

## THE CAMPAIGNER

### **The Battle Begins**

When Al Smith had struck his final pose for the newspaper photographers, when his joyous supporters had tired of celebrating his nomination, and when the last delegate had left Houston for home, Smith and the party of which he was now the standard-bearer had to get down to the business of organizing a campaign and devising a strategy that would produce an upset victory in November. The task of getting organized carried special urgency for Smith: although he and his political associates had already begun to give some thought to the campaign even before the national convention, they were hardly well-prepared for the formidable task that lay ahead.

Smith could not count upon a strong party organization for much help to ease his transition from governor to presidential nominee. The national Democratic Party in June 1928 consisted of little more than a name, a small treasury, and a national committee (two persons from each state and territory) that was largely ceremonial in nature. There was no permanent staff, no planning apparatus, no press office, not even a physical headquarters – and yet the election was only months away. Smith would have to move swiftly to deal with these handicaps.

The logistical problems involved in establishing a headquarters, assembling a staff, preparing campaign publicity, and commencing a national campaign paled in significance, however, in comparison with the challenge of mapping out a strategy that would enable the Democrats to carry the country against Herbert Hoover and the Republicans by convincing potential voters that Smith would make the more capable president. Smith's long-standing reluctance to make himself known outside New York and his preconvention posture of silence on national issues made it imperative now that he establish definite positions on the issues of the day and acquaint voters with his personality – all in a relatively short period of time. The reality was that Smith had a national *reputation*, not a record; moreover, many Americans had questions about much in that reputation. The complacent approach Smith and his inner circle had been able to follow during the preconvention period was no longer feasible: After a decade or demurrals, Al Smith finally had to cross over into the world beyond the Hudson River.

In keeping with tradition, Smith's first task was to choose a new chairman of the Democratic National Committee. This person would manage the campaign. For Smith, finding such a person was a dilemma in itself. As one New York politician summed up the situation: "The Governor says he wants a Chairman that he knows and who knows him. But the trouble is that the Governor does not know anybody who knows National politics." This statement was not entirely true, but the pool of Smith's acquaintances who might be tapped was indeed small. For months there had been speculation in the press, as

well as among informed Democrats, that Senator Peter G. Gerry of Rhode Island, a wealthy (and wet) non-Catholic with considerable national stature and political experience, was the man in line for the chairmanship. George R. Van Namee and Franklin D. Roosevelt, two of Smith's New York associates, were also thought possible contenders for the post but evidently were not seriously considered. When Gerry proved to be unsatisfactory to some of Smith's friends – reportedly those in Tammany Hall in particular, Smith selected instead a political neophyte, John J. Raskob.<sup>1</sup>

Raskob and Smith had met as early as 1922 and had formed a friendship by the mid-1920s. They had become political allies when the wealthy businessman and financier helped to bankroll Smith's re-election in 1926. The two men had hit it off very well. Their complementary personalities, their similar success-story careers, their shared devotion to the Roman Catholic Church (and, perhaps, their usefulness to one another) – all these factors had brought the two men close together. Raskob's rise from obscurity to positions of importance in both the du Pont and General Motors corporate hierarchies (he was a member of the finance committee and a vice-president of both companies, but he spent most of his time working for General Motors) had brought him widespread attention as a spokesman for business as well as the reputation of being an organizational, managerial, and financial wizard.

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<sup>1</sup> Through ability and entrepreneurial skills, Raskob had worked his way up from stenographer to secretary to Pierre S. du Pont. This eventually brought Raskob to General Motors, where he rose swiftly.

Raskob's close personal friendship with Smith and his proven executive and organizational skills, then, were sufficient qualifications for a presidential nominee who had few if any friends with political experience at the national level. Just how Smith came to settle on Raskob for the chairmanship is not entirely clear. Frances Perkins related that Smith decided upon the businessman at the last minute, in preference to Gerry, because Raskob had asked for the job. Others suspected that Smith had another, unnamed businessman (evidently Owen D. Young of General Electric) in mind but could not get him to agree, although Young's views on water power apparently were also an obstacle. Raskob himself insisted in later years that he had opposed his own selection because he was a wet, a Catholic, and a businessman but that Smith had overruled him. Others close to Smith had also counseled the nominee against Raskob without success. Whatever the specifics of the decision-making process, Smith made up his mind and, dutifully, the National Committee unanimously endorsed Raskob on July 11.

Surprise, controversy, and dismay – public and private – greeted the announcement that Raskob would direct Smith's campaign. "He is very rich, very wet, and very Catholic," one periodical succinctly observed. "And besides that, he is not a democrat [sic]." Few Democrats had expected to find a wealthy business executive and Wall Street speculator who described his occupation as "capitalist" at the head of their National Committee. Coming after Smith's nomination and some of the economic positions that the party had taken in its platform, a feeling grew among some Democrats – especially those of the

Bryan and Wilson camps – that the party had been surrendered to the opposition. Others, including progressives and labor leaders, for example, were also uncomfortable with Smith's selection of Raskob. Even some New York Democrats grumbled, wondering if Raskob thought he was buying stock in the party by accepting the position.

There were those who hailed Smith's choice as an indication that the campaign would be managed in a highly professional manner – and well financed in the bargain, but the bulk of the reaction focused on Raskob's liabilities. His conspicuous opposition to prohibition (not only was Raskob a leader of the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment but he had widely publicized his views on the topic both before and after his selection) reinforced the doubts of some Democrats about the wisdom of his choice and raised fears that Smith's action portended a campaign centered upon opposition to prohibition. Raskob's remarks to the National Committee on July 11 emphasized prohibition as well as economic issues, and in a later interview Raskob declared that his major personal interest was ending the disrespect for law he saw in America as the consequence of prohibition. Moreover, as the recipient of many papal honors because of his generosity to the Roman Catholic Church, it was obvious that Raskob would draw further attention to the matter of Smith's religion, although at this early stage of the campaign many observers still treated the entire topic of Smith's Catholicism with discretion.

Perhaps worst of all for members of Smith's party, though, was the fact that Raskob, besides wholly lacking in political experience, had only recently become a Democrat. Although he had voted for Woodrow Wilson in 1916, Raskob had subsequently described himself as "a thoroughly independent voter," had backed Calvin Coolidge in 1924, and had listed himself as a Republican in the latest edition of Who's Who in America. He was also a member of a prominent G.O.P club in Philadelphia, the Union League.

Open opposition to Raskob among party leaders was muted, but some Democrats were much less diplomatic in private than they could afford to be in public. Senator Carter Glass of Virginia probably spoke for many in the party when he railed at what he termed the "deliberate insult" of Raskob's selection. The Republicans, on the other hand, were delighted by Smith's selection. "Raskob helps us immensely," Raymond Robins wrote to a friend. "He is a Polish-Irish Catholic, a Knight of the Holy Roman Church, a leader of the wets seeking repeal of the 18th Amendment, a leader of the speculative big business group affiliated with the Du Pont's [sic] and the House of Morgan. This all makes happy reading for our folks in the south [sic] and the granger [sic] states."

As the press reported, some in Smith's own circle – particularly Roosevelt but perhaps even Joseph M. Proskauer and Belle L. Moskowitz – had resisted Raskob's selection; so had Senator Joseph T. Robinson of Arkansas, Smith's own running mate.<sup>2</sup> Smith

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<sup>2</sup> Raskob stated in 1931 that Smith had told him Roosevelt did not oppose his appointment as chairman in 1928.

evidently decided to proceed anyway. There was controversy, too, about Raskob's role in the campaign. Roosevelt advised Smith to emphasize that the businessman had been his personal choice and would function as a mere manager, but Smith rejected this advice and throughout the campaign Raskob made numerous political and policy pronouncements. Smith's own rationale for choosing Raskob seemed to be that his appointment would show business leaders that at least one of their kind had confidence in the Democrats and their platform. The candidate also preferred that a non-New Yorker chair the National Committee.

### **The Democrats Decide On A Strategy**

Raskob's selection was the first indication of how Smith intended to confront the general political situation in which he found himself. Leaving the business of organization and finances entirely to Raskob, Smith and his personal advisers turned their attention to the task of devising and implementing what they hoped would be a victorious campaign strategy. Like any other Democrat who might have been nominated in 1928, Smith was in a less-than-enviable position. The Republicans had enjoyed majority-party status since the 1890s, and on the presidential level the Democrats had had little to encourage them other than Wilson's two anomalous victories in 1912 and 1916. The Democratic Party had deteriorated badly since Wilson's time, though. Although it had demonstrated a core strength around 45% of the vote before 1920, the disasters of that presidential year

(36.1%) and in 1924 (28.9 of the three-party vote) made some observers wonder if even that support could be counted on in 1928. The mid-term elections of 1926 had deepened the gloom for the Democrats, since the Republican majority had suffered fewer than the typical off-year losses.

Moreover, Smith faced a formidable foe in Herbert Hoover. Not yet the unpopular figure he would become after the Great Depression, Hoover in 1928 had a generally positive national image as both a self-made man and an engineer. Although his ability as a politician remained to be assayed, Hoover had acquired over the previous decade and more a reputation for being a liberal-minded, farsighted, and immensely successful businessman, humanitarian, and governmental administrator. Many people gave him, as Secretary of Commerce, much of the credit for the prosperous consumer economy that was at its apex in 1928, and in some ways by 1928 Hoover had eclipsed even Coolidge in popularity. Most observers expected, too, that Hoover and the Republicans would run a well-operated and well-financed campaign.

Against such opponents, the Democrats lacked the strong organizational base and widely shared political views that would give them unity and vigor. On the contrary, Democrats had long been a factious lot – a collection of contentious groups that had (as in 1924) actually seemed to prefer disharmony to a cooperative effort against the other party. Unable to bury their differences in an overriding loyalty to either party or principles, as

the Republicans seemed able to do, Democrats found themselves driven out of the party – or took themselves out in disgust – when another faction took control. The rumblings of disharmony being heard in the South, and now at Raskob’s selection, seemed to indicate that this process was already underway at the outset of the 1928 presidential contest.

Finally, as a minority-party nominee at a time when prosperity and complacency seemed to be prevalent, Smith found himself in an agonizing strategic dilemma. Vigorously attacking the Republicans meant defying this contented temper of the times, but a simple and unimaginative “me-too” campaign would hardly induce the voters to turn the Republicans out of office. In fact, merely imitating the G.O.P. would actually leave the majority party in the advantageous position of being the real thing in competition with an imposter. As even the New Republic acknowledged, the truth was that there were (except, perhaps, for economic distress in the Farm Belt) no “burning issues” that aroused much interest in 1928. Smith could elect to challenge – even categorically contradict – the attitudes and policies that had helped to create the very complacency of the era, but both conventional political wisdom and Smith’s personal inclinations worked against his opting for such a radical approach.

As a matter of fact, the only “burning issues” in 1928 seemed to be those that Smith, his personal characteristics, and his background ignited. These things, whether he liked it or not, could hardly be kept from influencing many voters. But the nominee and his

characteristics and background influenced not only Smith's opponents, who believed they made him personally unfit to be president – they became an integral part of the strategy of Smith and his defenders. By emphasizing these aspects of Smith himself, he and his advisors concluded, they might overcome the other handicaps that a Democratic nominee would have in 1928 and see Smith elected as the nation's next president.

The strategy that Smith and his advisors developed to meet the situation in which they found themselves grew out of some assumptions that Smith's political career in New York politics seemed to substantiate. The nominee and his strategists saw no reason to believe that his experience in national politics in 1928 would be any different. Smith had learned that having a dependable base enabled a candidate to make inroads into the ranks of dissatisfied opponents and independents through the shrewd use of the proper tactics. More to the point, Smith had also come to believe that he could win the support of most voters if they became acquainted with his ability, dedication, and integrity. Most of all, though, Smith thought that exposure to his magnetic personality and inspiring background would convince many Americans, like so many New Yorkers, to vote for him.

Smith's dependable base, of course, would be his home state of New York and the Solid South. He and his friends seem to have taken for granted that New York, which had supported him so overwhelmingly in the past, could already be counted to contribute its

45 electoral votes (the most of any state) to the Democratic column. They also appear to have had confidence that the South's traditional loyalty to the Democrats would ultimately prevail over its obvious reservations about a man with his religion, wetness, and other characteristics that had made him objectionable to so many Southerners before Houston, and perhaps more so now after Raskob's selection. When Dixie's 114 electoral votes (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia) were added to those of New York, the nominee was already well over halfway to the 266 electoral votes he needed to win. With these 159 votes virtually in their pocket, Smith and the Democrats could turn to attracting Republicans and independents.

The most vulnerable of the traditionally Republican areas in 1928 seemed to be the upper Mississippi Valley, where there was deep-seated economic distress, vocal dissatisfaction with Republican farm policies, and a history of defections – most recently in 1924, when so many voters in this area had gone over to the candidacy of Wisconsin's former Senator Robert M. LaFollette, Sr., on the Progressive Party ticket. There was a consensus throughout the country that the Democrats ought to be able to capitalize on this situation. Smith and his advisors hoped that promises of farm relief measures and endorsement of certain selected "progressive" issues would make it possible to draw some valuable electoral votes – perhaps the 31 of Wisconsin and Missouri, say – away from Hoover without alarming other sections of the country, especially the Northeast, that opposed

such relief measures and were indifferent to such progressive issues. As for the rest of the region beyond the Mississippi River, Smith and his friends evidently regarded it as largely unimportant and not worth contesting anyway because of its strong Republican majorities.

With the outcome in the South and in the Midwest settled in their heads, Smith and his strategists then concluded that they should concentrate on wresting the crucial Northeastern states away from the Republicans. Here the unpalatable choice between merely echoing the G.O.P. and defying the status quo mood seemed most obvious to the nominee and his friends. The solution to this dilemma, as they saw it, was two-fold. First, they would make it clear to Northeastern voters that a Democratic administration would not depart significantly from the policies that the Harding and Coolidge Administrations had followed. But in addition, they would exploit this section's evident wetness by taking a moderate stand for the revision of prohibition that would attract like-minded Republicans and independents without offending too many drys elsewhere. Smith himself had believed for some time that only prohibition, rather than "ordinary" issues, offered him a chance to pull off a victory in 1928. He thought he could strike a balance between boldness and moderation that would enable him to hold sufficient dry voters in the South and elsewhere while attracting the all-important wet voters who lived in the Northeast. If he could win in New Jersey, Massachusetts, Maryland, Connecticut, and Rhode Island (52 votes), all states counted as opponents of prohibition, he would be

an even two dozen electoral votes away from the 266 needed for victory – and these might well come from the Midwest if all went as planned.

Many observers both inside and outside the party realized that by selecting as his national chairman a high-profile businessman, Smith intended to make the point, especially to the business community but more generally as well, that at least one such business leader had confidence that the Democratic nominee, platform, and presidential nominee alike would not threaten prosperity but actually be good for business. Raskob, whose appointment would help to blunt the Republicans' expected use of the prosperity issue, might be able to persuade other businessmen to support the Democratic ticket and use his personal contacts with other wealthy men to help underwrite the Smith campaign. Raskob's prominence as a critic of prohibition, too, neatly dovetailed with Smith's desire to indicate that a Democratic victory would be a wet victory – as a Republican victory most certainly would not. In those terms, Raskob's selection was a logical one in Smith's eyes. The announcement that the executive would become National Chairman did cause an immediate stir on Wall Street, but whether or not Smith's gambit in choosing him would pay off with money, support, and votes remained to be seen.<sup>3</sup> The success of Smith's action in underscoring his own wetness was even more in doubt.

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<sup>3</sup> There is evidence to suggest that Raskob himself was responsible for this stir on Wall Street.

The bonus in the Northeast in particular, as Smith and his advisors viewed the situation, was the powerful appeal that the nominee's personality and background seemed to hold there. He had proved in his New York campaigns that he could skillfully exploit his identity and attributes in order to win against an entrenched Republican Party. It made sense to them, then, to design a Northeast campaign emphasizing using the same things. After all, many voters in the area from Massachusetts to Maryland differed little except in place of residence from those in the parts of New York where Smith had tallied large margins; they might be expected to respond as voters in the Empire State had when Smith was on the ballot. By signaling that Smith would continue prosperous times, by taking a differentiated stand on prohibition, and by taking advantage of Smith's personal attractiveness to Northeastern voters, the Democrats might be able to swing the Northeast to their column, and with it the 1928 presidential election.

In fact, the more Smith and his associates came to regard his personal characteristics as a solid advantage in his home region, the more they came to look them as an asset that would win him voters, whatever their usual politics, all over the United States. Nor were they the only ones who thought so. "He has IT," one Republican woman was quoted as saying, and even such a severe critic of Smith as Norman M. Thomas could close his generally negative comments about the nominee's political positions with the admission that he felt drawn to Smith on personal grounds. If Smith, who would refuse to downplay his origins and camouflage his personal characteristics anyhow, could draw a sharp

contrast between himself and the somewhat aloof, stuffy Hoover, there could be much to gain. And if the general strategy contemplated for holding the South, tempting the unhappy Midwest, and broadening Smith's appeal in the populous Northeast could bring the Democrats within range of victory in the Electoral College, making Smith himself "the issues, the policies, and the candidate all rolled into one," as Roosevelt expressed it, should clinch the election – if anything could.

Thus from the outset Smith and his friends decided that there had to be more to winning the election in 1928 than merely having Smith take the right positions on "the issues," important as that was: Smith had to get Americans to accept him as their next president. This might seem something of a challenge, since he was so different from most other Americans: he was a lifetime New Yorker, had grown up on city streets, was a descendant of recent immigrants, had been born into the working class, was a member of the notorious Tammany Hall – and had always been a devout Roman Catholic. He was in fact a kind of living stereotype of a "Bowery Boy" for many Americans. Smith and his advisors refused to attempt to mask these facts about Smith. The nominee himself believed that he should be judged by the voters "the way I am or not at all."

Indeed, the nominee and his advisors thought they might be able to turn many of these things to Smith's advantage. They could exploit the quintessentially American aspects of Smith's biography: how he rose to political prominence from an unpromising start in an

immigrant enclave in lower Manhattan's South Street; how he rose from greenhorn backbencher in the Assembly to serve four terms as a highly popular and knowledgeable governor of the nation's largest state; how he rose from being rated as an "inconspicuous" member of Tammany Hall to being hailed for mastering this storied political machine; and how he rose in national politics from total unknown to Democratic nominee in the space of a few years. His devotion to his church and family; his reputation for unstinting personal honesty, official probity, and hard work; his celebrated expertise in the machinery of government; and his very "everyman" ordinariness – all these were things that, Smith and his advisors believed, should attract to him attention, respect, and votes throughout America, just as they previously had in New York.<sup>4</sup>

Nor did Smith and his friends think they should suppress the more unique features of Smith's personality: his intriguing blend of infectious geniality in informal settings and blunt pugnacity on the speaking platform; his distinctive, rather natty appearance (the

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<sup>4</sup> Information about the sizeable monetary subsidies and other financial benefits (nearly \$400,000 – six times Smith's salary during the years in question) that a wealthy New York financier and Democrat, Thomas L. Chadbourne, evidently secretly provided to Smith from 1922 at least through 1928, as a supplement to his official salaries, did not become known until many decades earlier. Although these were not bribes, in the sense that Chadbourne was seeking to influence directly any of Smith's specific decisions or policies, they would have been seen then, as today, as questionable payments. Chadbourne, who asserted in a chapter for his autobiography that was removed before the book's publication after his death that he merely wanted to make it possible for Smith to afford the low salary the state afforded its governor, eventually became disillusioned with Smith for what Chadbourne saw as Smith's lack of frankness and his double-crossing of Chadbourne – especially on issues related to New York's complicated subway situation; Chadbourne was a major investor in New York City's (then private) traction companies field at the time and certainly must have hoped that his subsidies to Smith would have borne some fruit thereby, even if they did not "purchase" Smith's outright support. For his part, Smith did not act as if he had been "bought" but according to Chadbourne was enough embarrassed by the huge financial payments – which by 1928 amounted to more than either man evidently had anticipated at their outset in 1922 – that he seemed willing to shade the true nature of the payments if news of their existence were to come out. Chadbourne's account is not corroborated by any other evidence. It is notable that Smith did not advocate a higher subway fare (which investors such as Chadbourne would have liked) until 1932.

brown derby he wore became its symbol); his strongly accented “N’Yawk” accent, emphasized by Smith’s somewhat harsh radio voice (drys called it a “whiskey voice”); his colorful, earthy speaking style and his habit of mispronouncing words even when he knew the correct way to say them (here, “raddio” for radio became his trademark); his sometimes breezy manner and occasionally broad sense of humor; his palpable lack of polish and sophistication; his apparently willful lack of knowledge of the rest of the nation; and his almost complete ignorance about the world beyond the country’s shorelines. These were the qualities that made Al Smith what he was – his *image*, as it would come to be called in later years. This image clearly had helped him to win support in New York, and he and his advisors believed that it would work the same magic now in the national political arena.

Smith and his friends dismissed the notion that some Americans might find those same aspects of his background and personality so unpalatable that they might even want to deny him the presidency because of them. Perhaps Smith and the members of his circle thought this because of their somewhat naïve faith in the ability of an ordinary person to “make it” in America. Perhaps they possessed a defiant pride that made them flaunt Smith’s very differences. Or perhaps they reflected the legendary provincialism of the New York City they all called home. Undoubtedly there were elements of all of these factors. In any case, their failure to appreciate that Smith might well be rejected for what he was surely prevented them from seeing the risk of making the nominee himself the

centerpiece of their strategy during the 1928 presidential election campaign. If anything, Smith and his friends sometimes exaggerated his personal qualities in order to draw attention to them.<sup>5</sup> To Al Smith, his language, accent, and attire were (in Proskauer's words) "theatrical accessories" that he thought helped him to gain and hold attention on the campaign trail.

Thus the decision to accentuate Smith's "winning personality" was anything but a last, desperate gesture born of the need to disguise the party's similarities to the Republican Party's stands in 1928. ("Al Smith will be the platform," said Smith's ally Senator Key Pittman soon after the Houston convention.) Instead, it was a calculated effort to create, along with the party's "moist" position on prohibition, a distinctiveness for the Democratic ticket that could tip the balance of the election.<sup>6</sup> Smith's personal background and attributes would in any case have helped many American voters to make up their minds about him, both positively and negatively, but he made sure that they would have to accept or reject him as a person.

To implement this last element in the overall strategy that he and his friends hoped would bring victory in November, Smith would repeatedly strive to draw a vivid contrast

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<sup>5</sup> Thus it is no surprise that Smith was a prominent feature of Tammany Hall's traditional July 4 celebration in 1928.

<sup>6</sup> As will be detailed below, many persons – including Republicans, independents, journalists, ordinary citizens, and even overseas commentators – recognized that the fight in 1928 (which one of them wrote would be recalled as "the Smith campaign") would be one between personalities, though they did not always view the likely outcome the same way that Smith and his supporters did. As part of their overall strategy, the Democrats initially avoided criticizing the popular incumbent, Calvin Coolidge, in hopes that he would remain silent about Hoover.

between himself and Hoover, both as candidates and as persons. By means of direct, hard-hitting, plain-talk speeches, Smith anticipated, he would be able to impress Americans with how well he was informed on national matters, how easily he grasped the challenge of the presidency, and how capably he would lead the country if elected. These speeches would also give Smith the opportunity to display his mastery of New York affairs, thereby enhancing the idea that he was competent enough to handle the demands of presiding over the world beyond the Hudson. Smith also expected Hoover to demonstrate weaknesses and make blunders in this, his first partisan campaign of any sort. He thought of himself as poised to exploit Hoover's missteps and sharpen the contrast between the fumbling amateur, Hoover, and the resourceful veteran of political discourse, himself. Smith's chief objective in this regard was to lure Hoover into the kind of public (though long-range) "debate" that had sent Smith's Republican opponents in New York down to defeat. Even if Hoover refused to take the bait, though, Smith would still have an edge if he could make an issue of the Republican nominee's evasiveness.

Beyond these tactical considerations, though, Smith and his advisors believed that Americans would respond enthusiastically on a personal level to the colorful Smith, all the more as they tired of the stodgy Hoover: Smith, the only other candidate, would soon be preferred as a refreshing successor to the famously colorless Vermonter who was winding up his stay in the White House. That Smith's inherent ethnic, urban, and

religious characteristics would in themselves attract many sympathetic voters was taken for granted in his headquarters. But Smith and his friends also relied upon a certain indefinable appeal that, they were confident, would work wonders even with those who were quite different from Smith – once they were exposed to him. Whenever he faced the voters in 1928, then, Smith would play the role that had been so successful in his home state. His vitality, distinctive appearance, unusual background, and personal charm would be designed to contrast with Hoover's somber and stuffy blandness.

