

Nicholas Murray Butler Biography

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Biography

The American educator Nicholas Murray Butler (1862-1947) was president of Columbia University during its period of greatest expansion, in which it acquired an international reputation as a center of research and scholarship.

Nicholas Murray Butler was born in Elizabeth, N.J., on April 2, 1862, the son of a manufacturer. He graduated from Columbia College, New York City, in 1882 and earned his doctorate there in 1884. After a year's study in Berlin and Paris he returned to Columbia to become an assistant in philosophy. His interest in the education of teachers led him to help organize, and to head from 1886 to 1891, the institution which later became Teachers College of Columbia University. In 1890 he was promoted to professor of philosophy and also became dean of the newly created faculty of philosophy, a position he held until his elevation to the acting presidency in 1901.

In 1902 Butler became permanent president and remained in office until his retirement in 1945. The transformation of Columbia into a modern university had already begun under his predecessors, but under Butler's leadership the school experienced a tremendous increase in endowment, buildings, size of student body, and number and quality of faculty. An indefatigable speechmaker, clubman, and fund raiser, Butler strove to expand and deepen the material and intellectual resources of his institution, building it into an international leader in advanced study and research.

An active worker for the Republican party for most of his life, Butler attended national conventions from 1880 on, frequently as a voting delegate. He was chosen as candidate for vice president of the United States in 1912, when the vice president died in office. In the 1920 Republican convention he was nominated by the New York delegation as a candidate for the presidency and received 69 1/2 votes. Although a firm proponent of liquor regulation, he opposed prohibition and fought the 18th Amendment to the Constitution. Many presidents sought his advice on matters of public policy.

Butler became interested in the international peace movement well before World War I, becoming chairman of the American branch of Conciliation Internationale in 1907. He strongly supported the League of Nations. From 1925 to 1945 he headed the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1931, which he shared with Jane Addams. Butler died in New York City on Dec. 7, 1947.