Significance

Alfred E. Smith would have been a memorable and noteworthy figure in 20th-century American political history even if he had not been cast in these two leading roles. He was one of the ablest governors in the history of New York State and a public administrator of the first rank, and he was a principal figure in the national Democratic Party for more than a decade. Throughout his political career, Smith earned high marks for his personal qualities as well as for his conviction that public life is an honorable calling in which anyone with the ability and character to rise to the challenge should be able to succeed on the basis of merit.

Smith was a pragmatist, not a theorist. During his twelve-year legislative career and eight years as New York's chief executive he advanced a wide array of creative and constructive solutions to many of 20th-century America's most complex problems. These included affordable and better-quality low-cost housing, health insurance, child welfare, wage and hours regulation, public control of power resources, more and better public parks, and enhanced educational opportunities. Convinced that government should be both economical and effective, as governor Smith worked on securing such structural changes as reorganization of the state government, institution of an executive budget, and implementation of a merit system for key appointments. He left an indelible imprint on the state not only by modernizing its government but by improving its services to its citizens. As governor, Smith also vigorously defended civil liberties and stood firm against such violations of them as censorship and loyalty tests.

A product of New York City's Tammany Hall organization, Smith had exceptional political skills and a strong sense of political loyalty. But he also demanded from others the same high standards of integrity he set for himself, and when he sought political objectives he did so in an effort to strengthen public accountability. Smith made extensive use of informed experts (for example, academics, social workers, city planners, and criminologists), he cultivated non-partisan citizens organizations, and he attracted to his banner many (women and independents in particular) whose experience and talents he drew freely upon in his administration. On those occasions when Smith could not persuade an unfriendly legislature to accept his proposals, his preferred solution was to take issues to the people, build a favorable public opinion, and secure adoption through subsequent elections or through referenda and constitutional amendments if necessary.

Such personal and political attributes attracted to Smith considerable respect not only from the public at large and from knowledgeable commentators but even from his political adversaries. Through his achievements in office Al Smith inspired a generation of future public servants, in New York and elsewhere, who found in his rise from the Lower East Side to a position of responsible leadership the encouragement to aspire to service and leadership in government.

Changes that New York State adopted in response to Al Smith's leadership made – and continue to make – it a better place in which to live. At the same time, Smith helped to transform his own political party into one that would stand for progressive and liberal initiatives addressing human and social problems. For these reasons alone he emerged as

a presidential candidate during the 1920s, but other factors also drew attention to him. Believing that the 18th Amendment was an unwarranted intrusion on state and individual rights, he consistently opposed nationally imposed prohibition of alcoholic beverages. Smith's signature on legislation ending New York's concurrent enforcement of the Federal prohibition laws in 1923 brought him national notice, and during the next ten years he would be the country's principal political advocate of modification of prohibition.

Combined with his unconventional origins, his colorful personality, and especially his Roman Catholicism, Smith's opposition to prohibition would also make him a polarizing figure in national politics during the 1920s – a fact most vividly illustrated by the Democratic Party's celebrated Madison Square Garden deadlock in 1924. By 1927, however, Smith's nomination as the party's next standard-bearer was virtually certain: not only were there no true rivals for leadership but many Democrats had concluded that he had to be nominated in 1928 for the good of the party. As later events would show, that nomination would bring not only the climax of Al Smith's political success but its abrupt and painful conclusion.

Smith was recognized as someone with a knack for communicating with his listeners. First in New York and then in national politics, Smith conducted honorable campaigns that reflected his own basic honesty and courage while they enlightened and persuaded the voters. He refused to talk down to rank-and-file voters as most other politicians of his age did. Instead, avoiding glittering generalities and lofty rhetoric in favor of the

ordinary language, honest emotions, and plain talk that came so naturally to him, Smith treated his listeners as thinking, responsible peers worthy of being communicated with.

