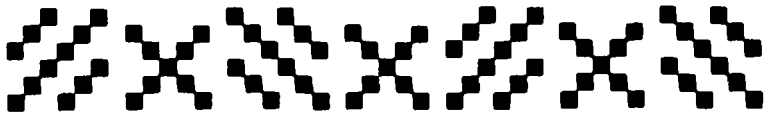


Charles Warren Fairbanks and the Republican National Convention of 1900: A Memoir

*Lewis L. Gould**



When Republicans gathered in their national conventions in the early twentieth century and thoughts turned to the vice-presidency, the name of Senator Charles Warren Fairbanks of Indiana came readily to mind. In 1904 he was Theodore Roosevelt's running mate, and he spent the years 1905 to 1909 in the relative obscurity that the president's energy marked out for the vice-president. When Charles Evans Hughes of New York was nominated to run against Woodrow Wilson in 1916, Fairbanks was once again selected to balance the GOP ticket. Though not a candidate for the place, he "felt it my duty to accept" when the second nomination came to him, although this time the Republican ticket did not win.¹

Fairbanks had a chance at the vice-presidency even earlier. In 1900 he was mentioned as a possible nominee with President William McKinley and could have received the president's endorsement had he expressed interest. Fairbanks pondered the matter, as he later recalled, and may have desired the place. The circumstances that thrust Theodore Roosevelt into the vice-presidency in 1900, however, were too powerful for anyone to overcome, and when McKinley died from the effects of an assassin's bullet on September 14, 1901, it was Roosevelt who succeeded him in the White House.

Fifteen years later Charles S. Olcott became William McKinley's official biographer.² In the course of his research, Olcott sought memoranda on central events of the president's

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¹ Charles W. Fairbanks to Victor Rosewater, June 26, 1916, Victor Rosewater Papers (American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati).

² Charles S. Olcott, *The Life of William McKinley* (2 vols., Boston, 1916).



CHARLES WARREN FAIRBANKS, CA. 1904

Reproduced from William Henry Smith, *The Life and Speeches of Hon. Charles Warren Fairbanks, Republican Candidate for Vice-President* (Indianapolis, 1904), frontispiece.

life from his friends and political associates. Fairbanks supplied a lengthy document entitled "The Vice Presidency" that outlined his role in the Republican National Convention at Philadelphia in June, 1900. Olcott used one page of Fairbanks's nine-page memorandum in his study; the entire document has never been printed. It contains revealing insights into this national convention that so affected the subsequent history of the GOP, and it is clearly the source of some of the enduring anecdotes about Theodore Roosevelt.

The vice-presidency became an immediate concern for McKinley in November, 1899, when the incumbent, Garret A. Hobart of New Jersey, died after a long illness. Speculation immediately focused on the governor of New York, Theodore Roosevelt, whose youth, popularity, and geographical base made him seem an ideal complement to the president. While friends such as Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts and Senator William E. Chandler of New Hampshire advised him to be receptive, Roosevelt saw the post as a dead end that would block his path to the White House. In February, 1900, he even went so far as to issue what appeared to be an unequivocal public refusal. "*Under no circumstances*," he said, "could I or would I accept the nomination for the Vice-presidency."³

A number of forces worked to move Roosevelt away from this outright negative. By the spring of 1900 he could not bring himself to say that he would refuse the vice-presidency if it were offered to him. As long as he made no Sherman-like statement, his backers continued to hope and to prod. In New York the state's Republican leader, Senator Thomas Collier Platt, found his corporate contributors upset at Roosevelt's attempts to tax business franchises and to develop a state program on the antitrust question. These industrial constituents told Platt "that they would not contribute a dollar to the republican campaign fund if Roosevelt is nominated for Governor."⁴ Platt helped to keep Roosevelt's vice-presidential prospects alive between February and June, 1900.

President McKinley could not in this same period find a plausible alternative to the New Yorker. He thought first of Elihu Root, his secretary of war, but decided that the cabinet officer, who had only joined the administration in August,

³ Quoted in Henry F. Pringle, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Biography* (New York, 1931), 218.

⁴ George Frederick William Holls to Andrew D. White, June 12, 1900, Albert Shaw Papers (New York Public Library, New York).

