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# THE CAMPAIGN OF 1928 RE-EXAMINED: A STUDY IN POLITICAL FOLKLORE

By PAUL A. CARTER

AT an early stage in the presidential campaign of 1960, Denis Brogan, interpreting that campaign from a foreign perspective, wrote: "American politicians live to an extraordinary degree by historical shorthand, by the memory of past . . . episodes that 'prove' that this *must* happen or that this *cannot* happen. And high on the list of such political rules of thumb is the belief that 'Al' Smith was defeated in 1928 because he was a Catholic."<sup>1</sup>

Up until election night of 1960, and indeed in some worried minds up until the meeting of the electoral college in December, the conclusion commonly drawn from this rule of thumb was that any Catholic American who sought the Presidency could expect the same fate as Smith. But even before the nomination and election of John F. Kennedy as the first Catholic President of the United States, the rule of thumb had begun to be

challenged. Richard Hofstadter, for example, said in an article published early in 1960: "There was not a Democrat alive, Protestant or Catholic, who could have beaten Hoover in 1928." John D. Hicks in a review in 1958 declared: "Had Smith been nominated in 1932, he would almost certainly have won."<sup>2</sup> And in 1952 Samuel Lubell, in an arresting sentence which is already reshaping the historiography of the 1920's, maintained that the 1928 election demonstrated, not the fatal weakness of a Catholic candidate for the Presidency, but precisely the reverse: "Before the Roosevelt Revolution there was an Al Smith revolution."<sup>3</sup>

Yet political folklore dies hard. As recently as 1956, the year in which the American Catholic who now occupies the White House

NOTE: This article originated as a paper read before the meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association at Detroit, Michigan, April 21, 1961. A portion of the paper dealing with the pre-convention presidential candidacy of Senator Thomas J. Walsh of Montana has been omitted.

<sup>1</sup> D. W. Brogan, "The Shadow of Al Smith," in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, May 19, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hofstadter, "Could a Protestant Have Beaten Hoover in 1928?," in *The Reporter*, 22: 31ff. (March 17, 1960); John D. Hicks reviewing Oscar Handlin, *Al Smith and His America*, in the *American Historical Review*, XLIV:203 (October, 1958); see also Robert K. Murray reviewing Edmund A. Moore, *A Catholic Runs for President*, in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIII:516 (December, 1956): "'Bible Belt' Republicans were not the only political species who sought the demise of the former employee of the Fulton Fish Market."

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (2nd ed. rev., New York, 1956), 36. See also the earlier judgment by Roy V. Peel and Thomas C. Donnelly, *The 1928 Campaign: An Analysis* (New York, 1931), 171.

began his spectacular drive to power, Edmund A. Moore examined the 1928 presidential campaign and warned that the supposed "unwritten law" against Catholic Presidents might still be in effect; therefore, politicians who were Catholics would be better advised to aim at the relatively modest office of the Vice-Presidency as a more realistic personal and political goal. Two years later, in the *dénouement* of his lucid and moving biography of Al Smith, Oscar Handlin wrote that at the time of Smith's death "no Catholic . . . could aspire to be President, whatever other avenues of advance might be open."<sup>4</sup>

"Can a Catholic be President?" As early as 1924, at least one American Catholic, Martin Conboy, put the question in such a way as to imply the answer "yes." In that era, when Alfred E. Smith was Governor of the nation's most populous state, there had already been a number of Catholic Governors and Senators, and two Chief Justices of the United States: "Short of the Presidency, Catholics have held every position of importance within the gift of their fellow citizens"—

therefore, Conboy reasoned, why not the Presidency?<sup>5</sup> The closing of the question in the affirmative as of 1960 invites at least a re-examination of the question as of 1924 and especially as of 1928.

ONE of the discoveries of the 1960 election has been that when Americans ask themselves the question "Can a Catholic be President of the United States?" it is necessary to specify what kind of Catholic. During 1959 and 1960, the thought of John F. Kennedy as a prospective President prompted all kinds of misgivings, among both liberals and conservatives, which had nothing whatever to do with religion.<sup>6</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, the same may be presumed of Al Smith in his day—although the misgivings roused by the man from Fulton Street would have been of a different sort from those roused by the man from Hyannis Port. One of President Kennedy's pre-election critics, for example, summed up his impression of the candidate in the title of an article: "The Cool Eye of John F. Kennedy." It is difficult to imagine anyone making precisely this assessment of Smith. Stock campaign jokes of 1960 about the Democratic candidate's Harvard accent and his father's millions—related no doubt to the "country squire" stereotype of Franklin Roosevelt still popular among aging Republicans—are a far cry indeed from the Al Smith portrayed in some of the more savage political cartoons of 1928: a bibulous, ungrammatical roughneck.

