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The Nomination of Wendell Willkie, a Reappraisal

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THE nomination of Wendell Willkie as the 1940 Republican presidential candidate has been called the "miracle in Philadelphia."

This term is used to point out the emergence of a dark-horse presidential nominee who overcame enormous odds to oppose Franklin D. Roosevelt's bid for an unprecedented third term as president. Willkie's appeal to historians is shown partly by the fondness with which they speak of his amateur political tactics. Willkie's lack of past political experience and his personal fondness for pointing out his amateur approach to politics have obscured much of his real impact. As a presidential contender, Willkie was one of the first to capitalize upon a public-relations packaging of his candidacy. The role that business and journalistic forces played in his nomination has been largely overlooked in most historical accounts. In order to understand Willkie's emergence as a presidential contender it is necessary to examine the influence of the young, energetic public relations experts, journalists, and businessmen who buttonholed delegates in Philadelphia urging them to nominate the New York businessman.

The thesis of this article is that Willkie's nomination was the result of a well-financed and smoothly organized public relations campaign. The energy of youthful businessmen and the financial support of their older colleagues produced the so-called miracle in Philadelphia. The influence of these forces in a brief ten-week period prior to the Philadelphia convention set the stage for Willkie's nomination. How-

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ever, it was during the actual convention week that the forces of public relations and image-building journalism were most important. The press skillfully obscured the fact that business and professional support was an integral part of the Willkie campaign. Thus, Willkie's "miracle nomination" was in reality a carefully planned and executed political event.

One of the main reasons that historians have labeled Willkie's nomination as the miracle in Philadelphia is due to the influence of foreign affairs upon national politics. The three prominent Republican candidates — New York City district attorney Thomas E. Dewey, Ohio senator Robert Taft, and Michigan senator Arthur Vandenberg — all campaigned on a strongly isolationist position. The invasion of Denmark and Norway by Nazi Germany in April 1940 hurt the pre-convention campaign of the three front runners. Then the fall of France on the weekend prior to the opening of the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia destroyed the early favorites. The mood of the convention delegates was one that favored aid to Great Britain, and this was Willkie's position. The significance of foreign affairs is that they produced circumstances which made the convention a wide-open and often confusing affair. In the confusion, Willkie appeared to be a compromise candidate when, in fact, he was a front runner as the convention opened. Problems in interpreting foreign affairs have prevented historians from concentrating upon the Willkie campaign strategy of recruiting wavering or defecting delegates. Thus, it was during the few days prior to the opening of the Republican convention that the business-journalistic influence swayed the Republican party toward Willkie.¹ Dewey reached the peak of his popularity in April, and the problems in foreign policy cut deeply into his strength by the time of the convention. According to the Gallup polls, his strength was more than cut in half during this period.

Another reason for historians labeling Willkie as a last minute candidate, is the overemphasis upon Dewey's campaigning. Of the three front-running aspirants, Dewey conducted the most effective campaign. He journeyed over twenty-five thousand miles and spoke in most of the important cities in the nation. By late May 1940 his campaign organization was responsible for five primary victories. In the Wisconsin and Nebraska primaries Dewey decisively defeated Senator Vandenberg. In Illinois, Maryland, and New Jersey, Dewey won

¹ Ellsworth Barnard, *Wendell Willkie: Fighter for Freedom* (Marquette, Mich., 1966), 157-58; *New York Times*, Apr. 11, 14, 17 and May 29, 1940.

without opposition. Dewey and Taft, for example, had not clashed head on in a single primary. Thus, the Dewey and Taft forces had a group of followers who could be counted on only for first ballot support. In fact, during the convention balloting only Dewey's Wisconsin delegates and Taft's Ohio aggregation voted as a unit for more than one ballot. This suggests that the 1940 primaries were less important than some studies have suggested.² Less than one-half of the one thousand Republican delegates were chosen by the primary system. In the Gallup polls the peak of Dewey's popularity came in the May 8 poll which revealed that he was the choice of 67 percent of the Republican rank and file. By June 21, he had slipped to 31 percent.

