



OFFICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY
1976 MOCK DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION
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MOCK POLITICS IN LEXINGTON

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"We as a party have an obligation to provide America the very best man. . . As we meet here today, the issue of the war is still facing us, and we find our government pursuing a course that we have long since realized to be a mistake. I take a deep pride in submitting before this convention, the name of Senator George S. McGovern for President of the United States."

It was shortly after 10 o'clock on a Saturday morning early in May when John Hammond, a second-year law student and a member of the Michigan delegation to the 15th Washington and Lee University Mock Convention, made that nominating speech in the school gymnasium in Lexington. The McGovern supporters in attendance followed with the obligatory demonstration on behalf of their candidate. On the floor, other student delegates, oblivious to the proceedings at the podium, solicited support for their own demonstrations to follow; some just gazed, awed by the draping banners and menacing photographers; a few simply peered between the pages of morning newspapers.

They were all spending that clear spring Saturday in what Time would later call the "boomingest of the quadrennial campus mass ventures into political prediction." As it has evolved over the past 68 years, the theory of the W&L Mock Convention is that once inside a gymnasium filled to the rafters with placards, banners, and political rhetoric, students braced

by the insights of contemporary political leaders and pundits and perhaps a modicum of beer and bourbon will more often than not predict the decision that these same political leaders will make when they gather in a similar environment at the actual convention.

Typically, the pursuit of realism is not to the exclusion of some collegiate burlésque. For example, the seemingly endless roll call votes of the '72 Mock Convention were made longer by the delegation chairmen who, while casting their votes, delivered one-line descriptions of their states. When it was his turn on the first ballot, a very staid chairman of the host delegation said into the microphone, "Virginia, the mother of presidents, casts the following votes" As the convention progressed Virginia became "the home of slow horses, bad whiskey, and slower women." Other examples: "Florida, the great state of green grass, blue waters and red necks"; and "Wisconsin, the home of Lawrence Welk. . . ."

The delegates to the Democratic National Convention who met that summer in Miami chose Senator McGovern to be the party's nominee on the first ballot. Alas, on the first ballot two-and-a-half months earlier in Lexington, there was no winner. A deadlock developed between McGovern and Senator Hubert Humphrey. The students found themselves caught between giving the nomination to a quixotic figure whose unconventional and seemingly unrealistic approaches to current political problems alienated many American voters or to a candidate who could not shake his image as a loser after 16 years of unsuccessfully seeking the

presidency. It was of course the same dilemma that Democrats all across the country faced, but the results of the California primary, held later in May, and New York primary, held in June, made a McGovern victory inevitable when the actual convention met in July.

These events lay ahead in an all-too-murkey future when the Lexington students held their Mock Convention. That same weekend in May, pollster Lou Harris was computing the results of a survey which showed Senator Edward M. Kennedy would run a stronger race against incumbent President Richard Nixon than McGovern, Humphrey, or Wallace. Likewise, George Gallup was tabulating the latest poll of local Democratic party leaders, which showed them preferring Humphrey over McGovern by a margin of two to one. Both polls were published the following Monday in the Washington Post, next to a small separate notice that the Washington and Lee University Mock Convention, which "has the most accurate record in the nation for predicting the presidential nominee of the party out of power," late Saturday night gave the nomination to Kennedy on the seventh ballot.

The McGovern forces were short of the nomination on the first ballot in Lexington by little more than three hundred votes; they were only 25 1/2 votes short of the necessary 1,509 on the third ballot before several delegations requested permission to change their votes. As the roll call continued McGovern's support waned till he had only 1,140, and Humphrey was the new leader with 1,325 1/2 -- while Kennedy, who had received only 20 votes on the previous two ballots, now had 523 1/2.

By then it was late in the afternoon. The chairman of the Kentucky delegation, sensing the frustration of the native Kentuckians among the delegates, motioned for a recess to allow them to watch the running of the Kentucky Derby on television. The motion failed and the Kentucky delegates filed out of the convention hall in protest. They returned about 20 minutes later to report that Riva Ridge was the new Derby winner.

The balloting continued with only a brief respite for dinner. A reporter for the National Observer later described the noticeable wear and tear on the participants by the seventh ballot: "Shortly before midnight, the distinguished clerk of the Democratic convention leaned gracefully against the podium, languidly twirling what earlier had been an immaculately curlicued mustache . . . The sweating, swearing conventioners trudged to their places."

The announced candidates had repeatedly fallen short of the votes necessary to secure the nomination. Even though a telephone call that afternoon by one delegate to Senator Kennedy's press secretary had produced an unenthusiastic response, the Mock Convention delegates -- weary and frustrated after a search for a nominee that had begun nearly 14 hours earlier -- reached the only consensus available to them. Kennedy would be given the nomination whether he outwardly wanted it or not.