1899, should stay where he was. In the early months of 1900 there was public speculation about Secretary of the Navy John D. Long, Seth Low, Andrew D. White, William Boyd Allison, and Jonathan P. Dolliver as possible nominees. None of these men could match the popularity and charisma of Roosevelt. As Lodge wrote in late April, "I think the Vice Presidency is closing in on him and that the party will insist upon his nomination."⁵

Apprehensive about Roosevelt's impetuous nature and his political reliability, the president scanned the GOP leadership for another possible running mate. In such a canvass it was natural that Fairbanks's name would come up. He had been a United States senator for only three years but was recognized as someone very close to the president both politically and personally. Fairbanks was just forty-eight on the eve of the convention. A native of Ohio, he had settled in Indiana as a young lawyer; his practice and political career prospered simultaneously. In 1896 he was the keynote speaker when the Republicans nominated McKinley at St. Louis. Within Indiana he used his personal fortune and control of such key newspapers as the *Indianapolis News* to construct a political organization which made him the state's leading Republican. In 1898 and 1899 he had been chairman of the Anglo-American Joint High Commission, a body which dealt with such vexing problems as the Alaska boundary question. On paper he would have added strength to the ticket.⁶

Fairbanks was not an outstanding national leader, however, and those in the upper echelons of the GOP knew it. To some extent it was his aloof public demeanor that limited his popularity. As Mrs. James L. Slayden, the wife of a Democratic congressman, put it, "Mr. Fairbanks seems an icicle." An obvious ambition for the White House put others off. Fairbanks was also very cautious, "almost as timid as was the boy who was

⁵ Henry Cabot Lodge to Leonard Wood, April 24, 1900, Henry Cabot Lodge Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston).

⁶ For biographical data on Fairbanks, see William Henry Smith, *The Life and Speeches of Hon. Charles Warren Fairbanks, Republican Candidate for Vice-President* (Indianapolis, 1904); Thomas R. Shipp, "Charles Warren Fairbanks, Republican Candidate for Vice-President," *American Monthly Review of Reviews*, XXX (August, 1904), 176-81; and Herbert J. Rissler, "Charles Warren Fairbanks: Conservative Hoosier," (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, Indiana University, 1961). The best brief account is James H. Madison, "Charles Warren Fairbanks and Indiana Republicanism," in Ralph D. Gray, ed., *Gentlemen from Indiana: National Party Candidates, 1836-1940* (Indianapolis, 1977), 171-88.

afraid to say boo to the goose." But most of all, there was the sense that Fairbanks had already found his true level, that he "may not be a great Statesman," but "he certainly is a great Politician." Some of these qualities come through in Fairbanks's recollections of his brush with destiny in 1900.⁷

⁷ Ellen Maury Slayden, *Washington Wife: Journal of Ellen Maury Slayden from 1897-1919* (New York, 1962, 1963), 119; Louis T. Michener to James S. Clarkson, October 15, 1902, James S. Clarkson Papers (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.); Madison, "Fairbanks," in Gray, *Gentlemen*, 171.

The Vice Presidency.⁸

Charles Warren Fairbanks

It was generally conceded that President McKinley would be nominated at Philadelphia. His administration had been so eminently successful and he was so popular that there was no division of opinion anywhere with respect to the fact that he should again lead his people in the great national contest, and it was generally regarded as a foregone conclusion that he would be re-elected.

The only question open for debate was who should be the Vice Presidential nominee. It seemed to be taken for granted that he should be some one entirely acceptable to the President. But no one seemed to know his preference, if he had one. One name and then another was proposed in the general discussion, but there was no agreement as to the nominee. Suggestions were made to him from time to time, but he seemed to have maintained the attitude of a listener. It was understood, however, that Cornelius N. Bliss⁹ of New York, who had ably served as Secretary of the Interior, would be an agreeable associate. Mr. Bliss was properly located to balance the ticket and was politically in perfect accord with his former chief. When he was approached upon the subject by Senator Hanna¹⁰ he declined to entertain it, particularly on account of the health of Mrs. Bliss, to whom Washington life was uncongenial.

Some weeks before the convention when I called to see the President upon some public business he said to me: "Senator, Senator Davis¹¹ of Minnesota came to see me this morning and said that you should be nominated for Vice President. He spoke very kindly of you and earnestly hoped that the convention would select you." I was of course taken by surprise, as the thought had never occurred to me. I simply said in reply: "Mr. President, it is very generous of Senator Davis to mention me for the nomination, and it is very kind of you to tell me of his

⁸ "Reminiscences—the Vice Presidency," Charles W. Fairbanks Papers (Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington).