The tendency to overemphasize Dewey's strength is further revealed by comparing his defecting delegates to Taft's. The small number of delegates who defected from the Ohio senator indicates his strength among rank-and-file Republicans. Taft's strength came from his cultivation of old guard Republicans, but he failed to add to his Ohio and Southern delegate strength. Taft failed to pick up the defecting Eastern delegates due to Willkie's business-journalistic pressure group in Philadelphia. Thus, it is important to analyze both Willkie's preconvention and convention week activity. It was during these two periods that the nomination was garnered. Taft was unable to gain the nomination due to the unwillingness of Eastern Republicans to support him. In every other section of the country Taft's delegate strength increased from the first through the fifth ballots. Taft picked up only 12 delegates from the East and Willkie picked up 171.³

There has been very little analysis of Willkie's campaign in the two months prior to the Philadelphia convention. In fact, many supposedly creditable accounts of the Willkie nomination persist in minimizing his political organization and dwelling on the miracle in Philadelphia theme.⁴ This approach is totally at variance with the facts. In the early months of 1940 his supporters organized a well-financed and smoothly functioning, professional political machine. This was done largely through the energetic enthusiasm of young New York business-

2 Hadley Cantril and Mildred Strunk, eds., *Public Opinion, 1935-1946* (Princeton, 1951).

3 Hugh Ross, "Was the Nomination of Wendell Willkie a Political Miracle?," *Indiana Magazine of History* 58(1962): 79.

4 Joseph Barnes, *Willkie* (New York, 1952). Barnes entitles chapter 11 "Miracle in Philadelphia" to describe Willkie's nomination. Eugene H. Roseboom in *A History of Presidential Elections* (New York, 1943) calls the chapter on Willkie's nomination "The Philadelphia Miracle." These accounts are responsible for many of the misconceptions of the Willkie campaign.

men and public relations experts. Their older colleagues provided the organizational skill and financial leadership. The intraparty political splits and the disastrous showing of Alf Landon in 1936 made the time ripe for a new Republican approach. Willkie also benefited from the dissatisfaction of business with Franklin D. Roosevelt's economic policies. These factors made the 1940 Republican convention a non-bossed affair.

As a viable campaign machine, the Willkie organization emerged as a well-organized and smoothly functioning organ by early April 1940. Historians have tended to ignore the professional nature of the Willkie forces because they became visible only eight or ten weeks prior to the Republican convention. This campaign was also personally organized by Willkie. He ceased his prolific speechmaking and writing for popular magazines during March. Willkie spent this time meeting with prominent Republicans and formally organizing his supporters. It is during this period that the business-journalistic forces became visibly important.

Russell Davenport, a former editor of *Fortune* and a longtime New York journalist, was typical of the influential journalists who found Willkie a promising political figure. He became the general director of Willkie's campaign. Davenport did not officially resign as managing editor of *Fortune* until May 3; however, he was literally a full-time Willkie organizer, as well as his chief confidant, during the early months of 1940. He was attracted to Willkie's presidential possibilities sometime in 1939, and he was responsible for persuading many newspaper and magazine people to support Willkie.⁵

The youthful Republican businessmen were represented by a young Wall Street lawyer, Oren Root, Jr. On April 13, 1940, Root placed an advertisement in the *New York Herald Tribune* requesting contributions to organize a people's committee for Willkie. The response to Root's appeal immediately provided him with a full-time job. It was Root, then, who was initially instrumental in organizing the popular groundswell for Willkie.

An analysis of Root's clubs sheds a great deal of light on the role that big business played in the Willkie nomination. The typical Willkie Club was led by a community banker, lawyer, or real estate man. The membership was almost exclusively composed of business and professional people. In many ways, the Willkie Clubs were more a vehicle to scorn and criticize the Roosevelt administration and less an organi-

⁵ Barnes, 163-65; *New York Times*, May 3, 1940.

zation to promote Willkie's candidacy. The typical Willkie Club was largely a psychological outlet for the frustrated businessman who found the New Deal to be the chief factor in retarding business growth. There appears to be little genuine feeling for Willkie. In fact, the evidence indicates that the Willkie Clubs were unaware of many of their candidate's political positions. For example, his criticism of the techniques used by the Dies Committee to ferret out supposed Communists was either ignored or unknown by his business supporters. Since the Republican party was preeminently the party of businessmen, it is not surprising that Willkie was nominated.⁶