### **Getting Down To Work**

Keeping all these strategic considerations in mind, Smith and his associates set about planning an energetic, focused campaign that would convince the American electorate that he was the more able, the better equipped, and, especially, the more appealing nominee. The nature and style of this campaign, quite naturally, would also draw upon Smith's experience in his home state as the veteran nearly twenty successful political campaigns, including four victories at the state level.

Following his acceptance speech, an extended essay setting forth his views on all of the issues, Smith would begin in September to foray out of Albany, covering as much of the country as was feasible while delivering a series of carefully prepared and vigorously delivered addresses that would concentrate, in turn, on each of these principal issues.

Quashing the idea of a time-consuming and probably pointless speaking trip to the pro-Republican West Coast, Smith decided to begin his campaign by invading the upper Mississippi Valley; doing so would symbolize the desire of his party to break the Republican hold on this area and would also demonstrate his readiness to submit himself for public scrutiny nationwide. After similar trips to other contested areas, he would build to a climax during the last two weeks, which he would spend in an intensive speaking tour in the Northeast urban areas that were expected to be so important to the Democrats.<sup>7</sup>

There would be no extended barnstorming, however. Smith decided that sort of campaigning, with dozens of appearances and brief remarks along his route, would leave him too weary to finish up vigorously and might risk overexposure – especially since all of his major speeches would be nationally broadcast. Moreover, Smith had always believed that a limited number of thoughtful and well-prepared addresses, one each on the vital issues of the day, was far preferable to whistle stopping and a barrage of haphazard and probably repetitious speeches. Despite Smith’s objections, though, the number of formal addresses that he was scheduled to give grew from about a dozen to eighteen, and even a few open-air and rear-platform appearances crept into his official itinerary. In addition, informal stops and appearances at the rear of his railroad car

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<sup>7</sup> Smith apparently believed that an election was decided during the last two to six weeks of a campaign. By 1932, perhaps disillusioned by his experience, he described a campaign as more of a “general reception” than an intelligent discussion on the issues.

proliferated as the campaign season wound on. The full fatiguing effect of the 1928 presidential campaign on Smith cannot be gauged, but by late October the strain seemed to be showing on him.

According to one close associate, several of Smith's key aides (Joseph Proskauer, Belle Moskowitz, Robert Moses, and Bernard Shientag in particular) would discuss the broad outlines of each of these addresses well in advance. Smith would review their notes and decide upon the main points to make. Using the material that had been loaded onto the campaign train, the day before the speech was to be delivered Smith would then dictate, with one of his advisors (in 1928, usually Shientag) listening, a first draft of the campaign address. After editing, Smith would read the finished version, typically using the backs of envelopes for his notes. This system, in which Smith had committed to memory the substance of what he wanted to say, still left room for changes in the final wording on the rostrum.

Whatever their number and however they were prepared, Smith was determined that his speeches and other remarks would be characterized by a refreshing directness and candor (the "low down," as he called it) about what he thought and about what he would do if elected, and about what he thought about his opponent's stands. Smith also resolved to adhere to his usual manner of delivery, despite the risks involved in extemporization, and so his speeches, although they usually remained close in content to the pre-delivery text,

were stamped with his unmistakable language and reflected his personality. (In Omaha, he even took the unusual step of responding point by point to a newspaper advertisement attacking him.)<sup>8</sup>

In keeping with his objective of appearing open and knowledgeable, Smith made himself readily accessible to the working press (who would travel on his train), and he promised to hold daily press conferences if he were elected. The campaign, he declared, would show how he intended to behave as president: he would tour the country in order to drum up support for his programs, bring pressure to bear on Congress, and provide Americans with plain talk about his objectives and actions. In spite of the fact that Smith's press aide, Joseph L. Cohn of the New York Graphic, irritated many newspapermen, Smith's personal relations with members of the press in 1928 were quite good (even though the executives and owners of their papers generally favored Hoover) and he probably received better news coverage than Hoover did.

Finally, as in New York, Smith planned to capitalize upon the ineffectiveness of his opponent's campaign. It was clear to the Democrats that Hoover would try to run a safe, confident campaign, limiting his exposures and avoiding any controversies. He would fill his infrequent, cautious addresses with praise for American progress; platitudes about the American character and values; and endorsements of the Republican policies that he

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<sup>8</sup> Smith read word for word only his acceptance speech, one radio address, and a few fragments of other addresses. Also see the discussion of his farm speech in Omaha below.

said corresponded to both. Hoover would let others attack – and react to – his Democratic opponent.<sup>9</sup> If Smith, while presenting himself as a capable and well-informed candidate in his own right, could call attention to Hoover’s reluctance to confront the issues and could harry him into “debating” with Smith, there was a chance that the politically inexperienced Republican candidate would make mistakes that Smith could pounce on with a blend of facts, acerbic humor, and sarcasm. This approach had succeeded in New York, the Democrats thought, and it should work just as well at the national level.

As the campaign evolved through the fall of 1928, it seemed evident that Smith’s style was making an impact on the country. In the press there was much discussion of the role that personality was playing in the campaign, and comparisons of Smith and Hoover’s personalities often showed the former in a more positive light. Interest in the election seemed high, newspaper and radio sales leapt upward, and everywhere Smith went large crowds came out to see him – or, as in the case of a Missouri prison that the New Yorker’s train passed, at least showed great enthusiasm for him. What these people actually thought of Smith was not clear, of course, and perhaps seeing him in person only confirmed their prior opinions for many who glimpsed and heard him. Nevertheless, the great crowds that met Smith, especially in such cities as Chicago and Boston but even in

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<sup>9</sup> In the end, Hoover gave eight campaign addresses after his acceptance speech: one in August, one in September, three in October, and three in November. Only Grover Cleveland and Calvin Coolidge had given fewer speeches during a presidential campaign.

North Carolina and Nebraska, could not but help make him think that his endeavor to put himself across to the voters was succeeding.

By late July, Smith and his long-time advisor Proskauer had already drafted the nominee's formal acceptance speech (the last that any Democrat would ever deliver).<sup>10</sup> He decided to delay its delivery until August 22, however, so that he would have an opportunity to hear and digest Hoover's acceptance address on August 11. Smith discarded the idea of presenting his acceptance remarks at the Biltmore Hotel in Manhattan, where he had a suite, choosing instead to deliver them at his "real home," the state capitol building in Albany. This location would underscore his position as an experienced governor.

During July and August, Smith prepared for the campaign. He met with his running mate, Senator Robinson, and with others whose opinion he respected – for instance, Adolph Ochs, publisher of the New York Times. Smith also invited to conferences in Albany several of his erstwhile rivals for the nomination – Cordell Hull, Walter George, and James Reed – and also a number of other prominent Democrats, among them such notables as Josephus Daniels and Carter Glass.<sup>11</sup> Some of the dregs who came to see

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<sup>10</sup> Smith had invited historian Claude Bowers, who had given a well-received keynote speech in Houston, to consult on his acceptance speech, but Bowers was unable to do so.

<sup>11</sup> Both of Smith's predecessors at the top of the ticket, John W. Davis and James M. Cox, gave speeches on his behalf in 1928. In September, Franklin D. Roosevelt stated that Woodrow Wilson had said in 1918 that he would be "satisfied" with Smith as president, and in October, Wilson's widow made it known that she was returning from Europe in order to vote for Smith.

Smith were disappointed to discover that the candidate's acceptance speech was already in near-final form when they arrived to "consult" with him, and some of them concluded that Smith had invited them to Albany only to soften them up for what he intended to say about prohibition and to derive publicity from their visits; it is clear from the evidence that their suspicions were well-founded.<sup>12</sup>

During this period in late summer Smith also began to familiarize himself with some of the national questions, such as the federal budget system, foreign affairs, and farm relief, that he had studiously avoided for so long. He consulted in Albany with several key members of Congress (notably Senator Pittman of Nevada, who had been instrumental in writing the platform the Democrats had approved in Houston), a number of academics (among them Rexford Tugwell and Lindsay Rogers), and representatives of the American Federation of Labor and the major farm organizations. While all of this was taking place, Smith generally refused to say anything about any of the potential issues of the campaign, and he also declined to comment on Hoover's nationally-broadcast acceptance speech (to which Smith listened) until he gave his own.

### **Smith Gives His Acceptance Address**

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<sup>12</sup> The visit of Glass and Daniels was marked by a bit of awkwardness when the visitors had to be kept waiting while some alcoholic beverages were put out of sight. Although it was no secret that Smith himself drank, and served liquor, having such beverages in view could not have helped Smith's efforts to cultivate the dry two southerners.

August 22 in Albany was rainy, forcing Smith to deliver his acceptance remarks in the legislative chamber instead of on the steps of the capitol building. (This change was in a way fitting, as it was here that Smith had begun his elected political career more than two decades earlier.) When Smith entered the chamber, he was dressed in an ordinary business suit instead of the traditional cutaway and sported a snappy Panama hat rather than the expected brown derby. He would be addressing his family, a crowd of supporters, and a battery of microphones (as well as a single, primitive television camera, a WGY apparatus that sent its crude but precedent-setting signal back to the General Electric laboratories in nearby Schenectady).

Smith read the eighty-minute speech that he thought ought to lay out his views on the major issues and would give most Americans their first distinct impression of him as a national political figure. Smith had decided to read this speech because of its transcendent importance, and so his delivery was understandably somewhat stiff. (Smith believed it was his poorest speech of the campaign.) Nevertheless, the acceptance did provide something of an outline of what Smith intended to discuss during the remainder of the campaign – except for the religious issue, which he did not mention during his remarks in Albany (and did not intend to address later on). Owing to the fact that a record 112 stations nationwide joined the radio network, four more than had carried

Hoover's, Smith's opening speech did allow millions of Americans their first chance to size up the Democratic nominee.<sup>13</sup>

Most of what Smith said in this address was thoroughly conventional and in harmony with the platform the Democrats had recently approved; only when he talked about prohibition would he surprise his listeners by taking a different tack than he had before. After briefly expressing his thanks for his party's invitation to lead his it in 1928, Smith moved immediately into the substance of his remarks by declaring that government should be "constructive" and "progressive," to which he coupled a pledge to work for desirable social legislation and to protect the rights of the poor and weak. He also declared his belief, however, that government must pay "a just regard for the rights of legitimate business, great or small." Concluding his statement of principles, Smith identified himself with those Jefferson, Cleveland, and Wilson had espoused and spoke earnestly about liberty, morality, and equality of opportunity.

Turning to the Republican record, Smith rebuked the G.O.P. for what he termed seven and one-half years of dishonesty and violation of the public trust, for which, Smith said, the Republicans had to bear accountability as a party. Their claims that they were responsible for prosperity were so much bunk, Smith went on: prosperity, he said, was a "myth" because it was not equitably distributed. For his own part, he promised expanded

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<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that the acceptance ceremonies were opened by an Episcopal priest and closed by a Roman Catholic priest.

programs for unemployment relief, economy measures, good management practices, and, especially, reorganization of the kind he had accomplished in his home state. Smith also endorsed a “strictly business” tariff, determined by an impartial commission, that would protect both legitimate business and a high standard of wages.

After the Democrats had abandoned the League of Nations, again, at their convention in Houston, there was little prospect that foreign policy would play much of a role in the presidential campaign, but Smith did touch upon this topic during his acceptance speech. He accused the Republicans of engendering “widespread distrust” of the United States, especially in Latin America, and he pledged not to interfere in the internal affairs of Latin America. (He specifically mentioned Mexico, a particularly sensitive subject for him owing to the controversy over the role of the Roman Catholic Church there.) Smith also advocated removal of the causes of war, urging “the same decent friendliness and fair play that self-respecting men and women show to one another” as a guide to national behavior. Smith did not bring up the recently negotiated Kellogg-Briand Treaty, but there were reports he had first approved an endorsement of it and then withheld the statement. (After his acceptance speech Smith hardly mentioned foreign affairs again, with his only extended remarks on the subject constituting a part of his campaign speech in Baltimore. Some of Smith’s supporters praised his attitude toward foreign affairs in 1928, but since it was clear that Hoover had a substantial advantage when it came to

discussing this topic the Smith camp seemed content to let it remain in the background during the presidential campaign.)

Moving from what many Americans would agree was the inconsequential to the consequential, Smith laid out a series of points, in the longest section of his address, that he wished to make about prohibition. Significantly, Smith began with a vow that as president he would uphold his duty to enforce the Eighteenth Amendment and its enabling legislation, but he immediately coupled this pledge with the statement that he also intended to fulfill his constitutional obligation to recommend those “necessary and expedient” changes in the law that accorded with his personal beliefs. After he had done so, Smith declared, the people and their representatives could act upon his recommendations as they wished. Proclaiming his attachment to both temperance and reverence for the law, the nominee contended that the present laws had failed to secure either. To achieve temperance and reverence for the law while preserving the diversity of opinion about prohibition that existed in the United States, Smith called for a “fearless application of Jeffersonian principles.” Consistent with his interpretation of these principles, Smith went on to advocate, as he had on several earlier occasions, replacing the Volstead Act with a “scientific definition” of “intoxicating” and allowing each state to set its own standard of intoxicating up to a maximum to be set by Congress.

Then Smith proposed, as a prospective addition to the Eighteenth Amendment, permitting each state, after obtaining the approval of its people in a referendum, to “import, manufacture or cause to be manufactured and sell” within its borders alcoholic beverages for consumption other than on the premises of the dispensing point. Under such a system (already in use in the Canadian province of Quebec), Smith said, the driest states would be protected from interstate traffic in alcohol while the wetter states would have a “carefully limited and controlled method” of meeting their citizens’ desire for alcohol – without the return of the “open saloon.” This package of proposals – enforcement of the existing laws, modification of the Volstead Act, and adoption of the “Quebec system” of state control of alcoholic beverages – was the formula that Smith and his aides had hit upon months ago for attracting wets to the Democratic nominee without driving dries away from him, and now it was in the open.

In his initial handling of this key issue in the campaign, Smith was careful to focus his remarks on the negative effects and not the wisdom of national prohibition itself. With the changes he was advocating, Smith stated, the country would regain respect for law and be able to move on to other important matters. (Smith would give another extended comment on prohibition in his speech in Milwaukee at the end of September. Here he repeated many of the points he had made during his acceptance speech but dwelt on the erroneousness of the Eighteenth Amendment and the deleterious effect of the defiance of

prohibition on American life, especially among young people. There and elsewhere Smith unequivocally pledged himself to enforce prohibition.)<sup>14</sup>

Chief among the other matters being overshadowed by prohibition, Smith declared in his acceptance, was the state of agriculture. Emphasizing that the country was an “economic whole,” he called attention to the plight of the farmers and asserted that government aid for them was as legitimate as aid to business was – and just as vital for true national prosperity. After castigating the Republicans for not living up to their promises to assist agriculture and for failing to propose an alternative to the plan that farmers had proposed, the McNary-Haugen bills, Smith endorsed the concept of cooperative marketing that Hoover had referred to in his acceptance speech. The Democratic nominee then went on to endorse the principle – but not the specific method – of the McNary-Haugen bills: control of the exportable surplus with the cost of the program to be imposed on the producers of the crop. “Only the mechanics remain to be devised,” said Smith, who pledged not only to appoint immediately after his election a commission to recommend with which method the goal could be achieved but to support the commission’s recommendation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Smith answered questions about his stand on prohibition at Omaha, mentioned his views in four more cities (Nashville, Chicago, Boston, Newark), and spoke extensively about those views in three more (Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York City).

<sup>15</sup> As early as 1924, in an interview with the Journal of Commerce in New York City, Smith had expressed sympathy for the farmer’s economic difficulties – which he described as being a national problem.

A group of other economic issues related to agriculture then received Smith's attention, though he did not develop any of these at length. He spoke, as Hoover had, of the need for better transportation to get farm goods to market and finished goods back to the farm. In this connection, he made a point of agreeing to reconsider his long-standing opposition to the proposal to open the St. Lawrence River to oceangoing ships once he became president, rather than governor of a state that expected to be harmed by the project's development. Smith also advocated a nationally administered flood control project to focus in particular on the Mississippi Valley, a suggestion that Smith included, possibly, in an attempt to offset the popularity that Hoover had won for his actions during the Mississippi River's flooding in 1927. Touching upon conservation, Smith devoted somewhat more time to a subject close to his heart: public ownership and control of hydroelectric sites. He specifically promised to retain federal control of Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Turning to labor, Smith endorsed collective bargaining and criticized abuses of injunctions in labor-management disputes. He also accepted the need to limit immigration but stated his objection to the discriminatory aspects of using the 1890 census as a basis for doing so, and he called for honoring the nation's debt to its military veterans.

Before closing his acceptance speech, Smith vowed to choose his appointees without regard to anything, including their religion, except for their qualifications and integrity. This was his only reference to religion in his remarks, and even it was rather oblique.

Smith went on to affirm his belief “in that true equality of women that opens to them without restriction all avenues of opportunity for which they can qualify in business, in government service and in politics.” With a series of earnest promises to devote himself to his country and its people, Smith closed the address that he hoped would form the foundation for the campaign to come.

Although the general reaction to Smith’s acceptance speech was, unsurprisingly, strongly influenced by partisanship and perspective, there were words of praise for his candor and sincerity – even from many of his critics. Most of the attention, also unsurprisingly, focused on his statements about prohibition, which, following Hoover’s commendation of the “experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose,” seemed to draw a clear line of demarcation between the two nominees. On a larger scale, some observers saw Smith’s acceptance remarks as vindicating his status as a capable national political figure, and Nation even termed Smith’s speech as one of the finest state papers since 1917. Others, however, remained unconvinced that Smith could grasp national issues or were put off by his conduct in his new role.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Smith had avoided discussing some other topics in his acceptance speech: relations with the Soviet Union, monopolistic business practices, the income tax, the World Court, the war debts problem, and the race issue, for instance. He would remain silent on them for the duration of the campaign. On the other hand, he did allude to some other issues – conservation and treatment of Native Americans – that would not become major campaign issues until later in the 20th century.

## **Raskob Organizes The Democrats**

While Smith was preparing his acceptance remarks, Raskob went about his new job with considerable energy, although he felt uncomfortable at first in the political role he would later term “distasteful.” Operating initially out of his own offices in the General Motors Building in New York City and then, beginning on July 27, from offices that the party rented in the same building, Raskob began to assemble an elaborate and somewhat bureaucratic campaign organization that reflected his business experience – perhaps, as well, his lack of political experience. Raskob had hoped to remain in his position with General Motors during the presidential season, but criticism from his business associates led him to step down from some of his corporate posts before the summer was out. (This caused him to sacrifice, he said, more than \$2 million in salary and benefits.)

The new structure that the chairman got the National Committee to set up (and that to some extent superseded that body) was highly centralized along functional lines. Most of the major decisions on day-to-day operations were entrusted to an Executive Committee, with Raskob at the helm. The Executive Committee’s membership was dominated, as one might expect, by Smith’s friends: Van Namee, Roosevelt, Belle Moskowitz, James J. Hoey, and Herbert H. Lehman, although Gerry was also a member.<sup>17</sup> Each of the

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<sup>17</sup> Bernard Baruch had declined an invitation to become Vice-Chairman of the Executive Committee.

members was at least in theory to be responsible for a particular aspect of the campaign, but in fact the Executive Committee existed largely for appearances.

Complementing the Executive Committee was an Advisory Committee, which would implement the latter's plans and also provide the sort of expertise in national politics that Raskob and the others on the former lacked. Perhaps, too, the Advisory Committee (which Pittman had suggested) would allay the fears of Democrats around the United States that the party's presidential campaign might be run exclusively by a group of Smith's New York friends who did not have a wide national outlook. Gerry chaired the Advisory Committee, which included among its members Eleanor Roosevelt, William Oldfield, Jouett Shouse, Millard Tydings, Parker Corning, Pat Harrison, Bruce Kremer, and, later, Alben W. Barkley; Raskob was an ex officio member.

The details of what the Advisory Committee in actuality did are difficult to ascertain; what is certain is that despite its existence the fears the Democrats' 1928 campaign was being steered by a provincial inner group of Smith's friends did not go away. Raskob envisioned the state party organizations as operating departments under the Advisory Committee, and these organizations were expected to carry out the overall campaign design and to channel information upward to headquarters.<sup>18</sup> Although the Democrats

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<sup>18</sup> Several times, well-placed Democrats made a point of saying that Tammany Hall was not involved in the national campaign. In fact, Hoey was the only person in the campaign hierarchy who had any ties to Tammany Hall. Smith's other Tammany friends, such as John F. Gilchrist and George Olvany, were purposely excluded from the campaign organization; they typically avoided the headquarters, although they did help out on an unofficial basis.

considered but then decided against establishing an official branch or office in Washington, D.C. (where the Republicans had such a presence), they did place branches in St. Louis (under Harry B. Hawes) and Salt Lake City (under Hugh S. Johnson); these, however, were hardly more than entrepôts for the distribution of publicity materials.<sup>19</sup>

Under these two superintending committees was appended, again following a business model, a layer of specialized committees and bureaus: a Finance Committee, a Bureau of Women's Activities (chaired first by Nellie Tayloe Ross and then by Eleanor Roosevelt, it was promised the same size and type of quarters as those allotted to the National Committee), a Bureau for Naturalized Citizens, a Labor Committee, a Veterans League, and the like. Completing the formal campaign structure was a multitude of even more specialized affiliated organizations. These included "Smith Lawyers' Clubs," a "Smith for President Colored League," a "Progressive League for Alfred E. Smith," a "College League for Alfred E. Smith," "Smith for President" clubs, a "First Voters Committee," and even a three-thousand-member "Smith-Robinson Sports Committee." All of these groups, some of them organized down to the district level in every state, were directed by veteran Democratic politicians with the assistance of Smith's friends. The "Smith for President" clubs, for instance, were managed by Hoey and Ashton D. Shallenberger, a U.S. Representative from Nebraska.

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<sup>19</sup> As a later section will show, the Democrats also declined to establish a Southern bureau, probably because it would be taken as an indication they were concerned about that region's loyalty to the national ticket.

The most of important of these specialized groups, naturally, was the Finance Committee, which was headed first by Lehman and then by James Gerard. (Jesse H. Jones chaired an Advisory Committee on Finance.)<sup>20</sup> Starting the campaign with a surplus of about \$200,000 turned over to it by the party's outgoing treasurer, the two committees charged with financial duties mounted a vigorous drive to secure the funds that Raskob said were needed for the campaign: first \$2,500,000 to \$3,500,000 and then, later, \$4,000,000. Lehman and others among Smith's wealthy friends, as well as the many new patrons whom Raskob recruited, contributed a sizeable share of the money that came in. To the amazement of many observers, for the first time in years it appeared as if the Democrats might have pockets as deep as those of their Republican opponents.

Despite some 90,000 individual contributions (considerably fewer than the Republican total), however, and despite the use of such innovative gimmicks as specially prepared editions of Smith's acceptance address that sold for \$1,000 each, the Democratic fundraising success soon began to slip behind that of the Republicans – and behind their own party's spending. Despite Raskob's continuing rosy summaries of the party's financial condition, the differential continued to widen as the weeks went on. In the end Lehman had to go on the radio and appeal for contributions. Such extreme measures – perhaps the first major use of the new medium for political fundraising – only partly

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<sup>20</sup> Baruch had also turned down a seat on the Finance Committee.

closed the gap between expenditures and income, though, and by October the party had to resort to borrowing from banks and wealthy individuals in order to pay its bills. In its final report, the campaign organization said it had spent about \$5,300,000 (slightly more than what the Republicans had expended) but had received only \$3,800,000 in cash. The deficit, which was the largest one any National Committee had accumulated to that time, was secured by loans from banks – and also from Raskob, who indeed seemed to have bought himself shares in the Democratic Party.<sup>21</sup>

A large portion of the money the Finance Committee did collect was spent by the publicity department that Belle Moskowitz ensconced in many of the 45 well-appointed rooms on the 7th and 8th floors of the General Motors Building that the Democrats had rented. Aided by nearly four hundred persons, many of them reporters lent by local newspapers and employees recruited from the General Motors public relations and advertising sections, Moskowitz threw her considerable energies and talents into promoting the Democratic ticket, and Smith above all. By November she had overseen the expenditure of at least \$2,100,000, including money for over 36,000,000 pieces of literature and over 19,000,000 buttons and other items.

