

The Nomination of Woodrow Wilson

William Allen White



OVERVIEW

William Allen White, one of the outstanding journalists of his day, describes the political maneuvering and the excitement of the Democratic nominating convention in 1912, in these excerpts.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- How did Wilson endear himself to the author?
 - Why does the author celebrate Wilson's victory?
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On the first ballot, [Champ] Clark took the lead. He registered a majority in the early balloting. As Clark was gathering his majority, it became evident that [Woodrow] Wilson would be his opponent. Other Democratic candidates lost strength, which generally went to Wilson. After Clark had assembled his majority, he held it for several sessions.

To say that, does not carry the sense of drama. To understand the drama we must realize that, ballot by ballot, the country was standing around the billboards of newspapers in great crowds, watching the Baltimore struggle. The cleavage between progressives and conservatives which had been opened by the Chicago [Republican] convention was deepened and widened in the hearts of the American people by the spectacle at Baltimore. Clark, who was a better politician than [William Howard] Taft, had not revealed his conservatism. That showed forth in the character of his supporting delegates, and after he held his majority for a day the nation realized, as the convention had realized from the first click of the temporary chairman's gavel, that Clark and [William Jennings] Bryan were fighting the battle that [Theodore] Roosevelt had lost to Taft.

I was almost as deeply moved, watching Wilson's strength develop, as I had been at Chicago, where I had a personal stake in the ballot. I had met Wilson at Madison, Wisconsin, two years before. I had watched his career as governor of New Jersey, when he had, by sheer intellectual strength, given his state the primary, the direct election of United States Senators, by the contemporary subterfuge of allowing candidates for the State Senate and legislature to pledge themselves to a candidate for United States Senator. Wilson was for the workmen's compensation law, for child-labor enactments, and for the whole progressive program. He had dramatized himself skillfully, and stood as a progressive Democrat just as [Robert] La Follette, Roosevelt and other state satellites in the Republican party had become branded with the

liberal sign. So I found myself cheering whenever Wilson gained a state in the balloting. I know now from looking back over my newspaper reports that I filed at the convention that I reasoned that the conservative vote outside of the deep South was negligible and that if we had Roosevelt running against Wilson, the country was sure of a progressive President. And in my heart, loyal as I was to Roosevelt, it made no great difference to me whether Roosevelt or Wilson won. Although I was capable of emotional strain and surface prejudice, my ingrained habit of seeing both sides helped me to size up the realities of the political situation, and I gave my loyalty to the progressive cause rather than to the Progressive party.

I had no great personal liking for Wilson. When I met him, he seemed to be a cold fish. I remember I came home from the meeting at Madison, Wisconsin, and told Mrs. White that the hand he gave me to shake felt like a ten-cent pickled mackerel in brown paper—irresponsive and lifeless. He had a highy-tighty way that repulsed me. When he tried to be pleasant he creaked. But he had done a fine liberal job in New Jersey. I liked the way he gathered the Irish politicians about him and let them teach him the game in his gubernatorial fights. In every contest he rang true. So, as the convention dragged on, far past the four or five days that it ordinarily took to hold a national convention, my respect for Wilson grew and my admiration waxed warm. And when the Nebraska delegation, after days and days of balloting for Clark, broke to Wilson, I stood on the reporters' table top and cheered, until I was hoarse, with the galleries; . . . all the country knew that Clark's day was done—that the progressives were about to win a victory in Baltimore to offset the defeat in Chicago.

Once at the last, as the convention was balloting until long past midnight, we were routed out of our beds almost at dawn and hurried into the convention to watch the break-up of the wreck that had been the Clark majority. It was then, I think, that I danced on my table and yelled to my heart's content. Wilson's strength in the convention slowly mounted until it tipped over the two-thirds majority needed for the nomination. But I did not exult much after that first demonstration of Wilson's power. It was tragic to see Clark's strength crumbling. I say tragic because it was indeed that disintegration of failure which one sees in well-built drama. Human nature is not always lovely in failure, and I sat watching the rise of Wilson and the fall of Clark—seeing men scurry from the Clark camp to the other to save their political hides, watching them sneak into the Wilson camp or go with banners. . . .

In reporting the convention I did not conceal my frank bias for the Wilson cause. I was a liberal before I was a Republican or a progressive, and was proud then of my heart's loyalty to the cause. Certainly I did not try to write a colorless story. I wrote frankly as a partisan of the liberals in both conventions, and while I told the truth as I saw it, my story was the story of the progressive split in each. There was no nonsense about concealing the cause of the rift, or smoothing it over as a personal triumph for either Taft or Wilson. I painted

the conservatives black, and probably made the liberals white-winged angels—which they were not. They were only men, two-legged and frail, walking in strange new roads drawn by something they did not quite understand, following a pattern of political conduct that they could not quite resist, in a drama whose lines they improvised out of the promptings of their hearts.

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