In addition to the Eastern Willkie Clubs, there were other organizations throughout the country promoting his candidacy. There is a tendency among Willkie's biographers to credit Root's organization with creating the initial impetus behind his campaign. However, in California John F. Neylan, an attorney and former Hearst editor, organized a San Francisco-based Willkie organization. In an exchange of letters, Neylan and Root discussed the methods that might be used to promote Willkie's candidacy. Root felt a mass petition-signing movement was the best way to show Willkie's grass-roots support. Neylan disagreed. He felt that the petitions might alienate potential supporters and make Willkie appear to be pushing his own candidacy. Root wrote to Neylan: "The time is so late and Willkie's position with the politicians and delegates is necessarily so questionable that the only way I see of nominating him is to demonstrate to the politicians that he has more public support among ordinary people than anybody now believes."⁷ Root argued that the petitions would give Willkie the independent and amateur look essential to a dark-horse nomination. Root also urged Neylan to employ young, unknown businessmen to circulate the declarations. This would minimize the possibility of alienating many Republicans. It would also soften the newspaper charge that big business was behind Willkie's candidacy.

The most revealing portion of Root's letter concerns Willkie's role in the preconvention campaign organization. Root stated that Willkie was advising his committee, and he readily approved of Root's clubs. This dispels the myth that Willkie did not actively pursue the nomination. By early April 1940 Willkie personally was directing his

6 Herbert S. Parmet and Marie B. Hecht, *Never Again: A President Runs for a Third Term* (New York, 1968), 94. My analysis of the Willkie Clubs comes from tracing biographical material on the list of members in the John F. Neylan Papers, Bancroft Collection (University of California, Berkeley).

7 Root to Neylan, Apr. 13, 1940, Neylan Papers.

candidacy. This last-minute entry into the presidential derby is the fact which has led most historians astray, and the Root letters further reveal the care Willkie took to hide his own interest in the campaign.

In a few days Neylan responded to the Root correspondence. From his vantage point in San Francisco Neylan disagreed with the Root clubs. He felt that by circulating petitions the Willkie forces would injure their candidate. Neylan wrote of Willkie's recent conversion to Republicanism, and he argued that the petitions would alienate many of his new-found supporters. Willkie's image, wrote Neylan, had to be built quietly. "The only chance Mr. Willkie has from the standpoint of practical politics, will arise out of a conviction that the Republican party needs him as a candidate, and if it happens it will be almost unique in the history of American politics." Neylan further stated that the petitions would give the Willkie campaign the odious appearance of an underground organization. This could alienate potential supporters and result in unfavorable publicity. Neylan concluded that Willkie's name was receiving favorable publicity, and the activity of Root could only hurt his candidacy.

The Root-Neylan letters dispel another myth surrounding the Willkie campaign. This is the notion that a single, concerted campaign force promoted Willkie's candidacy. The New York-based supporters were important, but numerous Willkie Clubs supported the movement in all sections of the country. Nonetheless, the Willkie organizations were an important catalyst in the nomination. A month after Root's initial letter 200 Willkie Clubs were in existence and by mid-June 1940 there were 750 such organizations. At least fifty thousand volunteers were in the field, and over seven hundred fifty thousand pieces of literature came from Willkie's Manhattan headquarters.⁸

By mid-April 1940 then, Willkie's campaign was functioning smoothly. Concurrently, by the latter part of April the Taft and Dewey campaigns were running out of steam. Dewey's decline was due to a number of factors. The most damaging was the attempt to oust Kenneth F. Simpson as national committeeman from New York. The Dewey-Simpson feud was an old one resulting from Simpson's cool support of Dewey's 1938 bid for the New York governorship. The feud was reflected in the newspapers in a manner that made it appear that Dewey could not control the New York delegation. Public opinion polls also showed that Dewey was at the peak of his popularity a full two months prior to the Republican convention. This gave his opponents

8 *Time*, June 24, 1940.

time to pry away delegates and seek political compromises. The Taft campaign was also plagued with problems. Taft would not leave the Senate to actively campaign, and he was too dry for most rank-and-file Republicans.⁹

Willkie's campaign successes were first reported in a virtually unnoticed editorial in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. On April 20, 1940, an editorial entitled "Can the Citizens Nominate Willkie If They Want Him?" praised the efforts of the Willkie-for-President movement. The *Courier-Journal* was correct in analyzing the strong popular feeling that the Willkie forces were creating.

