

Wisconsin Ends the Political Career Of Wendell Willkie

By Ronald H. Snyder

It is difficult to imagine a presidential election year without the array of state primaries that have come to determine success or failure for the pool of candidates in search of their party's nomination. So critical have these contests become, and so intense is the attention that the media, campaign strategists, and political pundits give to them, that it would be easy to assume that state primaries have been a part of the national political landscape for generations. Yet the system so familiar to voters today only emerged in 1972. That year was the first presidential election year since the tumultuous 1968 Democratic National Convention, where serious disruptions of the proceedings caused the Democratic National Committee to establish new rules for the selection of convention

delegates. These included a requirement that most delegates be elected by the voters in state primary elections or caucuses. The Republican Party soon adopted similar rules and primaries have become standard in the majority of states in the nation. Before 1972, that was not the case.

In 1903 Wisconsin became the first state to select delegates to the presidential nominating conventions through primaries. The purpose of the primaries was to open the nomination process to ordinary party members and to weaken the influence of professional politicians and party bosses. Presidential nominees were largely chosen at the national conventions by the party elite, office holders, and loyal party workers, who were mostly appointed to their state delegations.

Willkie's strong showing in Wisconsin during the 1940 presidential election was a major point in his 1944 campaign literature. The brochure cover pictured here was one of Willkie's most important pieces.

A black and white portrait of Wendell Willkie, a man with dark hair, looking slightly to the left with a subtle smile. He is wearing a dark suit jacket and a striped tie.

**WENDELL WILLKIE
AND**

WISCONSIN





Thomas E. Dewey, at far left, the Republican candidate for President, makes a whistle-stop in Baraboo during the 1944 election. Dewey carried Wisconsin by a slim margin, fewer than 25,000 votes.

WHS Name File

Presidential hopefuls not favored by the party leadership sometimes chose to demonstrate their support among ordinary voters by entering one or more of the primaries. As one of the few states that offered this democratic voice, Wisconsin served on several occasions as a vehicle for these candidates. In the process, the voters of the Badger State exerted important influence on presidential politics, and in turn, on the course of American history.

In 1960, for example, Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy chose to make his first foray outside of New England at the Wisconsin Democratic presidential primary. Kennedy's victory over Senator Hubert Humphrey of neighboring Minnesota demonstrated the Bay State senator's ability to connect with midwestern and Protestant voters, anointed him as the instant "front runner" for the nomination, and set him firmly on his path to the presidency.

Historians continue to debate the impact of the 1968 Wisconsin primary on Lyndon B. Johnson's decision not to seek a second term as president. Many argue that Johnson's withdrawal, announced two days before the Wisconsin vote,

reflected his fear of a humiliating defeat at the hands of insurgent anti-Vietnam war candidate, Eugene J. McCarthy, another Midwestern senator.¹

The current presidential election season marks the sixtieth anniversary of a dramatic, but little remembered, chapter in Wisconsin political history. In the spring of 1944, the state's Republican voters decisively rejected the effort of Wendell L. Willkie to win a second chance to be the Republican Party's nominee for president of the United States. In so doing, voters of the Badger State influenced the politics of the World War II era and ended the career of one of the most polarizing and controversial figures of that generation.

Four years earlier, Wendell Willkie had risen to the Republican presidential nomination from an unlikely background. Born in rural Indiana in 1892, Willkie graduated from Indiana University School of Law in 1916. In 1929 he joined a prestigious New York law firm, specializing in public utilities law. Four years later, he became president of the Commonwealth and Southern Corporation, a giant utilities holding company.

Willkie was an active Democrat and a delegate to the 1924 Democratic National Convention. He supported Franklin D. Roosevelt for president in 1932. Six months into Roosevelt's first term, however, Willkie became one of the president's most articulate and visible critics. His break with the New Deal was prompted by the administration's proposal to create a government corporation to develop the Tennessee River basin and its adjoining territories. The proposed Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) planned to build dams and power plants and provide low-cost electricity for thousands of economically deprived residents living in the six states along the river's course. Competition from a publicly owned utility would be the ruination of the privately owned local electric power companies in the region, all of which were subsidiaries of Commonwealth and Southern, the company over which Willkie presided.

For the next six years, Willkie waged a fierce battle against government ownership of electric power. After exhausting all political and legal remedies, he



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When Willkie visited Richland Center on March 18 for this large public event, businesses closed for the day to allow his motorcade access to the streets.



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Willkie, second from right, enjoyed the hospitality of the Republican Party in Wisconsin and his campaign supporters were in attendance at a small reception in November 1943, including, from left, Vernon Thompson, George Skogmo, and William Aberg.

engaged in protracted negotiations with TVA authorities, and in August 1939, Commonwealth and Southern's Tennessee Electric Power Company was sold to the TVA for 78.6 million dollars (or 10.4 billion in today's dollars).

