Mock Convention Report

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Of all the events which receive extensive publicity and media attention at Washington and Lee, no one can argue with the fact that, ever since its inception in 1908, the Mock Convention has been the granddaddy of them all. Dozens of campuses can boast a presidential prediction poll, and W&L’s version, opulent though it may be, isn’t even the oldest of such exercises; Oberlin’s goes all the way back to Civil War days. So what is it that makes our Mock Convention stand out?

Why, accuracy and research. Of course.

Correct 11 times in 16 attempts at predicting the presidential nominee of the political party out of executive power at the time, the Mock Convention has made it known—with increasing fervor—that it is in no respect a popularity contest or mere campus poll. Acknowledging the fact that no college campus can fairly be regarded as a cross-section of the voting public, Mock Convention participants carry their research out into the grass-roots political world of each state, putting personal preferences aside for the duration.

The results speak for themselves. Since 1948, the student politicos have been incorrect only one time—eight years ago, when they gave the convention nod to Edward Kennedy instead of George McGovern. And they made up for that mistake with a vengeance in 1976, correctly predicting both Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale as the eventual Democratic standard-bearers, the first time any serious attempt had been made to pick the right man for vice president.

With that statement as its philosophy, it was a foregone conclusion that the convention would be of Democratic sentiment. Anyone whose acquaintance with W&L is strictly post-Eisenhower, shall we say, may find it difficult to believe, but the fact remains that the campus was once as solidly Democratic as the rest of the South. (This characteristic proved to be a major stumbling block to convention accuracy, if not the greatest one of all.)

William Jennings Bryan, already a two-time loser for the real-life Democrats, had just spoken in Lexington—firing the students with enthusiasm and making the Silver Standard-bearer a major contender for the W&L nomination. And as the opening Mock Convention session on May 4 approached, only Gov. John A. Johnson of Minnesota possessed sufficient political force to have even a chance at stemming the Bryan tide.

After three days, friction was high between the rival groups—and soon there developed a situation that would send today’s scientific predictors into nervous trauma. When the roll call reached Kansas, a fight broke out on the floor. Floor fights of course are typical, if not
Mock Convention Retrospective

traditional, of conventions mock and otherwise. This floor fight, however, clearly took place on the floor.

"Very characteristic of that state indeed," clucked the Ring-tum Phi.

No sooner had the dust cleared than some other point of contention, forever lost to history, was raised. Whatever it was, the Johnson faction lost—inciting a Johnson man to jump up on a chair and yell to his comrades to leave the convention. And so, tempers flaring, they retreated to the English Room (which probably hasn't seen so much action since) and in rump session nominated Johnson themselves.

Following their abrupt withdrawal, the actual Mock Convention declared Bryan its nominee—and W&L gained its first correct prediction when the real Democratic delegates echoed the students' choice in Denver that summer. Bryan went down in defeat for the third time, his last, in the election that year against William Howard Taft.

But the inventive undergraduates immediately discovered the reason. After all, the Denver group had not agreed with the students' choice for vice president, Charles A. Culberson. And with a statement that perhaps reached a new level of collegiate self-assurance, the Ring-tum Phi announced that the real convention "made a mistake in the selection of a vice president and did not choose that most available one as selected in the old gymnasium.... Perhaps in that one error we find the reason why the Republican party carried the election."

When the next presidential election year rolled around, the memory of the "brawl of 1908" was still so vivid that students insisted on repeating the event. Again it was to be Democratic—not, apparently, for reasons of objectivity, but rather the dictates of sentiment. ("As a large majority of the students here are Democrats," it had to be so, one student wrote.)

The leading contenders in 1912 were Woodrow Wilson ("the Collegian's Candidate"), governor of New Jersey; Rep. Champ Clark, speaker of the House; Alabama's Oscar Underwood. Lee Chapel was to be the site of that year's mock affair; the real Democrats were scheduled to convene in Baltimore two months later. And while "Wilson clubs" and "Harmon clubs" rose up all over campus, an odd thing occurred—the first whiff of Republicanism. The Ring-tum Phi was baffled, dealt with it as though handling a freak child ("a Republican bandwagon was set in motion.... in spite of the fact that Virginia is a very Democratic state and that Washington and Lee is a very, very Democratic institution") and went on to praise the new convention newspaper, to be called The Democrat.

