

The Other Republican Businessman Candidate for President: Wendell Willkie

by Norman Berdichevsky (October 2016)



Frequent reference has been made in the current presidential campaign to Donald Trump as almost uniquely lacking experience in the political arena and not formerly having held elective public office. Comparisons are drawn with the last non-politician to run for the presidency, General Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952. Of course, "Ike" has the enormous executive experience of having led Allied forces as their Supreme Commander in World War II. A much more relevant comparison should be made with Wendell Willkie, who, like Donald Trump, was a successful businessman, and won acclaim after the delegates at the 1940

convention rejected all the leading traditional Republican candidates who had been critical of FDR and the "New Deal."

How different or similar was he to Donald J. Trump and how did he fare against the most popular four term chief executive Franklin D. Roosevelt? Did he significantly change the electoral map as Trump threatens to do? Can Trump benefit from his experience?

In our own era, another businessman, Ross Perot in 1992 garnered 19,700,000 popular votes (18.9%) but not a single electoral college vote, thus dooming his candidacy from the beginning. Third party candidates in the 20th century, such as five-time Socialist hopeful, Victor Debs, were notably unsuccessful, a reason no doubt why Bernie Sanders could never contemplate running on the Socialist ticket rather than as a Democrat. Debs ran in 1900 (earning 0.63% of the popular vote), 1904 (2.98%), 1908 (2.83%), 1912 (5.99% – his high watermark), and 1920 (3.41%), the last time from a prison cell. His personal appeal as Socialist could never be translated into Electoral College votes.

The only 3rd party candidate to challenge the Electoral College monopoly of the Republicans and Democrats was former charismatic President Theodore Roosevelt, running unsuccessfully as the candidate of the Progressive "Bull Moose" party in 1912, whose 88 electoral votes eclipsed the measly eight of the official Republican candidate and former President, William Howard Taft.

Wendell Willkie's political evolution steadily went from radical Left to Right but was always marked by a high idealism. After graduation from his Indiana home high school in January 1910, Willkie enrolled at Indiana University in Bloomington and became a "student rebel," chewing tobacco, reading Marx, and petitioning the faculty to add a course on socialism to the curriculum. After graduation, he got a job teaching history at a local high school but soon afterward in November 1914, he travelled to Puerto Rico to take a job as a lab assistant, arranged by his brother Fred. Willkie saw workers badly abused there and the experience deepened his commitment to social justice.

He eventually became a lawyer, and then corporate executive. Much of his legal work was done representing electric utilities and in 1929, Willkie moved to New York City as counsel for Commonwealth & Southern Corporation (C&S), a utility holding company. He was rapidly promoted, and became corporate president in

1933.

Like FDR, Willkie was deeply aware of the threat of the Axis powers and even before Pearl Harbor favored greater American involvement to aid Britain and the Allies. Although this internationalist orientation appears to be the opposite of what many Trump's critics have called a "go it alone" policy, his much more aggressive promise to destroy ISIS has struck a responsive chord among many voters disappointed with the ultra-cautious policies of President Obama who ignored the very "red lines" he himself drew.

Unlike his fellow Republican rivals from the Midwest, Willkie was an internationalist who had rejected the America first and foreign policy stance of his rival Republican competitors and the views of aviator and isolationist icon, Charles Lindbergh. Would-be supporters of Trump are anxious to make the case that the slogan "American First" used in the 1930s by isolationists should not be automatically transferred to 2016 and identified with their candidate who, unlike isolationists, has promoted a policy of rearmament and pressuring our allies to stand by their commitments.



Like Trump, Willkie had traditionally supported the Democrats. but changed his party registration to Republican in late 1939. He did not run at all in the 1940 presidential primaries, but made it known that he would be available as an acceptable choice in a deadlocked convention. Thus, just a few weeks before the start of the convention in Philadelphia, he had no delegates pledged to him. Like Trump, Willkie's most enthusiastic supporters were first-

time voters.

The three leading Republican candidates vying for the nomination, New York District Attorney, Thomas E. Dewey, Ohio Senator, Robert A. Taft and Indiana Senator Vanderbilt. All had avoided any statement construed as interventionist in the summer and fall of 1940 as the German army rolled into Paris the day before the convention opened and German forces stood poised to invade Great Britain.