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<sup>21</sup> Two years later, Raskob told Smith that his personal contribution had been \$850,000 and that he had co-signed a note for \$375,000 for the National Committee – this in addition to the money from General Motors he had foregone. Later disclosures (in 1932) showed that contributions by a few principal donors, particularly Raskob, had evidently been concealed by fictitious notes signed, instead, by a number of other persons – all friends of Smith. This apparent subterfuge became known when the bank sought to collect on the notes. According to what Smith later said, he knew nothing about what had been done in 1928 because (“for my own protection,” he said) he had left money matters to Raskob and whomever the chairman wished to involve. He added that he had known nothing in 1928 even about the expenditures that were made and the debt that the campaign was accumulating. It seems probable that Smith simply chose not to ask about how money was raised or spent.

Primary among the seventy-eight separate printed items was an updated version of “What Everybody Wants to Know About Al Smith,” 4,000,000 copies of which the Democrats distributed around the country. There was a new campaign biography for 1928, too.<sup>22</sup> Another notable publication was what would prove to be the last “campaign book” ever published by a national party, a large collection of documents, speeches, and articles relating to the coming election. Moskowitz released this book in sections for maximum publicity and then provided complete copies to Democrats out on the hustings. Reprints of addresses on Smith’s behalf, from Roosevelt’s nomination speech (over 1,000,000 copies of which went out) to copies of a radio talk on Smith and the religious issue by theologian Henry Van Dyke (500,000 copies of this document were distributed), were another product of the Moskowitz-run publicity machine.

Despite all this activity, Democratic Party organizers and staff members in states all over the country complained throughout the campaign, and afterwards as well, about the inability of the party’s New York headquarters to get adequate printed matter to them on a consistent basis. The local Democrats complained to their state leaders, who in turn complained to national headquarters – even to Raskob himself, but the situation did not improve. One Michigan campaign worker wrote in frustration to his state’s national

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<sup>22</sup> The author of Smith’s campaign biography in 1928 was Thomas H. Dickinson, The Portrait of a Man as Governor (New York, 1928). It was far less successful than the earlier biographies by Henry Moskowitz and Norman Hapgood.

committeeman: “I have written, wired, begged and implored, all to no avail....” This inability to deliver on the promise of publicity for Smith seems to have been the single most common failing of Belle Moskowitz’s vaunted 1928 publicity machine. The situation was, Gerry admitted in late September, “a hell of a mess.”

The range of other publicity vehicles was quite broad. In addition to organizing the usual barrage of pro-Smith speakers, Moskowitz shrewdly exploited the radio in a pioneering use of that new medium, and before the campaign ended she had spent on it well over \$500,000 – ten times the sum spent four years earlier and half again above what the Republicans had expended; more than one-third of the Democrats’ total was spent on Smith’s broadcasts alone. Planted and inspired articles favorable to Smith and Tammany Hall, as well as to Raskob, that appeared in national periodicals; a talking movietone that played every night in Times Square; a musical starring the vaudeville team of Smith & Dale, along with Ruby Keeler; a radio address and whistle-stop tour by Babe Ruth; a radio drama (starring Helen Hayes, Peggy Wood, William Frawley, and Clark Gable) based on Smith’s life – all these were included in the devices Moskowitz used in addition to the routine newspaper advertisements and news releases. Sometimes Raskob got into the publicity campaign by announcing the names of prominent Republicans – typically, wealthy businessmen – who had defected to the Democrats. He often timed these announcements to offset Democratic bolts to Hoover. This tit-for-tat game sometimes reached absurd proportions, as when the Democrats reported that 149 authors (including

many Republicans) were supporting Smith and the G.O.P. countered with a list of 500 others who were backing Hoover.<sup>23</sup>

Behind the scenes, less-heralded efforts to influence key Democrats were also being made. These included the distribution of materials critical of Hoover and the Republicans along with rebuttals to the rumors that Smith's appointment policy had favored his co-religionists – or would do so if he were elected.<sup>24</sup> All in all, Moskowitz's fertile mind and dedication to Smith succeeded in getting her candidate's name and record before the electorate like no other campaign before it, and the Democrats surely financed and executed one of the most vigorous efforts in their history to put the name and record of their presidential candidate before the American voters. Also behind the scenes, key Democrats – Senator Robert F. Wagner, for instance – were sent to states where intensive efforts might help to bring them over to Smith (in Wagner's case, Wisconsin).

Perhaps the relentlessly upbeat attitude of this energized publicity department influenced the generally positive mood of confidence that pervaded the Democrats' national headquarters. Especially after Smith got back to familiar Northeastern territory following

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<sup>23</sup> One special focus of the speaking campaign was putting down the scurrilous stories about Smith's wife.

<sup>24</sup> The campaign book, to which a number of prominent Democrats contributed but which was primarily the work of Lindsay Rogers, went into some detail to refute charges about Smith's record, especially his appointment policy in New York. Leaks about Smith's possible Cabinet and Supreme Court nominees were used to disarm the concerns about who he would appoint if elected. One product of the Democratic publicity machine was a cleverly named collection of Republican anti-Hoover statements entitled "What's the Matter With Hoover?"

his swings through other sections of the country and continuing right through the election, most observers detected little evidence of defeatism, doubt, or depression at the top. Indeed, the confidence the Democrats maintained in public actually seemed higher once Smith turned to the stretch run in the Northeast. Prominent Democrats in touch with the national campaign were struck by this optimism, and perhaps some of them were even infected by it. John W. Davis, for example, thought at first that Smith's headquarters was "cocky," but later in the campaign he came to believe that Smith would beat Hoover. Many of Smith's partisans apparently convinced themselves that it might take a "miracle" for their man to win what they realized would be an uphill battle but that they were going to pull it off. Not everyone around Smith shared in the optimism, however. Robinson thought the campaign nearly hopeless from the start, as did Roosevelt and his crafty political aide Louis M. Howe. Even Belle Moskowitz, Lehman, and Proskauer later admitted they had ultimately sensed that defeat was coming.

Certainly there was not the least hint of pessimism in Raskob's glowing reports of Smith's strengths – reports that went beyond the usual campaign hyperbole. Some of this exaggeration was genuine, for Raskob (and those closest to him) were described as "utterly sure" that Smith would win. Some of the exaggeration can be attributed to Raskob's own political innocence. But some of it derived, as well, from the organizational structure that the new chairman had established. This structure presumed an upward flow of accurate information, much as occurred in a corporation, but now

Raskob was not dealing with facts like supply and demand figures. Instead, he was receiving the guesswork of state committees and local Democrats, many of whom compounded the inevitable inaccuracies by distorting their reports in order to obtain more of the largesse they had been told to expect from national headquarters. By depicting the battle in their states as closer than it was, local leaders would make a better case for money that would tip the balance in favor of Smith. Hopeless states like Kansas reported hopefully in order to secure funds they could apply to their state campaigns, whereas those states with better prospects (New Jersey, for example) submitted guarded reports for the same reason. Only rarely did Raskob refuse to send money to states because there was no real prospect for success in November, whatever the reports, but in general the lack of reliable information gave him no real basis for making these decisions and left him prey to his own optimism and inexperience.

Thus Raskob's predictions to the press about the states Smith would win were sometimes ludicrous and often included states that were, to be generous, highly unlikely to fall into the Democratic column – Pennsylvania and Nebraska, to name two. By late August Raskob was forecasting 309 electoral votes as a “conservative” figure, and early the next month he had raised this number to 376. Undaunted by a big G.O.P. victory in Maine's state elections in September, Raskob and others at headquarters – even Smith on one occasion – continued to cite optimistic reports from all over the United States and to overestimate the Democratic candidate's strength. This caused experienced observers

either to shake their heads or snicker in derision at the naiveté they were seeing. Raskob's final estimate was an incredible 402 electoral votes. He conceded to the Republicans only California, Idaho, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Oregon, and Vermont, and he placed Delaware, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington all in the doubtful category.<sup>25</sup>

It is possible to make the argument that Smith shared Raskob's optimism about victory. Although he did not discuss his deepest feelings in his 1929 autobiography, in 1935 Smith wrote in The Citizen and His Government that he had expected to win. Certainly the apparent enthusiasm of Smith's reception nearly everywhere he went in 1928 could have blinded him to the truth that would burst upon him on November 6. Late in the campaign he made the following telling statement: "It could not be that these people cheer the way they do and then vote the other way. I could not understand that." Certainly Smith continued to exude a sincere confidence in public, right up until the eve of the election, and many (but hardly all) persons who came into contact with him in private during the campaign confirmed his positive outlook. One visitor in early October, for instance, reported to Oscar W. Underwood that Smith was "quite elated" about his chances. Did Smith really believe he would become the next president?

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<sup>25</sup> A Hoover spokesman, Raskob's Republican counterpart, George H. Moses, predicted 410 electoral votes for Hoover. The final betting odds were 5-1 against Smith.

In fact, Smith *had* come to recognize his fate. He later conceded that 1928 had been a hopeless battle, “as we partly knew at the time,” and with his most trusted political counselors reading the political winds as they did the politically astute Smith could hardly have believed otherwise – whatever else he said in public in an effort to keep spirits up before the election. His daughter has confirmed this view of Smith’s attitude by revealing that he had informed her – and only her, his sole political confidante within the family – soon before the votes were counted that he was going to lose. Perhaps Smith was for a time among those who believed almost to the end that he would pull off that miracle, but if so he lost faith before election day.

For the campaign season was bringing out the unpleasant truth that in all three geographical areas where the Democrats had expected their strategy to succeed they were not achieving the results they had hoped for. The assumptions that the South would remain steadfast to its traditional party, that in the upper Mississippi Valley the Republican Party would be rent by defections, and that Smith’s nomination would swing the critical Northeast toward the Democratic ticket – all of these assumptions remained in considerable doubt as the campaign wore on. What was worse, the decision to emphasize Smith’s personality and background in order to tip the balance to the Democratic ticket everywhere was creating at least as many difficulties as it was producing results. The grand strategy the Democrats had hammered out was proving to be full of holes and flaws.

## **The Surprising Contest In The South**

The first signs that all might not go well for the Democrats in the South came soon after the national convention when a conference of drys that met in Asheville, North Carolina, adopted a manifesto detailing its reasons for opposing Smith and laid the foundations for an anti-Smith organization to encourage bolting among Southern Democrats. Only a few party professionals had joined the ministers, prohibition organization leaders, and other drys (nearly half of them women) who met at Asheville, but the assemblage was composed almost entirely of Democrats. If large numbers of the rank and file in the South were to hear the call from Asheville to abandon Smith, the Democratic Party clearly would have its hands full in the region.

The manifesto, after describing Smith as the nominee of the Northern wing of the party and the representative of entirely different types of people than most Southerners, cited four reasons for opposing him: 1) Smith had repudiated the 1928 Democratic platform plank on prohibition in his telegram to the Houston convention; 2) he had a wet record; 3) he had selected a wet to head his campaign; and 4) he was too closely tied to Tammany Hall. (Smith's telegram was only a pretext for summoning the Asheville meeting, since the "call" to meet and the organization that was announced at Asheville were ready before Smith sent his message to Houston.) There was no overt reference to Smith's religion in the conference's official statement, but, according to one reporter,

fully four-fifths of the participants freely admitted to him that the candidate's Roman Catholicism was another major objection to his election. Presumably there was no need to mention religion, since Smith's wetness and affiliation with Tammany sufficed to justify opposition to him.<sup>26</sup>

The Asheville conference, which rejected a third-party movement, set as its goals the election of dries and the defeat of Al Smith. To these ends, its spokesman, Methodist Bishop James Cannon, Jr., announced the formation of an organization that would employ all "proper and honorable means" (and accept Republican money, he added) to beat Smith. Cannon, who for years had spoken out publicly against the New York governor, set up a headquarters in Richmond for the anti-Smith campaign he would direct in fourteen Southern and border states. Disregarding some health problems, Cannon threw himself – as an individual, he later said, not in any official capacity – into this new mission. Cannon was a formidable foe. As the chairman of the Board of Temperance and Social Service of the Methodist denomination in the South, the Bishop was widely known and respected throughout the area; as a lifelong Democrat and an able organizer, he was ideally suited to lead the anti-Smith crusade in the South.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The religious issue will be discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>27</sup> Cannon mentioned reasons other than prohibition for his opposition to Smith, although the Bishop chose to emphasize the candidate's wetness. Cannon's political ambitions in his home state of Virginia also influenced him to oppose Smith. Like so many others, Cannon made both overt and subtle use of the religious issue. He admitted that Smith's Catholicism was a factor in his own thinking, but for tactical reasons he did not want to do battle on the religious question. Cannon believed that Smith's Catholicism made him more hostile to prohibition, and, since Cannon had voted for James M. Cox in 1920 despite the nominee's wetness, perhaps the Bishop saw Smith as the "wrong sort" of Catholic. (This was a common distinction in 1928.) Later, Cannon was awarded a trip to the Holy Land by Christian Herald "as the

In order to encourage opposition to Smith, the dissident Democrats issued broadsides against him and sponsored countless public meetings, many of them in Protestant churches, where they denounced the Democratic nominee and called for his defeat. Since most anti-Smith Democrats wanted to maintain a clear line between themselves and the Southern Republicans, in many instances the two forces ran totally separate campaigns. The cooperation between the two anti-Smith efforts typically consisted only of the fact that they were making common cause against the same candidate, though there were fusion tickets in certain places.

The Southern Republicans, for their part, sought to be discreet because they feared arousing their Democratic counterparts – many of whom preferred to think that they would be voting anti-Smith rather than Republican in November. The Republican National Committee did name Oliver D. Street, an Alabama party leader, to head the G.O.P. effort to woo dissatisfied Democrats, and it is clear from surviving evidence that the Republicans' national headquarters played a role in supporting and funding some of the anti-Smith movements not only in the South but in other parts of the country as well. In addition, Hoover delivered a campaign address in Tennessee, as presidential candidates Charles Evans Hughes and Warren G. Harding had done in 1916 and 1920.

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American who during 1928 made the most significant contribution to religious progress” and as a tribute to his dry leadership in that year.

On the whole, however, Street conducted a quiet campaign for Democratic votes that emphasized personalities rather than issues and principles, that publicized Hoover's nonpartisanship and flood relief efforts along the Mississippi River the previous year, and that left the bulk of the public activities to the anti-Smith Democrats – especially in those areas where the Republicans did not have a strong foothold or where the anti-Smith Democrats were unusually well-organized (such as Virginia). Southern Republicans generally made open appeals for votes only on the local level, and even these were muted.

Only when it came to finances did the anti-Smith Democratic bolters and the Republicans cooperate in any significant manner. Even this collaboration remained out of sight until Cannon went to trial several years later for allegedly concealing contributions during the 1928 campaign. At that time, Cannon claimed that his statement that year welcoming Republican financial assistance had been a misquotation and that he had not sought money from the G.O.P.'s national committee. Testimony at the trial in 1934 revealed, however, that former Virginia Representative and Coolidge advisor C. Bascom Sloop had helped to funnel nearly \$100,000 in contributions through the Republican National Committee to Cannon for use against Smith in the South.<sup>28</sup> (Although Cannon and the G.O.P. did not plan a formal coordinated strategy, there were discussions along these lines.)

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<sup>28</sup> Cannon was acquitted.

Some Southern Democrats who could not support Smith went further than the Asheville contingent: they broke with tradition and worked directly with the Republicans. The most influential of these Democrats was probably George Fort Milton, editor of the Chattanooga News. An intimate of William Gibbs McAdoo, Milton opposed Smith for a multitude of reasons: his wetness, his views on immigration, his affiliation with Tammany Hall, his cultural makeup, his New York outlook, and his selection of Raskob. At first, Milton was inclined to remain silent in 1928, but his growing distaste for Smith, coupled with Hoover's steadfast dryness, moved Milton toward the Republicans even before Smith cabled the Democratic convention with his personal views about prohibition. Milton came to believe that he had a duty to the party he loved so much to serve as a spokesman for disgruntled Southern Democrats.

A personal meeting with Hoover dispelled Milton's remaining doubts, and after he took control of the "National Constitutional Democratic Committee," an organization of bolting Democrats that operated in seventeen states, Milton used this platform to disseminate his anti-Smith views. In his more philosophical moments, Milton described the election as a conflict between two types of civilization and opposed Smith to protect his own, but Milton also succumbed to the worst of the anti-Smith sentiments. Milton, like Cannon, accepted Republican funding for his activities, and although he protested that he would not be tied to the G.O.P. by doing so he in fact became an agent of the

same party he had excoriated in The Age of Hate, his widely read blistering attack on Republican Reconstruction in the South.

Other prominent Democratic bolters in the South included former Senator Robert L. Owen of Oklahoma and Mrs. Clem Shaver, wife of the former National Chairman. (Shaver, who did not abandon the Democrats in 1928, was asked to comment on his wife's action. He simply replied to his questioner, "Are you married?") A great many of all these bolters emphasized Smith's telegram to the convention, coming after the approval of a prohibition plank that had been made acceptable to both factions in the party, as sufficient reason for opposition to him. One called it "treason," and McAdoo declared that the telegram "absolves every Democrats from any obligation to support" Smith. Raskob's alleged characterization of prohibition as a "damnable affliction" also alienated many Democrats.

A great many Southern Democrats, however, could not bring themselves to support either Smith or the hated Southern Republicans, although they might cooperate with Cannon's organization in certain informal ways. The most prominent Democrat to adopt this stance was Senator Furnifold M. Simmons of North Carolina. Simmons had fought Smith during the battle over North Carolina's delegation to the national convention. Within a few days of the Houston gathering most of the other Tarheel Democrats who had also done so had endorsed Smith, but Simmons and his influential secretary, Frank A.

Hampton, remained on the sidelines. Hampton intimated to friends that Simmons and he would probably come out for the New Yorker. The continuing silence of the North Carolina senator raised some eyebrows, but he was still expected at least not to oppose the national Democratic ticket. While Simmons hesitated, Democratic leaders at the party's headquarters made overtures to him and, it would seem, plied him with promises of political rewards if he would remain in the fold.

In late July, however, Simmons abruptly resigned from the Democratic National Committee and, convinced that the voters would reject Smith in November, moved closer and closer to outright opposition to him. Once Simmons finally openly deserted the national ticket, during the autumn, he waged a desperate fight to persuade North Carolinians to defeat Smith; he also lent the talented Hampton to the anti-Smith forces. Simmons' actions puzzled and saddened many of the members of the state party that he had dominated so long, and even Hampton did not fully comprehend what his chief's motives were. A complex array of personal, cultural, and political factors – principal among them Simmons' resentment at seeing people like Smith and Raskob taking control of the national party – moved him to sacrifice his party regularity and, probably, his personal influence on the state party. The result was an acrimonious battle in which the Smith's presidential campaign was almost a side issue.

Even if North Carolina's Governor Angus McLean was far from correct when he declared that "the prominent Democrats of the South who are withholding their support from Governor Smith can be counted on the fingers of one hand," it was true that the overwhelming majority of the party's leading professional politicians did not desert the party as Milton and Simmons did; nor did most Democratic newspapers do so. Many of them, though, were obviously frustrated because their prominence in the party forced them to choose between backing Smith, thereby antagonizing many of their constituents, and bolting, thereby clashing with other party regulars and those Democrats who were sincerely pro-Smith. It had been one thing to believe – or even to advocate – during the pre-convention period that Smith could be nominated and then defeated. Now that Smith loomed before them as their party's presidential nominee, Southern Democrats realized that disengaging from him would entail certain serious political consequences.

On the practical side, these Democratic leaders knew that the votes of both the bolters and the loyalists were vital to the success of state and local Democratic slates – some of which had printed on them the names of these very leaders. They also realized that they would have a better chance of continuing to lead and influence their party after the 1928 campaign became history if they remained in its ranks during that campaign. Thus these leaders often felt a conflict between principle and duty to the party. The distress this conflict caused is readily apparent in what these leaders said and wrote. Senator Carter Glass of Virginia, for instance, spoke agonizingly of his "duty to make a fight for the

party” and lamented that he had to sacrifice his principles to the “moral constraints of party regularity” stemming from his obligation to support the platform and the outcome of the national nominating convention.

So, with varying degrees of resignation, nearly all of the Southern leaders (and not a few elsewhere in the country) resolved, like Senator Walter George of Georgia, to “pay the price” if necessary – but to remain loyal to the Democratic Party in 1928. This did not mean that these leaders necessarily expected their constituents to follow suit. U.S. Representative William Bankhead of Alabama, while proclaiming his personal loyalty to the national ticket, gave one of his constituents instructions on how to split his ticket in order to avoid voting for Smith; others simply freed inquiring correspondents to vote their own consciences while reaffirming their own personal allegiance to the Democratic Party.

Disloyalty in 1928 was not just a Southern problem for the Democrats, of course, but the South was the area with the most bolting. Nor was outright desertion of the party the only problem. Some anti-Smith Democrats apparently chose to sabotage the Smith campaign, if possible, often from high-level positions, rather than to bolt. Others gave mere lip service to Smith’s campaign and looked after their own interests or else ran completely independent campaigns. Even in North Carolina, where most of the party regulars worked relatively hard for Smith, some of them concentrated on the state ticket

because there was more to be gained in the long run by doing so than by vigorously supporting Smith. As it turned out, many Democrats who did back Smith enthusiastically did end up paying the price that George spoke of.

Although the number of Southern Democratic politicians who bolted was relatively small, there was no assurance that the rank and file would be as loyal to the party as its leadership. By August, Cannon had a good line on the anti-Smith sentiment in the South: he expected Smith to lose Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee and to have severe difficulties in Alabama, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia. (Smith won only Alabama and Georgia, both by small margins.) Southern Democrats who supported the national ticket could make similar calculations, and the implications were frightening. They knew that in some states, primarily in the upper South, relatively strong Republican state organizations gave the Democrats a serious contest every four years; already in 1920 and 1924 there had been deep cracks in the so-called “Solid” South. Southern Democrats also were aware that as industrial and urban growth in the South accelerated, the number of potential Republicans increased. Finally, Southern Democrats realized that for many people south of Mason and Dixon’s Line Hoover was an unusually attractive alternative to Smith. Therefore, those Democratic leaders in the region who wanted to remain faithful to their party, support their presidential nominee, and still protect their state and local tickets in the face of strong voter resistance to him engaged in frantic efforts to keep party lines secure on election day.

Once committed, loyal Democrats in many areas of the South set to work getting out a large vote, seeking to neutralize the activities of Cannon and the other anti-Smith Democrats, and trying to put Smith over to skeptical voters. This sort of conduct belied the public statements of confidence that emanated from most Southern Democrats and at the same time made many old-line rank and file Democrats indignant. “The idea of having public speaking in Miss. [sic] to prevent it going for a Republican President,” one Mississippian exclaimed in a letter to his children. Not all of the loyalists’ attacks on Cannon, which were launched as soon as the Asheville conference adjourned, were aboveboard. One aspect of the anti-Cannon campaign was an attempt to intimidate him with charges of war profiteering during the World War and with accusations that he was involved in a “bucketshop,” a dishonest stock-trading establishment. Raskob had refused to use most of this sort of material, but others in the Democratic headquarters did help Cannon’s enemies in Virginia to obtain it. Glass and other loyalists threatened Cannon with this information, but the Methodist bishop continued his anti-Smith activities.

In their campaigns to prevail upon the rank and file to vote a straight ticket in 1928, Democratic politicians employed a variety of arguments. Relentlessly they pointed to the benefits in power, patronage, and prestige for the South if Smith and Robinson were elected. They put the best face they could on Smith’s ties to Tammany Hall and his opposition to prohibition (the two objections to the New York governor most often heard

in the South). When these lines of approach proved to be insufficient, the loyal Democrats could always play their two aces: emotional appeals to party fidelity and invocation of the race issue.

Smith, many loyal Southern Democrats told their listeners, was the master of a “new” and benign Tammany. Furthermore, they said, even the “old” Tammany had not been all that bad, and it had assisted the South on several occasions – notably during the dark days of Republican Reconstruction. The Smith camp did its best to encourage the idea that Tammany had a history of being friendly to the South and now was far from being an evil monster. (Probably it was no coincidence that “Dixie” was played at the July 4 celebration at Tammany Hall in 1928.) Since many Americans outside the South shared these misgivings about Smith’s origins in Tammany Hall politics, the publicity the Democrats produced did double duty – but the emphasis on the machine’s sympathy for the South was of course aimed particularly at audiences there.