Willkie's highly public battles with the New Deal generated a great deal of attention and curiosity. He toured the nation, spoke to large and receptive audiences, and wrote articles for several major magazines. The image of an Indiana "farm boy" eloquently and passionately defending East Coast corporate wealth and private enterprise turned Willkie into something of a media star. In April 1940 he wrote an article for *Fortune* magazine entitled "We The People: A Foundation for a Political Platform for Recovery." It was organized in the form of a petition to the major political parties as they considered their platforms for 1940. The article consisted of six points for the parties to consider: stop thinking with a depression mentality, end negative attitudes toward private business, include private business in the operation of government programs, protect individual and states' rights, reveal the true costs of government programs, and adopt a foreign policy that opposes aggression and supports world trade. The article was enthusiastically received by a number of well-placed business, publishing, and financial leaders. Several of them, including Russell Davenport, managing editor of *Fortune*, and newspaper publishers John Cowles and Gardner Cowles Jr., organized a committee in support of Willkie for the Republican presidential nomination.

The movement quickly evolved into a grass-roots crusade. A twenty-nine-year-old attorney in New York, Oren Root Jr., spent forty dollars of his own money to design and mail petitions to Republicans around the country, in an attempt to secure signatures for a Willkie candidacy. Petitions containing three million signatures were returned to Root in fewer than sixty days, and about two hundred dollars a day in unsolicited campaign contributions poured in. Buoyed by the response, Root placed classified advertisements in newspapers across the country urging Republicans to organize local "Associated Willkie Clubs." Twelve hundred such clubs sprang up within weeks.

Despite the misgivings of many Republican leaders about the idea of bestowing their ultimate prize on a man without party credentials, the Willkie amateurs pulled off a storied upset. At the Republican convention in Philadelphia in June 1940, Willkie supporters packed the galleries, chanted Willkie's name incessantly, and stampeded the delegates. When the pandemonium ended, Willkie had emerged as the nominee. At a time when the Republicans faced the Herculean task of challenging Franklin Roosevelt's bid for an unprecedented third term and developing a viable alternative to the administration's foreign policy, they selected a recent convert to the party, who had neither political nor governmental experience, as their standard-bearer.

Willkie waged a vigorous campaign. He barnstormed the country warning that a third term for Roosevelt would jeopardize democratic traditions, but he supported most of the New Deal's domestic and international initiatives. He argued that he could provide fresh leadership and would administer those programs on a sounder economic basis. Most importantly, he bestowed the party's stamp of legitimacy on Roosevelt's internationalist foreign policy. Willkie supported aid to the allies and American military preparedness but charged that the administration was tired and incompetent and might blunder into war.

On November 5, 1940, Willkie received more votes than any Republican presidential candidate in history at that time—over twenty million. However, Roosevelt was the choice of over twenty-seven million voters. Willkie had cut the president's 1936 margin of victory in half, but it was not enough to overcome FDR's broad popularity. With the exception of the Milwaukee area, Willkie had done reason-



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Willkie's intense campaign for the 1944 Republican primary led him into all walks of life throughout the state; in Madison he spoke with typesetter Ed Mergen who was in charge of page layout for the Wisconsin State Journal.

ably well in Wisconsin in 1940, receiving 679,206 votes. He carried every congressional district in the state except those in the Milwaukee metropolitan area, losing Milwaukee by more than fifty thousand votes but losing the state overall by fewer than twenty-five thousand votes.

After the election Willkie was faced with a critical decision. He wanted to retain leadership of the Republican Party, but feared that as its titular head he would be expected to lead the opposition against the Roosevelt administration's foreign policy, especially its efforts to provide military aid to Britain. Willkie was convinced that the survival of the nation and the peace of the world rested on a British victory over Nazi Germany. He decided to work toward a redirection of Republican foreign policy and to recast the party as the "loyal opposition," placing national unity above partisan politics. Some political observers called Willkie's position heroic and critical to the efforts to defeat Nazi Germany. Journalist Walter Lippman, for example, wrote that "under any leadership but his, the Republican Party would have turned its back upon Great Britain, causing all who still resisted Hitler to feel that they were abandoned." Many partisan Republicans, however, thought Willkie's support for the opposition's foreign policy initiatives politically naive, at best.²

On January 10, 1941, HR 1776, the so-called "Lend-Lease" bill to provide U.S. military equipment to an embattled Britain, was introduced in Congress. As anticipated, the

response of the Republican establishment was swift and partisan. Former President Herbert Hoover warned that passage would mean that Congress had surrendered its responsibilities to the executive branch. The party's 1936 nominee, Governor Alfred M. Landon of Kansas, called it "a slick scheme to fool the taxpayers."³

On January 18, 1941, Willkie announced his support for the legislation and warned that "if the Republican Party makes a blind opposition to this bill and allows itself to be presented . . . as the isolationist party, it will never again gain control of the American government."⁴ In order to dramatize his point, Willkie testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in support of "Lend-Lease." In response to a question from GOP Senator Gerald Nye of North Dakota as to whether he still believed that FDR's policies would draw America into war, Willkie responded that the prediction was "a bit of campaign oratory."⁵ That flippant remark enraged many orthodox Republicans.

