al, and published in 1977. Klein's work provided useful data to compare the state's economy just before and after the policies of the Kerr years. Lage's study analyzed the period 1950 to 1975, measuring economic progress nearly thirty years after Kerr's actions.

Both of these works closely examined Oklahoma's per capita personal income, which indicates the economic progress, or individual well-being, of a population.¹ These earnings are also commonly used as a measure of economic development.² Making use of this key indicator, Klein's study showed the state's average personal income after adjustments for inflation at \$619 for the year 1929. After nearly a decade of depressed business activity, this had decreased to \$581 by 1939. In 1941, these individual earnings still averaged only \$690, but by 1960 had risen to \$1,461, improving Oklahoma

¹ Klein, *The Oklahoma Economy*, 1.

² Gerald M. Lage, R. L. Moomaw, and Warner Larkin, *A Profile of Oklahoma Economic Development: 1950-1975* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Frontiers of Science Foundation, 1977), 18.

residents' purchasing power for goods and services by 112 percent. In the years during and after the war, Oklahoma per capita personal income compared to the national average also dramatically improved, rising from 60.4 percent of the purchasing power of the average U. S. citizen in 1941 up to 83.1 percent in 1960.³

The three sectors that contributed the most to total personal income in 1929 were, respectively: agriculture, wholesale and retail trade, and mining. By 1960 the economic structure of the state had changed significantly, Klein found. The wholesale and retail trade sector contributed the most to individual earnings, followed by earnings in government and manufacturing, respectively.⁴

The relative number of state residents employed in these sectors, Klein wrote, also increased or declined closely with the group's percentage contribution to overall personal earnings. The agricultural sector showed a significant decline as a percentage of the total employees in the workforce, dropping from 33.4 percent in 1940 to 20.5 percent in 1950 to 9.4 percent in 1960.⁵ This dramatic decrease in the farm communities fueled an emigration of 219,000 Oklahomans in the 1950s, greater than the more publicized diaspora of the 1930s.⁶ Conversely, the relative number of workers in manufacturing in these same years increased sharply, from 7.8 percent to 9.8 to 13.2. The public sector also experienced a relative increase in employees. In the postwar era, the movement of workers out of the agricultural sector and into higher-earnings government and

³ Klein, *The Oklahoma Economy*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶ Baird and Goble, *Oklahoma*, 252.

manufacturing jobs significantly changed the makeup of the state's workforce.⁷

Klein concluded that the increases in per capita personal income were associated with these changes in Oklahoma's economic structure. Especially in the postwar years, the sectors of government and manufacturing, both high median-earnings producers, increased their contribution to the state's total wage, salary, and proprietors income. At this same time, the agricultural sector in Oklahoma dropped sharply in its relative contribution to overall earnings. These changes were not unique to Oklahoma, Klein noted, as the nation experienced a similar pattern in this period.⁸ Klein's findings were a distant echo of Kerr's hopes some twenty years earlier, although the politician promoted a shift in workers from agriculture to private industry, rather than to the public sector.

Lage's study analyzed Oklahoma's economy in the years 1950 to 1975. This analysis of earnings contributions from various sectors of the economy in the years 1950, 1960, 1970, and 1975 showed a continuation of the trends in Klein's earlier study.⁹

Lage also revealed a number of other significant economic findings in the twenty-five years studied. In 1950, Oklahoma per capita personal income tallied only 76.4 percent of the national average, but by 1975 it had risen to 89.0 percent. If differences in regional cost of living were factored in this percentage calculation, Oklahoma's real relative income would probably have been closer to the national average, Lage contended. Also, Oklahomans in 1975 could purchase fully twice as much goods and services as in 1950, while the nation as a whole could purchase only 1.8 times more than in 1950. Thus, Oklahoma personal income grew at a faster rate than the rest of the nation

⁷ Klein, *The Oklahoma Economy*, 40.

⁸ Klein, *The Oklahoma Economy*, 37-9.

⁹ Lage, et al, *A Profile of Oklahoma Economic Development*, 10.

from 1950 to 1975.¹⁰

Structural changes in the economy found by Lage showed a significant increase in public-sector contribution to total personal income in the state, just as Klein's work revealed in the earlier study period. By 1975, local, state, and federal government earnings contributed 20.6 percent of all personal income, the most of any sector. The wholesale and retail trade sector came in second at 18.1 percent, followed by manufacturing at 16.9 percent. Although public-sector earnings overtook that of wholesale and retail trade in the twenty-five year period from 1950 to 1975, the manufacturing sector increased at a faster rate. As another indication of the strength of the state's industrial sector, this group also showed a relative increase in total earnings from 1950 to 1975, which was counter to the national trend in this same time period. Agriculture continued its decline as a percentage of total earnings, from 13.8 percent in 1950 to 4.6 percent in 1975.¹¹

Somewhat remarkably, the relative contributions of the sectors of manufacturing and wholesale and retail trade grew faster than the public sector throughout the 1970s, according to data from the U. S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. In 1977, wholesale and retail trade surpassed government earnings as the top contributing sector. In 1980, government earnings fell to third, behind both wholesale and retail trade and manufacturing. Spurred by production from a new General Motors plant in Oklahoma City, manufacturing surpassed all sectors in 1981 but declined relatively afterward.¹² By

¹⁰ Lage, et al, *A Profile of Oklahoma Economic Development*, 8, 10, 18.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 39-41.

