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MESSY AND CLEAN CONVENTIONS: TWO STORIES

BY GARLAND S. TUCKER III

THE NEW YORK FRACAS

First, Americans heard Donald Trump crying foul at the very mention of a “contested” convention and warning ominously of “trouble” from his supporters if they were denied a first ballot victory. Next came Bernie Sanders alleging a “rigged” outcome and predicting a “messy” convention if super delegates denied his claim to the nomination. While it has been several decades since we have seen a contested convention, such conventions are not unprecedented in U.S. history. The parties have not only survived contested conventions, but these contested conventions have often nominated good candidates. However, there are some serious warning signs, and both parties, as they come face to face with the possibility of “messy” 2016 conventions, should heed them.



THE SCENE OF THE FIGHT: MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

Stanford White's Madison Square Garden, the site of the 1924 Democratic National Convention (Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society).

Many historic precedents of contentious conventions can be cited, but the granddaddy of them all was, without question, the 1924 Democratic National Convention. By the time convention delegates convened in New York City on June 24, 1924, there was ample evidence that the Democratic Party was deeply divided. As the leading quipster of the day, Finley Peter Dunne (“Mr. Dooley”) wrote, “The Dimmycratic Party ain’t on speakin’ terms with itself.” Former President Wilson’s son-in-law, William Gibbs McAdoo was running, campaigning on his experience as Wilson’s Treasury Secretary. Opposing McAdoo was New York governor Al Smith. The men squared off over the main issues – with a generous portion of personal animosity thrown in. Each held enough delegate votes to prevent the other from being nominated. At that time the Democratic Party labored under the requirement of a two-thirds nominating majority, and it was clear neither Smith nor McAdoo could make it.

To make matters worse, the social issues of the day provoked a white-hot fervor in the candidates and their followers. Prohibition, immigration, and the Ku Klux Klan were the issues, and there appeared to be no room for compromise. The convention opened with an explosive floor fight over the party platform. Record-setting temperatures outside produced what reporters called “furnace-like air in the draped hall that kept fans and straw hats waving vigorously.” By the convention’s third day, the *Washington Post* was running the headline: “Delegates in Fist Fights on Floor Over Klan.”

Al Smith and his anti-Prohibition forces had the whiskey flowing, while McAdoo and his pro-Prohibition delegates piously called for divine retribution against the “big city wets.” Former Secretary of the Navy and veteran Democratic warhorse Josephus Daniels wrote from the convention to the folks back home in North Carolina, “This convention is chock full of religion. It eats religion, dreams it, smokes it.” He warned the Democrats not to forsake “the denunciation of Republicans for religious warfare among themselves.”

After endless wrangling and grandstanding, the convention staggered to the adoption of a platform that was noteworthy only for its failure to confront the big issues. Nothing of substance was said about prohibition, immigration, the League of Nations, or the KKK. The platform did make a gracious acknowledgement of President Harding’s recent death;

but even that was contested. The original wording stated, “Our Party stands uncovered at the bier of Warren G. Harding....” But William Jennings Bryan and the prohibitionists insisted on substituting “grave” for “bier,” lest some of their supporters back home take offense!

Then came the primary task of nominating a candidate – and the real fireworks began. Seizing his home court advantage, Al Smith packed Madison Square Garden with his supporters and practically blew off the roof with what newspapers called “terrifying pandemonium.” Smith’s fans warned to his civil libertarian message against racial violence and prohibition. Opponents balked at Smith’s urban liberalism.

Other nominations of McAdoo and a string of favorite son candidates followed until after 4:00 a.m. The following day the balloting began. The first roll call vote had McAdoo with 431, Smith with 241, and the rest far behind. Because of the two-thirds requirement, a candidate would need approximately 640 delegate votes to secure the nomination. By July 1, fifteen ballots had been cast with hardly any movement among the candidates, McAdoo: 479, Smith: 305. By July 3, the convention sailed past the old Democratic Party record of fifty-seven ballots set in 1860, and the seventieth ballot was still McAdoo: 415, Smith: 323.