In May, a number of important Republicans came out for Willkie's candidacy. He met in early May with influential publishers, John and Gardner Cowles, Jr. They published *Look* magazine as well as the *Minnesota Star and Tribune* and the *Des Moines Register*. The Cowles brothers represented the so-called nonprofessional Middle Western Republican. Willkie also conferred with the young Minnesota governor, Harold Stassen. There is no available record of this meeting, but the ease with which Stassen supported Willkie suggests an early meeting of the minds. Most accounts of the 1940 Republican convention fail to note that in this nonbossed convention the young and seemingly amateur politicians emerged as leaders. They proved to be effective bosses at Philadelphia.¹⁰

In June, a week prior to the convention, a number of events took place that helped to make Willkie's nomination a well-planned affair. The miracle at Philadelphia began to form when many party regulars and delegates switched to Willkie. This was largely due to the escalation of the European war and the activity of Oren Root's Willkie Clubs. Then, President Franklin D. Roosevelt nominated two Republicans to his cabinet. The idea of a bipartisan cabinet had been in the air for some time. Nonetheless, the appointment of Henry L. Stimson as secretary of war and Frank Knox as secretary of the navy startled the Republican party. The result of the new cabinet appointments was that it caused many delegates to rethink their attitudes on foreign affairs. Had the Republicans congratulated the two new Roosevelt appointments, the party would have not publicly revealed the deep cleavage it was experiencing in foreign affairs. This aided

9 Donald Johnson, *The Republican Party and Wendell Willkie* (Urbana, Ill., 1960), 31-32.

10 Barnard, 160-61; *Time*, May 20, 1940.

Willkie's candidacy, because he was the only Republican not stringently isolationist.¹¹

As convention delegates gathered in Philadelphia, France fell to the Axis powers, and Walter Lippmann echoed the feeling of many journalists when he wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* of June 25, 1940, that Taft and Dewey had "a record of having been deaf, dumb and blind in the presence of every warning and every epoch-making development." This crisis over foreign affairs added more luster to Willkie's already formidable candidacy.

A seemingly insignificant, albeit important, event took place on the night before the convention opened. Meeting with *New York Times* columnist, Arthur Krock, Willkie convinced the *Times* writer that he had neither a floor manager for the convention nor a viable campaign force. Krock, as well as many other reporters, reported Willkie's gains during the convention week as coming against miraculous odds. The effect of this type of reporting was to make an already formidable candidate appear as a miracle worker.

The success of Willkie's preconvention campaign was revealed during the first three days of the Republican National Convention. It was during this period that Willkie's well-organized supporters gained the nomination for their candidate.

On June 24, 1940, in Philadelphia's Municipal Auditorium, the Republican convention formally convened. Minnesota's governor, Harold Stassen, was elected as the temporary chairman. When Stassen stepped down the following day he immediately announced that he supported Willkie. This was only one of many events in the first three days that brought Willkie the nomination.

Another event on the first day of the convention is even a better indication of Willkie's strength. Senator John Thomas of Idaho presented a petition to the committee on resolutions asking that the Republican party nominate a candidate whose views represented the voting record of the party in Congress. This move was clearly aimed at reducing Willkie's strength and appeal. It was organized by Ezra Whitlaw, a national committeeman from Idaho and a Dewey supporter. The petition included delegate signatures from thirteen Western states and the Territory of Alaska. It was an expression of Western isolationist sentiment and illustrated the deep split in the Republican party on foreign affairs. This incident also illustrated Willkie's strength in the early delegate battle.

11 James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York, 1956), 424.

Conservative attitudes on foreign policy were shown in the East when Hamilton Fish bought a full-page ad in the *New York Times* urging Republicans to keep interventionists out of the party. Fish organized a large group of isolationist-minded congressmen to testify before the Resolutions Committee in support of a "keep out of war" platform. In the final analysis, the Fish-Whitlaw factions swayed many delegates toward Willkie's position on foreign affairs.¹²

The last important, although almost unseen, Willkie supporter to emerge in the early campaign shuffling was Sam Pryor, the chairman of the committee on arrangements. It was Pryor's job to distribute tickets to the galleries, and consequently this enabled thousands of young Willkie Club members to pack the galleries. It is impossible to estimate the effect of the raucous activities of the gallerites. Most contemporary accounts describe the cheering galleries as creating the impression of a popular uprising for Willkie. Pryor's conversion to Willkie, then, provided another of the many seemingly unimportant events that swung the convention toward the Wall Street businessman.