The Democrat appeared in five installments, as many days, before and during the Mock Convention—making it the only daily newspaper in W&L history, however brief its life-span. In its pages, the Republican leaders were reduced to verbal rubble. President Taft was dismissed with the line "Nobody loves a fat man." But the greatest abuse of all was saved for Theodore Roosevelt—in the midst of a comeback effort after four years away from the White House. With obvious relish, the students ran this "mock creed," attributed to an anonymous Southern senator:

"I believe in Theodore Roosevelt, Maker of Noise and Strife, and in ambition, his only creed. He was born of Love and Power, and suffered under William H. Taft; was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into Africa. The third year he rose again from the jungle, and ascended into favor, and sitteth on the right hand of His Party, where he shall come to scourge the licked and the dead."

"I believe in the Outlook, the Big
Stick ... the Forgiveness of Political Actions, the resurrection of Presidential ambitions, and the Third Term, everlasting. Amen, amen, amen."

The convention was called to order on May 4, and tempers raged again—especially over the seating of delegates. Fraud was alleged against the Missouri delegation, Clark's home state; it seems that proxies had been called in from all over western Virginia to throw the delegation to Clark from Wilson. The chairman ruled them out of order, and as the session ended, he was reported disappearing "down the road."

Balloting began the next morning, with Wilson in the lead—a position he retained through four roll calls, but without reaching the two-thirds majority necessary for nomination in those days. Wilson's men then attempted to have the two-thirds rule abolished; no dice, came the reply from Clark's partisans. And so, on the fifth ballot, Gov. Harmon was officially nominated—starting a stampede when New York and Pennsylvania jumped on his bandwagon. It was an unfortunate move, as things turned out. Wilson got the convention bid in Baltimore, and defeated Taft in November of that year—ending 16 years of Republican rule. No doubt the students consoled themselves with that fact as the year closed.

By 1916, with Wilson as a popular incumbent, the Ring-tum Phi acknowledged that "the Democratic nomination is a matter of apparently no doubt." What were the students to do?

Finally, after weeks of discussion, they came to a cataclysmic decision—W&L would hold a Republican convention, where the outcome would be more in doubt. That year's Phi editor—eager to disassociate himself from possible conclusions that a mass political conversion had swept the University—hurried through an apology of sorts, noting that the switch was "just to make things interesting."

As the delegations began to form, the records show that S. M. B. Coulling (then a third-year law student; uncle of W&L's current English department head, Sidney Coulling) sat on the organizational committee. The press also reported that Rupert N. Latture, then a senior and recent co-founder of ODK, was to serve as "chairman of the platform committee to fight for the prohibition feature."

As it turned out, the prohibition of "demon rum" was one of the two major platform issues that year—along with women's suffrage. The great verbal battles came here, with Alabama reporting it was "inclined to scoff at the idea of prohibition," and Kentucky's banner proclaiming "Pretty Girls Don't Care To Vote." It may be needless to add that both planks were ripped from the platform.

The balloting that followed may have been confused—political fortunes skyrocketed on one roll call, only to collapse on the next—but for the first time, there is no record of a major fracas on the convention floor.

Things moved pretty smoothly—and here lies the key to the greatest turning point in Mock Convention annals. The campus was still overwhelmingly Democratic in sentiment; none of the Republicans in question were personal favorites with the students-at-large. It's even doubtful whether they knew a great deal about the campaign positions of the dozen G.O.P. nominees before the convention.

So—for the first time, it seems—the students saw the need for actual research. (And objectivity was a foregone conclusion; the students didn't want any of the Republicans to win in November.) Impartial research may have been born in a strange fashion, but it worked from then on. Charles Evans Hughes, Supreme Court Justice, was drafted on the sixth ballot—another correct prediction for the students at W&L.

