

Nicholas Murray Butler

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Nicholas Murray Butler (April 2, 1862 – December 7, 1947) was an American philosopher, diplomat, and educator. Butler was president of [Columbia University](#),^[1] president of the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), and a recipient of the [Nobel Peace Prize](#). He became so well known and respected that *The New York Times* printed his Christmas greeting to the nation every year.

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Early life and education [edit]

Butler was born in [Elizabeth, New Jersey](#) to Mary Butler and manufacturing worker Henry Butler. He enrolled in [Columbia College](#) (later Columbia University) earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1882 at the age of twenty, his master's degree in 1883, and his doctorate in 1884. Butler's academic and other achievements led [Theodore Roosevelt](#) to call him "Nicholas Miraculous." In 1885, Butler studied in Paris and Berlin and became a lifelong friend of future Secretary of State [Elihu Root](#). Through Root he also met Roosevelt and [William Howard Taft](#). In the fall of 1885, Butler joined the staff of Columbia's philosophy department.

In 1887, he co-founded with [Grace Hoadley Dodge](#),^[2] and became president of, the New York School for the Training of Teachers, which later affiliated with Columbia University and was renamed [Teachers College, Columbia University](#), and from which a co-educational experimental and developmental unit became [Horace Mann School](#).^[3] From 1890 to 1891, Butler was a lecturer at [Johns Hopkins University](#) in [Baltimore](#). Throughout the 1890s Butler served on the New Jersey Board of Education and helped form the [College Entrance Examination Board](#).

Presidency of Columbia University [edit]

In 1901, Butler became acting president of Columbia University, and in 1902 formally became president. Among the many dignitaries in attendance at his investiture was [President Roosevelt](#). Butler was president of Columbia for 43 years, the longest tenure in the university's history, retiring in 1945. As president, Butler carried out a major expansion of the campus, adding many new buildings, schools, and departments. These additions included [Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center](#), the first academic medical centre in the world.

In 1937 he was admitted as an honorary member of the New York [Society of the Cincinnati](#).^[4]

In 1941, the [Pulitzer Prize](#) fiction jury selected [Ernest Hemingway](#)'s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The Pulitzer Board initially agreed with that judgment, but Butler, ex-officio head of the Pulitzer board, found the novel offensive and persuaded the board to reverse its determination, so that no novel received the prize that year.^[5]

During his lifetime, Columbia named its philosophy library for him; after he died, its main academic library, previously known as South Hall, was rechristened [Butler Library](#). A faculty apartment building on 119th Street and [Morningside Drive](#) was also renamed in Butler's honour, as was a major prize in philosophy.

An in-depth look at Butler's time at Columbia University also can be found in the *The Goose-Step: a Study of American Education*, by Upton Sinclair.

Political activity [edit]

Butler was a delegate to each [Republican National Convention](#) from 1888 to 1936. In 1912, when Vice President [James S. Sherman](#) died a few days before the [presidential election](#), Butler was designated to receive the electoral votes that Sherman would have received. (The Republican ticket won only 8 electoral votes from [Utah](#) and [Vermont](#), finishing third behind the Democrats and the [Progressives](#).)

In 1916, Butler tried to secure the Republican presidential nomination for [Elihu Root](#). Butler sought the nomination for himself in 1920 and 1928, without success; his 1920 campaign slogan was "Pick Nick as President for a Picnic in November".

Butler believed that [Prohibition](#) was a mistake, with negative effects on the country. He became active in the successful effort for [Repeal](#) in 1933.

He credited [John W. Burgess](#) along with [Alexander Hamilton](#) for providing the philosophical basis of his Republican principles.^[6]

In June of 1936 Butler traveled to the Carnegie Endowment Peace Conference in London where, at the meeting, the question of gold being used internationally was considered.

Internationalist [edit]

Butler was the chair of the [Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration](#) that met periodically from 1907 to 1912. In this time he was appointed president of the American branch of International Conciliation. Butler was also instrumental in persuading [Andrew Carnegie](#) to provide the initial \$10 million funding for the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#). Butler became head of international education and communication, founded the European branch of the Endowment headquartered in Paris, and was President of the Endowment from 1925 to 1945. For his work in this field, he received the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) for 1931 (shared with [Jane Addams](#)) "[For his promotion] of the Briand-Kellogg pact" and for his work as the "leader of the more establishment-oriented part of the American peace movement".

In December 1916 Butler, Roosevelt and other philanthropists including Scottish-born industrialist John C. Moffat, [William Astor Chanler](#), [Joseph Choate](#), [Clarence Mackay](#), [George von Lengerke Meyer](#), and [John Grier Hibben](#) purchased the [Château de Chavaniac](#), birthplace of the [Marquis de Lafayette](#) in [Auvergne](#), to serve as a headquarters for the [French Heroes Lafayette Memorial Fund](#),^[7] which was managed by Chanler's ex-wife Beatrice Ashley Chanler.^{[8][9]}

Butler was President of the [Pilgrims Society](#), which promotes Anglo-American friendship.^[10] He served as President of the Pilgrims from 1928 to 1946. Butler was president of [The American Academy of Arts and Letters](#) from 1928 to 1941.