The acrimony was pervasive. In historian David Burner’s words, “The deadlock that developed might as well have [been] between the Pope and the Imperial Wizard of the KKK, so solidly did the Catholic delegates support Smith and the Klan delegates support McAdoo.” Some reporters claimed even the prohibition forces were drunk by this point.

Finally on July 9, Smith released his delegates and McAdoo very grudgingly followed suit, and a compromise candidate secured the nomination on the 103rd ballot. John W. Davis, a former U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain, was at last the nominee, and the longest and bitterest convention in American history mercifully came to an end.

What can be learned from all this? Three points:

First, America indeed has a history of contested conventions. Although such conventions can be testing, the republic and the political parties have survived them.

Second, it’s possible in the midst of bitter acrimony and division for a party to nominate a good candidate. The leading columnist of that day, Walter Lippmann, wrote this about the 1924 Democratic convention: “In this case the delegates, who had looked into a witches’ cauldron of hatred and disunion, yielded to a half-conscious judgment which was far more reliable than their common sense. For they turned to the one candidate (Davis) who embodied those very qualities for lack of which the party had almost destroyed itself.”

Third, although John W. Davis was as fine a man as ever nominated by either party, the serious divisions brought forward at the convention ruined his general election prospects. As Franklin Roosevelt wrote to a friend in the fall of 1924, “We defeated ourselves in New York in June.” With party divisions running so deep and personal animosities between McAdoo and Smith, it was impossible for the Democrats to rally around Davis and win the election.

This final point should be sobering to both the GOP and the Democratic Party in July 2016. Contested conventions have not usually been as bitter as the 1924 Democratic convention, but the big winner in any “messy” convention has usually been the opposing party.



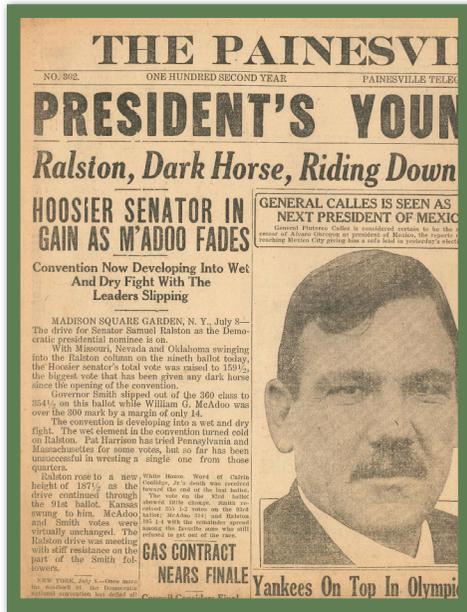
Former U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain John W. Davis, the 1924 Democratic presidential nominee (Courtesy of the Library of Congress).

BORING TOWARD VICTORY

As the Republican Party prepares to convene its nominating convention in Cleveland in July 2016, the party could well look back to 1924 with genuine nostalgia. It was also in Cleveland that the party faithful gathered in 1924, but what a difference 92 years can make. The 1924 Republican convention was universally proclaimed “one of the dullest in history,” while the 2016 convention promises to be a bit more lively.

One thing that has not changed in 92 years is the fact that Cleveland is a logical host city for the Republicans. No Republican president has ever been elected without carrying the state of Ohio. In 1924, Cleveland symbolized the automotive manufacturing boom that was propelling the American economy to unprecedented prosperity. The Cleveland of 2016 is hardly a boomtown, but Ohio’s electoral votes are still crucially important to winning the presidency.

By June 1924, as the delegates began to converge on Cleveland’s shiny new 12,000-seat Public Auditorium, it was apparent to all that Calvin Coolidge would be the nominee. Coolidge was first known as “the accidental president” as he had ascended to the presidency at the death of Warren Harding a year earlier.



The Painesville Telegraph reports from the 1924 Democratic Convention.



