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The Kelly-Wilson Mayoralty Election of 1935

THE TRANSFORMATION of Philadelphia from a safe bulwark of the Republican party into a Democratic bastion was a gradual process lasting nearly twenty years, from Al Smith's run for President in 1928 to Richardson Dilworth's strong race for mayor against Barney Samuel in 1947. A major, dramatic step in this transformation was the colorful, hard fought mayoralty contest of 1935 which pitted two original characters against each other—"Handsome" Jack Kelly, millionaire brick layer and former Olympic sculler, versus Philadelphia's answer to Huey Long, red-faced, nasal voiced, S. Davis Wilson.

The 1935 election was a crucial one for the Republican party if it were to hold onto the power base secured some fifty years before in Philadelphia. The party faced a desperate situation. The depression had brought the Democrats to power in Washington in 1932 and even more shocking for a Pennsylvania Republican, in 1934 the Democrats elected Joseph Guffey a Senator from Pennsylvania and the governor's office with all its patronage passed into the hands of a Republican-turned-Democrat, George Earle.

Against this backdrop both major parties intensely prepared for the 1935 mayoralty election. The Republicans feared a loss would dry up

access to jobs and patronage that they had controlled for decades. The Democrats, for many reasons, believed that they had a real chance to win. First, there appeared to be a Democratic drift in the nation since 1930. Second, in the off year election in Philadelphia in 1933 a coalition of Democrats and reform minded Republicans had captured the city row offices, including the Controller and City Treasurer. Third, the vaunted Vare machine in Philadelphia which had been creaking for years finally collapsed in 1934. In that year, the last and greatest of the Vares, William S., died. Fourth, the Democrats now had an aggressive press voice in Philadelphia, *The Record*. Owned and published by J. David Stern, *The Record* became a strong factor in the rise of the Democratic party both locally and statewide. Stern, one of the powers in the party, was consulted by the party leaders in the selection of all Democratic candidates. Finally, the Democrats possessed something crucial for success at the local level, something they had lacked for years—an attractive, articulate and popular leader in the person of John B. Kelly.

John Brendan Kelly, one of five brothers, was born in 1889. The family was an extraordinary blend of talent, ambition and drive. One brother became a famous vaudeville entertainer; another a Pulitzer Prize winning playwright. John B.'s early fame was as an athlete. He was among other things a championship rower, twice winning the Olympic sculling race. He was denied an opportunity to compete in the vaunted Henley regatta sculling events because he had once worked with his hands and thus did not qualify as a "gentleman."

In the 1920's Kelly devoted himself to the construction business, eventually helping to make his firm's name synonymous with fine quality brickworking. Nominally a Republican like most of his fellow Irish in Philadelphia, he remained on the fringes of the political world. The Presidential candidacy of Al Smith, the depression, and the election of Franklin Roosevelt gradually brought him over to the Democrats. Unlike some business men he had no problems with the ideas of the new administration in Washington and happily described himself as a New Dealer.[1]

[1] John B. Kelly Jr. Interview, August 5, 1977, Temple University, Urban Archives, 1. There are many biographies of the Kelly family, most of them terrible. There is no collection of Kelly papers available but the Free Library of Philadelphia has a four volume collection of press clippings relating to John B. Kelly's political career kept by his secretary, Lucy Duval.

Kelly's arrival in politics in the fall of 1933 was signaled by his defeat of John O'Donnell as chairman of the Philadelphia Democratic party. O'Donnell was notorious for his collusion with the Republican machine and was regarded as little more than a Republican creature within the Democratic party. Stern and Kelly devised strategy in 1933 by which their candidates for local office were chosen over the O'Donnell slate. This success combined with the federal patronage received from Jim Farley in Washington enabled them to freeze out O'Donnell and his cohorts.[2] After the overthrow of O'Donnell, Kelly was a coming star in the Democratic party. Along with some other former Republicans who deserted the GOP at this time—Stern, Joseph Guffey, Albert Greenfield, the banker and real estate tycoon, Kelly helped reshape and revive the Democratic party in Philadelphia.[3] The groundwork for this reconstruction began with the Al Smith race for President in 1928. Smith polled 39.5% of the vote in Philadelphia, an unprecedented total for a Democrat in this Republican fiefdom. More importantly, Smith brought into the Democratic party a large number of Catholic voters, mainly but not only Irish, who had traditionally voted Republican in Philadelphia. In 1932 Roosevelt slightly increased the Democratic vote in the city when he polled 43% of the city's vote.[4]

Kelly's task was to see that the Democrats maintained the base that had begun to develop in 1928. The row office election of 1933 was a success because independent Republicans and Democrats joined together to oust the Vare machine from power. This in turn contributed to a Democratic victory statewide in 1934 for in that election the Democratic candidates, Guffey and Earle, came within a few thousand votes of carrying the city.[5] 1935 then would be a true test between the two

[2] According to Maurice Osser, in 1933 a young Democratic committeeman on the rise, Stern was primarily responsible for dumping O'Donnell and replacing him with Kelly *The Philadelphia Record* made it a point always to refer to O'Donnell as the "Republican-Democrat " Maurice Osser Interview, January 22, 1970, Temple University, Urban Archives, 1.

[3] See Joseph Bauman, "The City the Depression and Relief The Philadelphia Experience," (Rutgers University, Ph.D. diss., 1969), 292.

[4] Roosevelt's vote in Philadelphia was the lowest percentage he received in any area with a population over 100,000. John L. Shover, "The Emergence of a Two Party System in Republican Philadelphia, 1924-1936," *Journal of American History*, LX, No. 4 (March 1974), 993. According to Irvin Greenfield in his definitive study "The Philadelphia Democratic Party, 1911-1934," (Temple University, Ph.D. diss., 1972), 434-435. Roosevelt's vote represented a significant gain for the Democrats over 1928 since it was spread over a larger part of the city and included a wider range of diversity, economically and socially

[5] Guffey lost the city by 3,000 votes, Earle by 19,000.

parties. The Democrats were organized, well led, comfortably financed and confident about the future. The Republicans were in serious trouble. The Vare dynasty which had ruled Philadelphia since 1916 was over and his lieutenants squabbled among themselves.

