The Nomination of the Democratic Candidate in 1924

By SEXSON E. HUMPHREYS

One of the strangest among the phenomena of American party history is the Democratic National Convention of 1924, in which all the elements that tend to divide the Democratic party combined to produce a bitterness such as had never been seen in a political convention before and to send the number of ballots required to name a candidate to the record figure of 103.

Historians are familiar with the problems that caused the impasse and have frequently analyzed their significance. Students of politics find in the convention a demonstration of how diverse are the interests represented in the Democratic party. There is one question regarding the convention, however, that has largely gone unanswered, and frequently unasked. That is the question of how it happened that John W. Davis became the nominee of the party. This is an important question, for it represents the first time since 1860 that the party had gone south of the Mason-Dixon line for its candidate, unless Woodrow Wilson, born in Virginia, but nominated from New Jersey, be considered an exception. The nomination indicates also the triumph of the metropolitan element in the party that was to lead it to defeat in 1928.

John W. Davis was the second choice, not of the forces which had kept William G. McAdoo in the lead during most of the convention, but of the forces of Al Smith—the urban, Catholic, and financial interests in the party. Mr. Davis was not a Catholic,¹ but if the convention is to be explained in

¹The writer is under the necessity of using the term Catholic in connection with this study of the convention of 1924. All readers should understand that it is not used as a term of disrespect. The student of history cannot shun the fact that prejudice existing in different parts of the country has resulted in a defensive political alliance which includes a large portion of the adherents of the Catholic Church.
terms solely of the religious conflict, his nomination was a victory for the Catholic forces, for they threw their support to him. Certainly he represented the urban and financial interests of the party. His southern residence was an advantage in gaining the nomination, but had contributed little to his political philosophy.

The failure to analyze the conditions that produced his nomination resulted from the suddenness of the outcome. The convention, after balloting uselessly for one hundred ballots, finally and suddenly threw its whole strength behind the banner of John W. Davis. In the rush to dig out of their "morgues" biographies of John W. Davis and to interview him upon the campaign, the journalists forgot to investigate or report the causes of the stampede. Historians, because of an overshadowing interest in the deadlock itself, have contented themselves with the explanation that the delegates were tired, but, as a matter of fact, the background of the nomination is one of the most thrilling chapters of the convention story.

There are, as every student knows, two opposing factions in the Democratic party. These divisions lie generally to the north and to the south of Pennsylvania and the Ohio River. Democrats in the Old South are members of the ruling class, whose one fear and general campaign issue is the Negro. They look back upon the Reconstruction era and forward to the possibilities of assimilation with the same feelings. Aggressively Protestant, essentially rural, inherently aristocratic, they have never made proscriptive organizations of the type of the Ku Klux Klan unwelcome among them. In the spring of 1924, the Klan and William Jennings Bryan combined to repudiate the outstanding political figure of the South, Oscar W. Underwood, because he was opposed to the ideals of the Klan and to the legal theories underlying the Eighteenth Amendment. They decided to support William G. McAdoo, son-in-law of the canonized Woodrow Wilson, whom they sought to make the political heir of the war-time President.

North and east of the Ohio River lies a Democracy that

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2 The most lucid explanation of the positions of these two wings of the party is contained in Sherwin Lawrence Cook's The Torchlight Parade (New York, 1928), 207-8. Equally aware of the situation, but more restrained in their statements regarding it, are the historians of the Democratic party. Henry Minor, The Story of the Democratic Party (New York, 1928), 461; Frank R. Kent, The Democratic Party: A History (New York, 1928), 466.
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is to a large extent metropolitan. One, two, and three generations are its elements removed from Europe, and their one political voice cries for the enlargement of the opportunities of the common man. The victims of Ku Klux Klan attacks from the standpoint both of their national origins and their Roman Catholic religion—for a large part of them were Catholic in 1924—they were determined to defeat the candidate of the Klan and the Anti-Saloon League. They found support in the fact that the business interests of the East were suspicious of McAdoo, among other reasons, because he had been a party to the government control of the railways during the Wilson administration. They rallied for the fight around the standards of Alfred E. Smith (whom they called "Al", the tremendously popular governor of the state within whose borders the convention was to be held), able administrator and brilliant personality.

The battle lines were tightly drawn, and the newspapermen at the rim of the battlefield early predicted the breaking of the record for the duration of the convention, when William R. Pattangall of Maine sallied forth from the Eastern ranks with a gage of battle. He offered a resolution condemning by name the Ku Klux Klan. The battle was bitterly fought by the most brilliant speakers on both sides, including William Jennings Bryan himself. His closing address turned the tide and the amendment was lost by less than half a vote. But the religious issue was clearly before the convention, and nothing now could keep it out of the minds of the delegates. There could be no compromise. Race and religion were chief among the issues and both sides stood firm on their ground long after the fifty-nine ballots it had required to nominate Franklin Pierce in 1852 had been exceeded.