And once that precedent was set, it stuck. Mock Conventions from that time on have been designed for the party out of the White House. With a few exceptions, excess frivolity is no longer a major problem. (One of those rare cases occurred in 1936, when Arthur Vandenburg's nomination hinged on the Pennsylvania vote—"finally decided in his favor by an errant delegate brought in from the tennis courts.") The excitement is there, and will always play a major part, but under the flags and confetti lies a depth of research nobody at the time might have imagined evolving from William Jennings Bryan's Chautauqua visit back in 1908.
The Great Prophecy of '24
The Year Impeccable Research and Devotion to a ‘Favorite Son’ Made History

Full-scale commercial radio was an infant of four in 1924, and Reader’s Digest was only in its second year of publication . . . Scott Fitzgerald was putting the finishing touches on The Great Gatsby . . . Wyoming elected the first woman governor in American history, Nellie T. Ross . . . Freudian theories, recipes for bathtub gin, and the aftermath of the Teapot Dome scandal dominated cocktail-party conversation . . . Congress finally declared that Indians were U.S. citizens . . . a group of zanies led by Alexander Woolcott and Harpo Marx began to meet for lunch at the Algonquin Hotel in New York, instituting the famous “Round Table” . . . a typical night on Broadway might consist of O’Neill’s Desire Under the Elms and a trip to Texas Guinan’s speakeasy . . . and everybody was humming Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue . . .

In presidential politics, this was the year William Gibbs McAdoo, son-in-law of the revered Woodrow Wilson, was thought to be a shoo-in for the Democratic nomination. His principal opponent was Gov. Al Smith of New York, but Smith had failed to produce any lasting momentum. He had locked himself into a momentarily unpopular pro-wet stand; he was Catholic; he was identified with his big business; he was the symbol of New York. Perhaps this last was the greatest irritant to the Democratic delegates that year—they were convened in New York City during the worst heat wave in history, and Madison Square Garden wasn’t air-conditioned.

At Washington and Lee University, Washington Hall was celebrating its 100th birthday, and the students were preparing for their fourth Mock Convention. The event had been abandoned in 1920. Official records blame the “depletion of the campus following World War I,” and the Ring-tum Phi pointed to lack of interest as “it passed by without action on the parts of the students.” But the intervening four years saw a tremendous rise in enthusiasm—so much so that the faculty voted a one-day holiday in honor of the convention for the first time.

During a marathon in 1924, McAdoo plummeted to as few as 17 votes on the 10th, friends supporting him labored for a comeback, but succeeded only in narrow margins against Smith. As the campaign progressed, McAdoo was accused of violation of the laws concerning prohibition by noted that “action will be taken to make the trial as realistic as possible.” At first, they had no idea how prophetic that statement would be. After an astounding 23 ballots, they named one of their own alumni, ex-Ambassador to Britain and former president of the American Bar Association John W. Davis—a man who wasn’t even a real candidate.

Before the balloting started, there were several humorous moments, centering on the Prohibition battle of “wets” against “drys.” As reported in the Ring-tum Phi: “A floor debate developed over inclusion of a prohibition article in the platform. The wet element, fighting for an amendment for wines and beer as part of the party platform, clashed with the proponents of . . . unflinching enforcement of the laws of the government . . . A telegram was read a few minutes before a vote was taken from the Plumbers’ Union of Bangor, Maine, urging the convention to take action toward modification of the Bone Dry Law.”

But the mock delegates had done their homework better than ever, and adopted an anti-repeal plank in their platform—hardly a move college students would have made anywhere if left to their own inclinations. (In fact, the student chairman of the Mock Convention that year, Randolph Gordon Whittle, bore the nickname “Booze.” What a trauma it must have been for him not to rule the drys out of order!)

The balloting began Tuesday, May 14, with McAdoo, as expected, the leading contender. In those days the real Democratic convention operated under a two-thirds majority rule, and so the students did too. They gave McAdoo a consistent majority at first, but just as consistently he was unable to capture the valuable margin between that and the nomination.

Then chaos set in. After 10 ballots, McAdoo plummeted to as few as 17 votes on the 13th vote, skyrocketed to 367 on the 17th, then trailed off again. Key states New York and Pennsylvania held out for dark-horse Davis throughout the deadlock, and their man began to pick up surprising strength as the hours passed.

Toward the end, when it became obvious that neither McAdoo nor Smith could win, a behind-the-scenes shift was arranged to throw support to a long-shot candidate. The Ring-tum Phi noted that “on the twenty-second ballot, following a
plea for harmony from the permanent chairman of the convention, the Texas, Ohio, and Connecticut delegates temporarily 'withdrew' from the convention, throwing the entire assemblage into an uproar. After a heated discussion, the insurgent faction reappeared on the floor of the assembly.

On the next ballot the Hon. John W. Davis received the required [two-thirds] majority and the results of the ballot were greeted with mad applause.