Professor Moore in his study of the 1928 campaign has shown that the anti-Smith feel-



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The crassness of much anti-Smith campaign material is exemplified in this cartoon from the Klan's Fellowship Forum, November 3, 1928.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund A. Moore, *A Catholic Runs for President: The Campaign of 1928* (New York, 1956), 200; Oscar Handlin, *Al Smith and His America* (Boston, 1958), 189.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Conboy, "Can a Catholic be President?," in the *Forum*, LXXII:76ff. (July, 1924); Professor Moore (*op. cit.*, 30) discusses this article but draws from it a conclusion different from that of the present paper.

<sup>6</sup> A characteristic liberal example is Margaret Halsey, "I'm Not All Right, Jack," in *Frontier: The Voice of the New West*, XI:5ff. (September, 1960). A characteristic conservative example is the lead editorial, "Jack Should Worry, Jack Should Fret," *Chicago Tribune*, July 26, 1960.

<sup>7</sup> Douglass Cater, "The Cool Eye of John F. Kennedy," in *The Reporter*, 21:27ff. (December 10, 1959).

ing contained a considerable element of sheer social snobbery, connected perhaps with the traditional middle-class Republican image of the Opposition as shiftless good-for-nothings—the image classically set forth in 1896 in the editorial “What’s the Matter with Kansas?”<sup>8</sup> “Can you imagine Al Smith in the White House?” the Republican National Committeewoman for Texas asked a W.C.T.U. meeting in Houston, visualizing for them a President Smith committing *gaucheries* of grammar and etiquette; and, more to the point for that audience, “Can you imagine Mrs. Smith in the White House?”<sup>9</sup> Those last words would have rather a different ring had they been said about the former Jacqueline Bouvier!

While Moore’s point on the effect of snobbery in the 1928 election is well taken, mere snobbism can not fully account for the detestation of Smith on the part of many who, like Al, could claim a heritage from the wrong side of the tracks. The most militant of all the anti-Smith forces, the Klansmen, liked to think of themselves as plain and even poor people (which some of them were), “open to the charge of being ‘hicks’ and ‘rubes’ and ‘drivers of second hand Fords.’”<sup>10</sup> For such voters to concur with W. C. T. U. ladies from Houston, there had to be something more than simple social condescension to unite them.<sup>11</sup> The common bond most frequently assumed has been anti-Catholicism. But the Woman’s Christian

Temperance Union had quite another primary concern, and the members of the Ku Klux Klan spent a part of their energies in destroying whisky stills. An inescapable political issue throughout the 1920’s for any candidate, regardless of his church or his manners, was Prohibition.

Common causes which unite rather widely disparate kinds of Americans—anti-Masonry, Free Soil, free silver, world peace, and most recently anti-subversion—are of course an old chapter in the republic’s history. When they have been comparatively short-lived, or when they have not seemed clearly related to issues which are alive for a later generation, the emotions which such movements can arouse have often seemed inexplicably intense. Robert Moats Miller has wisely noted: “Nothing is more difficult than for an individual indifferent to a certain issue to appreciate that to others it might be of transcendent importance.”<sup>12</sup> It can only be said again that Prohibition *was* deemed to be of transcendent importance by millions of Americans both “wet” and “dry”; the sheer bulk of serious public discussion of the issue during the 1920’s is enough to document the point. Since the antiliquor crusade of the twentieth century emerged from nineteenth-century conflicts which pitted Protestant against Protestant, it would be begging the question to insist that the prohibitionist case against Smith was nothing but a cover for anti-Catholicism. Hoover was “sound” on liquor; Smith was not. For many a voter the issue was as simple as that.

Edmund A. Moore, in the able study of the 1928 election previously referred to, up to a certain point makes this same judgment: “There can be no doubt that the enforcement, by statute, of the ban on alcoholic beverages was an issue of great importance in its own right.”<sup>13</sup> But he warns us that “Prohibition . . . was often made to play hide-and-seek

<sup>8</sup> This anti-Populist, anti-Bryan editorial has been widely reprinted both in its own day and in ours; *vid.*, e.g., William Allen White, *Autobiography* (New York, 1946), 280ff.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Moore, *op. cit.*, 159. Italics supplied.