Franklin D. Roosevelt’s inspirational speech, in which Roosevelt lifted spirits and declared Gov. Al Smith America’s “Happy Warrior,” was a high point at the 1924 Democratic National Convention (Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum).

Coolidge had masterfully consolidated his hold on the Republican Party during his “honeymoon period” of public goodwill. He had managed both to push forward Harding’s popular, conservative agenda and, at the same time, to disassociate himself from the scandals that emerged after Harding’s death. Indeed, as William Allen White was to write about Coolidge, he was already resonating with the public as “this cautious, unassuming Vermonter who embodied the virtues of probity and moderation, dutifulness and thrift.”

Coolidge’s first year had been so successful that his only challenge came from the most extreme fringe of the progressive wing of the GOP. By 1924, Senator “Fighting Bob” La Follette of Wisconsin had concluded he had best fight outside the GOP and moved to revive the old Progressive Party of Theodore Roosevelt. In response, Coolidge skillfully courted a number of the more moderate Republican progressives, especially Idaho Senator William Borah, and convinced them to remain in the GOP. By the opening of the Cleveland convention, La Follette’s threat from the left was decidedly fading.

As the delegates began to assemble in Cleveland, there was very little excitement in the air. As one newspaper noted, “Except for some anticipation about a fight for the vice presidential nomination, the preparation for this convention as a whole went ahead with almost as much quiet and decorum as a New England town meeting.” The opening ceremonies proceeded tediously as Harding was hailed as “the fallen warrior” and Coolidge as his “most worthy successor.” Fully 4,000 of the auditorium’s 12,000 seats were empty, the other 8,000 were filled with delegates struggling to remain awake. There was obviously no drama here; for, although Coolidge would not be nominated formally until two days later in the week, the convention on opening day announced the delegation that would officially notify him of his nomination.

The New York Herald Tribune headline ran, “Convention Runs as Smoothly as Machine That Makes Nails.” The reporter noted that the convention was “methodical as a machine that makes wire nails.”



Delegates crowded in at Cleveland’s Public Auditorium during the 1924 Republican National Convention. President Calvin Coolidge was not among them, as sitting presidents did not ordinarily attend their own nominating conventions in those days (Courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Apparently the manufacturing of wire nails was a Cleveland specialty. In any event, things got so dull that humorist Will Rogers, the Jon Stewart of the era, advised Cleveland “to open up its churches to liven things up a bit.”

The convention organizers left nothing to chance. There was to be only one name placed into nomination before the balloting began. A lengthy nominating speech was followed by nine seconding speeches after which the convention chairman swiftly brought down his gavel to close the nominations. The most memorable line of the night was when one of the seconders thundered, “Coolidge never wasted any time, never wasted any words, and never wasted any public money.” The candidate could not have stated the case better himself, and the delegates responded by making his nomination unanimous. Only Will Rogers seemed despondent: “I’ve been longin’ to attend a convention and see the excitement. Now, when I do get a chance, I draw this one.”

In the midst of this well-choreographed tedium, there was one amusing side note. Ever vigilant for an opportunity to undergird the president’s homespun image, the Coolidge managers had ensured that the press was covering the president’s father, Col. John Coolidge, up in Vermont. Earlier that week, headlines announced, “Crops Keep Coolidge’s Father From Cleveland.”

Old Col. Coolidge had turned down the invitation of the Republican National Committee to attend the convention because his spring planting was “a little later than normal this year,” but the party installed a new radio in the same simple living room where son Calvin had taken the oath of office the preceding year.

The June 13 *New York Times* headline proclaimed, “Colonel Coolidge In Tears Hears Son Nominated.” The article went on to report, “As the cheers which greeted the President’s name came to him through the air, the old man’s eyes watered, but his nerves were steady and he calmly took out his watch and timed each long round of applause.”

That picture of Col. Coolidge by the radio was worth a thousand pages of newsprint. The American public seemed convinced that Calvin Coolidge was indeed the real thing – an unassuming, honest, hardworking, and thrifty New England patriot.