As it turned out, of course, the thousand student delegates from W&L and the surrounding women's colleges who spent that long Saturday inside the gymnasium-turned-convention hall

had earned themselves a place beside the delegates to the 1912 Mock Convention, which nominated Governor Judson Harmon of Ohio rather than Woodrow Wilson as the real convention would; the '36 convention, which nominated Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg of Michigan rather than Alfred Landon; the '40 convention which nominated Oregon Senator Charles L. McNary rather than Wendell Willkie; and the '48 convention, which missed again by nominating Vandenberg rather than Thomas Dewey. Despite the results in '72, however, no other school has challenged W&L's record since 1908 of ten correct predictions offset by only five erroneous ones.

The tradition began unpretentiously enough as a class project suggested by W. Jett Lauck, an assistant professor of economics and politics at Washington and Lee. The first Mock Convention was dominated by students who only a few weeks before had heard William Jennings Bryan deliver his "Cross of Gold" speech at a Lexington skating rink. Bryan appeared as part of the traveling Chautauqua series, those carnival-like events which brought speakers and entertainers to rural communities early in this century. The enthusiastic students garnered enough support for Bryan to obtain the nomination on the first ballot -- the only first-ballot victory in the history of the Mock Convention. Two months later, the delegates to the actual Democratic National Convention, meeting in Denver, made good on that original prediction.

The first Mock Convention was of such little note to the editor of the student newspaper, the Ring-tum Phi, that he

chose to carry only a brief account of it on page two of the paper. The Lexington Gazette, however, on its front page reported that "the young gentlemen entered into the meeting with the zest of seasoned politicians plus the enthusiasm of collegians." If we are to believe the first-hand accounts, an imprudent combination of political "zest" and collegiate "enthusiasm" produced volatile results. The '08 convention saw the only political dispute among delegates that led to actual fist-cuffs. After the nomination of Bryan, members of the Kansas delegation, who had supported the candidacy of Minnesota Governor John A. Johnson, in no uncertain terms invited the Bryan supporters to join them outside the gymnasium, where, according to newspaper accounts, a "heated set-to" ensued. When it was through, those Johnson supporters who remained healthy enough gathered at the engineering building, held their own convention, and nominated the "man of the hour" -- in their eyes at least -- Governor Johnson.

It seems apparent that without the appearance of William Jennings Bryan there would have been no spark to set off a campus-wide interest in national political issues that spring in Lexington. Though first-hand accounts are silent on the point, it also appears at least plausible that many students, intoxicated by their recent exposure to the charismatic orator, employed the original Mock Convention as a vehicle for solidifying Bryan support. The students who have continued Prof. Lauck's class project have, however, with varying degrees

of success attempted to subordinate their own individual preferences in favor of the priorities and biases of the state leaders of the out-of-power-party.

The 16th W&L Mock Convention will take place May 7 and 8, 1976. Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin will deliver the keynote address the day before the delegates begin the process of predicting the next Democratic nominee.

But what's to keep the '76 Mock Convention from suffering the same fate of the one in '72?

"We are analyzing the convention from two perspectives," says Reed Morgan, senior politics major and co-chairman for the '76 Mock Convention. "First, our delegate surveys are going down to the grass-roots level not only to give us the delegates' political preferences but also their personal backgrounds, incomes and attitudes. Second, we are researching the convention from the candidates' eyes to give us a feel for their strategy."

Generous contributions by alumni and parents have relieved the planners of this convention of the financial concerns that have plagued earlier conventions. Still, what may be the most favorable factor is that the Vietnam War will not loom over the '76 convention as it did in '72. As the war lingered, the campus unrest it originally spawned turned to disillusionment. Many college students -- supporters and detractors of the war alike -- doubted the utility of traditional political methods.

An editorial in the Ring-tum Phi following the last

convention noted:

As little as two months ago, one could have justifiably wondered if the whole project was coming off at all. If one phenomenon could have characterized the American college student this year, it was apathy toward Establishment politics, and our student body was no exception. The Mock Convention leadership faced an uphill battle all the way to infect our student body with their own brand of enthusiasm.

The capacity attendance at preliminary Mock Convention functions held on the W&L campus so far this year suggests that the four intervening years may have witnessed a change in attitudes.

There is historical evidence that the Mock Convention which produces a nominee in the early balloting stands the best chance of having predicted the correct candidate. The '52 convention, which went only four ballots, appears to be a model of how, in theory, every Mock Convention should turn out.

The delegates, including senior economics major David Constine, chairman of the California delegation, had done their homework. Constine had established a correspondence with Governor Earl Warren, who would later head the California delegation to the actual Republican convention and whose name would be placed in nomination as a favorite son. After three ballots showed Ohio Senator Robert A. Taft ahead of General Dwight Eisenhower and Warren a poor third, the Governor wired Constine to free his delegates, and as a consequence, the California delegation swung its support behind the World War II hero. Warren received the Mock Convention's vice-presidential nomination. Several days afterwards, the Governor notified the students,

just to set the record straight, that he still considered himself a presidential candidate, but was very "flattered" to be chosen for the second spot. That summer, after General Eisenhower received the Republican nomination, he chose as his running mate another Californian, Senator Richard Nixon.