<sup>10</sup> Hiram Wesley Evans, Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, quoted by Richard Hofstadter in *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York, 1955), 294. Professor Hofstadter uses the same quotation again in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York, 1963), 124. Evans’ statement originally appeared in the *North American Review*, CCXXIII:38ff. (March-April-May, 1926).

<sup>11</sup> And yet, paradoxically, the Klan-minded were susceptible to snobbism, as is shown by the cartoon which appeared in the KKK’s Washington organ, *Fellowship Forum*, November 3, 1928. This may be involved in the psychology of a proletarianized, yet status-conscious American extreme Right, a phenomenon which has been noted by Hofstadter, Daniel Bell, Peter Viereck, and others.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Moats Miller, “A Footnote to the Role of the Protestant Churches in the Election of 1928,” *Church History*, XXV:149 (June, 1956). Substantially this same essay appears as Chapter IV of Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919–1939* (Chapel Hill, 1958), 48ff.

<sup>13</sup> Moore, *op. cit.*, 39, 117.

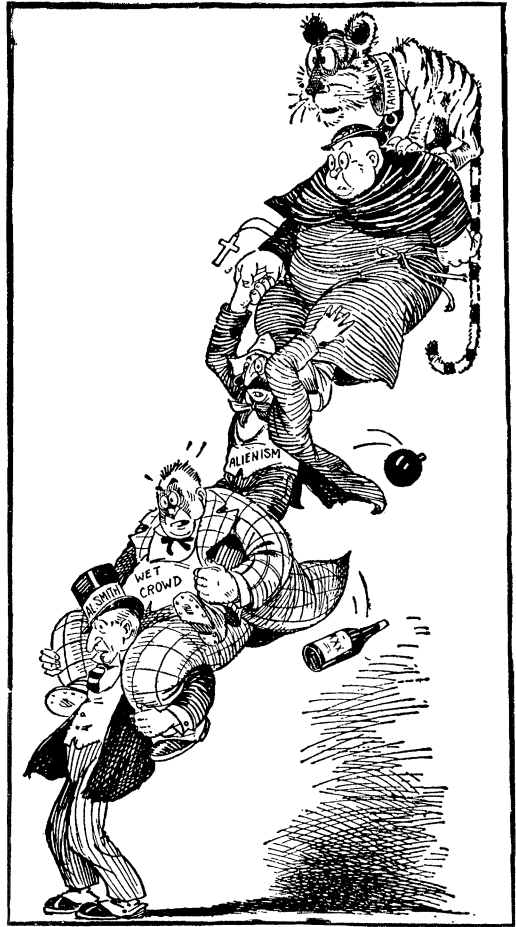
with the religious issue," and suggests that the extensive debate on Prohibition may have been a sublimated version of a debate on Catholicism, frank discussion of which was "limited by a widespread sense of delicacy and shame."<sup>14</sup>

**B**UT to speculate on what discussants *may* have meant—on the "latent" as opposed to the "manifest" content of their discussion, so to speak—is to play a very dangerous historiographic game indeed.<sup>15</sup> Having in mind some of the imputations of religious prejudice in the 1960 campaign, as for example the journalistic treatment of the West Virginia presidential primary,<sup>16</sup> the historian of the 1928 campaign ought perhaps to be less concerned with searching out anti-Catholicism assumed to be masquerading as something else than with avoiding the error of assuming what might be called "anti-Catholicism by association." This effort, which

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. Professor Kenneth K. Bailey, in a paper read before the American Historical Association on December 28, 1960, titled "Southern White Protestantism and the Campaign of 1928," dwelt at some length on prohibitionism as a politically unifying (and divisive!) force among Southern churchmen, but nevertheless concluded that "the corporate churches and their spokesmen cannot be absolved from complicity in the smear campaign often imputed to the Ku Klux Klan fringe of Protestantism," thereby aligning himself more nearly with Professor Moore's point of view than with Professor Miller's or my own. In a letter to the author of the present paper, March 20, 1961, he elaborated: "My feeling is that the religious question was much more vital in the South than the churches and churchmen admitted. . . . It was one of those issues, like race, which didn't have to be talked about much to carry great weight."