Kelly was the obvious choice for the Democrats to run for mayor in 1935. In fact speculation to that effect had begun almost immediately following the Guffey-Earle victory in 1934.[6] According to Stern, Kelly decided to run in May 1935. Kelly's decision created a problem for the only other possible Democratic candidate, the ex-Democrat, turned Republican, Pinchoite, returned Democrat, S. Davis Wilson. The process of selection laid the groundwork for the intense campaign that was to follow.

S. Davis Wilson was a more colorful character than Kelly. Where Kelly was a serious, if ambitious young man, Davis was an unpredicable rascal. He was born in Boston around 1881 and came to Philadelphia in 1905 after a stormy career in Vermont politics—while an assistant to Vermont's Attorney General he killed a man in a gunfight.[7] From the moment of his arrival Wilson was active in Philadelphia politics and he established a reputation as something of a progressive by taking part in the reform campaign of Rudolph Blankenburg. He also showed his independence by helping to run Woodrow Wilson's campaign for President in 1912 in Philadelphia. During the first world war he was an agent of the Department of Justice. After the war he went into business unsuccessfully and returned to Philadelphia in 1926, working for five dollars a day as an agent for the Lord's Day Alliance to ferret out vice at the Sesquicentennial.[8]

Wilson's rise to prominence in Philadelphia really began in 1927 when the city Controller, the independent Republican WillB Hadley,[9] hired him as an assistant. From this obscure vantage point Wilson soon made a name for himself by launching attacks on prominent targets in

[6] J David Stern, *Memoirs of a Maverick Publisher* (New York, 1962), 228

[7] When he was called a killer by hecklers during the 1935 campaign, Wilson would shout back "Was the man who shot John Dillinger a killer?"

[8] There is no biography of Wilson but good sketches of him can be found in "S. Davis Wilson," by T. Henry Walnut in J.T. Salter, ed., *The American Politician* (Chapel Hill, 1938), and in "Philadelphia," *Fortune,* XII (June 1936), 67-76 His obituary in the Philadelphia papers and *The New York Times,* August 20, 1939 contains some useful biographical information.

[9] That is a correct spelling of his name His mother wanted to name him after his father but did not like the term Junior. So the father was Will Hadley, the son WillB.

the City. Given the incredible level of corruption then existing in Philadelphia, inviting targets were not hard to find. Wilson's wars with Thomas Mitten's administration of Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company (PRT), the Fairmount Park Commission, United Gas Improvement Corporation (UGI) as well as his attacks on Mayor J. Hampton Moore's administration soon made him better known than his quiet, retiring boss. The press gave him extensive coverage because he was so quotable.[10]

Some idea of Wilson's growing political influence can be gauged from the fact that he ran Gifford Pinchot's campaign for Governor in 1930 in Philadelphia. In 1933 with the Vare machine in decline and the Republican party in disrepair, a coalition of independents calling themselves the Town Meeting party and Democrats led by John B. Kelly threw their support to Hadley for City Treasurer and Wilson for Controller. They both won handily. Wilson, whose allegiance to one party never lasted for long, cooperated with the Democrats and with Kelly in particular for the next year or so. With the Republicans in trouble nationally and locally, Wilson sought to attach himself to the Democrats. He supported the Earle-Guffey ticket in 1934 to the extent of making speeches for it in some forty counties all over the state.[11]

At the same time that his lines were opened to the Democrats, Wilson kept in touch with what was left of the Republican machine. He continued to court the public with his flamboyant attacks on the utilities and by his speeches in favor of fairer treatment of the police and firemen. As 1935 rolled around it was whispered that Wilson wanted the Democratic nomination for mayor. According to his assistant and protegé, Joseph Sharfsin, Wilson approached the Democratic leadership in Philadelphia about the mayoralty only to be told of a previous promise to Kelly. Sharfsin described his own depression when Wilson told him

[10] Walnut, 293-294 quotes a perfect example of Wilson's style. It consists of the dialogue from an appearance by Wilson before City Council where he was attacked by one of his favorite targets, Councilman Charles Hall:

Hall: Did you say that I told you that 18 years ago I was an $1800 sergeant-at-arms and now was worth two million?
Wilson: Yes, I said something like that.
Hall: (Very red in the neck) Why should I tell a dirty rat like you my personal affairs?
Wilson: You're a dirty rat yourself.
Hall: You're a bare-faced liar.
Wilson: You're a liar.

[11] Greenfield, "The Philadelphia Democratic Party," 566.

that the nomination would go to someone else. Wilson, however, was nonplussed. Don't worry, he told Sharfsin, now I'll get the Republican nomination.[12]

A more dramatic version of Wilson's rejection by the Democrats and his subsequent decision to run as a Republican is found in the memoirs of J. David Stern. Stern relates that he was discussing the forthcoming campaign with Kelly when Wilson entered his office and said that he, not Kelly, was the logical candidate for mayor. Stern disagreed and told Wilson that it was Kelly's turn. When Kelly offered to step aside Wilson said: "That's a wise decision Jack. A Catholic can't be elected in this town." Stern protested this bigotry and told Kelly that it was his duty "to lay that ghost." Wilson then left in a huff, telling Stern that he could count him out of the Democratic party. The next day, Jerome J. "Jerry" Louchheim, one of Vare's most powerful Republican lieutenants and a rich contractor, announced that Wilson was his candidate for mayor. Stern believed that Wilson went right from his office to see Louchheim and closed the deal.[13]

This is good theatre but doubtful history. Wilson had been carefully maneuvering to re-establish his relations with the Republicans long before the Stern meeting. Sharfsin, for example, dates Wilson's efforts to reconcile himself to the Republicans as early as January 1935.[14] With his record of unreliability and his constant change of parties there was no realistic chance for Wilson to take the Democratic nomination away from a candidate as solidly entrenched as Kelly.[15]

Wilson's first task was to get the Republican nomination. Unlike the old days when the Vare people could generally control a primary vote, the situation in 1935 was more fluid. No one man now controlled the Republican party; instead, the party had many leaders each controlling his own territory, usually a ward. The Chairman of the Republican City Committee, Edwin Cox, tried with very little success to keep the Republican leaders in some semblance of unity. What remained of the old

[12] Joseph Sharfsin Interview, November 29, 1977, Temple University, Urban Archives, 6.