Smith’s wetness was more difficult for the party loyalists to deal with, but Southern dries (like dry Democrats in other parts of the United States who had to reconcile themselves to Smith’s wetness) drew upon a large arsenal of reasons why prohibition should not come between Smith and dry voters. Some of the loyal dries, declaring that repeal of the prohibition laws was unlikely anyhow, reminded their fellow dries that as president Smith could do nothing by himself to change those laws; if the voters wanted any insurance in

maintaining a dry country, they should elect a dry Congress; as a last resort, they added, the dry states would still have their own prohibition laws to protect them.

Admittedly, Smith was in an awkward position on prohibition. In order to enable dries to support him, he too insisted that he would be able to do nothing as president except to advocate changes in the prohibition laws. But he also had to argue, in order to attract wets in the crucial Northeast, that he could indeed bring about a change in prohibition.<sup>29</sup> Smith had to hope that wets would count on one hope and dries on another. By pleasing neither of the two camps he bred disillusionment among wets and disappointment in both camps – and all of his pledges of enforcement of the existing laws may have been so many wasted words. (Even if he did not attack prohibition itself directly in 1928, of course, his long identification with opposition to it might well have prevented many dries from supporting him.)

Besides, Southern Democrats argued, the plank hammered out in Houston had been made broad enough to allow the party's dries and wets to stand together on it. Loyal dries frequently joined in deploring Smith's telegram to the convention, but they insisted that in it he had only stated his personal opinion; since the party had not sanctioned this opinion, no dry ought to feel committed to it – or to anything else Smith said about

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<sup>29</sup> Ironically, in order to keep Republican wets from being drawn to Smith, northern members of the G.O.P. had to argue, like loyal Southern Democrats, that Smith would be unable to do anything about prohibition by himself.

prohibition. They reminded the voters that Woodrow Wilson had never been a prohibitionist and had vetoed the Volstead Act. Dry Democrats also alleged that Wilson had been seeking, shortly before his death in 1924, a practical solution to the prohibition problem that, like Smith's plan, would have confined the federal government to the interstate aspects of prohibition, leaving the states free to enforce the dry laws as they saw fit. Whether or not Smith could get Congress to approve his prohibition proposal was an open question; but whether or not he was successful, the dry Democrats maintained, Smith likely would (as he repeatedly pledged) enforce the prohibition laws better than the Republicans ever had during the past eight years, and they described Hoover's position on the prohibition issue as vague and evasive.<sup>30</sup>

Whenever they could, though, Southern Democrats simply sought to downplay altogether the embarrassing prohibition issue. Sometimes they retreated onto the apparently safe ground of Smith's character, humble origins, honesty, executive ability, and the like. Sometimes they depicted the New York governor as "Democracy incarnate" because of his espousal of states' rights and local self-government. They also insisted that because there were so many important questions – corruption in government, economic issues, and the like – that Smith was "right" on, the Southern voter ought to forgive his being "wrong" on prohibition. Above all else, though, Democrats in the South contended that

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<sup>30</sup> Smith and Raskob cooperated with dry Democrats by emphasizing that prohibition was a local subject and that Smith's plan was true to Jeffersonian principles of self-government.

considerations of allegiance to the party and to white supremacy ought to override any hesitations that remained in the mind of the Southern voter.

Preserving “Democratic supremacy” in the South, rather than electing Al Smith, became many loyal Democrats’ surest refuge from the storm that his nomination had created. Inveighing against the very thought of deserting the party of their fathers for the Republicans, of all people, Southern Democrats reminded their listeners that alienating Northern Democrats and strengthening the G.O.P. in the South entailed the risk of bringing upon the region another era of Reconstruction. The Democratic Party, they said, was more important than any one man’s candidacy, and the risk of destroying or crippling the party through massive defections was one not worth taking. At the least, Southern Democratic leaders pointed out, the voters ought to think of how difficult it would be to guarantee the election of local and state Democratic slates and the preservation of seniority positions in Congress if large numbers of the rank and file turned away from the party in the fall.

(Some dissenters in 1928 cautiously pointed out what they saw as a positive side of bolting: it would remind Democrats in the rest of the country that the South should not be taken for granted or ignored. Since bolting thus could actually bring Democrats both North and South back into communication and cooperation, a temporary division of the Solid South in 1928, they suggested, might not be such a bad thing after all. This

argument may have spoken to the South's habitual sense of political insecurity, but that insecurity was probably better assuaged by exhortations to maintain and strengthen party unity.<sup>31)</sup>

When persuasion failed to ensure party loyalty, Democrats turned to coercion. In most Southern states, as the state committees and conventions fell into line the official party doctrine became allegiance to the whole ticket, from top to bottom. Those Democrats who were less than enthusiastic about going along, or who actually bolted, often encountered angry attacks from the regulars. Some alliances and personal friendships were permanently ruptured in the bitter wrangling over Smith's nomination. Party regulars frequently took the position that all Southern Democrats were obligated by their party membership to support Smith, especially if they participated in the Democratic primary or took a loyalty oath that bound them to support the party's nominees. Loyalists threatened to withhold their support in the 1928 primaries from those local and state Democratic candidates who would not endorse Smith, and in some cases recalcitrant candidates were barred from entering the primaries. Other threats included being ejected from party offices, being dropped from slates already drawn up, and being prevented from taking part in future primaries or elections.

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<sup>31</sup> Claude Bowers hurried into print his book, The Tragic Era, which appeared just in time prior to the election. Bowers evidently sought to remind anyone who had forgotten just how many Southerners remembered the years following the Civil War, as well as what Southerners owed the Democratic Party, North and South.

Strong-arm tactics, however, did not always produce the desired ends, and they even drove some wavering Democrats into open revolt. Withdrawing support from those who were against Smith, after all, only helped to legitimize and vindicate – as well as publicize – their campaign against the nominee: martyrs often attract support to their cause, after all. In view of the fact that harmony in the state or local party ranks was far more important in the long run than Al Smith's election, moreover, it was tempting to overlook or even condone a Democratic colleague's reluctance to pledge himself to Smith. This was especially so as Southern politicians reminded themselves that clearing the decks by seeing Smith defeated in 1928 – a sentiment that had helped the New Yorker to secure the nomination in the first place – would actually be best for the party in the long run.

As a result, harsh measures to coerce party fealty were only fitfully applied in 1928. When they were in fact taken, the motive was often not the punishment of the bolters' refusal to back Smith but their refusal to accept the Democratic Party's decision as binding. That threat to the system so carefully built up over the past generation and more could be countenanced only at great peril, and (along with deep-seated factional disputes within the state or local parties) that is what fueled the highly publicized punitive actions taken in 1929 and later. In the end, some Southern politicians realized that the events in

1928 might be an ominous foretaste of – and precedent for – what could lie ahead for the so-called “solid” Democratic Party in the South.”<sup>32</sup>

The issue of party loyalty in 1928 was rendered all the more ominous by its intimate connection to the race question. “Let the thinnest trickle of independent voting in the general election be permitted,” proclaimed the Charleston (S.C.) News and Courier, “and the torrents of independent action will sweep away the solid dam which holds the white people in the same party in South Carolina.” It is impossible to determine how frequently the race issue came into play during the presidential campaign in the South in 1928. In one sense, of course, this inflammatory issue was always intertwined with Southern politics, but in a more specific sense both the anti- and pro-Smith forces used race whenever it was convenient to do so – especially in such states as Alabama and Georgia where the contest between the two factions was so close. The unusually great emphasis that both groups placed on white supremacy caused anguish – and provoked protests – among those Americans who endorsed racial progress, but the race issue abated only once the votes had been counted in November.

It appears that anti-Smith Democrats (and some Republicans) brought up race in an effort to woo Democrats away from Smith and to put the party’s regulars on the defensive. Allegations began to circulate that Smith was a “friend” of the black, that he favored

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<sup>32</sup> The loyalists’ position was not aided by the fact that Raskob had been a Republican and that he was assuring Republicans that they could support Smith without surrendering their party ties.

intermarriage (and even had sponsored legislation in New York to permit it), had eagerly solicited black votes in his state's elections, had appointed blacks to important positions in state government, and was actively seeking black votes now in 1928. Certain areas of the South were saturated with these allegations, some of which received a particularly wide distribution, but even more vicious propaganda was used. Probably the most notorious single piece was a picture purporting to show a black New York official, F.Q. Morton, with his white secretary. Morton was described in the accompanying text as a powerful New York City figure who was in line for a Cabinet post if Smith won the election. There were also rumors that the black boxer, Jack Johnson, whose marriage to a white woman had generated considerable controversy, would tour the country for the Smith forces as a part of an aggressive campaign to organize the black vote in the South for the Democratic nominee. Anti-Smith Democrats who circulated material of this nature (including Bishop Cannon), reveling in the belief that it would be "wonderfully effective," openly challenged Smith to prove that he did not approve of political and social equality for blacks. Most of the Republicans in the South, who had recently begun to try to overcome their "black Republican" image there and to foster "lily-white" parties in the South, prudently remained silent on the race issue.

As a matter of fact, the Smith camp had toyed with an aggressive campaign to solicit black votes, but in the North – where they might help to win some key states, and Smith at least considered taking speaking out for civil rights. Many Northern blacks, becoming

increasingly disillusioned with the G.O.P., were attracted to Smith because of his overall record, his wetness, and his status as an apparent co-victim of prejudice. A number of black newspapers endorsed him over Hoover even though the Republican nominee had an acceptable record on race. Belle Moskowitz arranged for Smith to meet informally with Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, who earlier in 1928 had done some quiet organizational work for Smith; she hoped White would now undertake a drive to recruit black voters for Smith.

According to White, Smith declared to him when the two men met that his aims were equality of income and status for all Americans, and he also emphasized that Northern Democrats looked at the race question differently than Southerners did. When White urged Smith to issue an unequivocal statement denouncing segregation, to promise that he would appoint qualified blacks, and to speak out on the racial question, the candidate invited him to draft a statement that Smith might issue. White submitted such a statement but heard nothing more about it. Although the Democrats did use some blacks in local campaigns and Smith toured a few black sections during his visits to various cities, an active Democratic drive for black voters never materialized and Smith never spoke in public about the matter of race.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Belle Moskowitz also met with Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier, one of the country's foremost black-oriented newspapers, but nothing came of this either. Marcus Garvey, in exile in Canada, urged his followers by radio to vote for Smith.

Smith's reticence on race brought him reproach from some blacks (and whites) who were critical of his record on race, skeptical about his sympathy for blacks, and angry at his apparent decision to take the course of expediency and to appease Southern whites. Some blacks were angry, too, about the heavy-handed segregation that had been employed at the Houston convention. According to Belle Moskowitz, Smith later regretted his failure to act more aggressively to attract black voters, but whether he also regretted not having spoken out on the race issue is not known. In any event, Smith's silence helped Southern Democrats to rebut what his opponents were saying, as did some pointed official denials of specific allegations. Democratic headquarters publicly contradicted the reports that Johnson or anyone else was actively organizing blacks to vote, and its repudiation of the Morton story was accompanied by a press release stating that over the years Smith had made only one black appointment – a messenger. Democrats at party headquarters, including even the (black) leader of the bureau directing the campaign to persuade blacks to vote for Smith, gave detailed private assurances to correspondents all over the country that Smith was “sound” on race. This could mean whatever the correspondents chose it to mean.

Fortified by such assurances, Southern Democrats fought back ruthlessly with what they deemed their most powerful weapon in the battle to hold onto the Democratic vote. They denounced the Republican Party for Reconstruction, the 1890 Force Bill, for federal patronage for blacks, and for proposed anti-lynching legislation (which the G.O.P. had

endorsed in its 1928 platform). Hoover's reputed racial views did not escape attack, and some of the Democratic charges against him were as lurid and base as those made against Smith. The Democrats' counterpart to the Morton propaganda was a rumor that Hoover had recently danced with a black woman in Mississippi, and there were also allegations that Secretary Hoover had desegregated the Department of Commerce (specifically, that he had forced white women to use the same toilet facilities as black men).<sup>34</sup> Neither party in 1928 was above using such materials to inflame racial feelings.

For many Southern Democrats race alone supplied a good enough reason to vote the party ticket from top to bottom. "I am going to vote for Al Smith," said one of them, "because I am a life long Democrat and because I am a Southern white man." The single-mindedness of some voters could not conceal, however, their realization that not everyone heard the siren of white supremacy. "Don't let Catholicism, don't let Prohibition, don't let propaganda of any kind blind you," said a Mississippi Democrat. "There is only one issue in Mississippi – white supremacy, and crushing a Mississippi white and black Republican party in the making." The ability of the Democrats to put this idea across remained to be seen, but the consensus among observers seemed to be that they were having success for, as one scholar later put it, the Democratic Party "was racial before it was political, and a vote for Smith was a vote for the South...."

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<sup>34</sup> Perhaps it was no coincidence that the American Historical Association released, several months before its annual convention in 1928, the text of Ulrich B. Phillips's seminar article, "The Central Theme of Southern History," which identified this theme as a determination to keep the South a white man's country.

From the vantage point of those in the General Motors Building, from the beginning of the 1928 presidential campaign the Democrats had faced some rather delicate problems in the South. Entrusting the Smith cause there to those who had received his nomination only unenthusiastically – at best – held many risks, but interfering in some manner had its own drawbacks. For a time, notwithstanding the official optimism about Smith’s chances in the South, Democrats at national headquarters considered establishing a branch office below Mason and Dixon’s Line (as one of five such regional offices) in order to oversee the national campaign efforts there. Of course, by taking this unprecedented step the Democrats would clearly signal their concern about Smith’s weakness in the South, thereby both encouraging Republicans and the anti-Smith forces while demoralizing those Democrats who were genuinely working for Smith’s election. Moreover, a great many Southern Democrats, whatever their attitude toward Smith, would resent this equally unprecedented meddling in their region’s affairs, especially if it meant they would find it harder to take an independent line on prohibition and divorce their state and local campaigns from the national one. In the end, Smith’s advisors, satisfying themselves from reports of the situation in the South that matters did not warrant extreme action, decided that the regional headquarters plan would clash with Raskob’s desire to centralize the party’s organization. Southern Democrats were left to run their own, autonomous campaign.

There were similarly conflicting views in New York about the advisability of having Smith make a speaking tour of the South, or at least one or two speeches there, and until October it appeared that he would not even venture into the upper South or the border states. Omitting the South derived in part from Smith's own desire to devote more time to the Northeast and in part from his misgivings about giving too many speeches. The main objection to a Southern tour, once again though, was the opinion prevalent in headquarters that scheduling appearances by a Democratic presidential candidate in the South would be, in Raskob's words, "a terrible confession of weakness." Robinson had arranged to include the South in his own extensive speaking tour (which also included appearances in the West), the first time since 1896 that a member of the national ticket had spent so much time in the South. The Democrats, rather unconvincingly, protested that the vice-presidential nominee's plans did not represent any concern in headquarters about the South.

In October, though, Smith and his key advisors yielded to those Democrats who argued that a Smith campaign visit to at least some location in the South would be beneficial. The New York headquarters agreed to have him swing through parts of Virginia and North Carolina on his way to an address in Kentucky; a number of whistle-stop appearances of the sort Smith had eschewed were put onto his schedule so as to increase the nominee's visibility in this area. (Another formal Smith speech, in Nashville, was

subsequently added, possibly because of Hoover's recent appearance in Elizabethton, Tennessee.)

This trip into the South did not go well for Smith and the Democrats: not only were there were some embarrassing mix-ups, but when Smith declined to do more than speak informally to crowds en route to his two platform speaking engagements, his refusal to go beyond pleasantries on these occasions drew criticism. For some, this tour appeared to be a hurried response to political necessities and the fear of Republican inroads into traditional Democratic territory.<sup>35</sup> In the end, it seemed unlikely that this late gesture did much to encourage Smith's supporters in the South, and many observers confirmed Raskob's fear by interpreting the tour as evidence of the Democrats' growing anxiety about how the battle in the South was going.<sup>36</sup>

### **What Will McAdoo Do?**

One byproduct of the campaign in the South was a spirited contest for the affections – ultimately, the public endorsement as well – of McAdoo, Smith's erstwhile rival for the mantle of party leadership. McAdoo was thought still to have considerable influence,

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<sup>35</sup> Smith's camp let it be known that he would not be taking on his train the bulk of the extensive library that he had taken with him on his earlier campaign swing west.

<sup>36</sup> A number of Southern Democrats had urged that Smith deliver some speeches in the South not out of their fear of losing states there but out of their desire to see Smith and other Northern Democrats make a conciliatory gesture toward the region. When Smith refused to go any farther south than North Carolina and Tennessee, some Democrats in the deep South felt abandoned.

especially in the South, and some observers believed that what he did in 1928 might well be the difference between Smith winning and losing. McAdoo's difficulties in deciding what to do illustrate well in microcosm the problems that so many other Southern Democrats were experiencing, with the special twist, of course, imparted by McAdoo's prominence and the long intraparty competition between the two men and their backers. It had been Smith's fate to have blocked McAdoo's presidential aspirations in 1924. Now, four years later, it might be McAdoo's fate to determine whether or not Smith would be elected to the highest office in the land.

How McAdoo would react to Smith's nomination and campaign began in uncertainty and remained in doubt until the eve of the election in November. Many Democrats, including some at Smith's headquarters in New York City, hoped that McAdoo would not only endorse their nominee but speak on his behalf and encourage Southerners in particular to vote for Smith. The anti-Smith forces – among whom were several of McAdoo's closest political friends – also aspired to get McAdoo's active support for Hoover, but as the fall went on they came to regard his refusal to come out publicly for Smith as enough of a victory.

As soon as Smith had been nominated at Houston, McAdoo declared that he would remain silent at least until he heard the two candidates' acceptance speeches. He felt keenly the conflicting forces that were pulling at a large portion of the Democratic Party.

McAdoo knew that bolting would make him what he termed a “a political pariah” and would compromise any ambitions he might have in the party to which he had been fiercely loyal for decades, but he also believed that he had to preserve his principles and his position as a leader of the dries in both the party and the nation. In the eyes of McAdoo (a former Secretary of the Treasury), the Republicans had failed to enforce prohibition zealously enough and Hoover had deserted Wilson (McAdoo’s father-in-law) on the League, but McAdoo also believed that Smith had rejected “every” Wilsonian ideal and that a Tammanyite was not a true Democrat. What disturbed McAdoo the most about Smith, though, was his wetness (including his telegram to the convention) and what Smith might actually do about prohibition if he were to be elected. Smith’s former rival truly felt himself in a “sorry predicament.”

While speculation about his plans swirled about during the weeks after the convention adjourned, McAdoo repeatedly solicited advice from friends, sounded out political conditions in the South to see just how valuable his support might be, and eventually came to believe that he could advance his interests best by not leaving the party. McAdoo also decided, however, to maintain a “dignified silence” in public, even after both acceptance speeches. He reached this decision in part because he had become convinced from advances made to him through Roosevelt, Baruch, and others inspired by Democratic headquarters that Smith and his advisors coveted McAdoo’s support so much that he might be able to barter it for some concessions on the prohibition issue. Baruch

was the major contact between Smith's headquarters and McAdoo, but Raskob himself telephoned McAdoo when the latter demanded a direct approach. Two other men, Bryon Newton and S.R. Berton, played supporting roles in the drama played out by the Smith camp and McAdoo.

Rumors during August that McAdoo was about to endorse Smith were premature, for he was still bargaining with the Smith camp over terms. Specifically, McAdoo, who was content with the platform's statement about enforcement, demanded assurances from Smith about how vigorously he would enforce the prohibition laws. In late August McAdoo submitted for Smith's approval the draft of a letter for later publication that spelled out these terms. In it, McAdoo expressed his faith in Smith's good intentions and praised the nominee's candor but rejected Smith's proposed changes in the prohibition laws. Most importantly, McAdoo asked the New Yorker to pledge himself to seek adequate appropriations in order to "secure the best possible enforcement" of prohibition. If, as McAdoo contended, enforcement might serve as the "common ground" on which the two men could stand, beyond which they could hold onto their differing personal beliefs about prohibition itself and how the laws ought to read, then Smith would have to go beyond his acceptance speech: he would have to satisfy McAdoo and the dries for whom he spoke that as president Smith would actually enforce the law – especially in New York and other states without their own enforcement acts.

Thus McAdoo, who insisted over and over that he wanted above all to help the party, had by mid-September brought himself to the verge of action, but he decided to wait to see what Smith would say about prohibition in his Milwaukee campaign address, as well as how the nominee would respond to McAdoo's draft letter. Although nothing that Smith said in Milwaukee on September 29 departed significantly from his earlier statements, McAdoo now chose to believe that Smith had advanced too far beyond a position he could endorse or could get fellow drys to accept; McAdoo also was beginning to take seriously Smith's confident statement that he could turn public opinion against prohibition. Furthermore, McAdoo regarded Proskauer's redraft of the letter McAdoo had sent to Smith in August as colorless and equivocal about enforcement. So, declaring that Smith had foolishly passed up his opportunity to win over many drys without offending the wets, McAdoo proclaimed to Baruch in mid-October that it was now "too late" and said that his own continued silence would be best for all concerned.

McAdoo found his self-enforced silence difficult to endure, partly owing to his own temperament and partly because of the pressures to which he was being subjected. Smith's backers kept trying through October to talk McAdoo into coming out for the Democratic national ticket, but he had concluded that they were actually "amazingly indifferent" to a letter of endorsement from him. Meanwhile, anti-Smith drys like Milton – an old colleague at Treasury and one of McAdoo's most intimate political confidantes – continued to ply McAdoo with urgings to remain silent, if he could not bring himself to

oppose Smith publicly. McAdoo was determined to keep his silence to the end, and as late as October 28 it looked like he would succeed.

But then, on November 2, McAdoo released a statement to replace the unequivocal one (“I will be silent”) he had dispatched just four days before. The substitute read, “I am absolutely opposed to Governor Smith’s position on prohibition and the Eighteenth Amendment but I shall preserve my party allegiance.” McAdoo explained to friends that his brother had attracted unfavorable attention with some intemperate anti-Catholic speeches for Hoover, and McAdoo said he wanted to eliminate any confusion about his own position. He told Baruch that he had done “the best I could in the circumstances.” Privately, McAdoo also realized that remaining silent would make it very difficult for him “to be able to stay within the party and fight within the party against the very things that Smith represented.” As he admitted to his son, McAdoo was not proud of what he had done, and it is unlikely that many people were satisfied with the ambiguous statement that McAdoo ended up making.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> McAdoo told Baruch that he had done nothing to hurt Smith or to help the other side in 1928, but in fact he gave money to some anti-Smith Democrats in Texas, and perhaps elsewhere. In 1931, McAdoo contended that he had voted for, and contributed money to, Smith in 1928. Roosevelt later reported that he had sent, with the approval of the Smith camp, a personal emissary to see McAdoo but never saw the draft letter that McAdoo had submitted for Smith’s consideration. Roosevelt, who had himself experienced trouble seeing the nominee during the campaign, came to believe that Proskauer, Belle Moskowitz, and Raskob had “bungled” the chance to secure McAdoo’s support. There is no evidence that Smith did see McAdoo’s proposed letter, but McAdoo continued to think that Smith had rejected an agreement with him because he did not intend to enforce prohibition energetically if he were elected.

By the time McAdoo did speak out, of course, a great many Southern voters had already made up their minds. How many of them would desert the party of their fathers had remained a topic of lively interest throughout the fall campaign. Experienced observers used words like “moonshine” to dismiss the idea that a wholesale revolt would cost Smith the entire South. There was a widespread awareness that the Democratic national ticket could not hope to win the region as a bloc (Tennessee and Kentucky had already gone to the Republicans in recent years, 1920 and 1924, respectively). But only in the upper South, knowledgeable observers seemed agreed, did the anti-Smith Democratic renegades and the Republicans have a chance of capturing a few states – North Carolina, Virginia, and Texas – that had long been safely Democratic. Only election day would reveal whether or not Smith could actually win the Solid South, but it was increasingly clear as the 1928 presidential campaign unfolded that the Democrats’ plan to count on doing that might be seriously compromised.

### **Smith Takes The Fight To The Farm States**

Even as the Democrats were striving to prevent desertions in the South by appealing to party loyalty, they were attempting to break the same sort of ties some voters had to the G.O.P. in the upper Mississippi Valley. Here, in the area running from Wisconsin and Missouri west to Montana and Colorado, the Republicans were thought to be vulnerable to a nominee who could offer some hope of relief to depressed agricultural interests and

might reawaken the latent progressivism that had made the late Senator LaFollette such a strong candidate in this area four years before.