<sup>15</sup> The present writer is fully aware that he is himself on record as holding views similar to Professor Moore's and Professor Bailey's; *vid.* P. A. Carter, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1956), 40. He now regards himself, along with others of the guild who too uncritically accepted the "unwritten law" hypothesis as having been mistaken.

<sup>16</sup> *Vid.* discussion of Joseph Alsop's treatment of the West Virginia campaign in the *New Republic*, 142:5 (April 25, 1960); reply by Alsop in *ibid.*, May 2, 1960, 11f. The editors of the *New Republic* noted, May 9, 1960, not only that the convincing Kennedy victory in West Virginia refuted Alsop's charges of bigotry in 1960, but also that Al Smith, running against a Baptist, Senator Reed, had carried this same West Virginia presidential primary in 1928. That observation would seem to support the general thesis of the present paper.



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*This widely reproduced campaign cartoon personified the major popular objections to Smith's presidential candidacy.*

would now be superfluous in the case of John Kennedy, is still necessary when discussing Al Smith.

And yet a further pitfall awaits the historian of Prohibition, after he has disentangled it from anti-Catholicism: the temptation to construe such a question in terms of equivalent *political* ideas, so that the Wets become "liberal" and the Drys become "conservative." This reading of the question then becomes assimilable to a liberal-versus-conservative reading of the Smith-Hoover campaign more generally, especially when one notices that four of the conservative "solid-South" states carried by Herbert Hoover were subsequently to be twice carried by Dwight Eisenhower, and three of

them again by Richard Nixon. But in the case of Prohibition, at least, these "left"—"right" categories of political ideology break down; the present writer has shown elsewhere that a progressive, social-welfare, and even radical outlook pervaded the anti-liquor movement at least in its incipient stages and to some extent throughout its existence.<sup>17</sup> So unquestionably liberal a journal as the *Christian Century* justified supporting Hoover in 1928 on prohibitionist grounds;<sup>18</sup> and one social radical in 1932, finding the Democrats, the Republicans, and the Socialists either insufficiently liberal, insufficiently "dry," or both, by process of elimination voted Communist!<sup>19</sup>

Conversely, there were "wet" conservatives. Senator Oscar Underwood, for example, in his later years condemned the Eighteenth Amendment because it "challenged the integrity of the compact between the States" and compelled men "to live their lives in the mold prescribed by the power of government." The Alabama Senator argued, furthermore, that the Drys could no more force their interpretation of the Eighteenth Amendment on the Wets than the North could force its interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment on the South.<sup>20</sup> When one reflects that this same conservative Southern Senator had courageously denounced the Ku Klux Klan

at the Democratic Convention of 1924 and thereby ruined his own chances of being a presidential nominee, the campaign of 1928 which followed becomes even harder to see in "liberal" versus "conservative" terms.

Yet Smith himself is persistently seen by his latter-day admirers as a "liberal" who became "conservative" only upon the failure of his "liberal" expectations. He was not always seen in this light, however, by his contemporaries; Walter Lippmann wrote in 1925: "[Smith] is really a perfectly conservative man about property. . . . He believes in the soundness of the established order. . . . He is what a conservative ought to be always if he knew his business."<sup>21</sup> When one finds a *New York Times* story on June 27th, the second day of the 1928 Democratic National Convention, headlined "Stocks up in 'Smith Market' as Raskob tells business it need not fear the governor," one begins to understand what Lippmann was talking about: "Market leaders such as General Motors, United States Steel, Anaconda Copper, Allied Chemical and New York Central, had a sharp run-up. . . . Buying orders poured in so rapidly . . . that Wall Street began talking of a 'Smith market.' Friends of the Governor were said to be actively in the market, prepared to demonstrate that the financial and business interests are not hostile to his candidacy."

One of these friends of the Governor was John J. Raskob, whose remarks, the *Times* noted apparently without irony, "frequently have stimulated buying enthusiasm in the stock market." Franklin Roosevelt, among others, had serious misgivings about Smith's choice of Raskob as Democratic national chairman, largely on account of this Wall Street taint<sup>22</sup>—yet some of Smith's putative liberalism has rubbed off on the General Motors financier, who is described in Oscar Handlin's biography of Al Smith as "another

<sup>17</sup> Carter, *op. cit.*, Chap. III: "Prohibition, Left and Right." Professor Miller comes to essentially the same conclusion in the essay cited, note 12, *supra*. And cf. Walter G. Muelder, *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York and Nashville, 1961), 56: "Both Prohibition and Woman Suffrage were heralded as victories for purer politics, a cleaner national life, and an effective public control of political life. They were thus not isolated issues, but integral parts of the inclusive reform programs of the Progressive Era."