The dissension at New York cost the Democrats dearly. The Democrats dealt Coolidge a winning political hand.

Coolidge played that hand masterfully, by remaining distant and low-key. The selection of Charles Dawes as vice presidential candidate was not as smooth as Coolidge’s nomination, but what mattered was that

Dawes’s name reinforced the matter-of-fact culture of the campaign. After all, Dawes was known as an enforcer and a budgeteer.

Fate also kept Coolidge quiet. The weeks following the convention witnessed the tragic and unexpected death of Coolidge’s 16-year-old son, Calvin, Jr. Coolidge spent much of the rest of the campaign period in mourning – making him a distant and (to voters) increasingly fascinating figure.

After the Cleveland convention, the Progressives continued to fade. While La Follette took a handsome 16.6 percent of the popular vote in November, the Progressive candidate carried only

his home state of Wisconsin. Coolidge by contrast managed 54 percent, an absolute majority of the general election vote, winning more popular support than the other two parties combined.

OUR RIVAL’S SON

Politics divide, but politics also bring Americans together. That became abundantly clear in, of all places, Madison Square Garden during the Democratic Convention. The party was struggling in its effort to select a candidate to run against the Republican President, Calvin Coolidge. There was plenty of hostility being leveled at the Grand Old Party as well, while the GOP friends were referring to the Democratic convention as a “Klanbake,” to underscore the presence of the Ku Klux Klan.

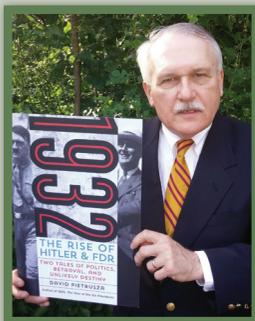
But at 10:50 p.m. on the night of Monday, July 7, around the time the 84th ballot failed, the chairman, Senator David Walsh surprised the crowd by calling for a pause. Something near silence filled the Garden. Then Walsh spoke into the microphone, just a few words. The president’s son, sixteen-year-old Calvin, Jr. had died suddenly and unexpectedly.

A low moan built in the hall as the crowd responded to what Walsh had said. The sound of the grief as it traveled around the room, *The New York Times* wrote, suggested the “nearness of the White House to every American home and the solicitous regard in which all people hold their president.” A country exhausted by politics came together over the death of the boy. Wrote the *Times*’ editors: “Their sorrows are his, as he frequently testifies, but in an especial sense his grief is also theirs.”



GARLAND S. TUCKER III is Chairman of Triangle Capital Corporation, Raleigh, N.C., a New York Stock Exchange listed specialty finance company and the author of *The High Tide of American Conservatism: Davis, Coolidge and the 1924 Election* (Emerald Books, 2010) and *Conservative Heroes: Fourteen Leaders Who Shaped America – Jefferson to Reagan* (ISI Books, 2015). He is also a trustee of the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation.

“1932: THE RISE OF HITLER AND FDR” AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID PIETRUSZA



DAVID PIETRUSZA is a bestselling author, historian, and National Advisory Board member of the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation. Pietrusza has written or edited over three dozen books, including *Silent Cal's Almanack: The Homespun Wit and Wisdom of Vermont's Calvin Coolidge*. He discusses his latest book, *1932: The Rise of Hitler and FDR—Two Tales of Politics, Betrayal, and Unlikely Destiny*, in this interview with the Coolidge Foundation.

(Photo Courtesy of David Pietrusza)

COOLIDGE FOUNDATION (CCPF): You are very good at taking a pivotal year and building a historical narrative from it. What is the significance of that approach?

DAVID PIETRUSZA (DP): People complain that history is dull. It's not, but a historian must confront that perception, to convey a sense of drama, to build a narrative around struggle, and, in this case, around the competition of two decisive elections. In discussing elections you analyze people who are very well known. People know the presidents. Once you have the combination of all that drama, of the competition of an election, of personalities that people know, then you can also instruct readers not only on the process and the personalities but on the back story of what transpired in a particular year, place, or era.