Of these two elements, the farm issue attracted the more attention in 1928. Hard times had plagued this region's agricultural sector for nearly a decade and had generated significant dissatisfaction with the Republicans – and with Hoover. Many farmers' organizations and political representatives had fought for the McNary-Haugen Plan. This proposal, they insisted, would elevate the prices of major cash crops through government purchases of their surpluses for disposal overseas and the imposition of an equalization fee to finance these purchases. President Coolidge had vetoed two McNary-Haugen bills, though, in 1927 and 1928, and it was widely believed that as Secretary of Commerce Hoover had counseled him to do so. It was also alleged that Hoover had sought to keep farm prices low during the World War and that he put the welfare of industry ahead of that of the farmer.

The farm organizations and many farm-state Republicans, consequently, had tried to win an endorsement of the McNary-Haugen Plan at the 1928 Republican National Convention and to block Hoover's nomination. Many of them sought to nominate instead former Illinois Governor Frank O. Lowden, who was thought to be far more sympathetic to farm interests. When both of these efforts failed, most of the politicians who had been cool to Hoover went home and sulked, but a number of the farm

organization leaders moved on to seek a more sympathetic ear among the Democrats in Houston.

These skeptical but hopeful farm leaders, who thought they had been treated rather rudely in Kansas City, did enjoy a warmer reception in Texas. They conferred with key Democrats, including several of Smith's representatives, and the result was a plank very much like the one they had sought from the Republicans. At the suggestion of George N. Peek, the pre-eminent spokesman of the farm organizations, the text of this plank seemed to endorse the McNary-Haugen concept but did not mention it or the equalization fee by name, doubtless in order not to commit the party to a controversial proposal that was not very popular in the Northeast.<sup>38</sup> Those who were interested the cause of the farmer or in specific ideas for agricultural relief did give the plank considerable praise, and they also seemed surprisingly open-minded when it came to Smith – although most farm leaders let it be known that they would withhold any endorsements until after the nominees' acceptance speeches.<sup>39</sup>

Smith and his strategists thought they faced two principal tasks as they got down to the business of trying to exploit the discontent about Midwestern Republican farmers and coax them into voting for Smith. On the one hand, the New York governor had to

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<sup>38</sup> Peek chaired the Executive Committee of Twenty-Two of the North Central States Agricultural Conference, and he was also involved with the Corn Belt Committee of Farm Organizations. He had been president of the Moline Plow Company before becoming interested in the matter of farm relief.

<sup>39</sup> Lowden approved of the Democratic plank.

familiarize himself with the substance of the farm issue so that he could talk about it convincingly. At the same time, the Smith camp had to find a formula that would persuade farmers and their friends that Democratic nominee stood for genuine farm relief without alarming the Northeasterners whose support would be vital to Smith's chances for victory – businessmen, union members, and consumers of all types – by raising the specter of higher prices for farm products. Whether the nominee's thoroughgoing Eastern and urban perspective, along with his views on prohibition, would help or hinder him in doing so was open to question; Smith and his friends had to hope that most farmers would agree with the dry Missourian who wrote to Peek that he supported the Democratic nominee because "I [am] doing more farming than I [am doing] drinking."<sup>40</sup>

Understandably, as governor Smith had never devoted much attention to the broader aspects of agriculture, and neither did he focus on the farm issue while he was a mere contender for the nomination; privately, he admitted his ignorance of the whole matter. After his nomination, though, he threw himself into a concentrated study of the farm problem in preparation for the campaign ahead. Smith read memoranda prepared by "experts" on agriculture and met at length with Peek and Hugh S. Johnson (a colleague of Peek, he was another spokesman for farmers), questioning them intently. The nominee

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<sup>40</sup> Some of those who advised Smith in 1928 believed that he did not place enough emphasis on the farm issue, give enough attention to winning the farm states, or act boldly enough in offering a plan of his own; a few of them, even among Smith's northeastern friends, wanted him to embrace the McNary-Haugen Plan in name and in its entirety.

absorbed from what he read and heard until he seemed to have a respectable grasp of the complex farm issue.<sup>41</sup>

When Peek met with and then endorsed Smith on August 2, the latter simply stated his approval of the Democratic plank, with all its vagueness about the equalization fee, and promised to convene a conference on the agricultural question if he won the election. But two days later, talking informally with a group of newspapermen, Smith repudiated the equalization fee by name while coming out for the principle of controlling the sale of surpluses and assessing the growers of crops for the costs involved in doing so. Along with Smith's seeming lack of a definite plan to deal with agricultural distress, beyond calling for a conference if elected, these conflicting statements confused and disappointed many observers – especially farm leaders. As Peek characterized it many years later, the nominee had “stubbed his toe” in his conversation with the newspapermen, and that misstep would hurt him considerably.

In 1928, though, Peek was not among those who were uncertain about where Smith stood on the McNary-Haugen Plan, for he seems to have persuaded the nominee to support the plan if elected but to avoid committing himself to it during the campaign. Peek (nominally a Republican) then accepted Raskob's invitation to direct the Democratic

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<sup>41</sup> Peek was impressed by Smith's ability to familiarize himself with the agricultural issue, but even he was still concerned about the depth of that knowledge of it until he heard Smith speak about the issue in his address in Omaha.

Party's special effort to win the farm vote and immediately got busy trying to mobilize support for Smith among the farmers and the leaders of their organizations. On August 13, Peek shepherded eleven well-known such leaders, seven of them Republicans, into an all-day conference with the Democratic standard-bearer. Smith listened to their views and then restated his endorsement of the equalization fee principle. He told the leaders that he was not opposed to the fee and to the McNary-Haugen Plan in general but also did not intend to limit himself to these proposed solutions. Most of the eleven leaders appeared satisfied by what they heard, for as the group left Albany it released a cordially written statement praising Smith's interest in farmers and his understanding of their problems.

Given this prelude of events, there was considerable interest in what Smith would say in his acceptance speech on August 22. As described earlier, Smith merely recapitulated the calculated ambiguity that he and his advisors had decided would attract many western farmers without alienating northeastern consumers and businessmen: a carefully worded approval of the principle of the McNary-Haugen Plan and a promise to charge a commission of experts with coming up with the precise means by which to accomplish the aims of the various McNary-Haugen proposals of the past few years. Raskob's statement a week after the acceptance speech that Smith was neutral on the equalization fee and Smith's own comment two days later that he had not ruled it out only

underscored the unwillingness of the Democrats to take a firm position either for or against the only notable proposal for farm relief that had come before the country.<sup>42</sup>

Smith's strategy of seeking to exploit farm discontent by promising relief vaguely along the lines of the McNary-Haugen Plan disappointed many who expected more from him than an expedient straddle, and most commentators seemed to agree that at bottom there was little real difference between the two nominees on the farm issue. Smith's position, the New Republic gibed, "sounds like saying that the Iliad was not written by Homer, but by someone else of the same name," but the publication also perceptively stated: "If Al Smith starts out with the idea that he wants to do something for the farmers, but will not do anything which conservative business men might disapprove, he will land on the farm issue exactly where Herbert Hoover stands. [Then] . . . the competition for the farm vote will come down to the question of whose smile the farmers like better." That, of course, was exactly the kind of competition Smith expected to excel in.

Having put himself on record in Albany with his acceptance address, Smith prepared to launch his first campaign tour. Tellingly, it would be into the Republican heartland, where he would be tested not just on the agricultural issue but – for the first time in his political career – on his abilities as a national campaigner. Smith would leave Albany in

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<sup>42</sup> Rexford Tugwell had tried to sell Smith on the concept of parity, but Belle Moskowitz opposed this idea and then Peek won Smith and his advisors over to the qualified endorsement of the McNary-Haugen principle. Robinson spoke extensively about the farm issue in the South and West, not only attacking the Republicans but endorsing the McNary-Haugen Plan by name.

mid-September bound for six speaking engagements in the Midwest and West, along with a final stop on October 1 at the New York Democratic convention in Rochester.<sup>43</sup> Never before had he engaged in the kind of campaigning, in unknown and sometimes unfriendly territory, that he would have to do over the next few weeks, in the West and elsewhere. As Smith's train headed west, the Hudson fell increasingly far behind him.

The nominee and his family rode on the "St. Nicholas," a private car belonging to Smith's old friend William Kenny. The remainder of his personal party – a few key advisors, a dozen or more staff members and secretaries, and a couple of western Democratic leaders – along with about fifty reporters and photographers occupied the other ten cars of the special train. The journalists were impressed by the generous accommodations and facilities allotted to them, and the fact that Smith was taking along an extensive reference library seemed evidence that he was determined to prove how thoroughly prepared he was making himself to handle the presidency.<sup>44</sup>

Also significantly, Smith's very first speech of the presidential campaign was to be in Omaha – on the farm issue. Baruch and others had wanted him to read his entire remarks so that unfriendly reporters could not misconstrue what he said extemporaneously, but Smith would agree only to read verbatim a section that summarized his position on the

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<sup>43</sup> Smith's remarks in Rochester, where New York Democrats were holding their 1928 meeting, would be exclusively devoted to state topics and politics.

<sup>44</sup> Pittman had urged there be no western tours by Smith, arguing that Robinson could best handle that region and that Smith would offend voters in the states that he omitted from his itinerary. Smith's train was the first to have radio installed, including a set for the reporters.

equalization fee. After discussing the problems of the farmer and attacking the Republicans' farm policy, Smith concluded by employing a tactic straight from his New York politicking experience. He referred to eight cleverly worded questions ten local citizens had put to him in a paid advertisement in an Omaha newspaper. Holding up a copy as he spoke, Smith addressed himself to the questions (five on farm relief and one each on prohibition, the St. Lawrence River project, and the tariff). Whether his rather combative replies were persuasive or not, Smith's effort to turn a potential embarrassment to an advantage was clear as he suggested that those who had placed the advertisement ask Hoover the same questions.

Smith's performance in Omaha pleased him and his intimates and impressed many of those who were sizing him up as a candidate – and as a potential president. His strategists in New York believed that he had had great success in showing himself off, beyond the substantive value of his remarks on a subject rather foreign to him. There were still those who complained that his farm policy was only “a gesture without real substance,” however. They began to wonder if Smith's insistent references to the fact that there were alternatives to the equalization fee for accomplishing the objectives of the McNary-Haugen Plan meant that he had in actuality rejected the equalization fee without actually saying so.

The rather lukewarm reaction overall to Smith's straddle on the farm issue prompted some of his advisors to try to get him to return at length to the farm issue, but, in keeping with his resolve to devote only one address to each major campaign issue, Smith refused. (According to one report, Smith even declined to discuss the issue in private conferences with Democrats farther along on his western swing.) Smith especially rejected the suggestion that he deliver a "blasting speech in barnyard language" because it would be obvious that he had not written it.<sup>45</sup> All that Smith would do in his remaining speeches, including a special radio address to farmers at noon on the day before the election, was to reiterate his slashing attacks on Hoover's statements and on the Republican farm record, offer corrections of what Smith regarded as distortions of his own position, and make cautious statements that he believed in farm relief but should not be thought "necessarily" for or against the equalization fee. Smith passed up an ideal chance to return to the farm issue when he addressed a large crowd at the Missouri State Fair at Sedalia in mid-October: he disappointed this largely rural audience by focusing instead on the topic of government economy.

Smith's traversal of the western farm states coincided with the opening of the Democrats' broader effort to win the farm vote. The bulk of this campaign would be carried on by an organization, technically independent but sponsored by the Democrats, that would concentrate exclusively on agricultural issues. Peek, though a nominal Republican, had

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<sup>45</sup> Raskob later gave part of this speech, though he hardly used barnyard language doing so.

been the natural choice to direct this organization, which he (aided chiefly by Chester Davis, another prominent farm leader) began to put together after his meetings with Smith and Raskob in early August. The “Smith Independent Organizations Committee,” as it was known, was based in Chicago and operated through satellite affiliates in nearly a dozen farm states.<sup>46</sup> After spending the remainder of August and early September getting organized, Peek and Davis submitted a proposed budget of \$499,800 to Raskob and got to work. Problems of coordination with the established state Democratic organizations and breakdowns in communication with the New York headquarters continued to plague Peek’s committee, but by mid-October a well-funded, active campaign was in progress. In the end, the committee spent the then-extraordinary sum of \$397,175, nearly half of it for written publicity materials and radio time, to persuade residents of the farm states to “vote as farmers not as partisans.”<sup>47</sup> By the end of the campaign, the Smith Independent Organizations Committee had established a new standard for a political organization, outside the two parties, that would engage in what would come to be called pressure-group activities.

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<sup>46</sup> The affiliates, whose names differed from state to state, were located in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

<sup>47</sup> Another independent organization, the “Smith Independent League,” which was headed by a renegade Republican, former North Dakota Senator Henry C. Hansbrough, made such vicious attacks on Hoover that Raskob felt obliged to repudiate Hansbrough and his league. Raskob also announced in early August that he had asked the economist E.R.A. Seligman to prepare a study of the agricultural issue, but, since Seligman’s work was not made public until after the election (it was not completed until the end of February 1929), it – perhaps purposely – would contribute little more than publicity value; in addition, some farmers resented being told by a professor what the remedies to the agricultural issue were.

Peek, along with Raskob, also strove to get prominent farm spokesmen – particularly Republicans, naturally – to endorse Smith. Some, like Frank W. Murphy of Minnesota, who chaired the executive committee of the American Council on Agriculture, showed little hesitation in doing so. Others, notably Iowa farm editor Henry A. Wallace, were willing to give speeches for Smith in front of farm groups. Probably only a few of these people had been persuaded to back Smith by his personal position on farm relief, though they may have had faith in Peek and in the Democrats’ apparent open-mindedness on how to stimulate the agricultural sector. In a broader sense, too, Smith lacked a voice in the Midwestern farm states: very few farm-oriented periodicals (Wallace’s Farmer was the major exception) endorsed his candidacy.

Many of those who came out for Smith seemed to be motivated, instead, mainly by their opposition to Hoover or the Republican resistance to the McNary-Haugen Plan and by their desire to teach the G.O.P. through a protest vote not to take the farm states for granted – as the Democrats were taking the South for granted. “Our job,” said Murphy, “is to beat [Hoover] and take our chances with some one who agrees to give us what we ask.” Certainly the most militant of the farm spokesmen seemed more interested in inflaming farmers against the Republicans than what the Democrats stood for, and even Peek calculated that he could use the results of the campaign for Smith in 1928 to pressure the Republicans, later on, into aiding the farmer.

Whether or not Peek and other dissident farm leaders would in the long run be successful in squeezing a more sympathetic attitude toward farmers out of the G.O.P. remained to be seen, but the reaction of the Republicans during the campaign showed that their concern over the loyalty of the farm states was real. They undertook an energetic campaign through the farm belt, spearheaded by Senator William E. Borah's telling attacks on Smith and his farm position. The Republican drive, which was climaxed by Hoover's promise in late October to call a special session of Congress to deal with the farm problem, was successful in holding party lines remarkably intact. Even Republican leaders who had praised the Democratic plank and expressed approval of Smith's position, like Nebraska's Governor Adam McMullen, in the end came out for Hoover.

The situation for many Republican leaders in the farm states paralleled that of the Democratic leaders in the South. The critical question for these unhappy Republicans was not whether to desert Hoover but whether they would publicly endorse and campaign for his opponent, Smith. Like their Southern Democratic counterparts, many Republican leaders in the farm states solved the problem by evading it if possible or by carefully detaching themselves from the national ticket.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Smith's basic unfamiliarity with the farm question is perhaps the major reason for his obvious sensitivity to the attacks of Republican orators, especially Borah, but other Democrats joined Smith in responding to Borah because they thought that the Senator's criticisms of Smith were undoing what the nominee had accomplished in the farm belt.

Despite all of the Democrats' efforts, Smith failed to win over even most of the leaders of the various farmers' organizations, let alone the farmers and their other allies; in addition, as a whole the press in the Northwest remained staunchly Republican and pro-Hoover. In general, the fact that Smith's familiarity with agricultural matters was more with what was termed "city pavement farming" than with the real thing, along with his continuing straddle on any definite remedy, weakened his candidacy in the face of a long history of Republican regularity; most farmers, seeing no compelling differences between the two candidates (on nearly all the issues, not just the farm issue), seemed willing to take their chances with Hoover than with Smith. As for the one campaign issue in 1928 where Smith did stand for something quite different than his opponent did, one farmer perhaps summed up the attitude in the farm region this way: "I do more farming than I do drinking."

In a way, Lowden served as his party's McAdoo in 1928. Lowden, who had been the farm bloc's candidate for the nomination that Hoover now held, was perhaps the most popular and influential Republican in this region. Peek, Johnson, Baruch, and others practically begged Lowden to endorse Smith, or at least to acknowledge that Smith stood for the principle of farm relief. Smith himself courted Lowden publicly by including a number of glowing references to the former governor in his speeches. In fact, Lowden was embarrassed by the position that Smith had taken, which he did prefer to Hoover's. But, as with McAdoo, personal considerations and the tug of party fealty prevented him

from deserting his party – though he did hope that a narrow victory for the Republicans might capture their attention and lead to action. Unlike McAdoo, though, Lowden managed to maintain his silence until the election was over. This disappointed the Democrats but at least quelled the apprehensions of the Smith partisans that the Illinois leader might throw in with Hoover before election day.

In the battle for endorsements in the upper Mississippi Valley, the foremost Democratic plum was Senator George W. Norris of Nebraska. Although he initially had kind words about Smith and some of his views, Norris remained uncommitted for weeks after the two nominating conventions. The Democrats did all they could to bring the Nebraskan into their fold, and Smith went out of his way during his Omaha address to praise Norris. The veteran Republican finally made up his mind in late September to back Smith but felt compelled to campaign for some progressive Republican senatorial candidates before publicly endorsing the candidate of the other party. In late October, partly in reaction to Hoover's remarks on the farm issue in his October 22 speech in Madison Square Garden, Norris somewhat reluctantly came out for Smith. He released a statement that emphasized his satisfaction with Smith's stands on the two issues that interested Norris the most, agricultural relief and hydroelectric power, then campaigned for Smith as a progressive.

The defection of Norris highlights the other, complementary, thrust of the Democratic campaign to breach the Republican stronghold in the upper Mississippi Valley: the attempt to portray Smith as a forthright “progressive” leader. Promoting this image of Smith had some value elsewhere, of course, but the upper Mississippi Valley seemed the most logical place to focus on winning progressives since it was here that the Progressive Party was born and had its most recent success, in 1924. If the Democrats could mobilize behind Smith most of those who had gone over to LaFollette four years before, the combination of their votes with those of the usual Democrats – to say nothing of the votes of dissident Republican farmers – might swing as many as ten states into Smith’s column in the fall.

Raskob entrusted the job of generating support for Smith among progressives to Frank P. Walsh, a Missourian (now a New York City attorney) whose extensive credentials as a pro-labor civil libertarian and progressive were well known. Walsh formed a “Progressive League for Alfred E. Smith” in September and set to work from his office at Democratic national headquarters trying to attract to Smith progressives and labor unionists throughout the country; Walsh also collaborated with independent Smith organizations in several states, including Pennsylvania. Several other campaigns to organize the latent LaFollette support and other progressive elements in the west were also initiated, but as a whole the endeavor to mobilize the progressive vote was neither as well-financed nor as vigorous as the campaign for the farm vote that Peek was leading.

Smith did his part to attract progressives by devoting major addresses on his western tour to several matters that the Democrats deemed of major interest to this rather disparate group. Not only did Smith concentrate on farm relief in Omaha, but he went on to speak about hydroelectric power (in Denver on September 22), about corruption in government (in Helena on September 24), and about dynamic executive leadership (in St. Paul on September 27). In nearly every instance the nominee also made generous references in these and later addresses to both LaFollette and former Bull Moose Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>49</sup>

In Helena, home of Montana's Senator Thomas J. Walsh (hero of the Teapot Dome hearings), Smith sought to remind listeners about the scandals of the past eight Republican years. His speech, which drew upon material that Senator Walsh and conservationist Harry A. Slattery furnished to him, failed to elicit much interest, however. Later in the campaign, in Chicago on October 19, Smith tried again. This time he attempted to exploit the fact that the Coolidge's Attorney General, John G. Sargent, had recently voided the Salt Creek oil contract renewal, which Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work (one of Hoover's campaign managers) had approved in February 1928. Again, though, Smith's speech had something of a tepid reaction: few people seemed

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<sup>49</sup> Smith made references to another progressive leader, Woodrow Wilson, throughout the campaign, but these would have been obligatory for a Democrat in any case.

interested in rehashing corruption in government during the last two Republican administrations.

Smith seemed to have more success when he discussed hydroelectric power, perhaps because that issue had a future and not a past. Water power was also an issue to which he brought not only considerable personal knowledge but his record in New York politics. In Denver, Smith developed what he had said about power during his acceptance address, reportedly speaking on this topic over the objections of some local Democrats who had hoped to sidestep the issue. (Smith had grasped the new situation in which presidential candidates found themselves: candidates' speeches once considered "local" were now in fact national because they were being broadcast by radio all across the country.) Again using some of Slattery's data, the Democratic nominee accused greedy monopolies of wanting to exploit valuable power sites for private profit and rebuked propagandists for the power companies. Smith criticized Hoover's stated willingness to lease these sites for private development and advocated instead governmental control of them as the only way to "provide fair and reasonable rates" with "fair and equal distribution of the power."

Smith reiterated these views in his later campaign speeches, in particular the one on October 12 in Nashville, not far from the nascent Muscle Shoals project in Alabama.<sup>50</sup>

When Hoover, in a speech in Madison Square Garden ten days later, termed Smith's

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<sup>50</sup> One wonders if Muscle Shoals is where the Democratic headquarters would have sent Smith had they opted for an address in the Deep South.

proposals on power, farm relief, and a state dispensary system for alcoholic beverages “State socialism,” Smith lost no time replying (in Boston on October 24). Here, at last, was the kind of national “debate” that he had hoped for. Citing the many prominent Republicans who had gone on record as supporting the public development of water power, Smith differentiated between having the state develop a natural resource and having it manage a fully operational business enterprise. On this issue, at least, Smith was eager to have his audiences believe that he was clearly on one side and Hoover was on the other.

Some people, including advocates of public power development, did see the matter as starkly as that. Many progressives, moreover, chose to believe that Smith’s stand on power epitomized his attitude toward the proper relationship between government and private enterprise. Thus they placed more weight than was warranted on the issue of hydroelectric power – perhaps because it was the only economic issue upon which Smith and Hoover definitely disagreed. Progressive Amos Pinchot, for example, describing Smith’s views on water power as “the opening gun of a bitter fight between democracy and plutocracy,” predicted that through Smith’s efforts “the people” would again rise up against “the interests.” Even the usually wary New Republic proclaimed: “If progressive voters do not appreciate the immense superiority of Smith to Hoover on hydro-electric power, there is little hope for progressivism in the United States.”

Others, including Norris, more wisely observed that Smith's views on power were not so advanced as they seemed at first sight – or as they might be expected to be in light of his generally positive record on the issue in New York. These people realized that Smith was loathe to go beyond simple governmental ownership of generating facilities and the transmission of electricity. His position on the matter of state regulation of private power companies was rather vague, they pointed out, and it was quite possible under Smith's system that the state would find itself helpless to control rates and distribution once it released the electricity to the private utility at the bus bar.

The Democratic efforts to win progressive support for their candidate bore some visible fruits when a number of notable progressives publicly endorsed and even campaigned for Smith. Among them were Senator John J. Blaine of Wisconsin, who had been one of LaFollette's chief lieutenants, and Magnus Johnson, a former Farmer-Labor senator from Minnesota. The editors of LaFollette's longtime newspaper voice, the Madison Capital-Times, also came out for Smith, but young Senator Robert M. LaFollette, Jr., would not endorse either nominee. Smith's tour through the upper Mississippi Valley had been particularly instrumental in convincing some skeptical progressives that they ought to back him. The editor of The People's Business, Mercer G. Johnston, who had greeted Smith's nomination with faint praise, wrote after the Democratic nominee's swing through the west that he had "fairly boxed the Progressive compass." Johnston added: "[Smith] has spoken with almost startling candor. With fine good humor. With the

simplicity and the easy grasp of a man at home with the people and at home with public affairs. And with a degree of sincerity that no person in public life among us today is entitled to challenge. The Governor has met Progressive issues not only squarely but, we think, satisfactorily.”<sup>51</sup>

Not all progressives believed, with Johnston, that Smith “qualifies as a progressive.” It is evident that some of them elected to cast their lot with him only because Smith’s views were less undesirable than those of Hoover, who, many progressives believed, had deserted their cause during the 1920s. It is also evident from the articles and letters they wrote that many of these observers were severely conflicted in 1928 (not the least because the issue of Smith’s progressivism had to share the stage with his stands on such other matters as his views on prohibition and immigration – and his religion). When they could focus on Smith’s progressivism, for them the choice became, in one contemporary’s terms, one between Smith the “conservative liberal” and Hoover the “liberal conservative.”