President Roosevelt called Willkie a "godsend" (in his memoirs following the

election) knowing that if any of his three Republican rivals had been selected as the nominee, the election would have turned into a risky referendum of actual American willingness to risk war by aiding Great Britain. Willkie had defied the isolationist Midwest Republican establishment by supporting FDR's "radical" policies of Lend-Lease to Britain and a peacetime draft. Ironically towards election day, both the President and Willkie tried to backtrack on what their critics had called the interventionist "risky pro-war pro-British policies" that would antagonize Germany and Japan and increase the risk of American involvement.

Roosevelt won a third term taking 38 of the 48 states' electoral votes but Willkie did much better than the two Republican candidates in the elections of 1932 and 1936. Not until this 2016 election cycle has a "dark horse" come from outside of politics to capture the nomination.

Comparison of Trump and Willkie

Willkie was born in Indiana in 1892; both his parents were lawyers, and he became one as well. He served in World War I but was not sent to France until the last days of the war so did not see combat. His background, upbringing, and demeanor were in many ways the polar opposite of both FDR and Trump. Unlike Trump, Willkie owed his business success not to inherited wealth but was a truly self-made man who rose from humble beginnings in a farming and rural environment. His behavior and tastes were rooted in rural America, almost personifying the naïve character types portrayed in the paintings of Norman Rockwell. After accepting a CEO position and transferring to New York City, he did acquire many of the tastes of a sophisticated and urbane cosmopolitan.

The same class distinction may be made in comparing Willkie with FDR. While Roosevelt aspired to be a "gentleman farmer," anxious to run his estate in Hyde Park as a going farm upon retirement, he maintained it largely as a hobby and then only through the help of a large staff. Willkie had established himself as a rock solid honest and ethical businessman and was frequently compared in the popular press as the real life equivalent of the movie hero Jefferson Smith (played by Jimmy Stewart) in the Hollywood film "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (1939), the story of an idealistic non-politician who was catapulted into the Senate by the big city bosses who believed they could control him only to discover that they could not. Like Trump, he accomplished sparking a wildfire

revolt characterized by an outpouring of emotion and idealism.

Willkie and Trump as Outsiders Fighting their Own Party

Both Trump and Willkie challenged the established leadership of their own party and channeled a major source of disaffection with voters. Many Americans were anxious about giving FDR an unprecedented third term in office. Nevertheless, the prospect of the three major Republican isolationist candidates committed to a foreign policy amounting to appeasement in the wake of Germany's massive victories in Europe terrified many who could not accept the prospect of a world dominated by the Nazis and Japanese imperialists which would surely follow a British defeat.

Trump, in a similar way, managed to channel the discontent of Republican primary voters convinced that the party had not aggressively and successfully challenged Obama's dithering foreign policy, autocratic rule by "pen and telephone," his contempt for Congress and Supreme Court decisions, the many executive orders, and ramming Obama Care down the throats of the public without a single Republican vote.

Nevertheless, the campaigns and business careers of Willkie and Trump could not be more divergent. Not even the Democrats could find any ammunition to sully Willkie's sterling reputation, honesty, modesty and integrity (beyond the hints of an extra-marital affair) and his concern for the underdog. On August 17, 1940, he gave his acceptance speech in his Indiana hometown of Elwood before a crowd of 150,000, the largest political gathering in the United States to that point making clear why he considered his nomination an act of non-partisan ideals and reached out to all Americans.

Willkie's Acceptance Speech

Willkie formally accepted the nomination saying .."Here I give you an outline of the political philosophy that is in my heart. We are here today to represent a sacred cause—the preservation of American democracy...Obviously, I cannot lead this cause alone. I need the help of every American—Republican, Democrat or Independent—Jew, Catholic, or Protestant—people of every color, creed and race. Party lines are down. Nothing could make that clearer than the nomination by the Republicans of a liberal Democrat who changed his party affiliation because he found democracy in the Republican party and not in the New Deal party...What we

need in this country is a new leadership that believes in the destiny of America. I represent here today the forces that will bring that leadership to you.

"My grandparents lived in Germany. They were supporters of the democratic revolutions in that country, and when the revolutions failed they fled to the United States. How familiar that sounds! Today, also, people are being oppressed in Europe. The story of the barbarous and worse than medieval persecution of the Jews—a race that has done so much to improve the culture of these countries and our own—is the most tragic in human history. Today there are millions of refugees who desire sanctuary and opportunity in America, just as in my grandparents' time. The protection of our own labor and agriculture prevents us from admitting more than a few of them. But their misery and suffering make us resolve to preserve our country as a land free of hate and bitterness, of racial and class distinction. I pledge you that kind of America."