If that were not insult enough, Willkie proceeded from the hearing room directly to the White House for his first face-to-face meeting with Roosevelt. Several days later, Willkie announced that he was going to England to observe the war situation and that FDR had provided him with a personal note of introduction to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

The split between Willkie and the traditional Republican leadership seemed nearly irreparable. Colonel Robert McCormick, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune* and a major figure in conservative circles, wrote the epitaph. "The party will take leave of its late standard bearer," McCormick wrote, "with the hope that it will never again see him or he it."⁶ Senate Minority Leader Robert A. Taft of Ohio proclaimed that Willkie "does not and cannot speak for the Republican Party," and Congressman Dewey Short of Missouri made the following accusation, ". . . and now with Roosevelt's blessing, he is smashing the Republican Party wide open."⁷

However, the *Chicago Daily News* hailed Willkie as a man of principle and argued that his views coincided with those of a majority of Republicans.⁸ Public opinion research seemed to support that conclusion. A Gallup poll, released in June 1941, indicated that two-thirds of those who voted Republican in 1940 supported Willkie's position on the "Lend-Lease" bill.⁹ In a



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Although the war in Europe had been a significant issue during the 1940 campaign, by 1944 American lives had been lost, and veteran support was critical. On March 25 Willkie conversed with C.L. Coon, commander of Madison's William B. Cairns American Legion Post No. 57.

survey taken in December 1941 by *The Republican* magazine, Willkie was the first choice for the 1944 nomination of forty-seven percent of nine thousand registered Republicans and was well ahead of his closest rival.¹⁰

Willkie's insistence on portraying himself as the head of "the loyal opposition" strengthened the attacks against him, however, and his fortunes slowly began to change. In the summer of 1942, with the mid-term congressional elections approaching, the White House announced that Willkie would visit the battle fronts in the Soviet Union and the Middle East. Willkie pointed to the assignment as proof that, under his leadership, the Republican Party was playing an important leadership role in the war effort, but many Republican congressional candidates felt that Willkie should stay home and campaign for them rather than travel the world as the representative of a Democratic president. The GOP made major gains in the election, picking up forty-four seats in the House of Representatives and nine in the Senate, but Willkie's role in the party had changed dramatically. Historian Donald Johnson quoted an unnamed congressional leader who said that "after the campaign of [19]42, not five members of the House were willing to follow his lead."¹¹ A nation-wide Gallup survey revealed that Willkie had dropped to second choice among likely Republican voters, behind General Douglas MacArthur.¹²

Willkie announced in an interview with *Look* magazine on October 5, 1943, that he would seek the 1944 Republican nomination. He said that his brand of internationalist Republicanism was the party's only hope for survival. He argued that

"the Republican Party can exist only if it catches the spirit of the times." He believed that the only way to demonstrate that the voters shared his vision was to take his case directly to them by entering several presidential primaries in 1944.

He decided to make his stand in the Wisconsin Republican presidential primary scheduled for April 4. "I have no illusions concerning the difficulties I will encounter in Wisconsin," he said, "but it is up to the Republican voters to determine their preference for president, and I am willing to rise or fall on such a test."¹³

Willkie believed that a decisive victory in the Wisconsin primary would convince the Republican leadership that he could win the presidency and return the party to the White House for the first time in twelve years. Some of his strongest supporters in Wisconsin were split over whether the Badger State was the right place to stage an all-or-nothing effort. Milton H. Polland, a Milwaukee insurance executive and an advisor to the former mayor, the late Carl Zeidler, feared an isolationist backlash among the state's large German American population and urged Willkie to stay out of the Wisconsin primary. By contrast, John C. Dickinson of West Bend, general sales manager for Amity Leather and Chair and member of the Washington County Republican Party, urged Willkie to vigorously contest the state. Even the press was conflicted about Willkie's plan to tie his fate to Wisconsin. The *New York Times* questioned if "a state in which pre-war Republicanism was the very antithesis of his own pre-war platform" was an appropriate place for Willkie to risk his candidacy. The *Milwaukee Journal*, however, welcomed the Willkie



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The Washington Evening Star ran this cartoon by Clifford Berryman after Wisconsin's primary determined the futures of both Willkie and Dewey.



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Although Wisconsin governor Walter Goodland, left, made clear that he would not support Willkie as a presidential candidate, he and Mrs. Goodland welcomed Willkie to the governor's mansion in November 1943.

effort and expressed the hope that it would “throw light on how the Middle West may react to Willkie and the things he represents.”¹⁴

Willkie decided to make his stand in Wisconsin because he believed that the state presented many advantages for him. From a certain perspective, Wisconsin seemed to be *made* for Willkie. He had won the state except for Milwaukee in 1940, after all. A win here would prove his cross-over appeal, and earn him his credentials. None of the other potential Republican candidates—New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey, Ohio Governor John Bricker, Navy Lt. Commander and former Minnesota Governor Harold Stassen, or even Milwaukee native General Douglas MacArthur—planned to campaign in the Badger State. At first, Dewey asked that his name not be entered. His leading Wisconsin supporter, Secretary of State Fred Zimmerman, ignored Dewey’s plea, however, and organized a slate of delegates pledged to the New York governor for the primary. Stassen and MacArthur were prohibited by law from campaigning while on active military duty. The only other declared candidate, John Bricker, announced that he would not seek delegates in Wisconsin.