[13] Stern, *Memoirs*, 228-230.

[14] According to the politically astute judgment of the *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger*, Wilson recognized "that a battle inside the Democratic Party of which he had been temporarily a member wouldn't go so good against Jack Kelly." July 22, 1935.

[15] Going after the Republican nomination might have presented a problem to a less confident individual than Wilson. For years he had taken great pleasure in attacking the Republican leadership, referring to them as a "corrupt and criminal conspiracy masquerading as Republicans." Sharfsin Interview, Temple University, Urban Archives, 6.

Penrose faction of the party, through its vehicle the Republican Alliance Auxiliary, endorsed Wilson's former boss, Willb. Hadley.[16] Sheriff Richard Weglein, a long time power in the party and leader of the 29th ward along the Schuylkill, also announced that he was a candidate. Louchheim and what remained of the Vare machine, still powerful in South Philadelphia and the river wards along the Delaware, threw its support to Wilson. Strangely enough there was no mutual admiration between the Vare people and Wilson since the latter had built his reputation on political independence and had baited them on his way to power. A deal was struck between them and Wilson. In return for their support he would leave all patronage matters to the machine.[17]

Joseph Pew, Jr. of Sun Oil, also a longtime power in Republican circles, went along with Louchheim's choice of Wilson even though he personally despised him.[18] Pew's support brought a steady supply of cash for the campaign. Of equal importance for Wilson was the good will that he had built up over the years among the 28,000 city workers, especially the police and firemen. He was seen as their defender against the constant budget cutting of the Moore administration.[19] Wilson moved cautiously. First, he took out nomination papers in both parties. This enabled him to gauge the level of support he had in each party as well as to prepare for a third party run in November in the event he was denied the nomination by both the Republicans and Democrats.[20]

The Republicans feared the results of a bloody primary because of the rising strength of the Democrats. Since Hadley and Wilson were equally determined to run, the *Daily News*, a strong Republican paper, suggested that someone with stature in the party, perhaps M. Harvey Taylor, step in and choose a compromise candidate acceptable to all factions.[21] Thirty-four different candidates were mentioned with pos-

[16] *Time* magazine, September 16, 1935, 14-16; *The New York Times*, September 16, 1935, 17.

[17] Greenfield, "The Philadelphia Democratic Party," 566-67.

[18] Sharfsin Interview, Temple University, Urban Archives, 7. Sharfsin's memory may have deceived him. According to *Evening Public Ledger*, August 17, 1935, 27 ward leaders were solidly behind Wilson while 13, including some of the most independent Republican leaders such as William Simons of the large 50th ward in the Northwest, supported Hadley. Five ward leaders backed Weglein who was also regarded as everyone's second choice.

[19] Robert E. Drayer, "J. Hampton Moore: An Old Fashioned Republican," (University of Pennsylvania, Ph.D. diss., 1961), 368. See also *Fortune*, "Philadelphia," 201.

[20] *The Philadelphia Daily News*, July 8, 1935; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 11, 1935.

[21] *Ibid.*, July 31, 1935.

sible unity figures ex-Mayor Harry Mackey and ex-Congressman William Wilson being the most prominent.[22] Eventually eleven separate candidates filed nomination papers.

All unity efforts collapsed in the face of S. Davis Wilson's belief that he was a sure winner and the equal determination of the Vare people to hold onto the city patronage. Control of the city was crucial to the Republicans who had lost the federal and state governments. In 1935, for example, forty-six of the fifty Republican ward leaders held elective or appointive office.[23] A political miscalculation now would cost them city hall and leave them virtually without patronage.

Wilson's strength among the Republican leaders arose from a number of factors. First, he convinced them that he stood a better chance of defeating Kelly than any other candidate in the field. Second, the other two leading Republican candidates, Hadley and Weglein, were for different reasons too difficult to control: Hadley because he was a genuine independent; Weglein because he had been around too long, had made too many enemies, and was regarded as unelectable. Louchheim was quoted by the *Record* as saying he was for any "candidate that can beat Jack Kelly in November" and that candidate was Wilson and Wilson alone.[24] Louchheim eventually lined up 40 of the 50 ward leaders behind Wilson.[25]

The Republican primary campaign which boiled down to a tough two-way fight between Wilson and Hadley, was bitter, and it left scars for the general election. The Hadley people accused Wilson of being a Democrat in disguise. In spite of working with him for eight years, Hadley described Wilson as "a stranger who came into our city to disrupt the Republican party. Anything he says cannot be in the best interests of the Republican party."[26] This effort to brand Wilson as a Republican renegade had the potential to hurt him. But he usually turned it to his advantage by focusing on the need to beat the Democrats in November. Many Democrats including Kelly, he said, were former Republicans and this election must guarantee that renegades who lost as Republicans did not seize the city in the guise of Democrats.[27] To those

[22] *Ibid.*, August 7, 1935.
[23] Shover, 990.
[24] *Philadelphia Record*, August 7, 1935.
[25] Sharfsin Interview, Temple University, Urban Archives, 7.
[26] *The New York Times*, August 25, 1935, 3, Section II.
[27] *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 9, 1935.

Republicans who pointed out his constant change of party labels, Wilson answered: "the mass of the voters are for me and will elect me and you are going to take it and like it."[28] Tact was never one of Wilson's strong points. Perhaps his abrasiveness contributed to his popularity.