Following the election, Willkie made two foreign trips as Roosevelt's informal wartime envoy, and as nominal leader of the Republican Party. He gave Roosevelt his full support and increasingly advocated liberal or internationalist causes. He was a firm supporter of equal rights for African-Americans and was intensely disliked by many whites in the South where he did not campaign.

Can Trump Imitate Willkie?

What almost all Republican voters know now and a great and growing majority of "independents" are beginning to realize is that this is not the United States of 1937 where even an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress rebelled against the popular Franklin D. Roosevelt who had just won the greatest landslide victory in the history of U.S. presidential elections. The 1937 Democrats in Congress rejected FDR's plan to add more Supreme Court justices fearing the inevitable "third term" trend towards a more and more authoritarian regime.

The dangers to us all if Hillary wins is that not only Congress but the FBI, the IRS and Supreme Court as well would do whatever the Democrats' new ultra-Leftist, Bernie Sanders style party demands. A new Hillary administration will see nothing in its way to running roughshod over us all. However deficient his mixed messages and conservative credentials may be, Donald Trump has emerged as the last line of defense for American democracy unless voters decide to support

the minor party candidates without a chance of winning any electoral votes. Continued illegal migration, with promises of eventual amnesty helped convince Republican primary voters that a much more aggressive candidate was needed than those "insiders" who had run the party. They believe that these party establishment figures would similarly back down to Hillary Clinton whom they viewed as a "Third Term Obama."

Donald Trump's life story and career contain few elevating achievements outside the world of business, and until quite recently, lacked any outreach to traditional Democrat voters. It remains to be seen if he can make the transition from business mogul and TV showman personality to statesman based on the appeal of the "outsider." Like Willkie, he had (still has?) an initial advantage in overcoming the veteran establishment of his party by his appealing independence from the influence of lobbies and special interests.

Like Willkie, Trump can count on the dissatisfaction of a substantial part of the electorate with eight years of the Democrats' abuse of power and repulsion at FBI revelations about Hillary's perjured testimony to Congress. Even as recently as mid-July, all the leading polls showed upwards of 65% of likely voters convinced that the country was headed in the "wrong direction."

Willkie garnered powerful allies among influential business executives, minority leaders (including endorsements from NAACP leaders) editors, journalists and writers at major publications such as *Fortune*, *Time*, and *Life*. In contrast, Trump throughout the primaries and even now has cultivated his image as a "winner" and someone who claims to know more than his critics, his fellow Republican colleagues, the generals and the media he regards as his enemies.

He cannot imitate Willkie's "boyish good looks" or innate modesty (both considered advantages in the America of 1940) but he would do well to take the most important page from Willkie's playbook, and remind voters what a "Third Obama Term" portends in every important policy decision. With all of Willkie's advantages over his Republican rivals, he had no chance against FDR who was still much beloved by many voters and whose dynamic appeal was unmatched throughout most of the country.

It remains to be seen if Trump's recent attempts to steer a course towards the middle and even adopt an air of humility, admitting past mistakes and

identification with the plight of minorities and women will help endear him with the voters he needs to win (or convince them he is the “lesser evil”). In his favor, and unlike Willkie, Trump faces the weakest Democrat candidate in memory who has already deserved what many regard as an “unofficial indictment” from the FBI refuting all her testimony made under oath. Many Republicans were initially disappointed in Trump’s nomination but just a few months ago at the end of the convention in Cleveland, polls showed him leading. Hillary has since dominated the polls but is beginning to fall like a hot rock. She still faces mounting grave problems that could turn all the polls upside down again. It is now her turn to lose and further revelations about her e-mails or the Clinton Foundation will do just that. Although Trump and Willkie could hardly have differed more in personality and character, they both exerted a devoted following as apolitical non-ideological figures unencumbered by political wheeling and dealing and beholden to special interests and lobbies.

Author’s note:

Just as Trump can be regarded as a modern alter-ego of Willkie, Hillary’s career, character, corrupt practices, dishonesty and populist appeal as a heroine of the masses bears an uncanny resemblance to Eva Peron (see [The Left is Seldom Right](#) and [here](#)).

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