<sup>18</sup> *Christian Century*, XLV:530f., 594f., 818ff. (1928), cited by Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960), 429n, 112.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 179. Meyer cautions (p. 435) that "the case was not quite clear," inasmuch as the man in question had been a socialist anyway; but it is significant that he nevertheless felt constrained to offer a "dry" rationale for his action, not only in the *Christian Century* but also in the *New Leader*, XIII:6 (1932), as cited by Meyer.

<sup>20</sup> Oscar W. Underwood, *Drifting Sands of Party Politics* (New York and London, 1928), 365, 376, 391.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Men of Destiny* (New York, 1927; the essay on Smith originally published December, 1925), 4f.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Ordeal* (Boston, 1954), 246, citing Roosevelt to Daniels, July 20, 1928; Moore, *op. cit.*, 122f., citing the same letter.



Moore, *A Catholic Runs for President*  
*Al Smith and John J. Raskob discuss campaign*  
*strategy in October of 1928.*

poor boy who had come up in the world." Raskob grew up, Handlin writes, in "the free-and-easy atmosphere of Detroit where religious prejudice seemed altogether out of place."<sup>23</sup> Remembering the notorious anti-Semitism of the then president of the leading competitor of General Motors, one is a little surprised at hearing Detroit described as being a city altogether free of religious prejudice; here is another indication that a straight liberal/conservative interpretation of the campaign of 1928 must be burdened with more ideological freight than it can carry.

Moore, in contrast to Handlin, sees Raskob's role in the campaign in terms not of liberalism but of expediency: the Democrats had to win some of the business community away from its prosperous love affair with Hoover Republicanism, and Raskob was their instrument for this purpose. But had not the candidacies of stanch "gold standard" advocate Alton B. Parker in 1904 and corporation counsel John W. Davis in 1924 demonstrated that Democratic attempts to

beat Republican conservatism at its own game usually failed? Moore does note that Raskob's appointment as national chairman "seemed like an insult to the dry, Protestant, rural South";<sup>24</sup> was it not equally an insult to the Democratic Party's anti-corporate, anti-speculative Progressives and liberals?

IF, then, the campaign of 1928 will not reduce to a campaign between liberals and conservatives, snobs and plain people, or Wets and Drys, are we then left with Protestant against Catholic by process of elimination? Not necessarily. Let us return again to the contemporary assessment of Smith by Walter Lippmann: "The Governor's more hasty friends show an intolerance when they believe that Al Smith is the victim of purely religious prejudice. . . . There is an opposition to Smith which is as authentic and, it seems to me, as poignant as his support. It is inspired by the feeling that the clamorous life of the city should not be acknowledged as the American ideal."<sup>25</sup>

Closely allied to the image of the corner saloon in American folklore has been the image of the Eastern city slicker. It is a venerable one; dissipated urban vice in contrast to abstemious rural virtue are themes as old in history as are cities themselves. In America, as witness Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* and Royall Tyler's play *The Contrast*, they antedate the Constitution. There is also a long-standing tradition of the South and the West perennially arrayed politically against the urban East, almost regardless of the specific political issues confronting America at any given moment. The anti-Smith country in the election of 1928 was, by and large, the old Bryan country—which suggests that the Prohibition issue, and the Klan issue, and possibly even the Catholic issue, were surface stirrings of animosities of another kind. It may be noted in passing that this same trans-Mississippi Bryan country of 1896, which had become Hoover country by 1928,<sup>26</sup> was to become Nixon country in 1960

<sup>24</sup> Moore, *op. cit.*, 121.

<sup>25</sup> Lippmann, *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>26</sup> But, pursuant to Mr. Lubell's "Al Smith revolution," it should be pointed out that, whether or not

<sup>23</sup> Handlin, *op. cit.*, 127, 128.

and Goldwater country in the maneuverings which followed; so perhaps President Kennedy and Governor Smith had more in common as actors of an American political role than simply their religion, or their status as (by definition) liberal Democrats.