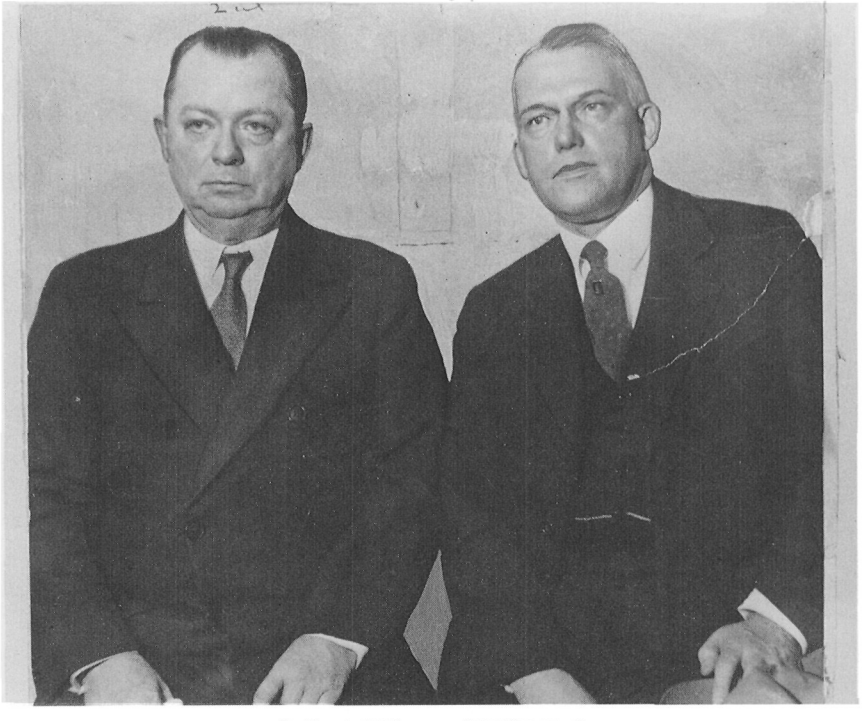
Former Mayor Mackey threw his support and powerful influence west of the Schuylkill to Hadley, opening up the possibility of a bloody "cat and dog" fight there.[29] Mackey called Wilson a Democratic cast-off, arguing that his nomination would mean that in a crisis the Republican party could not produce a serious candidate of its own. Conveniently forgetting Hadley's long tradition of independence, Mackey said that he was supporting a genuine Republican.[30]

Although the incumbent Mayor, Moore, was supposed to be neutral, it was no secret that he disliked Wilson for both his flamboyance and his sheer political opportunism. Moore was regarded as personally honest but he treated the Mayor's job as a glorified clerkship. He had tried to guide Philadelphia through the difficult days of the depression by a combination of stringent belt tightening and careful fiscal management. This meant cut backs in jobs and, therefore, lost patronage. Wilson used his position first as Assistant Controller and then as Controller to harass Moore for his parsimony and to seek headlines at Moore's expense. Toward the end of the campaign Wilson organized a meeting of firemen and police at the Garrick Theatre in downtown Philadelphia even though such activity was contrary to the city charter. This rally would not only pay rich political dividends but also allow Wilson to boast that he was not afraid of Moore's attempts to block the meeting.[31]

The final vote was a narrow victory for Wilson, 168,000 to 145,000 for Hadley with Weglein coming in a distant third. Hadley carried 20 wards, Weglein 2, and Wilson the remaining 28. Wilson's margin of just over 22,000 was much closer than anyone expected. On election day as the first returns trickled in his people were predicting a landslide. Wilson carried all of West Philadelphia, thus showing that Mackey's power had diminished sharply, and most of the former Vare territory in South Philadelphia. Hadley's strength was thinly spread through the

[28] *Ibid.*, August 2, 1935.
[29] *The New York Times*, September 1, 1935, 1.
[30] *Philadelphia Daily News*, September 3, 1935.
[31] J. Hampton Moore Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 170B, No. 374, Howard M. Long to Moore, August 23, 1935.

city with his strongest support coming from Northwest and Northeast wards. Weglein carried his own ward, the 29th, handily by 5300 votes out of 7300 cast, and the 32nd ward in North central Philadelphia by a few hundred votes. Some idea of what the Republican machine could still do was found in the 39th ward of South Philadelphia where Wilson



S. Davis Wilson and WillB Hadley

won over Hadley by 13,000 to 800.[32] Equally significant, the primary appeared to open wounds that might prove difficult to heal in the seven weeks remaining before the general election. Although Republican City Committee Chairman Edwin R. Cox called for unity there was considerable footdragging. Weglein announced that he would endorse and work for Wilson but Hadley refused to commit himself. There were other rumbles of discontent, and it appeared that Wilson might have won a pyrrhic victory, especially in light of the unity that the Democrats had shown so far.

[32] *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger*, September 18, 1935, and *New York Times*, September 18, 1935, 14.

With the Republicans divided and engaged in a major bloodbath, the Democrats had an easier time. Kelly had no serious competition for the party's nomination. Since taking over from John O'Donnell as party chairman in Philadelphia, Kelly had helped to revive the Democratic party. Along with Matthew McCloskey and Stern, he deserved a share

John B. Kelly, candidate for Mayor (seated right), beside him Curtis Bok, candidate for District Attorney. Standing are, left to right, George G. Meade, candidate for Recorder of Deeds; Gilbert Spruance, candidate for Sheriff; Dr. Leopold M. Jacobs, candidate for Clerk of Quarter Sessions; and Michael A. Spatola, candidate for Receiver of Taxes. *Philadelphia Record,* Aug. 27, 1935.

of the credit for the Democratic victory in the state in 1934 and he helped elect Wilson and Hadley as fusion candidates in the row office elections of 1933. In fact Kelly and Wilson had gotten along quite well personally. Their first falling out occurred shortly after Wilson's election as Controller when Kelly wanted some of the old line Republican officeholders removed and replaced with "deserving" Democrats. Wilson, who was carefully nurturing his relations with the Republicans, refused.[33]

[33] *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger,* December 31, 1933.

Stern claims it was his idea for Kelly to run for Mayor,[34] but he was the obvious choice. The Republicans worried about their chances of defeating Kelly. All the signs indicated that Kelly as the best known Democrat in Philadelphia would be a difficult man to beat. This became more apparent once the Democrats began to put together their ticket for November.