Personal life [edit]

Butler married Susanna Edwards Schuyler (1863–1903) in 1887 and had one daughter from that marriage. Susanna was the daughter of [Jacob Rutsen Schuyler](#) (1816–1887) and Susannah Haigh Edwards (born 1830). His wife died in 1903 and he married again in 1907 to Kate La Montagne, granddaughter of New York property developer [Thomas E. Davis](#).^[11] In 1940, Butler completed his autobiography with the publication of the second volume of *Across the Busy Years*. When Butler became almost blind in 1945 at the age of eighty-three, he resigned from the posts he held and died two years later. Butler is buried at [Cedar Lawn Cemetery](#), in [Paterson, New Jersey](#)

Despite Butler's accomplishments, many people regarded him as arrogant. He autocratically dismissed faculty members who displeased him, such as the great classical scholar [Harry Thurston Peck](#), and others who dared to question his dismissals, such as the civil rights pioneer [Joel Elias Spingarn](#). He had little respect for Columbia's fine arts faculty, and stripped them of academic affairs voting rights in 1903, accelerating his deteriorating relationship with music professor [Edward MacDowell](#); he went so far as to accuse MacDowell of unprofessional conduct and sloppy teaching, prompting MacDowell's abrupt resignation from Columbia in February 1904. In 1939, a former student of Butler's, [Rolfe Humphries](#), published in the pages of *Poetry* an effort titled "Draft Ode for a Phi Beta Kappa Occasion" that followed a classical format of unrhymed [blank verse](#) in [iambic pentameter](#) with one classical reference per line. The first letters of each line of the resulting [acrostic](#) spelled out the message: "Nicholas Murray Butler is a horses [sic] ass." Upon discovering the "hidden" message, the irate editors ran a formal apology.^[12] [Randolph Silliman Bourne](#) lampooned him as "Alexander Macintosh Butcher" in "One of our Conquerers", a 1915 essay he published in *The New Republic*.

Butler wrote and spoke voluminously on all manner of subjects ranging from education to world peace. Although marked by erudition and great learning, his work tended toward the portentous and overblown. In *The American Mercury*, the critic [Dorothy Dunbar Bromley](#) referred to Butler's pronouncements as "those interminable miasmas of guff."^[13]

One notable critic of Butler was [Beat poet Allen Ginsberg](#). While attending Columbia, Ginsberg scrawled the phrases "Butler Has No Balls" and "Fuck The Jews" in the grime on his dirty dorm window in Hartley Hall. (The dorm maid reported the graffiti to College dean [Herbert Hawkes](#), who summoned Ginsberg and told him, "I hope you realize the enormity of what you've done". This incident was among the reasons that Ginsberg was suspended from Columbia.)^[citation needed]

Nicholas Murray Butler



Portrait of Nicholas Murray Butler, by Hollinger

12th President of Columbia University

In office
1902–1945

Preceded by [Seth Low](#)

Succeeded by [Frank D. Fackenthal](#) (acting)

Personal details

Born
April 2, 1862

[Elizabeth, New Jersey](#)

Died
December 7, 1947

(aged 85)

[New York City](#)

Political party [Republican](#)

Spouse(s) [Susanna Edwards Schuyler](#),

[Kate La Montagne](#)

Profession [Educator](#), [diplomat](#), [politician](#)

Signature



Butler in 1916

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- *True and False Democracy*, 1907.
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See also [edit]

- Jerome Klein

Notes [edit]

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Further reading [edit]

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External links [edit]

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- Works by Nicholas Murray Butler at Project Gutenberg
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- Portrait of Nicholas Murray Butler, by Augustus Vincent Tack
- John D. Rockefeller, Letter to Nicholas Murray Butler
- "Address by Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler to the members of the Union League of Philadelphia, 1915, Digital Library@Villanova University"
- Documented in the United States of America Congressional Record, Proceedings and Discussions of the 76th Congress, Third Session, Remarks of Hon. J. Thorkelson of Montana, in the House of Representatives, Aug. 19, 1940: Steps Toward British Union - a World State and International Strife--Part IV (Page 12)"

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|---|--|---|
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| Party political offices | | |
| Preceded by James S. Sherman ⁽¹⁾ | Republican vice presidential nominee 1912 | Succeeded by Charles W. Fairbanks |
| Notes and references | | |
| 1. Butler replaced Sherman on the Republican ticket as the vice presidential candidate after Sherman's death. | | |

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