Yet Wisconsin also posed potential dangers for Willkie’s candidacy. The state’s Republican congressional delegation had voted against every measure designed to aid the allied forces before Pearl Harbor. The *Chicago Tribune*, voice of uncompromising isolationist sentiment in the Midwest, was widely read throughout the state. It was difficult for Willkie and his staff to determine how his consistent support of American intervention in the war would be received by Wisconsin’s substantial German American community.

Nonetheless, Willkie was not to be dissuaded. He visited Wisconsin in November 1943 for preliminary organizational planning and to meet with several key groups of potential supporters. The trip turned out to be disappointing. John Dickson arranged for Republican Governor and Mrs. Walter Goodland to host a small dinner party for Willkie and his wife at the executive mansion in Madison. Willkie

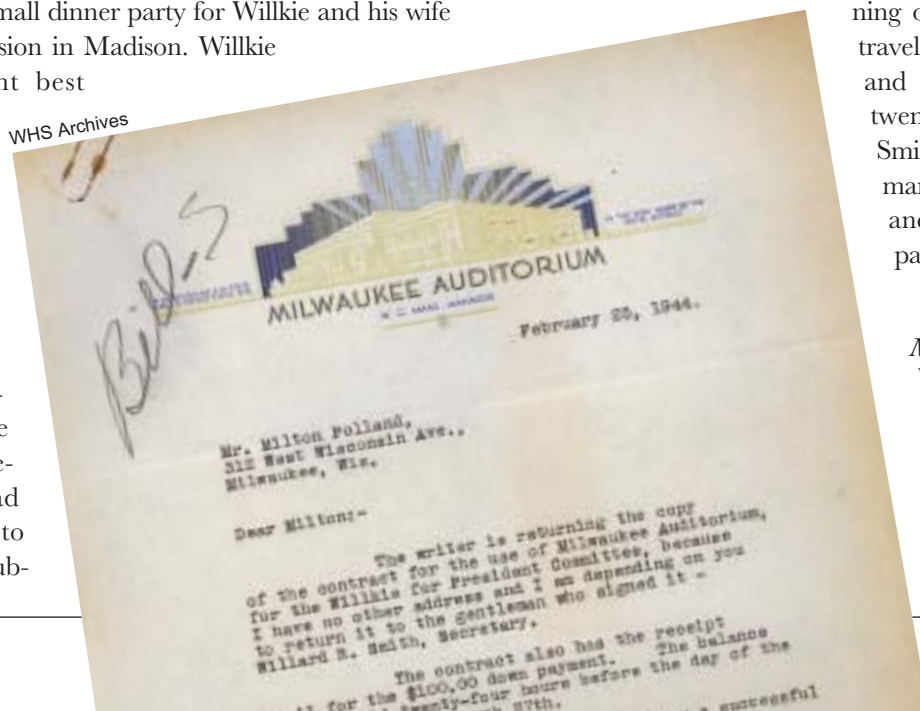
was at his eloquent best at that informal gathering, but was dismayed to learn that neither Governor Goodland nor state GOP Chair Thomas Coleman planned to support him. He was particularly stung when he learned that Coleman’s decision had come after a visit to Wisconsin from Repub-

lican National Chairman John Hamilton. Willkie’s resolve, however, was still apparent at a luncheon in Madison, where he declared, “I hope you’re with me in Wisconsin because I want a state like this with a great liberal tradition. But whether you’re with me or not, I’m sticking to my policies.”¹⁵

Unable to hide his bitterness, Willkie proceeded to speak to three groups during his brief visit, and alienated all of them. He chided a group of German Americans in Madison for allowing the destruction of freedom in their ancestral homeland. He received a potentially friendly delegation from the AFL and the CIO at West Bend and told them that if he was successful in the election campaign “labor will have a hell of a lot of housecleaning to do.” At a dinner for 125 corporate leaders in Milwaukee, he charged that business was indifferent to the public interest. At the conclusion of his remarks, only about ten people came forward to shake his hand.¹⁶

He returned to Milwaukee on February 5th to meet with the men who were planning to run in the primary as delegates pledged to vote for him at the Republican National Convention, and to map out his campaign schedule. The Wisconsin primary system required that each candidate select four “at large” delegates to run state-wide and separate sets of two district delegates to place before the voters in each of the state’s ten congressional districts. Willkie’s campaign organization had assembled a group of outstanding citizens to represent him. For example, the “at large” delegates included the Speaker of the Wisconsin State Assembly, Vernon Thomson of Richland Center. Thomson, a future governor and congressman, was one of the state’s most prominent Republicans. The other “at large” delegates on the Willkie slate were William Renk of Sun Prairie, a former state Commissioner of Agriculture, William Aberg of Madison, chair of the Wisconsin Conservation Committee, and George Skogmo of Milwaukee, whose affiliation is not known.¹⁷

A campaign schedule was drawn up. Willkie would spend thirteen days in the state beginning on March 16. He would travel fourteen hundred miles and make forty speeches in twenty-two cities. Willard Smith, a Madison newspaperman, would handle logistics and serve as the campaign’s official spokesman.