Each ballot began with the cry of Alabama—"Twenty-four votes for Oscar W. Underwood." As the ballots were taken, the totals were very nearly the same on each test—more than five hundred votes for McAdoo, more than three hundred for Smith, but more than seven hundred necessary to nominate. Neither side would yield. Compromise after compromise was proposed. John W. Davis, Samuel M. Ralston, Edwin T. Meredith, Carter Glass, Woodbridge N. Ferris—

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*New York Evening Post, June 22, 1924.

The Official Proceedings of the National Democratic Convention of 1924 (Washington, 1924) has been used throughout this study, but the writer has thought it unnecessary to make particular citations.
were offered by states interested in seeing the contest stopped before the party should be crushed in the gore of its own battle, but neither army would brook reason within its ranks.\

Then up rose William Jennings Bryan, thrice the nominee of his party for the Presidency, loved by many, and respected by most of the citizens of the nation he had served and sought to serve. He began to speak, but his speech of a few days before had marked the end of his influence in the party he had once ruled. No longer was his voice able to soothe the fires. He spoke in the same sonorous voice that had excoriated August Belmont a dozen years before, but when he spat upon Wall Street now, all New York spat back at him. The Bronx-filled galleries heckled the old leader unmercifully. A New Jersey delegate interrupted to tell the Great Commoner that he had voted for him the three times but was now genuinely sorry. A voice from the gallery hoped this would be Bryan’s last convention appearance.\

Governor Smith, who had possibly never expected to win the nomination, offered to withdraw from the race if McAdoo would do the same, but the ex-Secretary of the Treasury, whose acceptance of the offer would have allowed him practically to name the convention’s choice, refused to consider such a proposal or to release his delegates. On and on the battle raged.

The leaders of the contesting forces both had tremendous personal followings. The McAdoo celebrations of each Sunday took on the aspect of revival meetings. The Smith loyalty was displayed in the galleries of the convention hall, where the citizens of New York chose to honor their governor by heckling those who sought to defeat him. For ten days, it was a convention beyond the control of the bosses that usually dominated the choice of the presidential candidate. Delegates voted, in larger proportion than usual, for the men they sincerely respected or whose principles they upheld. Hundreds of them faithfully obeyed the instructions of the voters

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William Allen White, an eminent political commentator and an eminent politician in his own right, was reporting the convention for a newspaper syndicate. He reprint ed his convention correspondence in a volume, Politics: The Citizen’s Business (New York, 1924). On page 96, he declares: "The real second-choice candidates were Davis for the East and Ralston for the West and South. . . . but blind leaders held back the decisive struggle.."\

Cook, op. cit., 965-6.\

White, op. cit., 107; Christian Science Monitor, July 1, 1924.
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in the primaries and gave their support, ballot after ballot, to Mr. McAdoo.

Wiliest of all the bosses was Thomas Taggart, who had been an important factor in Democratic conventions before. He now planned the greatest coup of his life—the nomination of an Indiana leader in a year when the Teapot Dome seemed to augur Democratic triumph at the polls. Samuel M. Ralston, Governor of Indiana and then Senator, was an ideal compromise candidate. He was a Protestant, perhaps a little tinged by the Klan, yet beloved by the Catholic Democracy of the state he had long served. He possessed many of the same Victorian virtues that made President Coolidge popular. He said little, made very few opponents, and no enemies. Two years before he had succeeded in defeating a famous man, who had earlier served Indiana in the Senate for twelve years, Albert J. Beveridge. Ralston had endeared himself to the conservative members of his party in the East by this victory. At the same time, his record had been liberal enough that Bryan could look upon him with friendly interest.

If ever a dark horse was carefully groomed for a race, it was Samuel Ralston. He alone, of all the prominent candidates, was not in New York during the convention. Rather he was attending carefully to his regular duties in Washington and Indianapolis, appearing a little irked even that the Indiana delegation should so consistently cast its thirty votes for him.

He wrote Mr. Taggart, who had placed his name before the convention and constituted himself his campaign manager, telling his friend that he was not seeking the presidency. Taggart, however, was too shrewd to say anything about the communication. Ballot after ballot the Indiana delegation cast its every vote for Senator Ralston, while scattered delegates from neighboring states and even some from far away swelled the total by two or three votes on each succeeding ballot.

While the air burned most strongly with religious warfare, votes from all over the hall began to come to the man from Indiana. The New York papers freely predicted his nomination. When he passed John W. Davis of West Virginia,
who had been consistently in third place, and was known to
be the second choice of the Smith followers, Ralston's success
seemed to observers in the press gallery to be a matter of a
few ballots only.

But Tom Taggart was more experienced in convention
manipulation than were the newspapermen. As he looked
around him, he was worried because he sensed that the boom
had come too early. For a while he gave the tide toward Ral-
ston his support, but after a few more ballots he became con-
firmed in his belief that there was still so much strength in
the two battling armies that his candidate would be crushed
between them and definitely eliminated when the first evi-
dence that support for him was fading should become appar-
ent.

While Ralston was still gaining, Mr. Taggart drew from
his pocket the letter that the Senator had written him two
days before. He strode to the platform and read it, asking
Ralston's following to allow his withdrawal in the interest of
harmony. He then split the thirty Indiana votes between
McAdoo and Smith and sat back to wait. He frowned upon
the votes that were cast here and there for his candidate.