The Republicans, desperate for an issue, seized on the fact that the Democratic ticket was handpicked by party bosses. They contrasted this with the open primary that they were staging, conveniently forgetting to mention that it resulted from the failure of the Republican factions to agree on a candidate. The *Inquirer,* a staunchly Republican paper, reported that the Democratic ticket was being hammered out by party bosses in Harrisburg. John Cummings, the *Inquirer's* leading political columnist on state and local matters, named the men who picked Kelly as: Senator Guffey, Matthew McCloskey, David Lawrence of Pittsburgh, Attorney General Charles Margiotti, Secretary of Highways Warren Van Dyke, Harry Kalodner, the secretary to the governor, Thomas Logue, a well known Democratic politician, and Stern of the *Record.*[35] The *Inquirer,* and particularly Cummings, stressed that of the men dictating the Democratic ticket for Philadelphia only three, Kelly, Logue, and Kalodner, lived there.[36]

Kelly sought what he described as a true "People's Ticket" for the fall and he was willing, even eager, to secure a prominent Republican to run with him.[37] Before Wilson decided to seek the Republican nomination for mayor, there were hints in the press that the Democrats would offer him a place on their ticket, and the office of Sheriff was mentioned.[38] Wilson was not interested and many Democrats believed that they had a real chance to win without sharing the spoils of victory with the Republicans. This belief was probably a mistake. If Kelly had been able to secure a well known Republican, someone like Hadley, for instance, to run on his slate, it might have brought considerable strength.

The Democratic ticket that finally emerged showed a skilled balancing of the ethnic and religious groups who would come to constitute the Roosevelt coalition. Kelly, an Irish Catholic, was at the head of the

[34] Stern, *Memoirs,* 228-230.
[35] *Philadelphia Inquirer,* July 19, 1935.
[36] *Ibid.,* July 21, 1935.
[37] *Philadelphia Bulletin,* July 17, 1935.
[38] *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger,* July 19, 1935.

ticket, while Curtis Bok, son of the founder of Philadelphia-based *Ladies Home Journal*, was slated for District Attorney. Gilbert Spruance, for Sheriff and George Meade for Recorder of Deeds, represented the white protestant groups that still dominated the city. Jews and Italians, new and rising voting groups, were represented by Leopold Jacobs for Clerk of the Quarter Sessions and Michael Spatola for Receiver of Taxes. In an attempt to swing the black vote away from the Republicans, the Democrats named a prominent black lawyer, J. Austin Norris, for City Council. This was a shrewd move in light of the fact that the Republicans had angered the black community by dumping an incumbent black magistrate.[39]

By any standard the Democratic ticket was a formidable one. A further sign of the party's vitality was the great success it had in registering voters for the election. The final registration figures showed that they enrolled 299,000 voters, an all time high for them.[40] Even though they remained 200,000 behind the Republicans on the registration rolls, their chances appeared to be good. In 1934 when the Republican margin was even greater the Democrats had come within a few thousand votes of carrying Philadelphia. With a strong ticket, led by the popular Kelly, the Democrats were in strategic position to capture city hall for the first time in two generations.[41]

Kelly announced his program in mid-July once it was clear that he would have no opposition within the Democratic party. The platform was low keyed and unspectacular, geared to tap the various levels of discontent rampant in Philadelphia six years into the depression. There was very little mention by either party of methods for combating unemployment which had reached 30% in the city during the worst days of the depression in 1933. Unemployment was regarded as a national and state issue and not one which lent itself to a local solution. Kelly pledged to reduce the city tax rate, to cut city expenditures by $5,000,000, to block the proposed reorganization of the Philadelphia Rapid Transit

[39] James Miller, "The Negro in Pennsylvania Politics," (University of Pennsylvania, Ph.D. diss., 1945), 237.

[40] The Democrats hoped to enroll 250,000 voters and talked of running away with the election if they reached that figure. *The Philadelphia Record*, September 1, 1935.

[41] In 1934 the Democratic registration figure was 215,000. In the row office election of 1933 the Democrats had enrolled only 178,000 voters. The normal Democratic registration figure in the late 1920s and early 1930s was 85,000, a considerable percentage of whom were Republicans who registered Democratic in order to try to control the Democratic primary vote. See J.T. Salter, *Boss Rule: Portraits in City Politics* (New York, 1935), 217-18.

Company, and to cooperate with the federal government in securing Works Progress Administration funds.[42] This last point was aimed at Mayor Moore who had been warring with Washington over such welfare matters. Moore found the welfare policies of the New Deal distasteful. As an old fashioned, independent Republican who enjoyed being compared with Calvin Coolidge, he was appalled at the fiscal waste he saw in the New Deal. He liked and respected Kelly but the ensuing election campaign strained their relationship. Kelly's attacks on "thieves" in the transit system with its implication that Moore's administration had failed to stop them and particularly his promise to drive the 'drones' out of city hall bothered Moore. When Kelly charged that the large areas of the city were slums, neglected by the city administration, Moore issued a sharp rebuttal. He accused Kelly of trying to degrade Philadelphia and then in wearying tones chastised him:

> I am trying to be patient with Mr. Kelly because he is a candidate for the office I now occupy and should have a fair chance to tell the people what he can do for them, even though some of his promises are impossible of achievement.[43]

The 1935 election was a bitterly fought contest because so much was at stake for the two parties—for the Republicans a victory was a must for patronage purposes; for the Democrats they could honestly believe victory was possible—something that seemed beyond imagination just four years earlier when their mayoral candidate got only 10% of the popular vote. The bitterness of the election was intensified by the fact that the Republican candidate was not only a well known rabble rouser but he was also not adverse to pulling a few fast ones to secure his victory. The election attracted considerable national attention as evidenced by the fact that the *New York Times Index for 1935* devoted 7½ inches of column space to it. No other local election that year received as much attention from the *Times*.[44] More importantly, the national administration in Washington followed the election with keen interest. Roosevelt was aware of what was happening in Philadelphia under Kelly and McCloskey and regarded Kelly in particular as a "square and honest young man."[45]

[42] *Philadelphia Record,* July 19, 1935.

[43] Moore Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 170B, No. 374, memorandum dated August 1, 1935.

[44] *New York Times Index For 1935,* New York, 1936, 2018-19.

[45] Franklin Delano Roosevelt Papers, Hyde Park, OF 300, file 31, folder Pennsylvania, P-R, Roosevelt to Harry Hopkins, July 26, 1935.