Milton Polland, one of Willkie’s Wisconsin campaign leaders, booked the Milwaukee auditorium for the candidate’s appearance in March of 1944. The crowd was disappointingly smaller than expected, and the financial cost was significant.

Willkie inaugurated the campaign in Milwaukee, the state's largest city, on March 16. In his first three days on the stump, he set the frantic pace that would characterize the effort. He made eight speeches in Kenosha, Racine, Beloit, Janesville, Richland Center, and Ripon. In those early appearances, he honed the themes of his campaign: the Republican Party needed redirection in its approach to social and foreign policy issues, and the incumbent Democratic administration was tired, secretive, and mistaken in its vision of the post-war world.

Several problems developed in the early days of the campaign. Willkie's throat became severely sore, and his voice became increasingly hoarse, requiring medical attention. This would plague him throughout the campaign and beyond. The other concern was that the *Chicago Tribune* kept up a drumbeat of invective against him. For example, it began a "news" story on his Richland Center appearance as follows: "The defeated 1940 Republi-

can presidential candidate and a favorite son on Wall Street banking interests, tonight assumed the role of farm expert." In reporting on the size of the crowd greeting him at Ripon, the newspaper estimated that "about two-thirds of them (were) college students or persons of high school age who can't vote." His finance committee chair, John Kimberly, president of the Kimberly-Clark Corporation, was characterized by the *Tribune* as "a millionaire paper manufacturer and socialite."¹⁸ As a result, Willkie thanked an audience in Racine for coming to hear him even though "morning after morning you have read distortions of my motives and misconceptions of what I have been doing."¹⁹

In Oshkosh, he criticized his "shadow" Republican opponents. He called upon his audience in Appleton to reject the hate-mongering of Wisconsin native Gerald L. K. Smith. He pleaded with voters in Sheboygan to help him remake the Republican Party. He presented a program for post-war economic recovery at Manitowoc. He criticized Roosevelt in Burlington for not protesting violations of Poland's borders. In Waukesha, he



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Photo by Joel Heiman

Although Willkie's appeal to Democrats was an asset in gaining crossover votes, the lack of trust it created in Republicans was ultimately a major political liability.

While campaigning, Willkie needed the support of the local press, and his visit with retired Wisconsin State Journal editor and publisher Aaron Martin Brayton, took place in a local hospital.



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accused the New Deal of treating farmers as if they were idiots. His motorcade traveled two hundred miles through a major blizzard in Northern Wisconsin. It took five hours for a one-hundred-mile trip from Wisconsin Rapids to Eau Claire. While traveling to Beloit, a car in the Willkie motorcade ran over a dog in Walworth County. Willkie stopped the procession until the owners could be found, and Mrs. Willkie purchased a new dog for the family. (The owners named it "Wendell.")

In a March 29 dispatch from Milwaukee, *The Nation* reported that Willkie "has hit the towns and countryside with the personal zeal of the old-time circuit rider on the glory trail." At every stop the crowds were large. In Richland Center, most businesses closed their doors so that the community

could give Willkie a big welcome; over twenty-two hundred people lined the motorcade route. More than a thousand people heard the candidate speak in Elkhorn (population 2,000). Six hundred turned out at Evansville (population 2,500) for a 10:30 a.m. appearance. An overflow crowd greeted him at Waukesha Stock Pavilion. A capacity crowd filled the Plaza Theater in Burlington. Five thousand jammed the Sheboygan Armory. Six hundred turned out at 10:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning in Wisconsin Rapids. Laurence C. Ecklund reported in the *Milwaukee Journal* that the crowd at Jefferson "filled the seats in the main courtroom of the Jefferson County Court House, lined the walls and spilled over the corridors and the judge's chambers."²⁰

The campaign was scheduled to conclude with a major rally at the Milwaukee Auditorium on March 27. It turned out to be one of the more disappointing events of the campaign.²¹ Organized by a Milwaukee public relations firm, the rally was expected to draw sixty-five hundred people, but only about five thousand showed up. This was particularly disturbing because the *Milwaukee Journal* had predicted that the size of the crowd would be "a test of Willkie's drawing power."²²

Nevertheless, the evening included one of the lighter moments of the campaign. An aging Republican worker was given the honor of introducing the platform guests. He described Mrs. Willkie as "one who bears the aroma of her native Hoosier State." When it was Willkie's turn to speak, he quipped that he had heard Indiana described in many ways but had never thought about its smell before.²³

The Willkies left the rally and departed immediately for northwestern Wisconsin, en route to Omaha, to begin campaigning for the Nebraska primary. The Wisconsin primary belonged to the voters and to history.