On the eighty-seventh ballot, Taggart felt that the time
had come for a move. Both factions would now welcome a flank
movement that offered relief from exhaustion. Indiana's re-
turn to Ralston on that ballot was the signal for Missouri to
follow, and before the ballot was completed, the Hoosier
Senator had gathered ninety-three votes from all over the
Union. Steadily he climbed almost to the two hundred mark
by the time adjournment came. Reports became prevalent
over the convention that on the next morning McAdoo would
withdraw in favor of Ralston, assuring him four hundred and
fifty additional votes.11

With Taggart, making final arrangements in a room
far up in the Waldorf-Astoria, were: Pat Harrison, whose
Mississippi province had voted for McAdoo long and earnestly;
N. W. Brickly, whose Missouri delegates had long waited to
come in line for Ralston and had often strained at the leash;
Angus McLean, national committeeman from North Carolina;
Robert Jackson, who had brought forward the candidacy of
Governor F. H. Brown of New Hampshire for the presidency,
but who was now willing to bargain for an ambassadorship;

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11 Richmond (Ind.) Palladium, July 9, 1924.
Frank Farris of Missouri, and others of indeterminate complexion. The group was jubilant, and plans for the division of the spoils were already under way.

At this important moment came a phone call from Indianapolis for Mr. Taggart. The champion told the Senator of the day's events in New York City and spoke in glowing terms of the advance of the Ralston vote to nearly two hundred. The Senator failed to become equally excited. "Yes," he said, "I know all about it; listened to it on the radio; audibility perfect and clear."

He would be nominated beyond doubt in a very few more ballots, Taggart informed him. All the delegates were now so near exhaustion that they would ask few questions once the boom was started. Everyone would be fighting to get on the band-wagon while there was still patronage left.

The group surrounding Mr. Taggart sensed a difficulty and interrupted their conversation to catch the reply. They puffed carefully at Mr. Taggart's cigars, but only that gentleman heard the calm voice of the man in Indianapolis, who had never campaigned for the presidency, but who now seemed to have the nomination within his reach.

"My family does not wish me to take it," the Senator said deliberately, "and my own views coincide with theirs." His doctors, too, had told him it would be unwise for him to accept.13

That Mr. Taggart was amazed was not surprising, despite the warnings he had been given. He protested volubly. But his friend was sincere and remained stubborn. Nothing could budge him from the belief that a man of sixty-eight years was too old for the presidency.13 Finally Mr. Taggart gave up and broke the news to the "diplomats" gathered in the room, most of whom had already inferred the answer.

Confronted by this unexpected turn, Senator Harrison promptly announced that John W. Davis would be the nomi-
At the same time, Governor Smith and his campaign manager, Franklin D. Roosevelt, were at the Biltmore. Along with them were George Brennan, Democratic boss of Illinois whose adherence to Smith had lost him the long-time friendship of Taggart, Wilbur Marsh, and a number of others. All were talking John W. Davis.

On the morrow, July 9, the convention, which had first assembled almost three weeks before, heard Mr. Taggart, now heart-broken, for the second time withdraw the Indiana Senator's name. On the one hundred third ballot, the convention zestfully nominated John W. Davis of West Virginia, brilliant Wall Street attorney. The inevitable motion to make the nomination unanimous was proposed by Thomas Taggart.

There is a type of mind that is forever seeking the occult and refusing to accept explanations that are either simple or complimentary to the actors in any political drama. This type of mind is especially prone to deal with politics. Hence there is a legend around Indianapolis and elsewhere that makes Ralston refuse the nomination because it would have entailed an obligation to provide for friends of Governor Smith. It is nothing less than absurd.

Senator Ralston was mentioned throughout the convention as an ideal compromise candidate. If there had been any enmity at all between him and the Smith faction, there could have been no such mention. It was the enmity of Bryan towards John W. Davis, of course, that kept him from being the nominee much earlier. Senator Ralston, moreover, as we have seen, had at least twice before, when no bargain with Smith was in view, asked that his name be not presented. Though the statement before the Indianapolis convention and the first letter to Taggart looked like pure politics at the time they were given, in the light of the final refusal, they must be considered sincere. Finally, since Senator Ralston died within

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14 In a personal letter to the writer, dated February 6, 1924, Senator Pat Harrison corroborates the whole of Michelson's story (A copy of the account had been sent to him) and adds: "I haven't the slightest doubt that if Senator Ralston had not phoned Senator Taggart and told him it was impossible for him to accept, and that the doctors had told him that he could not, that Ralston would have been nominated within the next twenty-four hours. At the time of the telephonic communication there were groups of delegates in Taggart's room from many states—delegates who had been voting for other candidates, but who were voluntarily coming in and assuring the Ralston managers that they were ready at the appropriate time to swing over to Ralston. If Ralston had only given his word and permitted Taggart and the Ralston managers to proceed, he would have been nominated and I believe elected President of the United States."

15 Michelson, in New York World, July 9, 1924.
the next year, it should not be necessary to look further than the reason which he gave—namely, his health—to discover adequate motivation for his refusal.