Many progressives, therefore, were unable to work up much enthusiasm for Smith, and even Johnston admitted that the Democratic nominee was not “the kind of Progressive that the rank and file of Progressives could vote for as they could for a man like Senator Norris, with joy and melody in their hearts.” If they supported Smith at all, not only

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<sup>51</sup> See also the discussion of Smith’s progressivism in the first chapter of the author’s [The World Beyond the Hudson: Alfred E. Smith and National Politics, 1918-1928](#).

against Hoover but against Norman M. Thomas, the Socialist nominee for president, they rationalized their decision as a writer to the Nation did when he said: “Smith is not the leader of a progressive party, and to vote for Smith the liberal need not delude himself into believing that he is. Smith is not the liberal candidate; but by means of Smith liberals can make important gains. And that is all they should worry about.”

But there were progressives who did worry about other things. People like Gifford Pinchot, Peter Norbeck, Jane Addams, and W.E.B. Du Bois were drawn to Smith and some of the things he stood for but could not come out for him because of party loyalty, Smith’s wetness, his links to Tammany Hall, Smith’s unwillingness to commit himself on the race issue, or some other reason or combination of reasons. On a more fundamental level, some of them also believed that Smith was inherently unsympathetic to programs that would disturb the status quo in the areas of distribution of income, ownership of property, the power of American capital, and the role of government (particularly at the federal level). Thus they rejected Herbert Croly’s contention that Smith had “possibilities as a spring of political fermentation which progressive voters [could] not afford to ignore.” Like farmers, western (and other) progressives were in the end generally skeptical about Smith. This aspect of the Democrats’ grand strategy for victory in 1928, too, seemed to be have serious shortcomings.

### **Back To Base: The Critical Northeast**

Smith wound up his initial western trip at the end of September. He spent a fortnight in New York resting and attending to his gubernatorial responsibilities, then in mid-October made a week-long swing through the upper South and back into the Midwest – a tour that featured speeches in Nashville, Louisville, Sedalia, Missouri, and Chicago. Although most pundits and other observers agreed that Smith's trips west and south had gone well for him and that he had surely made an impression on these areas, they also concluded that he had not done much to change the likely outcome in November: much of the South remained uncertain and the Democrats' chances further west remained problematic in all but a handful of states, principally Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Missouri. Barring some surprise, it seemed increasingly likely as Smith prepared to campaign in the urban corridor between Boston and Baltimore that his series of speeches here would win or lose the 1928 presidential election for him.

Smith's climax in the Northeast would be a critical test for him. He would have to walk a delicate line between appearing too radical for this region and too conservative for the progressive left, all the while taking positions that would not offend either workers or business leaders. But back at home, on his own side of the Hudson, at least he would be speaking primarily to the kind of listeners he was used to addressing, rather than to the unfamiliar voters of the South and West. In the final days of the campaign, the home stretch Smith had looked forward to, he could be the Al Smith of old. In this vote-rich

region, where (with the exception of the Wilson years) the Republicans had dominated presidential contests since the 1890s, Smith was expected – chiefly because of his singular success at winning in New York and his personal popularity in the region – to run extremely well for a Democrat. Although the Democrats expected a heavy vote for Smith here, they recognized that they could secure this vote only if they made adroit use of his wetness and acted decisively to neutralize the inevitable contention of the Republicans that they alone could be entrusted with maintaining the country's prosperous economic conditions.

Prohibition, Smith and his advisors had decided at the outset of the campaign, was key to winning the Northeast. It was their opinion that support for prohibition was waning all over the United States, but nowhere did this judgment seem better borne out than in the urban centers in the region where Smith would now be speaking. Not only was there flagrant and near-universal disregard for prohibition laws in this area but several states here had followed New York's example in repealing their own enforcement statutes or in approving referenda against prohibition. Moreover, attacks by the urban press here had contributed greatly to the decline in the prestige of the Anti-Saloon League and other dry organizations, and the well-heeled and increasingly influential Association Against the Prohibition Amendment drew most of its membership from the Northeast.

Smith could by now hardly disguise his own convictions about the need to liberalize prohibition anyhow, but he had concluded – despite persistent advice from drys to the contrary – that he should base his presidential campaign in the fertile Northeast on prohibition. Smith thought that by repeatedly advocating changes in the law he could, especially in the Northeast, attract large numbers of independent and Republican wets as well as bring to the polls many thousands of Democrats and those who ordinarily did not vote. Arguing for changes in the prohibition law was a cause that he could ride to success in the Northeast, Smith was sure.

For Smith to capture the wet vote without alienating too many drys, both in the Northeast and elsewhere, once again he would have to find an equilibrium between two conflicting viewpoints: even while he was recommending the liberalization of the prohibition laws that would permit wet areas once again to obtain legal beer and wine, he would have to vouch that as president he would try in earnest to enforce these same laws. Just where Smith would position himself between modification and enforcement was not clear as the campaign commenced, though, and his telegram to the Houston convention in June and his selection of Raskob in July had dismayed many dry Democrats because these early actions seemed to portend a very wet campaign indeed. Some of these drys worried that during the campaign Smith would go so far as to decline to support the Eighteenth Amendment, or that he might even call for its repeal.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> There is no evidence that Smith did consider advocating repeal in 1928.

Reports originating from inside the Smith camp during July and August that the nominee refused to duck the prohibition issue, insisted on speaking his mind on it, and intended to provide what he depicted as “courageous leadership” with regard to the wet/dry problem concerned dry Democrats even more. Smith’s remarks about prohibition in his acceptance address did draw the line rather sharply between himself and Hoover (who merely endorsed the status quo on prohibition), prompting some observers to describe alcohol as the major issue in the campaign now, but Smith had in fact taken a relatively moderate position.

By refusing to run on what Heywood Broun termed “a dry plank and a wink,” Smith exasperated those party professionals who had wanted him to take the expedient position in his acceptance speech of either talking solely about enforcement or dodging the prohibition issue altogether. At least Smith had relieved many dry Democrats of the fear that he would embark on a crusade against prohibition that would make their positions totally untenable. During the next two months the nominee provided these dries with further reassurance, and at Omaha Smith even denied that prohibition was the “great issue” of the campaign. Although he subsequently did devote an entire address (in America’s beer capital, Milwaukee) to his proposals for modification, Smith’s sparing references to prohibition – only four of his twelve major speeches up to late October even mentioned the topic – contained no bombshells that embarrassed the loyal dry

Democrats, and in Nashville and Chicago Smith pledged to enforce the prohibition laws to the best of his ability.

During the campaign to this point, it was Raskob and not Smith who was vexing dry Democrats. According to rumors, he would become Secretary of the Treasury, and thus take charge of the Prohibition Bureau, if Smith were elected, and so the campaign manager's statements received careful scrutiny from loyal dry Democrats and others. Raskob disassociated the Democratic Party from the National Committee to Repeal the 18th Amendment, whose slogan was "Help Al Smith Give the People Beer," and he denied reports that he had said he accepted the chairmanship of Smith's campaign solely in order to rid the country of the "damnable affliction" of prohibition (though this alleged remark continued to be cited by his foes). But Raskob's evident emphasis on the need for modification – he consistently termed prohibition one of the two paramount issues in the campaign – and his occasional indiscreet remarks continued to unnerve dry Democrats.

Raskob was not the nominee, though, and so most dry Democrats could – with widely varying degrees of enthusiasm – reconcile themselves to Smith's moderate position on prohibition. There were others, of course, who found it impossible to support Smith, no matter how impressed they might be with his qualifications for the presidency, his record, and his positions on other issues, because Smith advocated relaxing national prohibition,

however so slightly. As one scholar has aptly summed up the situation, “Hoover was ‘sound’ on liquor; Smith was not. For many a voter the issue was as simple as that.”

The issue was even simpler for the leaders of the dry organizations, who had a vested interest in taking up the challenge that Smith was throwing down. The dry campaign against him in 1928 was in actuality only an extension and intensification of the efforts that these dry organizations had made since national prohibition had been adopted in 1919 to persuade Americans that outlawing alcoholic beverages was beneficial, efforts that had become more and more strident as prohibition became less and less a reality – and as Al Smith had emerged during the 1920s as a possible presidential contender. Numerous leaders of dry organizations were, naturally, quick to denounce Smith and endorse Hoover, and the Anti-Saloon League broke with its traditional stance of official nonpartisanship to do the same.<sup>53</sup>

The dries immediately launched a zealous campaign to defeat Smith, whom one of them described as “by all odds the most insistent, determined, uncompromising, influential and powerful enemy of prohibition that ever appeared in American public life.” The Anti-Saloon League alone spent over \$60,000 to circularize printed materials that denounced Smith and his views, and it also supported a large number of public meetings (frequently held in churches) where Smith and his candidacy were scathingly assailed. William H.

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<sup>53</sup> Not all dry groups backed Hoover; one intrepid Women’s Christian Temperance Union chapter in Oklahoma even came out publicly for Smith.

Anderson, the doughty New York Superintendent of the League, took to the airwaves weekly in New York City to castigate Smith and his alleged drinking habits – “very carefully avoiding any complication with the libel law,” as he pointed out later. As a sort of climax to the dry crusade against Smith, the Anti-Saloon League used “Good Citizenship Sunday,” October 28, to promote discussion of the two presidential candidates in many churches across the United States. The attacks of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union on Smith were somewhat more muted than those of the Anti-Saloon League, but it too conducted an energetic propaganda campaign that distributed 10,000,000 pieces of literature detailing Smith’s wet record in New York.

In their public criticism of Smith during the 1928 campaign, the prohibitionists rehearsed many of the familiar charges about that record. They accused him of having violated his oath and his duty by failing to enforce the prohibition laws and, especially, by engineering the repeal of New York’s enforcement statute, the Mullan-Gage Act, in 1923. To this odious record the drys now added Smith’s plan to sanction state-operated liquor outlets, which they contended would be merely saloons under another name. Some drys denounced Smith for even daring to propose a change in the prohibition laws that had, they said, accomplished so much for American public morality. Prohibitionists painted ominous scenes of a skillful President Smith inducing Congress to relax the prohibition laws and appointing new Supreme Court justices who would eviscerate prohibition.

Drys were quite aware of the less tangible, but perhaps even more consequential, effects that Smith's election might have on the country's attitude toward prohibition. They argued that the wet cause would reap prestige, converts, and added Congressional strength from a Smith victory. Thus the dry organizations, among others, sought to elevate the 1928 presidential election to a kind of national referendum on the issue of prohibition – making it, in the process, a test of their own political clout. “The one great issue,” a religious periodical intoned, “is whether or not dry America ... shall allow the hue and cry and the overweening conceit as to their own numbers and importance of certain dry-throated urban masses to over-ride the known will of the Republic concerning the greatest moral reform legislation ever undertaken by any nation.”

In contrast to the numerous dry organizations, the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment (chief among the groups that were urging a change in the status quo) remained officially neutral in the 1928 presidential election. This was due in part to the fact that many of the Association's directors and members were Republicans, but the organization's explanation that prohibition was only one of many issues in the campaign signified that wets were generally unwilling to see the presidential contest become the national referendum that drys hoped for.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> The head of the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment, Henry H. Curran, did endorse Smith, despite his dissatisfaction with the mildness of the Democratic plank on prohibition. A few brewers also openly supported Smith, but most of them understandably preferred to take no public position. Some prominent wets made a point of publicly opposing Smith. An informal survey of bootleggers showed a division of 282 to 7 in favor of Hoover, a majority that surprised no one.

The sometimes-shrill chorus of impassioned attacks and dire predictions revolving around prohibition must have struck many Americans as needlessly exaggerated until Smith's concluding swing through the Northeast. In late October it was reported that Smith, believing that opinion in the South and West had already crystallized, was readying a vigorous bid for wet support in the Northeast. His speeches in Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Newark, Brooklyn (mainly on New York issues), and Manhattan bore out those reports. Citing the deleterious consequences of national prohibition – corruption, disrespect for the law, and a disintegration of moral standards, Smith returned again and again to the need for modification, although he carefully reaffirmed his pledge to enforce the prohibition laws (to “the very last degree,” he said in Manhattan) and emphasized the effects and not the wisdom of trying to make the nation dry. Smith now asserted that there was “no public question ... of greater importance” than a change in the prohibition laws.<sup>55</sup>

Advocating the modification of prohibition may have been, as Smith and his advisors evidently believed, the common denominator that could unite behind him Northeastern voters of all classes and economic levels, but they knew that both grander and grittier economic issues would also influence these voters. Businessmen who worried about governmental interference with personal liberties and working people who simply wanted

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<sup>55</sup> Smith's use of “the very last degree” appears in the newspaper transcript of his remarks but not in his address as published after the election.

their beer and wine back might be inclined to vote for Smith, but many of them would actually do so only if he could dispel the notion that his election would jeopardize prosperous business conditions, a robust stock market, generally strong wage and employment levels, and a high standard of living.

Smith, attempting to head off the expected efforts of the Republicans to persuade the voters yet again that the G.O.P. alone could guarantee the continuation of these conditions, pointed to economic distress in agriculture, coal mining, and textiles; to unemployment estimates; and to the number of foreclosures and bank failures as evidence that in fact all was not well in the American economy. What prosperity existed, Smith declared, should be attributed to the Wilson Administration and to the effects of the World War. As he had in Sedalia earlier, Smith also sought to debunk the Republican contention that the Coolidge Administration had achieved efficiencies and economies in its operation of the federal government.

At the same time, Smith and the Democrats knew that no matter what they said most people would continue to believe that times were good and that the G.O.P. was the party of prosperity. “If you had these three [3?] men working for you, would you fire them?” asked a newspaper caption beneath a picture of Hoover, Coolidge, and Andrew Mellon. That concisely stated the party’s advantage: the general satisfaction with material well-being. The Republicans drummed at this theme throughout the fall, using advertisements

in newspapers, campaign cards, and even slips in payroll envelopes to remind workers (and their wives) that “Prosperity didn’t just happen” and that hard times came when Democrats were sent to the White House. If Hoover were sent there for the next four years, though, there would be a chicken for every pot. A major challenge facing the Democrats, therefore, was countering the apprehension that Smith’s election would disturb the economic status quo in any way. The Democrats met this challenge by seeking to minimize and blur the differences between themselves and the G.O.P. on economic issues.

Some of the Democrats’ efforts along this line were largely symbolic in nature. Raskob’s selection was partly intended to provide assurances that the party was safe on economic issues, but even before his selection as national chairman Raskob had set about cultivating the idea that a Democratic victory would present no threat to prosperity. Just before Smith’s nomination in Houston, the businessman issued a statement declaring that neither large nor small business had anything to fear from Smith’s election. This statement, which ran on the Dow-Jones wire and attracted considerable attention because of Raskob’s prestige, was followed by a spate of buying that drove stock prices up and generated numerous comments about the apparent absence of anxiety on Wall Street regarding a possible Smith victory in November. (What was not generally known was

that Raskob had secretly engineered this brief “Smith boom,” as it was called, by arranging for buying orders to be placed at the proper moment.)<sup>56</sup>

After Raskob assumed the national chairmanship, he continued to insist that Smith’s election would do nothing to upset prosperity. Raskob, who termed Smith a “conservative” in his views toward business, also paraded before the electorate one Republican banker and businessman after another who had endorsed Smith – stretching these announcements over time so as to get maximum press coverage. Some of these Republicans, like Pierre S. du Pont, Raskob had personally recruited, while others crossed over to Smith’s banner on their own. Even though most of these converts cited prohibition rather than economic issues as their motivation, Raskob hoped that the sight of wealthy Republican businessmen expressing their confidence in a Democratic presidential nominee would help to allay apprehension that he posed a threat to prosperity. The phenomenon of such men supporting a Democrat was not unprecedented, of course, although the Bryan years had led to a decline in such endorsements. Raskob’s labors to obtain and publicize these switches of allegiance to Smith were unusually intense, however.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Raskob might also have engineered the slight dip in the stock market during the Republican convention in Kansas City, but there is no evidence of that.

<sup>57</sup> As the New York *Times* pointed out, although some wealthy Democrats, including some businessmen, crossed over to Hoover, the Democrats clearly had the better of the millionaire game because they had fewer to lose to the Republicans.

For his part, Smith did his best to encourage the idea that he would be just as “safe” as Hoover when it came to preserving prosperity. In various speeches, especially in the Northeast, he expressed his “just regard for the rights of legitimate business, great or small”; pledged his determination to promote efficiency and economy in government by means of reorganization; and promised positive action to counter unemployment, including the scientific use of public works expenditures. Smith also tried to scotch the suspicion that he might favor relaxing immigration restrictions, which would overburden the labor market. In his acceptance address Smith had pointed out that using the 1890 census as a basis for determining immigration quotas discriminated against some nationality groups, and later (in St. Paul) he criticized the national origins plan for calculating these quotas. When his views on immigration began to draw criticism, Smith repeatedly emphasized, as the campaign moved into its final weeks, that both he and Hoover opposed lowering the barriers to immigration and called attention to the fact that the Republican nominee had also come out against the national origins plan. Smith never mentioned the 1890 census again after his acceptance speech.

A firm stand against increased immigration would help to reassure working people that Smith had their economic welfare firmly in mind. To cultivate support among organized labor, Smith, who described himself as an ex-laborer with a real interest in the problems of working people, endorsed collective bargaining and promised to find a “definite remedy” to the abuse of injunctions in labor disputes. Smith had considerable support

among organized labor due to his good record in New York, and some state labor groups endorsed him. As President William Green of the American Federation of Labor reported that a majority of that body's executive council was "friendly and sympathetic" toward Smith. But the council decided – despite fervent efforts on Smith's behalf by Daniel J. Tobin of the Teamsters – in an "acrimonious" debate at its August 1928 meeting that neutrality in the election was the most prudent course for the A.F. of L., particularly in view of Smith's unpromising chances for victory. Meanwhile, Frank Walsh's efforts at Democratic headquarters to generate support for Smith among labor groups were proving only moderately successful.<sup>58</sup>

As the Democrats knew all too well, the Republican high card when it came to prosperity was the protective tariff. Hence the challenger's ability to deal with this issue would be the acid test of the Democrats' ability to convince voters, particularly in the industrial Northeast, that they and Smith could be trusted with control of the country just as well as the G.O.P. could. At Houston the Democrats had adopted a rather vague tariff plank that did, however, mark something of a retreat from the party's historic opposition to a protective tariff. In his acceptance speech Smith declared that he would work for a "strictly business" tariff that would protect business and the American wage scale, and Raskob consistently asserted that the tariff was no longer an issue over which the two parties disagreed. The Democrats also used their assurances that a tariff reduction was

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<sup>58</sup> Hoover had some support in organized labor, too, but his refusal to speak out against the abuse of injunctions hurt him.

out of the question if they won when it came to coaxing Republican businessmen to endorse Smith.

At Louisville, the commercial center of the upper South, Smith had reiterated his call for an impartial, non-political commission that would achieve legitimate protection for labor and agriculture as well as business without fostering favoritism or monopolies. In later speeches Smith announced that over 90% of the Democratic members of Congress and candidates for election to Congress had, in a telegraphic survey, upheld Smith's reading at Louisville of the 1928 Democratic platform plank on the tariff. It was true that most Democrats either approved of Smith's views or remained silent, but there was some grumbling in private about the party's departure from its traditional low-tariff doctrine.

Smith and his party convinced some observers that the tariff gap was "now formally closed" – although some of these observers pointed out that it had been closed only because the Democrats had capitulated to their opponents on the issue. The Republicans naturally scoffed at the notion that the Democratic position on the tariff was the same as their own and responded to Smith and Raskob's statements by arguing there was a connection between the Republican-sponsored protective tariff and American prosperity during the 1920s. This minor motif of the campaign swelled in intensity during late October and early November, and Hoover hit the tariff these hard in his last few speeches. The Republican counterattack forced Smith to repeat assurances that he

foresaw no general reduction in tariff rates and would undertake no action that would endanger the living standards of the American laboring class.

With Smith on the defensive on the tariff issue, Hoover boldly pressed the attack with his charge that his opponent was proposing “State socialism” prohibition as well as in agriculture and electric power.<sup>59</sup> As the genuine Socialists howled in indignation, other Republicans picked up Hoover’s charge in hopes of scoring last-minute gains against the Democrats. Smith reacted promptly and vigorously to the Republican attacks by pointing out that the very cry of “socialism” had long been used against him in New York and by naming the prominent Republicans who would have to share the label of “socialist” because their views were so similar to his own. Once again, however, the Republicans had driven Smith onto the defensive – so effectively that Smith seized upon Coolidge’s October 30 statement that the imminent election would not affect business conditions and touted it as a kind of backhanded endorsement of the Democratic ticket he headed. (The Democrats wisely refrained from attacking Coolidge too vigorously in 1928, hoping that his persistent silence might be taken as disapproval of Hoover or, at the least, as neutrality.)

No one could say how successfully Smith and his party had blurred the differences on economic issues between themselves and the G.O.P., or whether they had quieted the

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<sup>59</sup> Hoover’s real concern, he wrote later, was that a “growing left-wing movement” was uniting behind Smith and it was his responsibility to attack proposals by Smith that might lead to “collectivism.”

anxiety that the election of a Democratic administration would bring hard times. To be sure, there seemed to be little overt apprehension within the business community over the possible consequences of a Smith victory. Most of the eight prominent businessmen who contributed to a Forum symposium, for instance, expressed the opinion that both men were eminently “safe”; and a writer for The Magazine of Wall Street, describing Smith as “the most acceptable Presidential candidate offered by the Democratic Party since Grover Cleveland,” declared that either he or Hoover would conduct an administration that would minister to the interests of business.

In fact, probably the loudest complaints about Smith’s views on economic matters came from the progressives. They charged that his frank appeals for business support, his incantation of Jeffersonian and states’ rights principles, his failure to commit himself to a program of stringent controls over business, and, above all, his studied imitation of Republican economic positions in order to appear “safe” made Smith a disappointment as a nominee of the Democratic Party. Although many of these progressives ended up backing the New Yorker as the more desirable candidate, they could not help lamenting that he seemed to have become, in the words of the New Republic, the “perfect political Rotarian.”

How positively American voters, especially those in the Northeast, would respond to Smith’s attempt to convince them that there were in 1928 (as the political writer Clinton

W. Gilbert expressed it) “two Republican parties, one wet and the other dry” thus remained a question mark as the campaign wound its way to November 6. The consensus among contemporary observers seemed to be that the presidential race in the Northeast was more competitive than it had been for years and even more in doubt than the Smith-Hoover contests in the South and in the upper Mississippi Valley. Here the Democrats’ grand strategy of drawing into their party enough voters to overcome their G.O.P. opponents’ traditional strength would be severely tested. Would that strategy prove to be as flawed as counting on the Solid South and winning over large numbers of farmers and progressives?

### **The Crux Of The Election: Is It Al Smith Or His Religion?**

In such a situation, with what seemed to be tight contests in all three of the key regions of the country and many other unknowns, Smith and his advisors were gambling that their trump card – Al Smith himself – would make the difference. In devising their strategy these advisors had been confident that emphasizing their nominee, his background, and his personality would win over voters in other parts of the country, just as Smith had won them in New York during the previous decade. They had worked energetically to implement this multi-faceted strategy throughout the campaign. Now, when the presidential contest appeared like it would be going down to the wire, the Democratic

strategists advisors hoped that this focus on Smith himself would prove to be the deciding factor in the balloting on November 6.

In practice, on the hustings all did not go quite as well as Smith and his supporters had hoped when the campaign was getting started. Smith's speeches, almost as replete with impressive data as Hoover's (and at times as dull as his, too), were not always convincing when it came to his mastery of national issues. As for the substance of these issues, Smith often merely reiterated what the Democratic platform said about many of them. As described earlier, on the one subject that most tested his ability to master a complex national issue, agriculture, Smith appeared to vacillate and then, by pausing to read verbatim (first at Omaha and again at St. Paul) a section describing his position on the issue, left the impression with many of his listeners that his grasp of the farm problem might not be as secure as it ought to be.<sup>60</sup> Whether Smith was actually up to the challenge of presiding over the federal government was, therefore, still an open question.