By the second day of the convention the Willkie Clubs were operating at peak efficiency. Between the previous Saturday and the convention's second day, Tuesday, a million messages were sent to delegates, alternates, and interested Republicans in Philadelphia. In addition to the Willkie Clubs, the support of prominent state governors, mayors, and local county chairmen pointed to the highly professional nature of Willkie's campaign.¹³ Prominent governors such as Minnesota's Stassen, Rhode Island's William Vanderbilt, Connecticut's Raymond Baldwin, Massachusetts's Leverett Saltonstall, and Colorado's Ralph Carr combined with Syracuse mayor Rolland Marvin and New York County chairman Kenneth Simpson to give Willkie strong professional political leadership. These factors suggest that the notion the Willkie campaign was a political miracle is not based on factual material.¹⁴

A Gallup poll taken Tuesday through Thursday of the convention week reveals enormous gains for Willkie. This poll, published on July 7, indicated that 44 percent of the Republican rank and file favored Willkie. In other words, according to the Gallup polls, Willkie's strength rose from less than 1 percent on March 24 to 44 percent by convention week. Most accounts note the phenomenal increase in

12 Barnard, 177.

13 Herbert Eaton, *Presidential Timber: A History of the Nominating Conventions, 1868-1960* (New York, 1964), 378-79.

14 Ross, 99-100.

Willkie's popularity, but they fail to see it as the result of a well-financed and professionally conducted campaign. By the end of the third day of the campaign the excitement of Willkie's dark-horse candidacy obscured his carefully laid plans for the nomination.¹⁵

When a number of violent attacks on Willkie's tactics erupted on Wednesday evening, June 26, and Thursday morning, June 27, the success of his strategy became apparent. In the midst of the Willkie surge it was also charged that many of the telegrams and messages coming into Philadelphia were "canned." There is undoubtedly some truth to the canned-message charge, but this obscures the fact that Willkie already had wrapped up the nomination.¹⁶

It was almost anticlimactic when the Republican party began to ballot on Thursday afternoon. On the sixth ballot, just past midnight, Willkie was nominated. The scope and direction of each ballot reveals Willkie's campaign success. The first ballot hurt the Dewey forces. They polled only 360 votes to Taft's 189 and Willkie's 105. This was far below the 400 to 450 delegates the Dewey forces had predicted and made the necessary 501 ballots appear unreachable. On the second ballot Dewey slipped to 338, Taft rose to 203, and Willkie received 179. Then the permanent chairman, Massachusetts's Joe Martin, ordered the aisles cleared. This was followed by a recess from 6:45 to 8:30. During the recess, Stassen met with Alf Landon, the 1936 Republican nominee, and persuaded the Kansan to support Willkie. When the convention reconvened Dewey continued to decline in delegate strength. The third ballot revealed the result of the recess as Dewey declined to 315 delegates, Willkie rose to 259, and Taft to 212. As the Dewey managers tried to adjourn for the night, Chairman Martin called for the fourth ballot. This placed Willkie in the lead with 306 delegates, Taft followed with 254, and Dewey sank to 250. Willkie was on the verge of being nominated by Dewey defectors.¹⁷

As rumors swept the convention that the Illinois and Pennsylvania bosses were combining to block Willkie, he picked up 123 delegates on the fifth ballot for a 429 total. The sixth ballot simply saw a trickle of the votes necessary for the nomination. By 12:20 on Friday morning, Willkie's miracle in Philadelphia was accomplished through the dedication of the young political amateurs and the organizational skill of their professional Republican elders.¹⁸

15 Parmet and Hecht, 131.

16 John Chamberlain, "Candidates and Speeches," *Yale Review* 30(1940): 48.

17 *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Republican National Convention* (Washington, D. C., 1940), 279-320.

18 Barnard, 185-86.

In looking at the Willkie phenomenon historians have over-emphasized his homespun simplicity and urban liberalism. It is impossible in a study of this length to conclusively prove that Willkie represented the force of business and professional opinion in the Republican party. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the war had rehabilitated business by the 1940 Republican National Convention. In Willkie's campaign, then, it is possible to suggest that the future leadership of big business in the Republican party was foreshadowed. Further study is needed of the socio-economic background of the Willkie Clubs to fully document the degree of business and professional influence upon Republican politics in 1940. However, it is obvious that Willkie's nomination was far from a miracle in Philadelphia.

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