In addition, Smith had a distinctive speaking manner characterized by candor and a lack of pretense. Referring frequently to "the record," he addressed the pertinent issues methodically and straightforwardly. An animated and persuasive orator, he used both down-to-earth humor and cutting sarcasm to great effect and was a devastating debater. Throughout his career Smith courageously stood his ground against hypocrites, mountebanks, and political opportunists – sometimes using his considerable popular appeal to turn public opinion against them. His addresses typically manifested not only Smith's fine mind and penetrating analysis but the warm-hearted manner and generous spirit that earned him the sobriquet "the Happy Warrior."

Smith did not believe in image-making influenced by polls, pandering to his listeners, or disguising his essential nature as a rough-hewn commoner who had not enjoyed advanced educational opportunities. Yet he was perhaps the first major national political figure who fully understood the previously untapped power a candidate's unique personality possessed in attracting popular interest and support. Although this approach did not bring Al Smith the presidency in 1928, it would, when cultivated by other skilled hands, flourish and bloom in American politics later in the century. He also was among the first to sense the political potential in the new medium of radio, a tool that within a few years others would master.

In New York, Smith had been among the forerunners of the new breed of America's urban, ethnic political leaders, who would go on to transform American politics at all levels. Bringing to politics practical objectives, attracting (and energizing) new constituencies, and employing different styles of politicking, these new leaders had quickly risen to positions of power in cities and states across the country. It was Smith's fortune to be the first such leader to articulate in national politics the perspectives and needs of the urban, ethnic peoples who were on the threshold of exercising their growing voting prowess. During a decade when the political and cultural balance between America's rural areas and its cities irreversibly tipped to favor the latter, Al Smith naturally became their residents' hero and spokesman. His run for the presidency in 1928 was for them a source initially of great joy but ultimately of great sorrow.

Smith's presidential campaign also played a major role in recasting national politics in ways that would influence presidential elections for decades to come. His nomination shattered the Democratic "Solid South" but won him the nation's largest cities and counties and attracted to the Democratic Party elements of what would after 1932 become the long-lived New Deal coalition. It was an unkind irony that the man Al Smith had, with great difficulty, persuaded to succeed him as governor of New York, Franklin D. Roosevelt, would capitalize on what Smith had begun in 1928. It was a crueler irony yet that Smith's later years would see him in lonely opposition to that same man, who took the liberalism that Smith had explored earlier into regions where he himself had declined to go.

Smith consistently followed his convictions wherever they led him and spoke his mind without stint or second-guessing. It was typical of Smith, therefore, that he would confront questions about his Roman Catholicism and its possible political implications in a forthright and resolute manner. Denying any conflict between his religious convictions and obligations and his official duties and actions as a public figure, Al Smith staked out the ground on which later candidates – Catholics and non-Catholics alike – also would stand. Exposed in 1928 to a cascade of often-reprehensible attacks from bigots, snobs, and narrow-minded opponents, Smith did not respond with reprisals and hatred. Instead, he called for tolerance, a fair hearing for all viewpoints, and continued faith in the American dream, thereby attracting admirers who looked beyond politics to the importance of these values in American culture.

It was Smith's misfortune, however, that his personal political opportunity to claim the ultimate prize of American politics coincided with the climax of the mood of contentment and optimism the United States enjoyed before the onset of the Great Depression. It would be small comfort to Smith in later years that the character he displayed and the themes he sounded in 1928 might well have elected him had the presidential campaign occurred a year or so later.

So it was that Al Smith should be remembered as the forerunner of the kind of politician who would later compete for the country's most powerful – and symbolic – elected position, the American presidency. In due course one of Smith's political heirs, his own path to success having been blazed by Al Smith in 1928, would attain the office his

predecessor had sought in that year. Through the rejection of the earlier nominee and then the success of the later one, Americans would finally come to accept with equanimity the election of a Roman Catholic to the highest public office in the land. Al Smith's singular political legacy, then, was his 1928 sacrifice to secure the bridge that John F. Kennedy would triumphantly cross in 1960.