⁹ Cornelius Newton Bliss (1833-1911) was McKinley's secretary of the interior from 1897 to 1898. An opponent of Thomas C. Platt in New York, he had served as treasurer of the Republican National Committee in 1892 and 1896. He held the same post again in 1900.

¹⁰ Marcus Alonzo Hanna (1837-1904) was a senator from Ohio from 1897 to 1904 and President McKinley's closest political ally. In 1900, however, their friendship was not as close as it had been, and the senator was operating on his own in the vice-presidential matter.

¹¹ Cushman Kellogg Davis (1838-1900) was a senator from Minnesota, 1887-1900, and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee.

partiality. I thank you both." No further comment was made upon the subject and I immediately left for the Senate.

Soon after the morning hour in the Senate, Senator Davis, who occupied a seat not far from me, came to my desk to ask some question, whereupon I said to him: "Senator, that was very nice of you." "What?" he asked with some little surprise, as I had not particularized. "What you said to the President this morning," I replied. "About you? About the Vice Presidency?" he inquired. "Yes," I answered. "Did he tell you about it?" he asked. I nodded assent and he continued: "I told him that because it is the way I feel. I think it is what the party should do and I frankly told the President so; but I had no thought that it would reach your ears." "Well," I said, "I have found you out." And that ended the incident.

While the Vice Presidency was subsequently mentioned by others it was never referred to by the President until Thursday evening before the Philadelphia convention was to assemble.¹² It was desired by Senator Hanna, chairman of the National Committee, and others that I should be the chairman of the Committee on Resolutions. A number of informal conferences by a number of the friends of the administration, including Senators Hanna, Spooner,¹³ Post-Master General Smith,¹⁴ myself and others, were held before leaving Washington, at which various planks of a platform were suggested, discussed and outlined. There was general agreement as to the substance of the more important resolutions to be presented to the Committee on Resolutions.

As a matter of courtesy I called at the White House before leaving for Philadelphia, and to get any suggestions the President might have as to the platform upon which the campaign should be fought. I always felt, by the way, that with the President as our candidate a formal declaration of party principles was quite unnecessary. Usage rather than necessity compelled a declaration of policies. Upon arriving at the White House I found the President in the upper rear family hall and alone, engaged with his cigar and reading the evening paper, possibly the gossip which was already being sent out from Philadelphia as the delegates arrived. I told him that I had

¹² June 14, 1900.

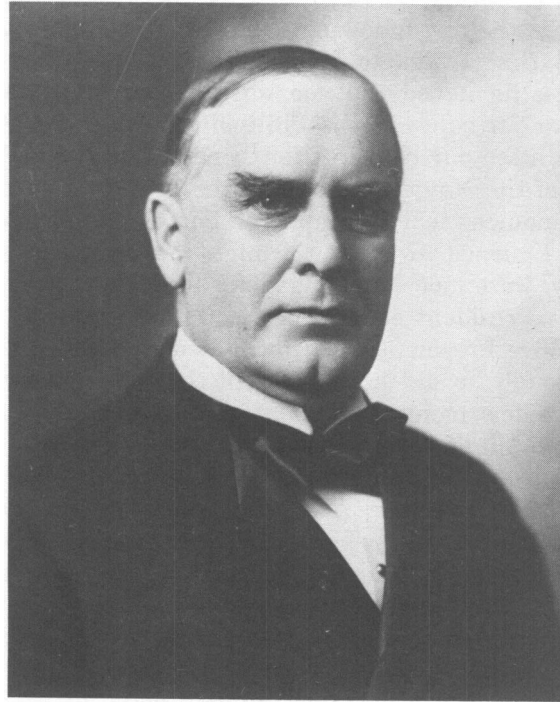
¹³ John Coit Spooner (1843-1919) was a senator from Wisconsin, 1885-1891 and 1897-1907, and a member of the inner circle of the Republican party in the upper house.

