

## Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe Peter Norbeck as a person? What were the major influences upon him? Describe his relationship with his parents.
2. Where do you think he got his ambition? Do you know people like him who have a thirst for knowledge and schooling despite little encouragement or opportunity for obtaining it? Where do you think that impulse comes from? What might we or others do to elicit that kind of thinking and behavior?
3. Why do you think Norbeck became a progressive? What were the influences that led him in that direction?
4. What were the characteristics and actions that led to Norbeck's success as a businessman? Is there anything he did as a businessman that might be criticized?
5. How do you read his relationship with his wife and children? Were his aloofness and distance understandable and justifiable? Have expectations about family life changed since the early 1900's? How do you feel about Lydia? Would you like to live the kind of life she did? Do you think there might be more to the story of the couple's family life than Fite is able to tell us in this book?
6. What sort of understanding do you get of the South Dakota political system from reading this book? Has reading it changed your view on South Dakota politics? In what way?
7. Why do you think Norbeck's rise up the political ladder was so seemingly smooth? What assets and qualities did he have to help him along the way?
8. Gilbert Fite notes some of the specific books and periodicals Norbeck read to expand his views about American society and politics. How important do you think it is that our political leaders have an informed picture of social and economic affairs? Is it enough for them to have been successful in some field of endeavor, to be practical-minded citizens, and to be able to "pick the brains" of the people they talk to? Can you think of any examples of politicians you know or have read about that might help answer this question?
9. What do you think about Norbeck's rural credits program, which eventually cost the state \$57 million to liquidate? Might it have been successful had it been better managed? Should government get involved in these kinds of economic programs?

10. What do you think about Norbeck's programs for hail insurance, a coal mine, and a cement plant? Was it accurate to label them "state socialism," as some did at the time? Were they desirable or understandable?
11. How do you judge Norbeck's reaction to the Nonpartisan League, defeating them by labeling them too radical and unpatriotic? Weren't these "McCarthyite" tactics? How far should a politician be allowed to go in smearing his or her opponents?
12. Norbeck was one of the state's first great conservationists. How do you evaluate his commitment to conservation, Custer State Park, the Needles Highway, and Mount Rushmore? Where do you think he obtained his creative energy in these areas?
13. Although Fite doesn't exactly put it this way, the McNary-Haugen Plan was an effort to relieve America's problem of agricultural surpluses by "dumping" them on overseas markets at lower prices than the products could have obtained in the United States. Do you think this made sense, and why do you think this proposal might have become such a popular idea during the 1920's? Are there any historical lessons to be learned from this?
14. Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal created a whole new political equation after his inauguration in 1933. How did Norbeck respond to the situation? Are you surprised?
15. What is your final evaluation of Peter Norbeck as a person and as a civic leader? What might we learn from his life and example?

**Note: Information was attained from one of the South Dakota Book Bag Study Guides (a project supported with funding from the South Dakota Humanities Council).**

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