Smith's performance as a campaigner was also a mixed success. Although his extemporaneous style of delivery could inject a healthy spontaneity and freshness into his remarks, it had its own liabilities. When in an address Smith strayed from the advance text that formed the basis for the newspaper copy written about his appearance, he left

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<sup>60</sup> Judging from the newspapers accounts, Smith read a similar short statement on the tariff at Louisville. In St. Paul, the nominee's advance copy of his address contained a reference to the equalization fee that he did not use when he gave it.

some people who both heard him and read about the speech the next day wondering just what he had in fact said. Smith sometimes wandered away from the single stationary microphone, too, leaving radio listeners struggling to hear what he was saying, and he did not always stay within the radio network's time constraints.<sup>61</sup> In addition, even before his western tour was completed Smith had stopped devoting a single, entire address to each issue; instead, he began to spend more and more time parrying criticisms of what he had said earlier in the campaign. As Smith's speeches became more repetitious they also became less and less organized, and as the fatigue of an 11,000-mile campaign began to take its toll on him in late October, Smith's speeches began to ramble. Perhaps he had been right when he doubted before the campaign opened that he had more than half a dozen good speeches in him and that any more would be "flops."

Smith's candor did draw plaudits, even from many of those who disagreed with what he said, but others interpreted his seeming frankness as "a cocky self-confidence" that seemed inconsistent with the solemn responsibilities that Smith was asking the voters to entrust to him. And when he repeatedly claimed for himself the credit for the accomplishments registered in New York since 1918, Smith left some of his listeners outside that state with the impression that he was an egotist and a braggart. Even Smith's reputation for candor, moreover, could not disguise – and perhaps served to underscore – the political expediency that occasioned his continuing straddle on the farm issue.

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<sup>61</sup> Fortunately for Smith, the networks indulged him when he ran over his time.

Nor did Smith himself always play well in Peoria, or in other parts of the country. Some observers (including Hoover himself) were disappointed, even shocked, to see and hear for themselves that a man they deemed uneducated, somewhat crude, and perhaps even uncouth was one of the two contenders for the highest office in the land. Cultural and class differences surely contributed to this disappointment with Smith, along with an idealistic conception of the American presidency. Smith's cultural and class baggage, his humble upbringing, his lack of formal education and polish, even his rather proudly ordinary wife – for some Americans, all these aspects and more marked the Smiths as less than “presidential,” especially in comparison to the two Hoovers. Common man he most certainly was, Smith's critics might admit, but in their eyes he was rather *too* common to serve as their leader for the next four years. In the clash between the image of the presidency and the image of the nominee, Smith was an also-ran.

Hoover, meanwhile, was campaigning like a triumphant incumbent, stolidly emphasizing the progress that America had made and turning his back on the status quo only because he pointed to the rosier tomorrow that he said was about to dawn. Even though Hoover was piqued by some of Smith's attacks, he continued to elude Smith's efforts to get something of a debate underway – he never even mentioned Smith's name in public during the campaign – and hoped that the Democratic nominee would talk himself out. By remaining aloof from the political battle taking place beneath him and by devoting

himself to infrequent, dull, platitude-filled statistical essays that avoided controversy, Hoover left Smith with little of substance to criticize. As one contemporary aptly summed up the Democrat's situation, "Smith, the most pitiless political duelist of his time, simply could not fence with a stone wall."

Other Republicans, like Senator Borah, did want to debate with Smith, however, and in frustration Smith finally resorted to sparring with some of them. By permitting himself to be drawn into debates with Hoover's surrogates, though, Smith deflected attention from Hoover's empty speeches and drew attention to his own inability to silence Hoover's stand-ins. In the process, Smith's complaints about Hoover's refusal to debate the issues with him went largely unnoticed, and Smith increasingly saw the initiative pass to his opponents. Even when the Republican nominee appeared to slip near the end of the campaign and accused Smith of advocating "State socialism," the target of his remarks was unable to shift the discussion to the issues involved and remained on the defensive. Now in the unaccustomed position of being an "out," Smith found himself unable to control the direction of the campaign as he had in New York elections and would up futilely fending off petty Republican criticisms. No longer focusing each of his addresses on a major issue, he was spending his time on the platform rehearsing and clarifying what he had previously said – and responding to criticisms.

Then there was Smith himself. There could be little doubt as the campaign unfolded during the fall of 1928 that Smith and his quest for the presidency were attracting unusual attention, as the Democrats had hoped. Newspaper and radio sales accelerated sharply, which seemed to indicate that interest in the presidential contest was keen. When Smith hit the campaign trail, large and animated crowds came out to see and hear him, not only in such cities as Chicago and Boston but in rural areas like those in North Carolina and Nebraska where someone like Smith would be a real novelty. Whether in the news or in person, most Americans were being exposed for the first time to Smith's derby, cigar, and snappy clothes; to his rather thick voice and pungent accent; to his mispronunciations (he said "Oklahomer" in Oklahoma City, for instance, and "laryx" for larynx); to his blunt, almost coarse language; to his wisecracks; and to his often breezy and somewhat irreverent manner.<sup>62</sup> As Smith and his friends had hoped, there was no escaping the dramatic contrast between him and the plain, staid, and rather boring Hoover.

Whether or not those voters who saw, heard, and read about this unusual New Yorker would respond positively or negatively to what they were discovering was another question. Smith himself had been confident that the electorate would turn to him, in the end, largely because Americans would embrace his personality, character, and fitness for the presidency, and he and his advisors considered this the keystone of their strategy.

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<sup>62</sup> Smith's final remarks to the electorate, in an evening broadcast from the studio at Carnegie Hall the night before the polling, were quite uncharacteristic. He spoke quietly, almost intimately, to the listener ("as if I were sitting with you in your own home") as he made his earnest appeal for their support by reviewing his record of achievements in New York.

Would Smith have what one commentator called “the worst of the prejudices, but the better of the personalities,” or would he have the worst of both?

Smith’s adversaries were even more eager than he was to make the Democratic nominee himself become the centerpiece of the contest for the presidency in 1928. Smith’s near-complete silence on national issues during the years leading up to his nomination, following his bitter fight with McAdoo at the protracted political slugfest in Madison Square Garden in 1924, had served to focus an unusual amount of attention on his background, his personal qualities, and the groups whose aspirations he seemed to symbolize. Some Americans had come to believe, as Smith had been increasingly mentioned for the office of president, that these things made him unsuited, even unfit, to hold the preeminent position in American politics, and they prepared to oppose him with all their might. Smith’s strategic decision now to minimize the substantive differences (except on prohibition) between his own positions and those of Hoover and to accentuate his background and personality thus delighted many of Smith’s foes: by making himself the foremost issue, he had made himself all the more vulnerable to their attacks on what they regarded as his fatal liabilities.

These adversaries had been unable to prevent Smith’s nomination in 1928 because of the many real strengths that he possessed, the absence within the party of a qualified and popular alternative candidate, and the desire of some Democrats to eliminate “the Smith

problem” once and for all by sending him to certain defeat in 1928. Speaking now with a new urgency and to a wider audience, Smith’s opponents found their task greatly facilitated by the fact that his rival for the presidency seemed, almost providentially, to be the very antithesis of Smith and all that he represented. As a result, as Smith’s foes sought to rally native, rural, Protestant America in order to repel the challenge of alien, urban, Catholic America that Smith and his sort were thought to pose, the presidential contest in 1928 often was cast as a struggle between civilizations. The issue, declared one spokesman for “Puritan civilization,” was one between “the America that we know and love, and the new America built by the urban type and growing out of urban ideals.”

The hostility to Smith’s elevation to the presidency stemmed, as it had before he was nominated, from an amalgam of attitudes that included nativism, intolerance, snobbishness, ruralism, prohibitionism, xenophobia, and religious prejudice – attitudes that often interacted in ways that resist systematic analysis. Much of the opposition to Smith was an instinctive rejection of him that did not need to be articulated, let alone justified. Much of it, too, doubtless consisted of private person-to-person rehearsals of the reasons why, in the minds of his foes, Smith ought not to be elected. All too frequently, echoes of a widespread “whispering campaign” of abuse against Smith, and even his wife, could be heard aloud. Probably the most prevalent single rumor about Smith was that he drank excessively and was habitually intoxicated, for example at a recent New York State Fair; the canards about Catherine Smith frequently included the

charges that she too was an alcoholic and was so crude that she “eats with her knife and goes bare-footed.”<sup>63</sup>

Elements of this whispering campaign rose well above the level of a whisper, however, and Smith had to decide how to handle it. After initially believing that ignoring such attacks would cause them to fade away, Smith came to the conclusion early in the campaign that he could not to let virulent slurs against him go unchallenged. Although he was deeply hurt by attacks on his character and integrity, rather than on his stands on the issues, Smith was determined to fight back in 1928. This was not only out of pride but out of his conviction that a decisive, vigorous counterattack would, as it had in the case of his May 1927 reply to Charles C. Marshall’s questions about Smith’s Catholicism, win him sympathy – and votes. The Smith headquarters, therefore, let it be known at the start of the campaign that the Democrats would trace and refute whispers and slanders whenever they could do so. The gauntlet was down.

Anonymous whisperers and thousands of slanderers proved impossible to combat, though. In order to quash the whispering campaign, Smith would have to avail himself of someone who, like Marshall, was worthy of a well-publicized, definitive reply. Smith’s opportunity to speak out came barely two weeks after his nomination. On July 13 (the same day, ironically, that a New York Times editorial first inveighed against the already

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<sup>63</sup> The national press, even much of the anti-Smith press, was usually guarded in discussing the specifics of the whispering campaign for fear of stimulating and spreading the whispers themselves.

widespread whispers defaming Smith), a wire service report from Olathe, Kansas, related how William Allen White, kicking off the Republican campaign in his state, had charged that Tammany Hall had forced Smith to compromise his integrity by instructing him to vote in the New York Assembly to protect not only saloons but also prostitution and gambling interests.

White, who admitted his deep respect for Smith's abilities and conceded that the Governor had by now outgrown Tammany, nevertheless feared that a Democratic victory in the fall would "Tammanize" the national government. For many years before the 1928 election, many Americans (including White) had regarded Tammany Hall as the archetype of the selfish and corrupt urban machine. These critics believed that the leaders of the Wigwam conspired with Wall Street (and betrayed the national Democratic Party) even while it purchased the votes of immigrant residents through its unique brand of welfare programs and scuttled prohibition enforcement in New York City. (Some people also mistakenly believed that Tammany was a "semi-religious Catholic organization.") Whatever the talk about a "new Tammany," it was clear that many of the machine's old ways persisted, and so attacks on Smith's character often alleged that he was subservient to the New York City Democratic organization. During the campaign, Tammany Hall was an especially favorite subject of Republican and anti-Smith orators, and several books attacking it were published and circulated during the second half of 1928.

Democratic headquarters undertook special efforts, both public and private, to put Tammany Hall – and Smith’s relationship to it, in the best possible light, to defend Smith against the charge that his appointments had been heavily skewed in favor of Tammanites (or Roman Catholics), and generally to depict the Tammany issue as a false one – especially in contrast to the Republican scandals of the 1920s.<sup>64</sup> Many open-minded persons, like Senator Norris, found these reassurances persuasive, and even the absolutely incorruptible Harold L. Ickes declared “I think I could be such a member of Tammany Hall as Al Smith now is and not feel any more apologetic for that fact than if I were a member of the Harding and Coolidge Administrations as Hoover has been. . . . I will take Al Smith on the corruption issue quite cheerfully as against Hoover.”

White’s national prominence, and the outrageousness of his indictment of Smith’s integrity, prompted the nominee to choose this opportunity to land his first counterblow. At a press conference the day after reports of White’s comments were published in the New York newspapers, Smith scolded the Kansas editor but saved his most scathing remarks for one Reverend O.R. Miller, the superintendent of the New York Civic League and a long-standing Smith enemy who, according to the Governor, was the source of

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<sup>64</sup> During August and September, Smith also made it known that he had authorized investigations of two alleged gambling operations, one in Saratoga and the other in Albany.

White's inaccurate charges. Clearly Smith hoped to stop attacks of this sort before they gathered momentum.<sup>65</sup>

Smith now discovered, however, that direct attacks on him were every bit as difficult to deal with as whispers were. In late July White renewed his allegations about Smith's record, citing additional data assembled for him by two researchers – furnished, although White did not say so, by the Republican National Committee and the Anti-Saloon League. Then, while passing through New York City a few days later en route to Europe, the Kansas editor once again accused Smith of voting to protect saloons but withdrew (but did not retract) the charges against gambling and prostitution because, White said he had decided, they were inappropriate in a presidential campaign.<sup>66</sup> His comments had occasioned considerable criticism and had even made White unpopular in his home state of Kansas. The Republican state chairman there, Alfred M. Landon, had difficulty finding a county chairman who would let him speak and finally had to sponsor White himself.

Smith, who had wanted to crush imputations about his integrity, not to initiate a running dispute with White or anyone else, was reported in early August to be contemplating a

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<sup>65</sup> In fact, White had obtained his data primarily from an upstate New York newspaper article he had read in Houston, but, as the editor acknowledged, similar "analyses" of Smith's record were common. Miller's Reform Bulletin was perhaps the most widely circulated version of this set of charges against Smith. The ultimate source, though, was a 1918 Anti-Saloon League circular.

<sup>66</sup> According to White, Walter Lippmann told him that Smith and his family were "heartbroken" by these particular charges, and Lippmann also explained to White the well-intentioned reasons why Smith had voted as he had on these Assembly bills.

comprehensive public statement, on the model of his reply to Marshall in Atlantic Monthly, that would answer “vile suggestions” such as White’s once and for all. In August, after personally combing through the records of the Assembly and interviewing persons accused of fostering rumors about him, Smith released a rebuttal to the allegations about his voting record. He explained in detail how, Smith said, White and the others had distorted or misconstrued it and accused the Republicans of complicity in the whispering campaign against him. Again, Smith surely hoped that his action would settle the matter.

Even as Smith was discovering that White would not be so easy to silence, the Democratic nominee was also learning that his attackers, hydra-like, were proliferating. Perhaps the most well-known new critic was the Reverend John Roach Straton, a fundamentalist preacher and the pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in New York City. On August 5, Straton recited from his pulpit charges similar to those White had mentioned and termed Smith the “best friend,” wittingly or not, of immorality, vice, and crime; Straton described the nominee as the “deadliest foe” of “moral progress” in America. Smith, perhaps thinking that he could dramatize his campaign to stifle the abuse against him by means of a public skirmish with Straton (a tactic Smith had successfully employed in New York), immediately challenged the minister’s statements and demanded the right to reply at Calvary Baptist Church itself.

Straton in return proposed several alternative sites, including Madison Square Garden, and even suggested that the two men make a series of joint speaking appearances through the South – all the while continuing to assail Smith and his record. When the nominee insisted on speaking from Straton’s pulpit and the minister would not agree to let him do so, Smith finally stopped sparring with Straton and resumed work on his reply to White.<sup>67</sup> Those who had advised Smith that answering such attacks would put – and keep – him on the defensive without extinguishing the attacks themselves were seeing their prediction come true.

White had not attacked Smith as a Catholic (in fact, White, a long-time enemy of the Ku Klux Klan, disclaimed opposition to Smith on religious grounds) and Straton had only obliquely touched upon religion in his denunciations of the Democratic nominee. But by the time Smith had become embroiled in controversies with these two men there was abundant reason to think that many of the whispers about him dealt with the purported menace to Protestant America of a Roman Catholic nominee for president. Moreover, a spirited public discussion of the religious issue, ranging from the attention-getting clamor of fanatic anti-Catholics to more dispassionate and thoughtful analyses of the topic and invocations of the principle of religious tolerance, was already under way, and Smith

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<sup>67</sup> Straton continued to press his attack against Smith throughout the campaign, especially in his native South. Smith’s responses to White and Straton were not his last efforts to choke off attacks on himself. Later in the campaign, Smith moved personally to suppress the whispers that he was frequently intoxicated in public, once by means of an official denial issued over his own name and once by personally confronting an Albany clergyman whom Smith accused of spreading such rumors.

could hardly fail to take cognizance of it.<sup>68</sup> Anti-Catholicism had permeated American culture for decades, even generations, but now the nomination of a Roman Catholic for the presidency of the United States aroused it, galvanized it, and gave it a single focus for action: the defeat of Al Smith. The issue that had laid behind a large part of the opposition to him for years was now coming fully to the surface, surprising those who thought that modern America was too advanced for Smith's Catholicism to matter – but not those who recognized what power opposition on religious grounds could have both by itself and when combined with other objections to him.

Much anti-Catholicism in 1928 was unwritten, unspoken, and even unwhispered – in part because it was intuitive, in part because by 1928 there was no need to remind most Americans that Smith was a Catholic, in part because Smith's foes sometimes masked this opposition – at least in public – by attacking him on other issues, and in part because his religion was so interwoven with other factors that prompted many Americans to look upon the Democratic nominee with disfavor. For these reasons, there was not then, and there is not now, any way either to parse or to plumb the full depth of the opposition to Smith's faith in 1928. But there can be no doubt that for many persons Al Smith's Catholicism was a significant, and often deciding, reason for rejecting him.

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<sup>68</sup> There had been no clear consensus, before the campaign began, about whether the religious issue would play a role in the election or not.

Some of the most blatant Catholic-baiting in 1928 came, as expected, from the Ku Klux Klan. Incidents like the cross-burnings that were reported to have welcomed Smith's campaign train in Oklahoma, Indiana, and Montana brought the organization some publicity, but in truth by 1928 it had lost most of the political influence that it had wielded only a few years before. Although the Klan retained outposts in a few states, such as Alabama and Georgia, and was temporarily rejuvenated in some areas by Smith's nomination, it now lacked the effective leadership, the prestige, and the body of zealous supporters that might have made it a major political force against a Catholic nominee in 1928: the Klan had indeed become an "invisible empire." (In fact, many ex-Klansmen could now be found among Smith's supporters.) On the other hand, the impulse and fears from which the Klan had derived its strength during the 1920s had hardly dissipated, and some of the suspicion of a Catholic nominee in 1928 was the legacy of the atmosphere of intolerance that the Klan had in turn fostered.

Also prominent in the anti-Catholic crusade in 1928 were scores of existing quasi-religious publications, inveterately hostile to the Roman Catholic Church, that merely stepped up their operations and expanded their audience during the presidential campaign. Probably the most widely circulated and most notorious of these periodicals, apart from the pro-Klan Fellowship Forum, was the Rail Splitter, whose masthead advertised it as "the greatest anti-Catholic monthly on the American continent." These publications, along with countless handbills, pamphlets, chain letters, and even ballads,

fairly blanketed the American countryside (and cities), particularly in the South and West with fresh editions of their apocalyptic-tinged and strident descriptions of the “crisis” now facing Protestant America in the person of a presidential nominee who had kissed the ring of a legate from the Pope. Although most of this vitriolic propaganda, some of which was close to illiterate, concentrated on Smith’s religion, it often voiced other objections to his election – chiefly his affiliation with Tammany Hall and his views on prohibition.

Most of the anti-Catholic material being circulated was fundamentalist (if it had any particular theological orientation), and fundamentalists in various denominations – Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and others – were among the most outspoken and uncompromising critics of the Roman Catholic Church. Since many fundamentalists believed a Smith victory would be, in the words of one of their spokesmen, “the beginning of the final plunge into the day of apostasy,” they sought to prevent such an eventuality by hammering on the religious question and by advocating turning the voting booths into “holy shrines for the Lord” – and for Herbert Hoover. These denominations were well-represented in rural areas but had a significant presence in cities as well. Clergy and laity of denominations ranging from Congregationalist to Unitarian, as well as other non-Catholics, often joined fundamentalists in opposing the election of a Catholic president, although of course there was nothing automatic about the reaction of Protestants (or of Catholics, for that matter) to Smith’s nomination. Nor could one

always predict who would take exception to Smith on religious grounds and who would defend him, and religious toleration, instead: the issue could be quite divisive in odd ways. (For example, the pastor of Senator Robinson's church in Arkansas vociferously opposed Smith even as the vice-presidential nominee was on the hustings calling for toleration.)

Some of these opponents of Smith merely repeated the time-worn anti-Catholic falsehoods about venality, immorality, and anti-American conspiracies within the Roman Catholic Church; probably most common among them were lurid tales like "Convent Life Unveiled" and implausible stories about Catholic plots to stage a coup in the United States.<sup>69</sup> Others among those who opposed Smith practiced a kind of subtle, almost innocent (perhaps even unconscious) form of anti-Catholicism: the sly wink, the funny story, the repeated bit of gossip that still carried a subtext of bigotry. Still others among those who opposed Smith, though, articulated in a reasonable and candid manner their deep-felt reservations about elevating to the presidency a member of a church that was based in Rome yet exercised political considerable influence in America. The fact that many of those who expressed these reservations represented denominations that had been born in reaction to the theology and actions of this same church complicates the matter of dissecting their motives and objectives. But unless all hesitations about the advisability of electing a Roman Catholic president are categorically labeled "bigotry," a good many

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<sup>69</sup> Catholics comprised about 16% of all Americans in 1928.

of those who raised serious questions about the implications of Smith's religious affiliation in 1928 should be thought of not as bigots but as skeptics. The range of Smith's "anti-Catholic" adversaries was quite broad, therefore, and generalizations about their views are fraught with difficulty.

Especially in the South but elsewhere as well, Protestant ministers were not only active in the movement against Smith but in fact supplied much of its leadership. Indeed, in the South, according to many accounts, it was uncommon to encounter a Protestant clergyman who was pro-Smith or even neutral in the presidential contest – though the evidence shows that there were exceptions. Numerous prominent church leaders published broadsides or spoke against Smith at public meetings. Thousands of pastors also opposed him from their pulpits. And most of the robust denominational press regularly editorialized against the Democratic nominee. A large portion of these attacks on Smith were nakedly anti-Catholic; others were only thinly veiled versions of the same hostility.<sup>70</sup>

All these broadsides, speeches, sermons, and editorials reviewed the reasons why, anti-Catholics believed, a member of the Roman Catholic Church ought not be made president. To them, the church was intolerant, illiberal, and undemocratic; it opposed the separation of church and state; and it sought and exercised inordinate political influence

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<sup>70</sup> The denominational press had been usually neutral in presidential elections, and it would be so again during the 1930s.

by manipulating its communicants in order to achieve its objectives on matters extending from immigration restriction to birth control to public education. Moving from the larger picture to the immediate threat they saw, anti-Catholics also told their listeners and readers that Smith had acted suspiciously in the past by supporting state financial aid for parochial schools, by appointing nearly all Catholics to public positions, and by kissing the ring of a visiting cardinal.<sup>71</sup>

Above all else, though, many anti-Catholics contended that no Catholic public official could be wholly free from the influence of his church as he sought to carry out his constitutional duties. Dismissing Smith's statements in Atlantic Monthly as evasive or as inconsistent with his church's orthodoxy, anti-Catholics remained concerned that he divided his loyalty between Rome and the United States. Their fears were exacerbated when they read reports that Smith's friend, Mayor Jimmy Walker of New York City, had recently said that he hoped Smith did take his orders from Rome. Thus, many Protestants concluded, they could hardly "look with unconcern upon the seating of a representative of an alien culture, of a medieval Latin mentality, of an undemocratic hierarchy and of a foreign potentate, in the great office of President of the United States."

Since most anti-Catholics defined their objections to Smith in terms of what they labeled the "political" issue of his church's influence, not his religious beliefs and practices per

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<sup>71</sup> Ironically, in the eyes of some liberal Protestants, the Roman Catholic Church was too fundamentalist.

se, they refused to apologize for opposing his election. Christian Century probably spoke for a great many anti-Catholics when it declared: “Governor Smith has a constitutional right to run for President, even though a Catholic. This we confess. And we have a right to vote against him because he is a Catholic.” Indeed, many Protestants vigorously defended their prerogative to consider religion “in due proportion and in a reasonable way” as “a part of the totality of conditions” that would influence their decision on November 6.