Not surprisingly, the Democratic administration paid some attention to what was happening in Philadelphia because the Republicans tried to make the election a test of support for the New Deal. Wilson, whose political instincts were sound, tried to avoid this stance but he gradually found it necessary to attack the New Deal to drum up support among Republicans for his ticket. He said over and over during the final stages of the campaign that a Democratic victory would be looked upon as an endorsement of the "economic fallacies and social vagaries of the New Deal—the New Deal must be utterly repudiated." Instead Philadelphia should support the "sound and tried Republican policies that have made Pennsylvania the industrial capital of the nation."[46] He argued that the New Deal would lead to such "catastrophes" as fifty cents a pound meat and a jail sentence for planting potatoes.[47] Wilson's attacks on the New Deal were remarkable in light of the fact that he had supported Roosevelt in 1932 and worked hard for the election of the Democratic slate in Pennsylvania two years later. No wonder the *Record* attacked Wilson by comparing what he said in the past with what he said during the campaign in a column labeled "Before and After."[48]

While many Republicans were unhappy with Wilson's nomination, they realized that they had nowhere to go. Their only hope was to join with Wilson who was their best chance to hold onto power. Since the Mayor was a weak figure under the Philadelphia City Charter they could then cement control in their hands during his term. *The Daily News,* long associated with Vare regime, expressed this sentiment best. "To bolt the Republican ticket in the election because of a Wilson on it, would be akin to cutting of one's nose to spite one's face."[49]

Republican disunity contributed to a belief in the weakness of their position. Hadley announced shortly after the primary on September 18 that he would not support Wilson. "As between the two Democrats," he

[46] Walnut, "Wilson," *The American Politician,* 296.

[47] *The New York Times,* October 6, 1935, 7.

[48] *Philadelphia Record,* October 20, 1935. Since Wilson was not shy about his ambition it is interesting to ponder how much of this rhetoric reflected his real feelings and how much his desire to appease such New Deal haters as Joseph Pew Jr. Wilson's campaign manager was John J. McGarvey, head of the Operative Builders, an anti-union group which was anathema to organized labor in Philadelphia. See the pamphlet put out by the Building Trades Council of Philadelphia, "Elect Your Friends and Defeat Your Enemies," by James M. Myles. Copy in Franklin Delano Roosevelt Papers, OF 300, file 31.

[49] *The Philadelphia Daily News,* September 18, 1935.

said with some bitterness, "I will support Kelly."[50] He was followed by another Republican candidate for the mayoral nomination, Edward Hunter of the Registration commission, who accused Wilson of corruption. "Wilson is a thoroughly unscrupulous man politically," Hunter said, "and to put him into the mayoralty would amount to civic suicide."[51] More shocking than these desertions by men who had lost the primary to Wilson was the announcement that Aus Meehan, a Republican leader of the huge 35th ward in the Northeast, would support Kelly. Meehan's son William, now leader of the Republican party in Philadelphia, remembers his father's reason for backing Kelly. Both men were Democrats, Aus Meehan said, and since nobody picks my Republican candidate for me, nobody will pick my Democratic one.[52] The growing list of Republicans deserting Wilson was partially responsible for the optimism that surged through Democratic ranks in the weeks before the election. To a certain extent the complacency was misplaced. A few big names swung over to Kelly but the Republican war leaders remained loyal to Wilson. This would prove to be crucial in the election. The combination of Wilson's popularity and the remaining strength of the Republican machine proved to be too much for the Democrats to overcome.

The campaign began in earnest in October with an exchange of bitter charges. Wilson's attacks on the New Deal became more intense as he virtually ignored Kelly in an attempt to divert attention from the flaws of Republican rule in Philadelphia to Democratic failures on the national scene. Kelly accused Wilson of trying to cover up the glaring failures of years of Republican rule and neglect. The newspapers, with the exception of the *Record,* were all strongly Republican—the most balanced in its coverage of the campaign was probably the *Ledger*. Stern pulled out all stops to elect Kelly and blacken Wilson's reputation. He ordered the paper to concentrate on Wilson's failings. As a result the *Record* was responsible for much of the unpleasant tone of the press coverage during the election. The *Record* played up two embarrassing developments from Wilson's past career. One was the old charge that Wilson had killed a man years before in Vermont. This was given extensive coverage in late October.[53] Secondly, and a potentially more serious problem for Wilson, was a Grand Jury presentment in October which accused him of personally using part of a $65,000 appropriation

[50] *Philadelphia Record,* September 26, 1935.
[51] *Ibid.*, September 27, 1935.
[52] William Meehan to author, private conversation, July 2, 1982.
[53] *Philadelphia Record,* October 25, 1935.

for a survey of Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company property.[54] The *New York Times* correspondent covering the election believed that this Grand Jury charge, coming so late in the campaign, would seriously hurt Wilson and might cost him the election.[55]

Stern's attacks on Wilson reached a peak in mid-October with the publication on October 18 of a satirical biography of him entitled, "Sutler Sam, The Camp Follower."[56] The series ran for days and brutalized Wilson as a turncoat, a traitor to both political parties, and a thoroughly corrupt politician. This plus the often cruel cartoons of Jerry Doyle, then a rising young cartoonist with the *Record*, boomeranged against the Democrats. One of the Doyle cartoons shows Wilson with a Halloween mask holding up various businessmen.[57] Stern eventually came to realize that he had gone too far. After Kelly's defeat he told him: "Jack, it was my fault. I knocked the son-of-a-bitch too hard."[58]

The combination of these harsh press attacks, the grand jury revelations plus the story of Wilson's part in a murder encouraged the Democrats. There was talk around town that the Republicans had given up on Wilson and were willing to make a trade—have the voters cut Wilson and give them Republican District Attorney candidate, Charles Kelly.[59] Some Democrats believed that they would now win by 15,000 votes.[60] The highly regarded *State News Service* on the eve of the election even went further and predicted a Kelly margin of 75,000.[61]

Wilson had a few tricks up his sleeve. He accused Kelly and McCloskey of being tools of Jewish interests.[62] He insisted that they were in debt to Albert Greenfield, the banker and real estate tycoon, and a recent convert to the Democrats after a long career in Republican politics in Philadelphia. Greenfield's bank, Bankers Securities Corporation, was distrusted by many conservative Philadelphians. As a

