**FEATURE STORY**

**Trump’s Emergence Brings Memories of Willkie**

By Matt Ottinger

The materialization of the Donald Trump phenomenon and his solidification as Republican nominee for President of the United States may stoke memories for Hoosiers of another businessman turned politician. Several national publications have already noted comparisons to Elwood native Wendell Willkie, who surpassed expectations and surprised many by capturing the GOP nomination in 1940.

And while there are similarities, stark contrasts must also be considered as well. Stephen T. Jackson, Madison County’s official historian, credits Willkie’s charisma for ultimately defeating favorites Sen. Robert Taft and Thomas Dewey en route to the nomination.

“He just had an ability to be able to speak to people in a way that drew them to him,” Jackson relays. “Clearly, that was demonstrated by the numbers of people who flocked to hear him speak as he made his way campaigning across the country.”

**All about business**

A notable similarity to Donald Trump is that both he and Willkie were known for their business acumen, as Willkie led the large electric utility company, Commonwealth & Southern Corp. In fact, one of Willkie’s main campaign points was challenging President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a New Deal program that posed a threat to Commonwealth & Southern.

“Willkie endeared a lot of people to him because he challenged Roosevelt’s TVA program, and of course he was trying to protect his own utility company,” Jackson notes.

**PARTY CRASHERS**

Formal acceptance of Wendell Willkie’s presidential nomination took place on August 17 in his hometown of Elwood. He was greeted by a crowd estimated at 250,000 and spoke from a platform in a field where he once herded cows for 75 cents a week (Photo courtesy of Library of Congress).

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Election 2016: Presidential comparison

offers. “But in the process, he made a lot of headlines and personal converts due to his outspokenness. That stimulated what were called Willkie Clubs. Hundreds of them sprang up throughout the country because of their support for him.”

And while Trump is often criticized by some for once being sympathetic to candidates and ideas of the Democratic Party, Willkie too was a convert – a Democrat until 1939.

“He was getting so much encouragement by his supporters to run for the presidency because of his charisma,” Jackson states. “And he had advisors, and they realized that in order to run for President, if he ran as a Democrat he’d have to go through the Democrat primary, and they didn’t feel like he’d be a strong enough candidate to defeat Roosevelt. So he elected to change politics and become a Republican.”

Opposition

Trump and Willkie are hardly peas in the same political pod, however. Where Willkie parlayed his charm into gaining acceptance, Trump has traveled gleefully down an antagonistic path during his campaign.

“Obviously, Trump is more, how shall I say it, caustic,” Jackson points out. “Willkie was smooth. Trump speaks his mind, and Willkie was more guarded in his speech. He didn’t want to ruffle feathers, and Trump doesn’t give a second thought to ruffling feathers.”

Another difference is their respective paths to the nomination. While Trump effectively secured the nomination with consistently strong showings in early primaries and caucuses, Willkie never formally entered any and his success came at the GOP convention amid a rigorous process of surviving multiple ballots.

“Willkie came in further down the ladder (than Trump),” Jackson notes. “But you know, he predicted correctly that he would be nominated on the sixth ballot. I don’t know if that was a good guess or if he actually had a good feel for it, but he correctly predicted that when the convention started.”

Willkie ultimately won just 10 states (including Indiana) and lost the Electoral College count to Roosevelt (449-82), who then began his third term in office.

Willkie, however, is still remembered and honored with Willkie Day festivities and parades in both Madison and Rush counties. (He headquartered his presidential campaign out of Rushville – his wife’s hometown – and his running mate was Sen. Charles L. McNary of Oregon.)

RESOURCES: Stephen T. Jackson, Madison County historian | Indiana Historical Society, at www.indianahistory.org
the New Deal had
Fortune
parties devoted to progressivism. …

To defeat President William Howard Taft for the 1912 Republican nomination, Elihu Root helped to rescue the country from having both
J.P. Morgan & Co. Root’s uncle Elihu had been a U.S. senator and Theodore Roosevelt’s secretary of war. By opposing his friend TR’s bid
mailing to Princeton’s class of 1924 and Yale’s class of 1925. Another close Willkie adviser was Thomas Lamont, chairman of the board of
Polk, Wardwell, Gardner & Reed, whose clients included the J.P. Morgan banking empire. Root began seeking support for Willkie with a
sprouted like dandelions, but not spontaneously. Their growth was fertilized by Oren Root, a lawyer with the Manhattan law firm of Davis,
Wendell Willkie’s 1940 Nomination: When Party Establishments Mattered

Winston Churchill’s wartime government. But aghast at his sagging poll numbers, Willkie then decided to do what it might take to win: He
September 1940, the Germans were bombing London. Willkie was, therefore, forced to argue that he would make a better commander in
of New Deal economics, noting that more than a decade after the start of the Great Depression unemployment stood at almost 15%. But by
“opposition research” on Willkie’s secret paramour, Irita Van Doren, who was the
himself asking operatives to publicize what would now be called
strange bedfellows.” In the Oval Office, Roosevelt accidentally recorded
husband, Mrs. Willkie reputedly noted in private that “politics makes
the campaign’s duration – with his wife, Edith, from whom he had grown
distant. Of her smiling public appearances with her newly-nominated
Willkie, ‘the barefoot boy from Wall Street,’ cultivated an Indiana aura but had become a Manhattan fixture. By 1937 his criticism of
New York, sought to make himself more voter friendly by returning to Elwood
for his formal acceptance speech. He also patched things up – at least for
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Willkie would have preferred to fight the 1940 campaign over the president’s managerial deficiencies and what he argued was the failure
of New Deal economics, noting that more than a decade after the start of the Great Depression unemployment stood at almost 15%. But by
September 1940, the Germans were bombing London. Willkie was, therefore, forced to argue that he would make a better commander in
chief than Roosevelt during a time of possible global war.

Willkie issued no public objection to the president’s controversial decisions to seek a peacetime military draft and provide destroyers to
Winston Churchill’s wartime government. But aghast at his sagging poll numbers, Willkie then decided to do what it might take to win: He
began feigning a strong streak of isolationism. …”

Willkie traveled the country and parlayed his charisma, transitioning from a longshot candidate to the GOP’s nominee for
president (Photo courtesy Indiana Historical Society, P0569).