"The principal obstacle in Smith's way," wrote a contemporary observer of the pre-convention maneuverings of 1928, "never becomes palpable. . . . It lies in the fact that to millions of Americans he . . . embodies something alien. Not something alien in race or religion, but something alien to themselves . . . something they do not understand and which they feel does not understand them. . . . Some of the perturbed Methodist clergymen in the South opposed to Smith's nomination unconsciously revealed what really moves them most profoundly . . . when they said he was 'New York minded.'"<sup>27</sup>

Had these words been written by one of those same perturbed Methodist clergymen, or indeed by any other Protestant, or even by a secularist liberal such as Lippman,<sup>28</sup> they could be cited as merely an unusually tortuous rationalization for anti-Catholicism. But they were written *by a Catholic*, and were printed in the Catholic liberal weekly *Commonweal*. And, conscious that bogeymen are not slain by one magazine article, the writer, Charles Willis Thompson, returned to the fray some months later in the *Catholic World*, with a piece entitled "The Tammany Monster." This second article was a ringing defense of the "monster" against attacks by the kind of outlander (Thompson mentioned Iowa, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Little Rock,

Arkansas) who viewed the mysterious East and all its works as evil, saying: "Tammany and Wall Street are the same thing, aren't they?"<sup>29</sup>

Smith's own managers and friends were aware of this widespread fear of the urban East in the American hinterland. Norman Hapgood and Henry Moskowitz, in their campaign biography of Smith in 1927 (significantly titled *Up From the City Streets*), faced the problem squarely. The story of Al Smith, they wrote, "suggests that in the future our vast cities may do better by humanity than we have feared." Specifically, the politics characteristic of great cities, abhorred by some as "machine" or "Tammany" politics, might have creative possibilities undreamed of in the Mississippi Valley. Smith, in particular, "has been a product of the machine and . . . has remained a member of it, and at the same time has become a leader of the most progressive thought of the United States." Corner saloon politics, these authors argued, were not in essence very different from country store politics. Far from regarding "the machine" as oppressive and corrupt, the urban poor among whom Al Smith had grown up "were convinced that Tammany Hall was kind to them." Pressing this interpretation perhaps a shade too far in their enthusiasm, Hapgood and Moskowitz defined machine politics as "neighborliness—which on election day is translated into votes."<sup>30</sup>

For the rural voter, who on successive days during the spring of 1928 might have seen headlines such as "Chicago's Election Starts with Kidnapping" and "Deneen Ticket Leads; His Candidate Slain," such a concept of big-city neighborliness was rather hard to take.<sup>31</sup> New York was, of course, not Chicago,

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it was true that Smith "had not fully studied the farm problem" (Moore, *op. cit.*, 119; Handlin, *op. cit.*, 129, disagrees), nevertheless the Democrats in 1928 made some inroads into traditional Republican strength even in farm areas. On this point *vid.* Gilbert C. Fite, "The Agricultural Issue in the Presidential Campaign of 1928," in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXVII:653ff., (March, 1951).

<sup>27</sup> Charles Willis Thompson, "The Unseen Factors in Politics," *Commonweal*, VIII:95 (May 30, 1928).

<sup>28</sup> The writer classifies Lippmann as a "secularist" at this period because he was about to publish *A Preface to Morals* (1929). Whether the term "liberal" is fully applicable to Lippmann at that time is perhaps open to question.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Willis Thompson, "The Tammany Monster," in the *Catholic World*, CXXVIII:1-9 (October, 1928). Thompson is described by the editors of that journal as a Republican (*ibid.*, 111); his defense of Tammany may therefore be presumed a reasonably disinterested one.

<sup>30</sup> Norman Hapgood and Henry Moskowitz, *Up from the City Streets: A Life of Alfred E. Smith* (New York, 1927), 3, 95, 45, 42.

<sup>31</sup> Great Falls (Montana) *Tribune*, April 10 and 11, 1928.



especially in 1928 when the Capone organization was near its peak; but to the rural mind one big city was much like another.<sup>32</sup> With this problem in mind, local leaders in some rural areas—not all of them Democrats—strove to bridge the chasm between their constituents' world and Al Smith's.