[54] *Ibid.*, November 2, 1935.
[55] *The New York Times*, November 1, 1935, 1.
[56] *Philadelphia Record*, November 3, 1935.
[57] *Philadelphia Record*, October 21, 1935.
[58] Stern, *Memoirs*, 230.
[59] *Philadelphia Record*, October 25, 1935.
[60] The New York Times, November 3, 1935, 6.
[61] *State News Survey*, number 50, October 28, 1935. Copy found among Greenfield Papers, Box 27, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The figure 75,000 is circled in pencil, and, in Greenfield's handwriting, 30,000 is drawn in.
[62] *Time*, November 18, 1935, 15.

wealthy Jew he was also the recipient of a great deal of anti-semitic abuse. By attacking him and accusing him of using his money to control Kelly, Wilson capitalized on this sentiment. Greenfield, unlike Stern, tried to keep a low profile politically. He kept in touch with both parties but increasingly in the early 1930's he became identified with the Democrats.[63] Throughout 1935 he protested to anyone who asked that he did not want to get drawn into the campaign for mayor and that he no longer had any interest in politics.[64] This was camouflage since he kept in touch with major figures in the Democratic party. When Curtis Bok was nominated for District Attorney on Kelly's ticket, Greenfield sent him a note of congratulations because as he told Bok you will "lend not only strength but distinction to the ticket."[65]

Wilson's charges brought Greenfield out in the open. He denied trying to gain financial control of the Democratic ticket. Bitterly angry at getting drawn by name into the election, he issued a press release which dripped with sarcasm:

> I am sure Mr. Wilson desired to adhere to that scrupulous regard for veracity which has marked his career. I will therefore say he had been misinformed. There is no truth in the statements he repeats regarding the Corporation of which I am chairman.
>
> The facts are that neither Mr. Kelly nor Mr. McCloskey nor Mr. Lawrence nor any person on their behalf owes Bankers Security Corporation any money, nor has the Corporation made any advance or contribution for political purposes.[66]

Obviously, Wilson had struck a sensitive chord. In the Greenfield papers there is a long memorandum, never made public, which nonetheless shows the real extent of Greenfield's anger at Wilson's veiled anti-semitism.

> Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. This fury is not limited to ladies of strict virtue. Sam Davis Wilson is, to put it mildly, a flirt. His successive alliances indicate that his leniency is not passive but active. Sam Wilson is not content with sitting for company. He goes after it.

[63] Among the Greenfield Papers there are copies of receipts for membership with various Republican organizations such as the Union Republican Club of Philadelphia while at the same time he was contributing lavishly to the Democrats. See Grover Whalen to Greenfield, February 1, 1935.

[64] *Ibid.*, Greenfield to Dr. Henry Slonimsky, January 15, 1935.

[65] *Ibid.*, Greenfield to Bok, September 19, 1935.

[66] *Ibid.*, memorandum dated November 1, 1935.

> During that last 2 years Sam Wilson has been in my office in the Bankers Securities Building not less than 20 times. He has sought the interviews. He has asked my help in many matters. He has wheedled, flattered and boot-licked. He has asked my support for his political advancement. He described his campaign of vocal terrorism against the PRT. . .and other vested interests who have to buy him off. He wanted the Democratic nomination for Mayor of Philadelphia.
>
> I was cold to his advances. I declined to finance his projects for capitalizing his voice and information. I felt only disgust over the prospect of this man in control over the city's government. . . .
>
> He was willing to be used. I refused to be the one to use him. I told him what is the fact, that I am not in politics. Hell hath no fury like Sam Wilson scorned.
>
> Now Wilson has sold himself to those who are financing the present Republican organization. If that organization had the brains and capacity it showed in the past it would not be reduced to such bed fellows. It would not allow its vicious hate for the Roosevelt regime to send it out on parade with such a tainted campaigner.
>
> Sam Wilson realizes that his new friends are beginning to whisper about some of the places where he had been seen. So he is having a tantrum of respectability to convince them of his virtue. I suggest to Sam Wilson he had better stick to the issue without dragging in someone who is not one, or there will be a scene created in church that will upset the marriage.[67]

Election day witnessed the largest turnout of voters in Philadelphia history. Eighty-eight percent of the registered voters went to the polls. If nothing else the election demonstrated that two colorful characters could excite the electorate even if the campaign centered less on issues than on personalities. Wilson won a narrow but comfortable victory, 379,299 to 333,811, for a plurality of 45,000 over Kelly. Wilson also carried the entire Republican ticket with him, including all twenty-two City Councilmen.[68] The Democrats were disheartened. Kelly won only eleven wards to Wilson's thirty-nine. On the positive side Kelly's vote was 2,000 more than Guffey's and 9,000 more than Earle had gotten in 1934. No Democratic candidate had ever received a larger vote in Philadelphia history. Still, something had gone wrong.

In retrospect it is clear Kelly had been unable to overcome a number of handicaps. First, the Republican machine functioned surprisingly

[67] *Ibid.*, memorandum undated but with material from October 1935.

[68] *Bulletin Almanac and Yearbook*, Philadelphia, 1936, p. 440. Wilson's majority is small when compared with Mackey's 286,000 in 1927 or Moore's 337,000 in 1931.

well. Almost every ward leader worked diligently for Wilson. $200,000 in poll money was passed out to insure that the party workers performed.[69] *Time* magazine estimated that the Republicans outspent the Democrats $600,000 to $400,000 of which $125,000 was Louchheim's own money.[70] The river wards, the controlled vote in central Philadelphia, and the Hamilton brothers' control of Roxborough and Manyunk gave Wilson a huge majority. There were rumors that the Republicans stole the election in these areas, obtaining over 30,000 votes illegally.[71] Mort Witkin, the boss of the thirteenth ward along the Delaware, was often given credit for masterminding the election night shenanigans that cost Kelly the election.[72]

Other factors hurt Kelly. His religion undoubtedly brought him the support of many Catholics, especially Irish Catholics, who in the past had voted Republican. But it also served to hurt him. Protestants, whether black or white, and Jews made up between 60 and 70% of the population of Philadelphia and there still existed a tradition of anti-Catholicism among what was often called the Church people of the city. They went strongly for Wilson. Every ward that Kelly carried was in a district where the Catholic population was very high, either a majority or a near majority.[73]

One of Greenfield's confidants, S.R. Rosenbaum, shrewdly analyzed the Democratic defeat for him. Rosenbaum believed that there was a conservative trend apparent in 1935 and this hurt Kelly. He credited the *Inquirer* with cleverly escalating the campaign against Kelly. He also thought that Kelly and McCloskey stirred up a great deal of resentment by their "arrogance and unapproachability" among the better class of Democratic workers and leaders. For better class, read Protestant and Jewish. The Democrats also suffered from the lack of a

[69] *The New York Times,* November 3, 1935, 6.