Given the general response to the Willkie campaign across the state and the fact that none of the other Republican presidential hopefuls visited Wisconsin during the 1944 primary season, a large victory for the Willkie slate was widely predicted. Willard Shelton, writing in *The Nation*, reviewed the vote totals that Willkie needed to score an impressive victory and stated that "some of the experienced local newspapermen think he will score this kind of victory."²⁴ The *Wisconsin State Journal* in Madison forecast that sixteen to eighteen of the twenty-four delegates would go to Willkie. State Senator Bernhard Gettleman, a co-chair of the local Dewey organization, said that Dewey would win five delegates and Willkie would take the rest.

Lester Bradshaw, a spokesman for Governor John Bricker, predicted that Willkie would win fifteen of the contested delegate spots. Leo Casey, director of publicity at Willkie headquarters in New York, wired campaign workers in every state asking them to secure statements from prominent Republicans on the meaning of Willkie's success in Wisconsin, and at Willkie's state headquarters, Willard Smith drafted a victory statement. It quoted the candidate as saying that "in vindicating my judgment, the voters of Wisconsin have made me very happy."²⁵

Wisconsin Republicans voted on April 4. They elected seventeen of Dewey's delegates, four of Stassen's delegates, three of MacArthur's delegates, and none of the Willkie delegates. Willkie's slate ran last in every district. Fred Zimmerman, the leading Dewey delegate, polled 143,031 votes. The top Stassen delegate received 67,495 votes. The leading MacArthur representative won 76,811 votes. Vernon Thomson, who received the largest number of votes among Willkie delegates, tallied 49,535 votes.²⁶

On the evening of April 5, Willkie delivered a blistering attack on the New Deal before a crowd of three thousand in Omaha. When his prepared text was complete, he took a slip of paper from his pocket and began to read it aloud:

I quite deliberately entered the Wisconsin primary to test whether the Republican voters of that state would support me and in the advocacy of every sacrifice and cost necessary to winning and shortening the war and in the advocacy of tangible . . . cooperation among the nations of the world . . . The result of the primary is naturally disappointing and . . . it is obvious now that I cannot be nominated. Therefore, I am



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Roosevelt's campaign of 1940 brought much criticism because he ran for an unprecedented third term. Political adversaries targeted him in 1944 with the same complaints when he ran for his fourth term.

*asking my friends to desist from any activity toward that end and not to present my name at the convention. I earnestly hope that the Republican Convention will nominate a candidate and write a platform which represents the views which I have advocated and which I believe are shared by millions of Americans.*²⁷

The Willkies left the Omaha auditorium and boarded an overnight train for their home in New York.

Several of Willkie's Wisconsin associates attribute the devastating defeat to the parochial attitudes of a largely rural state. Milton Polland said that Willkie's ideas were "too advanced for the countryside."²⁸ Willard Smith admitted that Willkie supporters "learned, to our great embarrassment, much about our state which we had not known before."²⁹ Other observers, removed from the state and the passions of the moment, saw the Wisconsin vote as an example of the way that traditional Republican voters felt across the country.³⁰

Indeed, the fact that Willkie's career ended in Wisconsin was more a matter of coincidence and timing than a reflection of any unique message from the voters of the Badger State. To many Republicans across the nation, Willkie was a closet Democrat, who had captured the GOP nomination in 1940 and vainly attempted to lead the party toward a cooperative relationship with the nation's war-time leader. Yet, war-time or not, that commander-in-chief was Franklin D. Roosevelt, and orthodox Republicans would have none of it.

For Wisconsin voters, the other candidates may have snubbed the state by not bothering to campaign there, but they were *real* Republicans. Every one of them outpolled the ever-present pretender. The *Wall Street Journal* speculated that Willkie's humiliation in Wisconsin resulted from the fact that "the voters . . . wanted to do more than defeat Willkie. They were intent on punishing him."³¹

The possibility that Wisconsin Democrats would cross over and vote for Willkie in the Republican primary never materialized. Even the draw of a friendly Republican failed to prompt dissatisfied Democrats to forego the opportunity to vote for Roosevelt, despite the fact that the president ran without opposition in the primary.