¹² Jim Reid, "City GM Plant Going Full Speed," *The Daily Oklahoman*, January 11, 1981, B-5; Bureau of Economic Analysis, *State Personal Income: 1929-87*, 209.

1982, public-sector earnings again contributed the most.¹³

The growth of manufacturing in the 1970s occurred despite the failure of the Arkansas River waterway to live up to expectations. Dedicated by President Richard M. Nixon at its opening in 1971, the McClellan-Kerr Navigation System was transporting 6-million tons per year along the 448 miles of waterway in Oklahoma by the early 1990s. This fell well short of the nine million tons estimated by the corps of engineers. Kerr's forecast of small factories flourishing in northeast Oklahoma also never occurred.¹⁴

Still, Klein's and Lage's analyses demonstrated that the shift in the economic structure of Oklahoma advocated by the Kerr administration transpired in the postwar era. Many state workers left the lower-earnings jobs of producing food and fiber for more remunerative employment elsewhere. The higher-earnings sectors of government and manufacturing increased sharply for several decades after the war. The state made significant economic progress and the standard of living in the state thereby improved.

Some of these economic changes may have occurred as part of a larger national trend, and some economists and politicians could argue that the growth in public-sector jobs may have been a negative development. But none could deny that the restructuring of Oklahoma's economy in the decades following the war led to economic progress for state residents. The policies of Robert Kerr, an opportunistic, savvy businessman-turned-politician, built the foundation for these changes.

¹³ Bureau of Economic Analysis, *State Personal Income: 1929-87*, 209.

¹⁴ W. David Baird and Danney Goble, *The Story of Oklahoma* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 30.

Conclusion

Governing in a period of transition, Robert Kerr established a means to diversify Oklahoma's agriculture-based economy and to provide better opportunities for its residents. After the years of dust and poverty in the 1930s, residents looked to the native son who shared their values and history but offered new ideas for economic progress. Kerr provided innovative leadership through this time of change.

His policies to expand and restructure the state's economy were not new. Governor Marland saw both the opportunities of cooperation with the federal government and Oklahoma's need to conserve natural resources and improve industry. Kerr aided the Marland administration and learned from its shortcomings. He also understood the mistakes of his predecessor, Leon Phillips, who squandered federal opportunities and further divided state politics.¹⁵

Kerr used his personal and political skills to forge alliances in Washington and with other leaders outside Oklahoma. The governor worked well with other politicians, relentlessly seeking and frequently winning funding and programs to help his home state. The businessman-politician clearly saw the opportunities available to the state in the era of a larger federal government, and he acted decisively to use largesse from Washington to benefit Oklahoma. He was the first of a succession of governors to court federal government and its projects.¹⁶

A successful industrialist before entering politics, Kerr had learned to manage a

¹⁵ Morgan, *Robert S. Kerr*, 11-12.

¹⁶ David R. Morgan, Robert E. England, and George G. Humpreys, *Oklahoma Politics and Policies: Governing the Sooner State* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 55.

large organization to achieve results. His revitalized Planning and Resources Board resembled a large private corporation's board of directors. As chief executive, the governor guided the actions of this planning group to accomplish the economic goals of his administration.

His development of the state's neglected water resources transformed the state, bringing irrigation, flood control, hydroelectric power, recreation—and, finally, river navigation. After World War II the state's formerly dry, dull landscape shimmered with numerous reservoirs and 71,000 farm ponds, both of whose waters nurtured many of the 15 million trees planted during the Kerr administration.

With his amiable personality and speaking skills, the governor improved the state's image, to its residents and the nation. During his term and afterward, the face of Oklahoma softened. The rancorous squabbles of early statehood were discarded. Politics became more concerned with increased governmental services and who paid for them. The growing public sector reflected this, and roads, schools, pensions, and taxes became the focus.¹⁷

Several Oklahoma historians wrote that the energetic Kerr's personal motivation in politics and public service stemmed from his father's example as a civic leader and its impression on the first-born son.¹⁸ As a U. S. senator, he was repeatedly asked by a longtime friend, Oklahoma Fifth District Congressman Tom Steed, why he was so driven by politics. Kerr adamantly, even angrily, refused to answer.¹⁹

¹⁷ Scales and Goble, *Oklahoma Politics*, 242-3.

¹⁸ Corbett, "Robert Samuel Kerr," 125; Morgan, *The Senate Years*, 4.

¹⁹ Tom Steed interview by Malvina Stephenson, Box 6, Folder 12, Malvina Stephenson Collection CAC.

Yet we do know the results of his political policies and actions. The Kerr administration used federal spending as the catalyst to modernize and restructure the state economy, providing new opportunities and improved earnings to residents. Subsequent governors continued and expanded these efforts. Oklahoma's steady economic progress in the postwar era and its standard of living near the national average by the late 1970s demonstrated the success of Kerr's policies.

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