[70] *Time,* November 18, 1935, 14.

[71] Sharfsin Interview, Temple University, Urban Archives, 7. Sharfsin, a friend and supporter of Wilson and thus not totally objective, did not believe the election was stolen.

[72] James Reichley, *The Art of Government,* 10. Kelly believed that he had won the election but that in those districts which used paper ballots his vote had been illegally reduced. Among other points about the election, he believed that some of his votes had been dumped into the river. John B. Kelly Jr. Interview, Temple University, Urban Archives, 2.

[73] Kelly carried the 49th and 42nd wards in Germantown and Olney; the 19th, 45th and 33rd in Kensington; the 28th and 38th in East Falls; the 34th and 44th in West Philadelphia and 26th and 48th in South Philadelphia. Interestingly enough, Hadley had carried 7 of these wards in his primary race against Wilson.

complete organization in some wards, a factor attributable to the problems of a new outfit getting started. Finally Rosenbaum felt that there was a definite anti-Catholic mouth to mouth campaign going on in the city.[74] Mary Smollens, one of the leaders of the Democratic women of Philadelphia, confirmed at least part of this analysis. She told Greenfield that in almost every ward the Democrats needed reorganization as well as the removal of dead wood and outright party traitors.[75] In Sharfsin's opinion it was simply a case of a more experienced machine out performing a young but inexperienced Democratic organization. The Democrats had plenty of eager workers but lacked the know how. In a close election, he said, the pros always win.[76]

Stern believed that Kelly could have beaten any candidate other than Wilson. He took part of the blame on himself because the *Record* had been responsible for building up Wilson in the past as a club to use against the Vares and the Republican machine in general.[77] Wilson deserved some of the credit for his victory. He proved to be a tough, wily campaigner. He recognized that the Republicans needed him and got on their right side once the primary was over. He hit out at Kelly's identification with the New Deal, attacked the Earle administration, and continued his courtship of the large number of city workers whose friendship he had won in the past. It paid off rather well, especially when you consider that many Republican leaders were hoping for a margin of around 30,000 at best.[78] The Republicans held onto the controlled vote, and, probably because of Kelly's Catholicism, kept his vote to a minimum in the so called independent areas where the Protestants voted in large numbers. Kelly did slightly better with blacks than past Democrats. He courted them during the campaign with promises "to place the number of Negroes proportionate to their voting strength in every city department." As a result the black vote was a couple of percentage points higher for him than for the Democratic

[74] Greenfield Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Box 27, S.R. Rosenbaum to Greenfield, November 6, 1935.

[75] *Ibid.*, Smollens to Greenfield, November 7, 1935.

[76] Sharfsin Interview, Temple University, Urban Archives, 8.

[77] Stern, *Memoirs*, 230.

[78] The New York Times, November 3, 1935, 6.

ticket in 1934.[79]

* * * *

The election demonstrated among other things that the Republican machine could still deliver the votes, a fact on which Wilson capitalized. The choice facing the Republicans was simple: keep Wilson and retain their patronage in the city, or Kelly and risk losing everything. Faced with that prospect the Republican machine came through impressively. Philadelphia politics in the 1930s were still machine oriented. The Republicans won because their organization, even though still suffering from the ravages of the collapse of the Vares, was clearly superior to the new Democratic machine. Furthermore, Kelly lacked both the issues or the ruthlessness needed to overcome the Republican organization, while Wilson was not afraid to use it for his own purposes. The Republicans had enough strength left to outlast even a popular candidate such as Kelly and to hold onto power in Philadelphia for another sixteen years.

The New Deal and Roosevelt's personal popularity played only a marginal part in the outcome of the election. Wilson bitterly attacked the New Deal but he wisely avoided any negative comments about Roosevelt. Kelly, on the other hand, while a very attractive candidate with a flair for relating to his audience, lacked the demagogic qualities that Wilson so richly possessed. Kelly was uncomfortable patronizing the voters and as a result stuck to the safe, noncontroversial issues he first developed when he won the Democratic primary. A more direct appeal to the poor and the downtrodden might have served him better, but as a gentleman that just was not his way.

In the final analysis Kelly probably did as well as any Democratic candidate could have done given the nature of Philadelphia in 1935. Nathaniel Burt, a shrewd observer of the Philadelphia social scene, believes that Kelly's defeat demonstrated in 1935 "that though Catholics might run the policies of both parties, one could not be actually

[79] Miller estimates that the Democratic vote increased by 2-3/4% among blacks. "Negro in Pennsylvania," 237. Kelly got 43.5% of the black vote. In contrast his percentage with another traditional Republican group, the Italians, was a full 4% points higher. See Hugo Maiale, "The Italian Vote in Philadelphia Between 1928 and 1946," (University of Pennsylvania, Ph.D. diss., 1950), 52.

elected."[80] A non-Catholic candidate as well known as Kelly might have done better. For example, Wilson had he been able to secure the Democratic nomination could have won on the Democratic ticket. Kelly's 46% of the popular vote was an impressive turnout. Even though he lost, he held a large number of Democrats loyal to the party and convinced many doubters that Philadelphia finally had a workable two party system.[81] That made it easier for them to vote Democratic in the future. Roosevelt would win a massive victory in Philadelphia in 1936 for which a share of the credit must go to Kelly. And in the next mayoralty election Robert White, a little known Democrat, improved slightly on Kelly's percentage of the popular vote. The Kelly campaign was a significant step on the road to Democratic recovery in Philadelphia and the eventual takeover of the city.

LaSalle College JOHN P. ROSSI

[80] Nathaniel Burt, *The Perrennial Philadelphians: The Anatomy of an American Aristocracy*, Boston, 1963, 552.

[81] Drayer, "J. Hampton Moore," 371.