The Wisconsin Willkie loyalists were left to pick up the pieces. They had raised \$18,674. An additional \$1,800 was

contributed by the national Willkie organization to the Wisconsin effort. The campaign overspent its income by \$7,500. Vendors and bill collectors pressed what was left of the local organization to pay their bills. Even Willkie supporters clamored for money that they had fronted during the campaign. State Senator Louis Fellenz Jr. of Fond du Lac, chair of the Wisconsin Willkie Committee, pleaded with Willard Smith to find some funds to reimburse him for campaign expenses. On June 24, Milton Polland wrote Smith that he had "been paying many small bills. . . and I am getting rather provoked having the bill collectors hound me daily. . . . It is all coming out of my own pocket." The Milwaukee public relations firm of Gauer and Block, the Shorewood Printing Company, and the Schroeder Hotel of Milwaukee threatened lawsuits. An attorney from Portage sought \$60.95 for out-of-pocket expenses and the Independent Film Exchange of Milwaukee demanded \$50. Polland sent the *Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle* a check for \$25 to pay for an advertisement. The paper's business manager sent the check back to Polland and demanded payment in full of \$40. Polland returned the check with a note that they could take it or forget it. Nearly a year after the campaign, the *Milwaukee Journal* was still writing about an unpaid bill of \$5.33. It appears as if the bills were paid by Polland, John Kimberly, and Willkie himself.³²

Willkie was not invited to speak at the Republican National Convention and declined an "honored guest" pass. He delayed an endorsement of the party's nominees, Dewey and Bricker.

On October 4, 1944, the throat infection that Willkie had developed in Wisconsin returned. It weakened his heart muscles and produced an acute cardiac condition. He died in a New York hospital on October 8 of coronary thrombosis at the age of 52, with the election in which he had hoped to be the Republican candidate still nearly a month

away. His hope that a success in Wisconsin would return him to the center of the national political stage proved to be a false one, but in his attempt he joined a number of politicians of both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who found in the Badger State a political barometer that forecast success or failure accurately. ❧

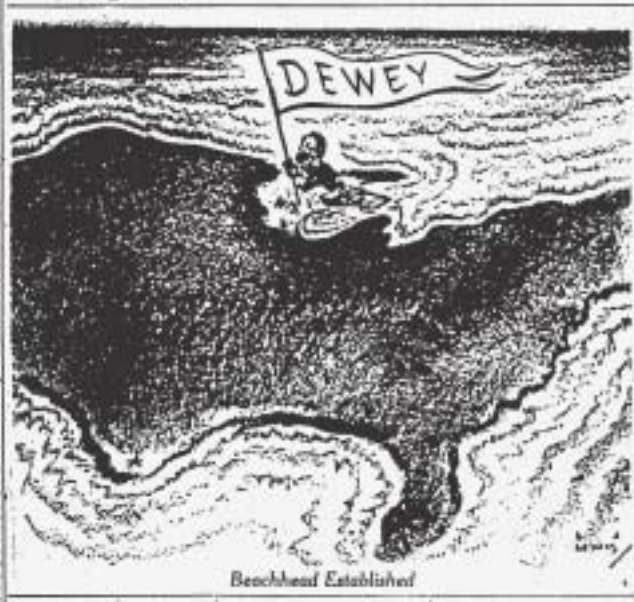


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Photo by Joel Heiman

The Wisconsin campaign materials for Wendell Willkie were abundant and many of the bills were left unpaid by the debt-ridden campaign or were paid by private citizens who were never reimbursed.

Turned Down by Wisconsin, Willkie Quits Race and Cancels Rest of Tour



Willkie Move Gives Rise to Varied Views

Political Leaders Differ on Probable Effect on Race; Decision to Quit Called 'Courageous'

From Frank Reppert
Wendell L. Willkie's withdrawal from the presidential race was big news in political circles Thursday, including both noted comment and prediction.

Republican leaders not only decried Willkie's withdrawal as an act of "cowardice and retreat," as a step in the direction of party unity, as a frank admission that the nation's Republican voters were not disposed to follow the politics which Willkie represented, some Democrats said it meant that the Republican party was going back to "the old guard and traditionalism" and marked a triumph for "the bosses."

In many of the Republican comments there was evidence of an increasing swing toward Gov. Thomas H. Dewey of New York, who still remained silent on his resignation.

Editorial in "Chicago"
Gov. John W. Bricker of Ohio, another contender for the GOP nomination, and Willkie's withdrawal came as a surprise, but he paid tribute to Willkie for "fearless and courageous leadership."

Exit Willkie 'I Can't Be Nominated'

CHICAGO, Nov. 10—This is the brief statement made by Wendell Willkie Wednesday night.

"It has been my conviction that as a Republican could be nominated for president unless he returned at the convention the vast majority of the major newspapers across the country that the Republican party has had its greatest success."

"Therefore, I quite deliberately returned the Wisconsin primary to test whether the Republicans would give the greater support and in the advocacy of every sacrifice and cost necessary to winning and electing the man best in the advocacy of language, effective speech, and political cooperation among the nations of the world for the preservation of the peace and the rebuilding of humanity."

"The result of the primary is a fully disappointing and doubly so since the delegates who met at the public University of State Administration in known as the American First, opposed to the policy which I advocate."

"As I have said many times, this country desperately needs one leadership. It is obvious now that I cannot be nominated. I therefore am asking supporters to discontinue from any activity toward that end and not to present my name at the convention."

"I earnestly hope that the Republican convention will conduct a realistic and with a positive plan to carry out the program."