ONE of the most interesting of these attempts, particularly in the light of what happened later in the campaign, was made by the Republican editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, William Allen White. Writing to Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 11, 1928, on behalf of the Kansas State Editorial Association, White invited Al Smith to come out to Kansas, "the center of the world which Smith does not know and which does not know Smith." "Smith is supposed to have

<sup>32</sup> C. W. Thompson, in the *Catholic World* article cited previously (note 29, *supra*), tried to distinguish between the governments of New York and of other large cities, as well as between the party organizations in each of New York's own five boroughs.



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William Allen White, "a man of good will towards the Opposition three and a half years out of every four."

horns and a tail out west," he wrote, and a confrontation between the New York Governor and a bipartisan group of Western newspaper editors "would do more for him politically than any other one thing he might possibly do."<sup>33</sup> Frank Freidel has noted that Roosevelt tried to persuade Smith to accept this invitation, but failed;<sup>34</sup> in that failure may lie a subtle indication of one reason for the failure of Smith's entire campaign.

The aftermath of this friendly gesture was saddening and distasteful. Throughout his life, William Allen White was the kind of partisan who can be a man of good will toward the Opposition "three and a half years out of every four," as Franklin Roosevelt himself later put it.<sup>35</sup> As the campaign grew hotter than it ever could have been in February, even in 1928, an organization man "regular" enough to have supported Harding and Coolidge when the time came<sup>36</sup> could have been expected to be drawn into the fray against Smith, even though White credited Al with "one of the important brains now functioning in American politics."<sup>37</sup> But, as Professor Moore has shown at length in his study of the campaign, White's attacks on Smith went far beyond the generally acceptable limits of campaign behavior. White wrote that Smith's record as governor showed the New Yorker to be "soft" not only on Prohibition but also on gambling and prostitution. Worse, when he realized the enormity of such a charge when unproven, his retraction was grudging and ambiguous.<sup>38</sup> It was, Moore concludes, a

<sup>33</sup> White to Roosevelt, February 11, 1928; reprinted in Walter Johnson, ed., *Selected Letters of William Allen White* (New York, 1947), 282.

<sup>34</sup> Freidel, *op. cit.*, 229n.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Johnson, *op. cit.*, 13f., quoting FDR.

<sup>36</sup> On White's rationalized support of Harding in 1920 (having opposed him at the nominating convention), *vid.* W. A. White, *Autobiography*, 596f.; on his support of Coolidge in 1924, *vid.* Johnson, *op. cit.*, 12. When an election was not actually under way White could be remarkably detached about politicians (always excepting Theodore Roosevelt); *cf.* the appraisal of Harding in the *Autobiography*, Chap. LXXXVI ("An American Tragedy"), and of Coolidge in White's *A Puritan in Babylon* (New York, 1938).

<sup>37</sup> White to Roosevelt, as cited in note 33, *supra*.

<sup>38</sup> This episode is discussed and described in Moore, *op. cit.*, 129-136.

shocking lapse in a theretofore conspicuously honorable political career.

Professor Moore conjoins William Allen White's charges against the Governor with those of the Fundamentalist Baptist leader in New York City, the Rev. John Roach Straton—a conjunction which strongly implies that White's and Straton's warfare with Smith comes down essentially to the same thing, namely, anti-Catholicism. White in this period of the campaign saw Al Smith as a threat to "the whole Puritan civilization which has built a sturdy, orderly nation";<sup>39</sup> and Moore comments: "Of course one important facet of the 'whole Puritan civilization' was its stanchly Protestant character." Moore finds this attitude of the Kansas editor particularly "confused and distressing" because White, in a book which was already in press while these attacks were going on, "was about to present Smith in an essentially favorable light."<sup>40</sup>

A re-reading of *Masks in a Pageant*, the work referred to, leads the present writer to a conclusion somewhat different from Professor Moore's. References to "Puritanism" and "a Puritan civilization" occur throughout White's writings in contexts having little or nothing to do with Smith or Catholicism. His apt characterization of Calvin Coolidge as "a Puritan in Babylon," for example, loses all its bite if the most cautious of all of America's Presidents is made merely a *Protestant* in Babylon. And parenthetically it may be observed that President Kennedy has had some notoriously kind words to say about Puritanism.<sup>41</sup> What worried White far more than Al Smith's religious affiliation, or even his "wet" sympathies, was the old Jeffersonian bugbear of the great city as an

enemy of liberty. In *Masks in a Pageant*, White was trying not only to reassure his readers about Smith but also to reassure himself about Smith's background.