Those conventions which have made correct predictions even after extended balloting have often done so because of some fortuitous occurrence. For example, in 1960 Adlai Stevenson accumulated enough votes to win on the fourth ballot -- but a shortage of adding machines delayed Mock Convention officials from ruling him a winner, and in the interim several delegations switched their votes. (Had not more adding machines been brought to the Convention floor, the vacillating delegates might never have nominated a candidate.) By the fifth ballot, the Stevenson momentum had dissipated; the new front-runner was John Kennedy, followed by Senator Lyndon Johnson. Kennedy went over the top on the sixth ballot.

The most uncanny example of the good fortune enjoyed by the Mock Convention occurred during the days of prohibition in 1924. When the balloting began, many delegates were still smarting from the earlier debate over the insertion of a "wet" plank in the party platform. More recent Mock Conventions have written party platforms reflecting student sentiment, but the leaders of the '24 convention decided to attempt to predict the actual platform as well as the actual Democrat. The delegations divided along east-west geographical lines, and the wet plank was defeated -- no doubt to the great consternation of "Booze" Whittle, the name of the convention chairman,

according to the Ring-tum Phi. There were 13 names placed in nomination, including six from northeastern states. By the 22nd ballot, those six candidates had been abandoned and the northeastern delegations united behind the favorite son of West Virginia, John W. Davis. Texas, Ohio, and Connecticut temporarily withdrew from the convention floor, shouting conspiracy among the "wet" states. Tempers later subsided and Davis was nominated on the 24th ballot with all the delegations present. That summer, the Democratic National Convention, meeting in New York City, conducted a protracted and hotter version of what had taken place in Lexington that spring. There were 103 ballots before a consensus was reached on a nominee -- a record that still stands. By the time it was all over the Democrats had passed a dry platform and had selected the same "wet" candidate, John W. Davis. Before the convention adjourned, the band struck up the fight song of the candidate's alma mater, the "W&L Swing"; it became his campaign theme song.

The keynote speaker at the Mock Convention is traditionally a prominent member of the party out of power. The '56 convention was no exception; the students invited former Vice President Alben Barkley whose "down-home" style of oratory was sure to get the delegates in the proper frame of mind. Though 78 years old, the Kentucky native was much in the public eye since his re-election to the Senate.

It was ninety degrees on the day of the convention. Former Vice President and Mrs. Barkley viewed the parade from

chairs placed in the shade that surrounds the University President's home. When the convention was gavelled to order later that afternoon, Senator Barkley was introduced by Virginia Governor Thomas B. Stanley. The Senator remarked that he had previously not planned to attend the national convention, but he had become infected by the spirit he had seen that day in Lexington and the "old firehorse," as he was fond of referring to himself, had changed his mind. Much to the delight of the delegates, the speech was filled with colorful derisions of the opposition party. It ended with a familiar Biblical quotation: "I would rather be a servant in the house of the Lord," Barkley thundered, "than to sit at the feet of the mighty." He fell to the floor; within 15 minutes Senator Barkley was dead, having suffered a heart attack. It is difficult to imagine a more dramatic ending to any life -- even one as remarkable as his.

Barkley's death led to a controversy that has lingered among those who witnessed the '56 convention. A few moments after the Senator's collapse, student leaders of the convention surrounded the podium in an effort to prevent photographers from aiming their cameras at the fallen keynoter. Just how much force was levied depends on whether one asks a student or a photographer. The students later defended their actions, saying they acted on instructions from a nervous school administrator and at the request of Mrs. Barkley. An editorial in the Roanoke Times, understandably and predictably, branded the action as censorship. Student photographer Avery B. Juhring avoided the

human barricade by scampering up to the balcony above the podium. A week later in the midst of the controversy, Juhring's photograph, though one in which Senator Barkley is barely visible, appeared in Life magazine.

Following his keynote address to the '72 Mock Convention, Governor Jimmy Carter was asked by a student what he thought his chances were in seeking the vice presidential nomination. He replied, "If you nominate me, I guess not very good," -- a reference to W&L's record of never choosing the right man as the nominee for Vice President. As a matter of fact, the Mock Convention, in all its 68 years, has not even come close. Its first vice presidential nominee, Texas Senator Charles A. Culberson, a graduate of neighboring Virginia Military Institute, wrote back to the students that he was not a candidate -- lest anyone get the wrong impression. If the Senator had lived to see how the fates dealt with subsequent Mock Convention Vice Presidential nominees -- Governor Earl Warren in '52, Senator Henry Jackson in '60, Senator Charles Percy in '68, and Representative Wilber Mills in '72 among others -- he would have discovered how unwarranted his apprehensions had been.

All sorts of traditions are on the line this May 7th and 8th.