Decision Told From Omaha; Blast at Foes

Thrust at Zimmerman Is Seen in His Reference to 'America First' Move; On Way Back East

By LAWRENCE GREEN
OF THE JOURNAL SENTINEL
Tired from his strenuous campaigning in Wisconsin and Nebraska, Wendell L. Willkie was on his way back to New York Thursday after a dramatic withdrawal from the race for the Republican presidential nomination at Omaha, Neb., Wednesday night.

Willkie bowed out because of his stunning defeat in the Wisconsin delegate primary Tuesday in which he failed to win a single delegate and in which Gov. Thomas E. Dewey was 11, with three more friendly in his; Gen. Alexander Harold E. Haig, Gen. and Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Gen.

The last Republican nominee, who had stated his political future as the "American first," announced

No Further Word
CHICAGO, Nov. 10—Wendell L.

The political impact of Wisconsin's rejection was complete. Willkie left the presidential race on April 6, 1944, as reported by the Milwaukee Journal.

Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Notes

¹The 1960 Wisconsin Democratic primary, and its impact on the candidacy of John F. Kennedy, is discussed in Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President—1960*. (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1961), 80–96. The possible effect of the Wisconsin Democratic Primary on the election of 1968 is discussed in a variety of sources including Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election That Changed America*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 1992), 48–50; Paul R. Wiecek, "Wisconsin's Response to an Honorable Man," *The New Republic*, March 30, 1968, 16–18; "How McCarthy Scored: Wisconsin Primary," *Business Week*, April 6, 1968, 26; Ronald H. Snyder, "The 1968 Wisconsin Democratic Presidential Primary," Local History Collection, Milwaukee Public Library.

²*New York Herald Tribune*, October 19, 1944.

³Ellsworth Barnard, *Wendell Willkie: Fighter for Freedom*. (Marquette, MI: Northern Michigan University Press, 1966), 275.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, 288.

⁶*Chicago Tribune*, January 18, 1941, sec. 1.

⁷Donald B. Johnson, *The Republican Party and Wendell Willkie*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1960), 187.

⁸*Chicago Daily News*, January 17, 1941, sec. 1.

⁹Johnson, *The Republican Party*, 187.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 201.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 216.

¹²*Ibid.*, 238.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*New York Times*, February 22, 1944, sec. 1; *Milwaukee Journal*, February 20, 1944, sec. 1.

¹⁵Johnson, *The Republican Party*, 253–254.

¹⁶Mary Earhart Dillon, *Wendell Willkie*. (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1952), 323, 325.

¹⁷The district delegates pledged to Willkie were: District 1—J. Harry Green (Janesville, exec. sec. Wisconsin Constructors, Inc.) and Alfred LaFrance (Racine, attorney); District 2—Robert Caldwell (Madison, former state senator) and Alfred Ludvigson (Hartland, affiliation unknown); District 3—Foster Porter (Bloomington, chair of the Grant County Board of Supervisors) and Lawrence Brody (LaCrosse, attorney); District 4—Peter Piasecki (Milwaukee, former U.S. Postmaster) and Harold Schultz (Wauwatosa, president, American Lutheran Association); District 5—Harvey Hartwig (Milwaukee, attorney) and Walter Dunn (Milwaukee, international representative of the Carpenter's Union, AFL); District 6—John Dickinson (West Bend, general sales manager, Amity Leather) and Frederick Foster (Fond du Lac, attorney); District 7—George Mead (Wisconsin Rapids, president, Consolidated Paper Co.) and Wendell McHenry (Waupaca, former district attorney); District 8—David Smith (Appleton, president, Badger Printing Co.) and Harold Krueger (Oconto, former district attorney); District 9—Robert Pierce (Menomonie, general mgr., Wisconsin Milling Co) and William Gharry (Chippewa Falls, editor, *Chippewa Falls Herald*

Telegram; District 10—Ralph Nelson (Superior, Douglas County Register of Deeds) and Louis Nagler (St. Croix Falls, attorney).

¹⁸*Chicago Tribune*, March 19, 1944, March 20, 1944.

¹⁹Barnard, *Wendell Willkie*, 421.

²⁰*Milwaukee Journal*, March 26, 1944, sec. 1.

²¹Papers of Harold Gauer, 1935–1959, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

²²*Milwaukee Journal*, March 24, 1944, sec. 1.

²³Barnard, *Wendell Willkie*, 464.

²⁴Willard Shelton, "Willkie Against the Gods," *The Nation*, April 8, 1944.

²⁵Records of the Willkie for President Committee, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

²⁶*Milwaukee Journal*, April 5, 1944, sec. 1.

²⁷*New York Times*, April 5, 1944, sec. 1.

²⁸Dillon, *Wendell Willkie*, 331.

²⁹Willard R. Smith to Wendell L. Willkie, May 7, 1944, Records of the Willkie for President Committee, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

³⁰Barnard, *Wendell Willkie*, 471.

³¹*Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 1944.

³²Records of the Willkie for President Committee, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

About the Author

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