CCPF: Hitler and FDR were chalk and cheese in many respects. In what ways did their lives intersect?

DP: There's a significant chronological intersection between the lives of Adolf Hitler and Franklin D. Roosevelt. For the purposes of this book, of course, it's the fact that both of them run for president in 1932 and assume power in early 1933, Hitler in late January and Roosevelt in early March. They also died within a matter of weeks of each other in 1945 and,

of course, competed in that little matter called World War II. There are a multitude of differences between the two men, but there are also similarities. Both overcome adversity. Both are masters of the spoken word. Both employ new technologies to get their messages across. Both are very good at organizing political campaigns. We remember that last point about FDR. We tend to forget it about Hitler.

Both were intensely ambitious. All politicians are ambitious after all, some more than others. They were both underestimated. Hitler came from nothing, literally from the gutter, and people thought he was going to end up having nothing. Roosevelt emerged from a very soft, very privileged background, and even many prominent Democrats of the time (such as Walter Lippmann, Bernard Baruch, or Heywood Broun) assumed he was simply a rich lightweight, someone lacking any great sense of ideas, fixed principles, or even political integrity. He was an unknown regarding what he would do in the White House. Sometimes, it turns out, it's not such a bad thing to be underestimated in politics.

CCPF: What were America and Germany like in 1932, and how did the conditions of the two countries lead to the elections of these peculiar men?

DP: Both countries were a mess because of the Great Depression. But Germany was a far more wounded society. America

enjoyed the prosperity of the Harding-Coolidge years in the 1920s. Germany suffered as a result of the defeat of the World War and the inflation of the 1920s, which left millions of people unemployed. Germany was moving away from a traditional moral basis and towards more modern attitudes. The society was really becoming unhinged. Beyond that, relatively few people were wedded to its Weimar republican system, which was imposed upon it at the end of World War I. The Nazis, of course, opposed the Republic. The ultra-nationalists opposed it. The Communists opposed it. The Socialists and the Catholic Center Party supported Weimar, but they became a smaller and more marginal portion of the electorate as the Depression gathered force.

America still supported the conventions of its constitutional system to a large degree, including support for a balanced budget and a market capitalist system. This is why FDR's program and the 1932 Democratic Platform can appear so conservative at times when compared to what was on offer in Germany and elsewhere in Europe in those days.

CCPF: You point out that Nazism was, in many respects, a left-wing phenomenon. How so?

DP: Let us not forget that on the most basic level Nazism is, simply, “National Socialism.” It's a variant of socialism. It emphasizes the collective, though with its very special racialist twist. Differences between left-wing and right-wing in the American and European models can often be very confusing. What is seen as being on the Right in Europe may not be what we Americans consider “conservative” at all. It could be authoritarian or even monarchist. In America generally what we talk about as being on the Right is anti-statism. It's small government. It's constitutional. It is not necessarily those things in Europe at all.

There were similarities not only between the Socialists and the Nazis in terms of government control over various aspects of the economy and life, but also between the Nazis and the Communists. They were totalitarian. They were opposed to the Weimar Republic, and in the

early 1930s there were also many people moving over from the Communist Party to the Nazi Party as the Nazis were on the verge of taking power. It's been said that many members of the Nazi Party, particularly the storm troopers, were like steaks: “brown [Nazi] on the outside; red [Communist] on the inside.” You also saw that many prominent Nazis, particularly Joseph Goebbels and Gregor Strasser, were very left-wing individuals. It's very difficult to call them right wingers. Goebbels at one early point in his career even described himself as a “National Bolshevik.” And beyond that, the Nazi Party was not merely anti-Semitic, it was profoundly anti-Christian, particularly in the personalities of Alfred Rosenberg and Martin Bormann and the early Nazi-backed presidential candidate Erich von Ludendorff.

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