William Allen White was aware that great cities had brought forth American Presidents before, and he cited Theodore Roosevelt—whose faithful vassal he himself had been—and Chester A. Arthur. But neither of these two men "was purely urbanite" (recall Mark Hanna's "damn cowboy" epithet hurled at T.R., for example), whereas Al Smith was "urbanite with an urbanity unstrained . . . city born, city bred, 'city broke,' city minded, and city hearted." And, White's urban reader might well have asked, why not? The Kansas editor did his best to agree: "There is no reason why the back alley cannot produce as good moral, spiritual, mental, and physical timber for politics as the backwoods. . . . The streets educated [Smith] as the woods and fields educated Lincoln." And yet, backwoods and back alley were inevitably headed for conflict in the twentieth century; "industrial democracy" was destined to "struggle for supremacy with . . . rural democracy—the America of our past."<sup>42</sup>

As a determined political progressive, White was intellectually on the side of the new order; as a product of the Kansas frontier he was emotionally drawn to the old. The most revealing fact about the Al Smith sketch in White's *Masks in a Pageant* is that the author grouped it at the end of the book in a section titled "The Young Princes of Democracy"—and his other young prince was Mayor William Hale "Big Bill" Thompson of Chicago. The Al Smith essay *was*, in the main, favorable to Smith; but Al and Big Bill were of the same species in White's mind. In the epigraph to that part of the book, White wrote: "When we have sloughed off our rural philosophy—our fundamental Puritanism—we shall crown the young princes. In the meantime the warning is plain: 'Put not your trust in princes!'"<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 131, citing AP dispatch (July 15, 1928) which thus quoted White.

<sup>40</sup> Moore, *op. cit.*, 129f.

<sup>41</sup> Examples: the discussion of the cultural heritage of John Quincy Adams in *Profiles in Courage* (New York, 1956), Chap. 2; the praise of the "courage—judgment—integrity—dedication" of the builders of the Bay colony by the President-elect before the Massachusetts General Court on January 9, 1961 (*New York Times*, January 10, 1961).

<sup>42</sup> William Allen White, *Masks in a Pageant* (New York, 1928), 465f., 473ff., 479.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 462.

WITH mistrust of White's sort rampant throughout the Bryan country, it is understandable that practicing Democrats in the spring of 1928 might have cast about for a candidate who could hold Al Smith's constituents without alienating William Allen White's; ideally, a Catholic who was not one of the young princes. Predictably, some of them found him, in a state even more rural than Kansas. On March 4, Senator Thomas J. Walsh of Montana tossed his hat into the ring.<sup>44</sup> On May 1, he was knocked out of the running in the California presidential primary;<sup>45</sup> but in the meantime he had posed a major obstacle for the hypothesis of an "unwritten law" governing Catholic candidates. What is one to make of the fact that, in Professor Moore's words, "The two lead-

ing candidates for the Democratic nomination in 1928 were Catholic [and] one of them was nominated"?<sup>46</sup> If the Walsh candidacy was a stalking-horse to divide the Catholic vote, as has been suggested,<sup>47</sup> clearly the effort was unsuccessful; and if it was a serious bid for the Presidency, then the "unwritten law" was already well on the way to being a dead letter. In either case, conclusions about toleration in American life more optimistic than those which have been customarily drawn for the 1920's would seem to be in order.

<sup>44</sup> L. C. Speers, "Walsh of Montana Throws in His Hat," *New York Times*, March 11, 1928.

<sup>45</sup> Walsh attributed his defeat, under California's cross-filing and cross-voting system, to "thirsty Republicans and misguided Drys." AP dispatch, May 2, 1928. The Senator, it may be noted, was a teetotaler, though a Catholic—a factor which had contributed to his initial availability.

<sup>46</sup> Moore, *op. cit.*, 93. Moore believes that "an attack on Walsh as a Catholic would surely have been made had he been nominated"; but he concedes that "except in a most indirect and farfetched way, Walsh could not have symbolized, as did Al Smith, the insistent claims for more recognition of the newer and urban population groups."

<sup>47</sup> This charge was made, *e.g.*, in the *Catholic World*, CXXVII:104 (April, 1928). But J. Leonard Bates, who is writing a scholarly biography of the Senator, has the impression that Walsh "wanted the nomination pretty badly." Bates to author, January 28, 1961.



Wide World

Franklin D. Roosevelt and Al Smith in a joint appearance at Madison Square Garden, November 3, 1928.