This “totality of conditions” often included matters that were not strictly religious in nature but that were for many Protestants almost inseparable from their religious views. Prohibitionism was the chief matter of this sort. Sometimes religion and prohibition were explicitly linked together, as when a Georgia association of ministers resolved: “You cannot nail us to a Roman cross or submerge us in a sea of rum.” Many of Smith’s Protestant opponents, though, emphasized their objections to his wetness and not to his Catholicism, and some of them convincingly denied that Smith’s religion had anything at all to do with their rejection of him. Doubtless some of Smith’s foes were hypocrites who found prohibition a convenient and respectable way to legitimize their essential anti-Catholicism, but many of Smith’s dry, Protestant opponents meant what they said when they cited his wetness as the reason for their actions.

It should be remembered, however, that by this time a faith in the efficacy of prohibition had become virtual dogma for some Protestants, and the Roman Catholic Church was commonly supposed to be an enemy of prohibition. Religion, therefore, may have influenced some of Smith's enemies without their being fully conscious of the fact. In addition, since the groups that Smith represented, at least in the public mind – recent immigrants, city dwellers, and Tammanyites – were generally thought to be overwhelmingly Catholic, those Protestants who rejected Smith out of their antipathy towards some or all of these groups were expressing a kind of anti-Catholicism as well.<sup>72</sup>

Although Catholicism was most often seen as the common denominator – though far from universal – among these three suspect groups (recent immigrants, city dwellers, and Tammanyites), for many persons in the American hinterland another common denominator may have rivaled it. This was a deep-seated and broad-gauged rural outlook that regarded most aspects of cities with distaste, from the modern manifestations of popular culture found there to the big businesses that were based there to the origins and political tendencies of the people who lived there. The rapid urbanization that had occurred in recent decades had aggravated this ruralism to the brink of tension. Now that the first true city man had been nominated for the presidency – Theodore Roosevelt might have been considered Smith's predecessor, in view of the former's urban

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<sup>72</sup> If prohibition was sometimes a screen for anti-Catholicism, it must be said that the reverse could also be true: dries sometimes discovered that the religious objections to Smith intensified the dry opposition to him.

upbringing, but his heritage and his exploits in the West marked him as far different from Al Smith – the issue was squarely put. In some sense at least, the 1928 election would be between a contest between an urban American and a rural American.<sup>73</sup>

And yet, curiously, rural/urban issues were rarely mentioned overtly during the campaign. In retrospect, it seems that Americans were slow to grasp the fact that the balance between city and country in their country had finally, irreversibly, tipped in favor of urban areas. Perhaps this is because so many who had moved to the cities in recent years had come from rural parts of the United States, or countries abroad, and as a first generation still held tightly to their country attitudes – studies of the Ku Klux Klan have suggested this was so for its members. Nevertheless, there are indications during the presidential campaign of 1928 that a powerful rural/urban undercurrent lay below the waters being roiled by other issues.

Signs of this undercurrent are seen in the continuing criticism of Tammany Hall, which symbolized the worst of urban machine politics not only because of its well-earned reputation for corruption but because it was the political voice of the immigrant and seemed dedicated to the return of the saloon. Thus the specter of Tammany Hall became something of a catchword in 1928 for all that was thought to be wrong about the city and threatening about Al Smith's candidacy. The tone of the discussion of the immigration

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<sup>73</sup> Hoover was, of course, conspicuously a product of rural America, never mind his long career in business not only in this country but also abroad.

issue during the campaign – primarily how fairly and successfully the influx of newcomers had been restricted in recent years – also revealed that a rural/urban undercurrent was present below the surface.

This undercurrent can be seen, too, in the uninformed attitudes of those who observed millions of newcomers, clustered in the cities (prime among them New York City), who had different names, talked different languages, worshipped (whether Roman Catholic, Jewish, or Orthodox) in different ways, had different political mores and cultural values, and perhaps had a different perception of the promise of America than members of the groups that had been on these shores long before them. Paradoxically, many of those who felt these fears had fairly shallow roots in American soil themselves but – sometimes being aware of the irony in their objections – pointed out that the even more recent newcomers were somehow “alien” peoples, did not seem interested in “becoming Americans,” and showed no signs of wanting to make their homes anywhere else except the city – all of which made them different from their “Anglo-Saxon” predecessors.

Onto this stage in 1928 strode Al Smith, the child of (relatively) recent immigrants who was born and raised in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and had from the start of his political career been intimately associated with Tammany Hall. Repeatedly elected in New York, allegedly by immigrant voters, he now was on the brink of becoming the country’s first true urbanite president by riding the crest of similar voters there and in

other urban states.<sup>74</sup> For many Americans, not all of them rural dwellers, Smith's nomination was an alarm bell, and their rude awakening was to a future America in which urban majorities made up of "alien" peoples would be manipulated by selfish political machines for purposes that those in the country could only find suspect. Smith's election, the fruit of "the uprising of the unassimilated elements in our great cities against the ideals of our American fathers and founders," might not in itself threaten those who lived in rural America (except perhaps through the elimination of prohibition, directed in large part at curbing immigrant drinkers). It would, however, give the newcomers both status and a political foothold that might lead to control at some future time.

Built as it was upon America's long-standing and widespread blend of jealousy and suspicion (with flashes of envy as well) of New York City and its powerful businesses and banks, its ostentatious lifestyles and its polyglot masses, its intellectuals and its Jews, its jazz culture and its liberal thinking, its role as the country's link to Europe and its provincial mentality, this growing uneasiness among Americans with rural perspectives about what the future would hold if Smith were to be chosen to be president was a potent if latent force – a bomb with a lit fuse. It is no wonder that some rural dwellers viewed the 1928 presidential election as "a national referendum on the city," as one scholar has termed it.

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<sup>74</sup> There was a widespread impression during 1928 that a high percentage of most ethnic groups would support Smith in November. Judging from the endorsements of foreign-language newspapers, there was anything but unanimity among these groups, however.

Thus anti-Catholicism was often buried deep in a complex of attitudes that is difficult to disentangle, and perhaps it is unwise and unhistorical even to think of these attitudes as being distinct from one another. When Bishop Cannon described Smith as “personally, ecclesiastically, aggressively, irreconcilably Wet, and . . . ineradicably Tammany-branded, with all the inferences and implications and objectionable consequences which naturally follow from such views and associations,” Cannon illustrated the nexus of attitudes that activated so many Americans in 1928 and have frustrated those who have sought to make sense of the opposition to Smith. Many Protestants who opposed Smith now, as they had before his nomination, declared their readiness to vote for a “different type” of Catholic, such as Senator Walsh. Whether these people were genuinely trying to differentiate between Smith’s religion and his other, undesirable, attributes or whether they were only making an insincere gesture to deflect criticism cannot be discerned. Doubtless many Protestants and others feared that Smith’s election would bolster the prestige as well as the actual influence of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States; Smith’s nomination thus took on added symbolic meaning to them.

The anti-Smith activities of Protestant churches and their leaders in 1928 did not escape criticism, including some that came from within Protestantism itself. Even in the South there were those who objected to the active role that Bishop Cannon and others were taking in the anti-Smith campaign. Two of Cannon’s fellow bishops publicly rebuked

him and the other Methodist bishops who were opposing the Democratic nominee, and numerous other non-Catholics also found fault with the Protestant clergymen, ministerial associations, religious periodicals, and the like that took a stand against Smith. The outspokenness of some pastors who fought him strained their relationships with their congregations, and the scars of the 1928 presidential campaign often remained for many years.

Some of those who protested the anti-Smith activities of the Protestant denominations and their leaders simply acted out of their overriding loyalty to the Democratic Party. Others pointed out that by placing the Protestant churches in opposition to the party the anti-Smith church people might in the long run harm the very causes, such as prohibition, that they thought that they were promoting by fighting the New Yorker. Astute Protestants also realized that a united Protestant opposition to Smith invited him to play the role of religious martyr for all it was worth. The major theme of the critics of the anti-Smith clergy, though, was that no church – Protestant or Catholic – ought to inject itself into secular politics.

Accusations that anti-Smith Protestants were doing exactly what they charged the Roman Catholic Church of doing, interfering in politics, did not sway those who led the religious fight against Smith. Some of them, while acknowledging that as a general rule churches ought to stay out of politics, contended that great moral issues such as prohibition – or,

more abstractly, preserving American civilization – justified exceptions like their active participation in the 1928 presidential contest. Furthermore, anti-Smith Protestants retorted, there was a fundamental difference between the consistent efforts of the Roman Catholic Church’s hierarchy to compel their parishioners to vote in line with the Church’s many interests (and, therefore, for Smith) and the unparalleled effort of independent, democratically organized, disinterested Protestant churches to come together voluntarily to preserve moral progress by defeating Smith.

To be sure, anti-Smith non-Catholics were hard put to find much real evidence that the Roman Catholic Church was in fact striving to see Smith elected. The Vatican hardly even took official notice that there was an American presidential contest, and Pope Pius XI reportedly directed his legate in Canada to detour around the United States in order to avoid any appearance of meddling in the campaign. Only rarely did Catholic clergymen publicly comment on Smith’s candidacy, no matter how interested they were personally in his election, although some of them did publicly compliment the nominee as an individual. The Catholic press, too, was circumspect in its commentary on the presidential campaign, and only a few periodicals – mostly local ones with small readerships – actually endorsed Smith’s candidacy. Some Catholic leaders discouraged political activities: Catholic colleges and universities by and large abstained from sponsoring Smith-for-President clubs, and one bishop in Michigan even forbade the nuns under his jurisdiction from voting. Catholics did sometimes speak out to rebut the

allegations that were being hurled against their church, but usually they chose to suffer in silence.

The prudence of most Catholics and the absence of any evidence of a concerted movement for Smith among Catholic, somewhat perversely, only strengthened the convictions of many anti-Catholics that Smith's church controlled its members and was secretly mobilizing them behind him. "The reason the Roman church seems not to be in politics in this campaign," declared Christian Century, "is simply that it is better politics at this moment to seem not to be in politics." Anti-Catholics contended that the unusual restraint of Catholics merely demonstrated just how much power the church's hierarchy could wield when expediency dictated a course of circumspection; all the while, they asserted, Catholic leaders were quietly and efficiently using this power to line up the Catholic vote for Smith. Somewhat contradictorily, anti-Catholics also argued that such activity by the church's hierarchy was unnecessary because Smith's fellow communicants would vote as a bloc for him whether or not they were directed to do so.

Smith, unlike most Catholics, had no intention of suffering in silence once it became clear that his religion was going to influence the outcome of the election. Somewhat naively holding to the belief that his Atlantic Monthly essay affirming his independence from his church would serve to settle the religious issue for most non-Catholics, Smith had apparently hoped that he would not have to discuss the matter of his religion again.

The fact that religion had scarcely been mentioned as Smith emerged as the likely nominee during the first half of 1928 and then was victorious at the national convention in Houston, sustained his optimism. By September, however, Smith realized that he had underestimated the extent of anti-Catholicism and had overestimated the effectiveness of his reply to Marshall. Once Smith concluded that religion had unavoidably become an issue in the campaign, he resolved – just as he had with the whispers about his personal integrity and record – to strike back, not only because his pride was wounded but because he might turn to his advantage the very fact that the issue had been raised.<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps the most provocative of Smith's opponents was a previously unremarkable Assistant Attorney General of the United States, Mabel Walker Willebrandt, whose official duties included enforcing the prohibition laws. By September she was engaged in a campaign of confrontational anti-Smith speeches, mainly before church groups in Ohio and other Midwestern states, in which she excoriated Smith for his record and his proposal to change the prohibition laws. Almost immediately, her remarks attracted attention – not only because of Willebrandt's government position but because she seemed to sum up so well much of the unwhispered opposition to Smith, his wetness, his Tammany Hall background, and his religious faith. When it was clear that she was also acting as an agent of the Republican National Committee (the exact relationship was

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<sup>75</sup> Smith also refused during the campaign to play down his devotion to his church, and on at least one occasion he even served as an acolyte.

somewhat vague and seemed to depend on who was describing it), Smith decided that he must act.

It was characteristic of Smith that he would not let what he saw as baseless charges and odious insinuations pass without challenge. He had done the same when confronted with them during his career in state politics, and he had responded to the early manifestations of the whispering campaign by challenging White and Straton. It would be cowardly now, he thought, not to deal with the mounting accusations and the continuing whispers head-on; in addition, he was sure that Americans would respond positively to his aggressive counterattack and recital of his record. Besides, Smith believed that he had nothing to be ashamed of. As a matter of principle, therefore, he preferred risking defeat in the election by confronting these charges directly to being elected “on his belly,” as H.L. Mencken put it.

So it was that Smith decided to scrap the projected topic of his second address of the western swing, which was scheduled for Oklahoma City two days after his speech on agriculture in Omaha. Instead of taking up the next great issue of the campaign, the nominee – reportedly over the objections of some of his closest advisors – decided to use this occasion as the forum for his counterattack on those who had brought up his religion. In tough, blunt language that soon had many in the overflow audience enthusiastically shouting their support, Smith confronted the religious issue head-on. After reviewing at

length his political and executive record of accomplishment, Smith asserted that Willebrandt and a few other misguided persons – with the approval, and even the collusion of the Republican Party – were attempting to inject bigotry, hatred, intolerance, and “un-American” sectarian division into the presidential campaign by spreading innuendos and lies about his record in New York.

The real objection of these people to him, Smith declared, was not his association with Tammany Hall or his wetness but his religion, and their activities now forced him to address himself to the matter of his Catholicism. He went on to describe and dismiss some of the things that, he said, were part of the extensive propaganda campaign against him. Smith also reminded Americans that there was no religious test for public office; declared that religion should not influence any voter, whether Protestant or Catholic; and asked to be judged on merit alone. Having spoken out on the subject of his religion, Smith concluded, he would not devote another campaign address to the topic.<sup>76</sup>

The reaction to Smith’s speech was not entirely positive, and the criticism was not confined to those who were determined opponents. Even some persons who were

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<sup>76</sup> Some of Smith’s friends were apprehensive about his personal safety in Oklahoma City. There were rumors of physical attacks on the nominee, and some pro-Smith Democrats donned military uniforms in case the situation worsened. Reports of gunshots outside Smith’s hotel (evidently an unrelated police action) worried his friends both there and in listening to radios back in New York. There are conflicting views about the quality of his speech in Oklahoma City and also about how well the audience received it. Smith did refer to what he believed were religious-inspired attacks on him on a couple of occasions after his address in Oklahoma City, notably in Baltimore in late October; here he accused the Anti-Saloon League of trying to make prohibition a matter of religious dogma for Protestants, ridiculed the Klan at length, and charged the Republicans with cooperating with the “forces of intolerance.”

sympathetic to him and his candidacy, along neutral observers, regretted that he had spoken as he did in Oklahoma City. They worried that the tone and content of his remarks was below the dignity of a man running for the presidency, or that his reaction to criticism showed him to be too thin-skinned to hold the office. They also were concerned that Smith had made two major miscalculations: by responding as he had, Smith had thereby actually legitimized attacks on his religion, and he would hardly be able to rebut all of the criticism he was likely to receive as he sought to do in Oklahoma City. Furthermore, Smith was putting himself on the defensive at a time when he needed to be attacking the Hoover and the Republicans on the real issues of the campaign. Indeed, this was exactly what some of Smith's opponents had hoped for.

Other Americans considered the topic of Smith's speech in Oklahoma City to be one of those real issues, and they sought to make sure his remarks there did not put an end to the public discussion of the religious issue. Far from it: there is abundant evidence that religion continued to play a very important role in the remainder of the presidential campaign in 1928. Anti-Catholics rejected Smith's remarks as an inadequate response to their concerns, complaining that he was trying to browbeat and brand as bigots those non-Catholics who had sincere reservations about his religious affiliation and its implications. Anti-Catholics accused Smith, too, of seeking to solicit a sympathy vote or even making up charges against him so that he could "explode" them to his benefit. His reason for reacting as he did, they said, was to deflect attention from the real issues: his wetness, his

Tammany connections, and his other weaknesses as candidate. They vowed to press even harder than they had before the issue of Smith's religion – an issue they agreed he had now legitimized by discussing it himself at Oklahoma City.

This disagreement about the political significance of Smith's religion was, of course, not just one between Catholics and non-Catholics. Because Smith was the nominee of one of the two major parties, a large number of other Americans had a stake in the matter – and an opinion about the core issue. Both in private and in public, many Democrats – even before Smith spoke out in Oklahoma City but increasingly so afterwards – blamed his Catholicism for much of the opposition to him not only in the South but elsewhere as well. They took pains to try to refute the notion that Smith had been or would be subservient to his church, but they also followed his example in characterizing the bulk of the religious opposition to him as nothing more than religious intolerance. Democrats accused anti-Catholics of cynically cloaking their prejudice behind other issues, especially prohibition. They denounced Protestants who took a position against Smith. And they argued that the 1928 election would be a test of the country's commitment to religious freedom and the political equality of Catholic Americans. Orators for the party often included in their speeches a defense of Smith's right to worship as he pleased, a review of the American tradition of religious tolerance, a reminder of the patriotic service of Catholic Americans, or a plea for Americans to rebuff the efforts of bigots to sway them against Smith.

The Democratic Party's publicity operation in New York City also sounded the alarm against prejudice and saw to it that the most virulent (and often truly bigoted) religious attacks on Smith received widespread attention. Examples of the worst of the anti-Catholic propaganda were publicly displayed in a building in downtown Manhattan, where this "chamber of horrors" was seen by countless visitors – including potential donors to the Democratic cause. In addition, as noted above, the party distributed numerous copies of Henry Van Dyke's radio address on religious tolerance and information showing that Smith had not favored Roman Catholics in making his official appointments as governor.<sup>77</sup>

As many anti-Catholics suspected, the Democrats' appeals for religious tolerance were designed not only to rally to Smith both Catholics and other minority-group members who saw themselves as fellow victims of discrimination but also to prick the consciences of Protestants, who might be persuaded thereby to vote for Smith. Many people who were not motivated by any partisan interest in Smith or the Democratic Party echoed the pleas for religious toleration and depicted him as a martyr to bigotry. Even some persons who were otherwise unimpressed by the Democratic nominee were drawn to him primarily because he and his nomination seemed to them to symbolize resistance to a

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<sup>77</sup> Some of the printed material from the "chamber of horrors" was later published in [The Shadow of the Pope](#), by Michael Williams.

reign of prejudice in America: a vote for Smith was thought to constitute a vote for tolerance, therefore.<sup>78</sup>

While they were denouncing Protestants who raised religious objections to Smith, Democrats and others who sympathized with him because of the abuse he was experiencing also demanded that the Republicans take positive steps to help quell the whispering campaign in general and, in particular, to repudiate those who were supporting Hoover because Smith was a Catholic. Republican spokesmen piously protested that their party had nothing to do with the whispering and anti-Catholic campaigns, but in actuality some within the G.O.P. leadership condoned and even assisted both. Speeches and propaganda sanctioned by the Republican Party sometimes contained outright attacks on Smith's Catholicism or struck at him in an underhanded manner, and there is evidence that the Republicans cooperated with some of Smith's most fanatical anti-Catholic foes.

Only when these activities attracted embarrassing criticism did the top G.O.P. leaders mildly reprimand a few Republicans who hit Smith below the belt and disown some of the most offensive anti-Smith (and often blatantly anti-Catholic) propaganda that had

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<sup>78</sup> Afterwards, there were those who said that the election actually benefited religious toleration, and perhaps the Roman Catholic Church as well – that there was a better understanding of both the Church and the importance of a spirit of ecumenical brotherhood. One manifestation of this spirit, it would seem, was the establishment of the National Conference of Christians and Jews in 1928. There were also those who insisted that that year's presidential campaign, despite its deplorable examples of bigotry and prejudice, was in fact rather mild – that there was no violence or bloodshed, for instance.

been traced to the Republican Party. Hoover, who seems not to have been personally responsible for any of these attacks upon his opponent, nevertheless did little more than put himself on record against them in rather general terms – at the same time complaining that he, too, was the victim of a vicious, widespread whispering and religious campaign because of his Quakerism.<sup>79</sup> Few observers agreed that the two candidates were suffering the same kind of abuse, however: Smith was by far the principal target in 1928.

Democrats and others continued to press the Republicans, including Hoover, to take firmer action to suppress the whisperers and also to renounce the support of bigots. The Republican high command, however, having performed its perfunctory duty for the sake of propriety, sat back to see if T.R.B.'s assessment about Smith having “the worst of the prejudices, but the better of the personalities” would, as they anticipated, work on balance to the advantage of Hoover and his party.<sup>80</sup> The Democrats, wondering the same thing about that assessment, nervously awaited the election results to see whether their efforts during the campaign to acquaint Americans with Smith's record, his strengths, and his personal characteristics would prevail against those prejudices – and the country's Republican majority.

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<sup>79</sup> Some Democrats and renegade Republicans were in fact guilty of spreading falsehoods about Hoover and his Quakerism. Also see the section on race above. In later years, Hoover insisted that he “must have denounced [religious bigotry] half a dozen times during the campaign,” but this is a considerable overstatement.

<sup>80</sup> Some Republicans, especially in the Northeast, realized that underhanded attacks on Smith might backfire, so they avoided the religious issue altogether and even repudiated the support of whisperers and bigots. Their efforts to get the national party to do so were unavailing.

### **Smith's Fate Becomes Clear**

Uncertainty about how American voters would react to the strikingly dissimilar personalities of the two nominees facing them was only the largest of the unknowns in 1928 that caused many contemporaries to describe that year's presidential election as one of the closest and most enigmatic ones in memory. (Even those who sensed that the victory might be a lopsided one for either candidate often hesitated to say which of them would prevail.) The suspense remained high until the end, and professional politicians and political commentators alike confessed their puzzlement. "There is nothing normal at all about the campaign," lamented Frank R. Kent as he surveyed the many extraordinary features that made forecasting so chancy in 1928.

These features included the revolt among Democrats in the South and the simultaneous disaffection among Republicans in the mid-section of the country; the near-complete accord, for once, between the two parties on economic issues, with the wild card of prohibition seeming to be the major remaining difference; the likelihood that an uncommonly large number of voters would cross party lines, possibly neutralizing one another but possibly creating pluralities that could not be predicted; the impact of the new medium of radio; the indications that many Americans (particularly women) would go to the polls for the first time in 1928; and the probability that powerful – and imponderable – emotional forces like ethnic, religious, and cultural loyalties would influence voters

people to an unusual degree. Prophesizing the outcome in 1928 was risky business, indeed.

To be sure, most students of American politics regarded Hoover as the favorite, but few of them were willing to count Smith out because of the prevailing notion that he had wellsprings of latent support that might manifest themselves in unexpected ways on election day. Each party seemed assured of certain states, of course, but very many – more than enough to tip the election – were widely thought to remain in doubt. Probably few knowledgeable Americans would have disagreed with the comment of one veteran Democrat who, reflecting on a political experience that stretched back to the 1870s, observed: “I think this is a race that Politicians [sic] know absolutely nothing about, and that practically all of the States are doubtful States....”<sup>81</sup>

All doubts about the outcome evaporated quickly, though, as the votes began to be tallied on election night. Smith, surrounded by family members, key advisors, Tammany Democrats, and friends, awaited the results in a Manhattan armory. The New York City returns, which showed the Governor falling below his customary downstate strength, were an ominous sign of what was soon to come. In state after state Hoover took a commanding lead, and by mid-evening there could be no mistaking the overwhelming

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<sup>81</sup> Endorsements by newspapers and periodicals generally favored Hoover. The straw votes in 1928 favored Hoover but forecast a fairly close election. The betting odds were 5-1 for Hoover, but the wagering was said to be light. A stock market boom that occurred on the day following the election seems to have indicated a different sort of betting on the outcome of the election – and surely Raskob had no role in this upturn.

defeat that the Democratic ticket had sustained. By midnight it was clear that Hoover would win well over 400 electoral votes (the ultimate division would be 444-87) and would outpoll Smith by at least several million popular votes (the final margin was approximately 21,400,000 to 15,000,000).<sup>82</sup>

Shortly thereafter Smith dispatched a graciously worded telegram of congratulations to Hoover. After Harpo Marx, present to play his harp at the Democratic victory celebration, saluted Smith with a poignant rendition of “The Sidewalks of New York,” the man who was now just another presidential also-ran departed for his hotel residence – and, it would seem, for political oblivion.

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<sup>82</sup> In the end, Smith won just two states in the Northeast (Massachusetts and Rhode Island) and six more in the South (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina).

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### **The Crux Of The Election: Is It Al Smith Or His Religion?**

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### **Smith's Fate Becomes Clear**

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