¹⁴ Charles Emory Smith (1842-1908) had been editor of the *Philadelphia Press* and served as postmaster general from 1898 to 1902.

dropped in merely to say good-by, as I was leaving for Philadelphia the day following. He said he was glad that I had come, and that I was to be chairman of the Committee on Resolutions; he hoped that no mistake would be made with reference to our policy in the Philippines, Cuba and Porto Rica [sic]. Soon after our conversation began Hon. John D. Long,¹⁵ Secretary of the Navy, entered and the President excused himself for a moment while he and the Secretary engaged in conversation. I turned away that I might not overhear what was said. They were not long engaged, and when the Secretary retired the President said: "The Secretary wants to be nominated for Vice President," and intimated that this was impracticable, though he did not say so in so many words. He then said after a few moments: "Senator, they may turn to you at Philadelphia." I was somewhat at a loss to know what reply to make. In a moment I said: "I thank you, Mr. President, for your confidence and kindness. As you of course know, I desire to serve you whenever and wherever I can. But I do not know that what you suggest is the best." Nothing further was said upon the subject. The President expressed himself as believing that the convention would be a notable one. He seemed to be pleased that there was to be no contest over the ticket or platform, and that there was such widespread interest being taken in it. The prospect of a large and enthusiastic convention, he thought, was a good sign for the future of the Republican party; and he felt that such a convention would give strength to the administration. He made no comment whatever upon himself as the central figure of the historic event; his whole thought seemed to be centered upon the party which had honored him and the country he was serving with all of his ability and power. I assured him that I would endeavor to see that the platform was in harmony with his policies and administration. I congratulated him in advance upon his assured nomination and election, and with his hearty thanks and good wishes I retired, leaving him alone.¹⁶

¹⁵ John Davis Long (1838-1915) had been governor of Massachusetts and a congressman in the 1880s. He was secretary of the navy from 1897 to 1902.

¹⁶ President McKinley regarded the possibility of Roosevelt's nomination with some reserve. He was aware of the New York governor's reputation for impetuosity and political unreliability, and he knew of the opposition to Roosevelt among party conservatives. Temperamentally, he would have preferred a less flamboyant spirit than Roosevelt, which Fairbanks certainly was, but he also did not intend to interpose the White House in the way of the general wishes of the party. If the genuine enthusiasm of the rank and file carried Roosevelt onto the ticket, he would accept the result. Until that was inevitable, he explored and encouraged alternatives. Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1980), 215-18.



WILLIAM MCKINLEY

Courtesy Stark County Historical Society, Canton, Ohio.

I left for Philadelphia the day following and arriving there found among many of my friends an impression that I was to be the nominee for Vice President. Soon after reaching my hotel Harry New¹⁷ and many other friends from home called and said the nomination was coming to me if I would accept. Some of my best friends favored and others opposed it. Those who advised against my taking it did so for different reasons: some thought that it would interfere with possible future preferment which some of my friends already had in mind; others did not think so, but felt that if I resigned from the Senate it would precipitate confusion among Republicans in Indiana. The party in our State was then united and harmonious and there was a natural and somewhat general anxiety that nothing should be done which should put in jeopardy this happy condition.¹⁸ However, there was entire agreement upon every hand

¹⁷ Harry Stewart New (1858-1937) was a member of the Indiana state senate in 1900. He was a United States senator from 1917 to 1923 and postmaster general from 1923 to 1929.

¹⁸ Fairbanks does not mention the factional tension that the rise of Albert J. Beveridge produced in the Indiana Republican party. John Braeman, *Albert J. Beveridge: American Nationalist* (Chicago, 1971), 30-35, 72-74.

that whatever I might desire in regard to the matter would be graciously accepted by all my friends in the State. Delegates and influential Republicans from other States strongly urged me to be a candidate, some upon the distinct ground that with a friend in the White House it would naturally put me in line for the succession, while others maintained that I should accept so that the President would be assured of a Vice President in thorough accord with his policies and in entire personal harmony with him.

A notable banquet was given Senator Hanna and many others who were delegates to the convention by some of the prominent [sic] citizens of Philadelphia at the Union League Club two or three nights before the assembling of the convention. I was among the number upon the favored list. The subject of the Vice Presidency was frequently suggested about the table and informal remarks by several speakers pointedly asserted that I should be nominated; in fact this seemed to be the only matter still unsettled. I took it all good-naturedly but made no response other than to shake my head. I was embarrassed and scarcely knew how to handle myself, under the circumstances. I did not wish to seem to be either obdurate or covetous of something which my better judgment [judgment] did not entirely approve. No one appreciated the great honor more highly than I. I was naturally flattered by the mention of my name for it [came?] from so many influential sources and with such obvious heartiness. My duty to my party in Indiana was something which I could not lightly disregard; and the unwisdom as it then seemed to me of nominating some one so near to the home of the President weighed heavily with me. My personal inclination was toward the nomination - I regarded it a high honor - but my deliberate, sober sense of duty was against it. My personal friends understood full well how I regarded the matter.

The platform engaged the larger part of my attention. I was very anxious that no false note should be struck and that it should be worthy of the occasion. There were several drafts of specific resolutions and two or three complete platforms had been prepared for consideration. Although I was busily engaged upon the platform, I was not beyond the reach of the Vice Presidential gossip. Delegates from other states were pursuing me, urging me to stand for the nomination. There was a very strong and decided opposition to the nomination of Governor Roosevelt of New York. He was circulating actively through the hotel lobbies and frequently appeared in the headquarters of different state delegations, wearing an army hat and awaken-

ing enthusiasm wherever he went. He protested frequently that he was not a candidate and that he would not accept a nomination if it were tendered. When it was reported to Wayne MacVeagh,¹⁹ former Attorney General of the United States, that the Governor was circulating among the delegates, vowing his unwillingness to accept a nomination if tendered, he dryly observed: "Is the Governor wearing a rough rider hat?" And upon being assured that he was, added: "That's an acceptance hat."

Senator Platt²⁰ of New York insisted upon the nomination of Governor Roosevelt. He demanded it in the interest of Republican party politics in New York. Senator Quay²¹ of Pennsylvania co-operated with him in his effort to make the New York Governor the nominee for Vice President. It was generally understood that Senator Quay's activity was due in a degree to his desire to favor his old-time friend and party co-worker, Senator Platt, but more especially to embarrass and defeat if possible the wishes of Senator Hanna, who had opposed his being seated in the Senate of the United States upon the certificate of the Governor of Pennsylvania. Senator Hanna, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, one of the most masterful and resourceful political managers of his day, the bosom friend of the President, was upon the ground, marshalling his forces to nominate a Vice President who would be entirely acceptable to President McKinley.

I had discussed some of the features of the platform with the Senator in Washington, but the subject of the Vice Presidential nomination was never mentioned between us, except that the Senator advised me that he had urged Secretary Bliss of New York to accept and had made a special trip to his home in New York City to plead with Mrs. Bliss to consent that the nomination might be made.

On Sunday or Monday afternoon before the nomination I called at Senator Hanna's headquarters to see him with respect to a ship subsidy plank which was being strongly urged and which it seemed to me was unwise.²² The central and middle

¹⁹ Isaac Wayne MacVeagh (1833-1917) had been attorney general under James A. Garfield and Chester Alan Arthur in 1881.

²⁰ Thomas Collier Platt (1833-1910), the notorious "Easy Boss" of Republican affairs in New York State, was a senator in 1881 and from 1897 to 1909.

²¹ Matthew Stanley Quay (1833-1904), longtime power in Republican politics in Pennsylvania, had been appointed by that state's governor to the Senate after the legislature failed to elect anyone in 1899. In April, 1900, the Senate declined to seat him, with Hanna's vote a decisive element in the result.

²² The conversation probably took place on June 17, 1900, a Sunday. The proposal to subsidize American merchant shipping was very unpopular in Indiana. See James A. Mount to Fairbanks, February 26, 1900, Fairbanks Papers.



IS HE SETTING THE SWITCH FOR THE ROOSEVELT FLYER?
From the Tribune (New York).

POLITICAL CARTOONISTS WERE INTRIGUED BY THE MANEUVERING
SURROUNDING THE VICE-PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATION



CHAIRMAN HANNA TAKES A STROLL DOWN POLITICAL AVENUE.
(From sketches on the spot by the Philadelphia Inquirer cartoonist, Mr. McAuley.)

Reproduced from *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*,
XXII (July, 1900), 27, 28.

west was strongly against it and its adoption meant the introduction of a plank which would lead to sharp division. The election of President McKinley was already assured and I thought and many others agreed that we should not project into the campaign an issue which would awaken sharp controversy in our own ranks.

I knew that the Senator was strongly in favor of a ship subsidy declaration. He had given the subject, as he gave to all questions of public moment, very thorough consideration; and I wished to advise him of the drift of sentiment and to get his consent if possible to the omission of any specific pledge in behalf of a subsidy. As soon as I reached his rooms I found a great crowd waiting to see him. I was immediately invited to enter by his private secretary, Elmer Dover.²³ Upon entering a very large room I found it filled to its capacity. Senator Hanna met me and we stepped to an open window where he said: "We have met to consider the selection of a nominee for Vice President, and we have just decided upon you and we urge you to accept." I judged from the number assembled that the various States were represented.²⁴ He then proceeded to say that Governor Roosevelt wanted the nomination but "we do not want him to have it. I have just come from a conference with him; there was some very plain talk. I had been wanting to see him but it was difficult for me to do so. At last I got hold of him and said: "Teddy, I think you owe something to President McKinley, and that you should consider his wishes. Under the circumstances I feel that I have a right to talk to you and talk to you plainly." Governor Roosevelt replied that he was under obligations to Mr. McKinley and that the Senator could frankly talk to him. Said he: "Senator, I am not a candidate for Vice President, and I don't want the nomination. What I want is to be Governor of New York." "Then," said Senator Hanna, "by G — —, Teddy, if that is so, why do you allow Platt and others to continue to organize for your nomination?" The Governor replied that he had told them that they must not do so, and reiterated his opposition to the nomination. "Then you are not a candidate?" inquired Senator Hanna; "No," said Governor Roosevelt, "I am not." "Then you will not be a candidate will you?" "No; I will not. But, Senator, if they nominate me notwithstanding, what shall I do? How could I help it?" "By G — —, Teddy, you know," said Senator Hanna, "that there is

²³ Elmer Dover (1873-1940) was Hanna's private secretary from 1897 until the senator's death in 1904.

²⁴ Olcott, *Life of William McKinley*, II, 274, quotes Fairbanks at this point.

nothing in this country which can compel a man to run for an office who doesn't want it. You know that nobody can compel you or me to be a candidate for anything if we are determined we shall not be. If you are nominated all that you will have to do will be to rise in your place and decline the nomination. If you tell the convention that you will not have it they will not try to nominate you; and if it should nominate you and you tell them that you will not accept, there will be no danger of your being forced into the race." Then the Senator added: "Teddy, if you are nominated will you rise in your place and flatly decline?" "I will, Senator," he replied. They then shook hands cordially and Senator Hanna withdrew.²⁵ After the Senator made this statement as to the interview he said: "We will nominate you; that is our desire." While the suggestion was unexpected and very flattering to me, I said that I appreciated the situation fully; "the honor is a great one and I regret that I cannot see my way clear to consent to be a candidate. It goes without saying that I would be glad to render any personal service to the President or to yourself, but it has seemed to me that I should not be a candidate, and that indeed it is unnecessary that I should be. I have reflected upon the matter since my name has been suggested and I have come to the conclusion that I ought not to be a candidate, and that it is not necessary in the interest of the President that I should be. I am sorry that I cannot come to the same conclusion that you and other good friends have reached."

No reference was made to the platform, which was the object of my visit, and I returned immediately to my hotel.

²⁵ Olcott, *Life of William McKinley*, II, 276, ends the quotation of Fairbanks at this point.

Postscript

Hanna's effort to stop Roosevelt's nomination failed. On Sunday evening, June 17, President McKinley refused to assist Hanna; over the phone he told the senator that "The choice of the convention will be his choice; he has no advice to give." The next day Roosevelt issued a statement of withdrawal, but it left open the possibility that he would accept. Once again, on June 19, McKinley backed away from an anti-Roosevelt posture. "The Administration wants the choice of the convention." That choice came on June 21 when Roosevelt was nominated.²⁶

Could Fairbanks have been named in the face of the pro-Roosevelt tide at the convention? Had the administration and the president pushed him earlier in the spring, he could have developed some strength. It is unlikely, however, that the colorless Indiana politician would have been as attractive as the charismatic Roosevelt. Fairbanks's own caution and indecision settled the matter. Four years later he would be the vice-presidential candidate of the GOP, but he never came close to the presidency again.

²⁶ Gould, *Presidency of William McKinley*, 218.