The W&L newspaper immediately went on the defensive. After all, before the convention the editor had grandly proclaimed that "the world is waiting for Washington and Lee to nominate the winning candidate." And whom had they chosen? An alumnus, a former teacher, a current member of the Board of Trustees. Still, to the students he was "the biggest man of the times," and interested—if skeptical—eyes waited and shifted their gaze to New York.

If the Mock Convention had seemed strange and rather absurd, going on for 23 ballots as it did, the real convention was stranger and more ridiculous. With 729 votes necessary to nominate, McAdoo could barely muster more than 500. And so it went, day and night, until McAdoo released his delegates on the 99th ballot. The students had predicted this, as well as a last-minute threat to Davis from Sen. Carter Glass of Virginia. But the most striking parallel occurred when the chairman of the Texas delegation took the floor during the 103rd and final roll call, and led the final stampede that put Davis over the top—one of those three "insurgent delegations" that had performed the same task in Doremus Gymnasium . . .

The Democratic nominee lost to Calvin Coolidge by seven million votes in the election, but the correct prediction of John W. Davis gave the W&L Mock Convention its first big place in the headlines—a rare instance where devotion to a "favorite son" and impeccable research walked hand in hand. —M.G.C.

Yes, Virginia, a GOP Jumbo Will Tread the Streets of Lexington Again This Year

LEXINGTON—Washington and Lee University students are elephant hunting—right here in Virginia.

The Lexington undergraduates have been scouring the countryside for a pachyderm. Even "a tired old fellow" will do, the students say, but one with "previous G.O.P. experience" is preferred.

The occasion for the search, which has extended from New Jersey to North Carolina under the direction of a student "elephant committee," is the students' forthcoming mock political convention—a quadrennial event here for 40 years, and this time Republican.

An elaborate parade through the streets of this collegiate community has been planned as a pre-convention feature on opening day. One W&L mock conventionist, appointed chairman of the "elephant committee," said he doubted whether "there's ever been anything like the parade we're going to have," but bemoaned the fact that the parade's key figure, an elephant, so far was conspicuous mostly by its absence.

"We don't care whether he's a jumbo or a baby, just so he's a Republican elephant, and most elephants are," he said.

The parade will feature about 60 floats bearing "native color" representatives of each state, and various Bands, horses, bears (for California), a sheep herd (corralled by the Montana "delegates"), and a variety of "secret plans" are included.

If anyone knows an elephant, even a Democrat willing to carry a G.O.P. rider, the W&L mock conventionists would be glad to entertain the big fellow for a day. Pink elephants have been officially banned from the convention.

Gray (not pink) elephants enhance Mock Convention parade.

This article was written more than three decades ago, as part of national publicity for the 1948 Mock Republican Convention. Pink elephants notwithstanding, which are no strangers to conventions or Mock Conventions of either party, it should be noted that student parade officials in '48 did indeed secure the services of a gray pachyderm for the day. And on the theory that forewarned is forearmed, students have already secured the services of a successor for next May's street pageant.
Dogged Error Vanquished
Setting the Record Straight on Those Elusive Last Words of Alben Barkley

Error is a hardy plant.
—Martin Farquhar Tupper
(honest)

There are lots of errors connected with Washington and Lee. Such a large quantity of the mail meant for us goes to Lexington, Kentucky, that the post office there has a rubber stamp to redirect it. The story is told that many years ago, at his first faculty meeting, a new president expressed his pleasure at arriving on the campus of William and Mary. We ourselves have a plaque on campus on which the name of another man, who was our president for 30 years, is misspelled. Half the world thinks the statue of Cyrus McCormick on the Front Campus is really of Robert E. Lee, and the other half thinks Lee is buried inside Edward Valentine's marble Recumbent Statue in the chapel.

Perhaps no error is more persistent or widespread, however, than the one about Alben Barkley's famous Last Words.

We ourselves have committed the error more frequently than anyone else. It is all the more a shame because Barkley's Last Words must rank, by any yardstick, among history's most *à propos*. (Contrast them, for instance, with Elvis Presley's, uttered to his girlfriend: "Baby, I'm going into the library to read.")

In fact, others than us at Washington and Lee also regard Barkley's Last Words as transcendent. In their book *The Best of 1974*, Professors Peter Passell and Leonard Ross label them "Best Exit Line." But they misquote Barkley. They have the occasion wrong. And they say it happened in Lexington, Kentucky.

Passell and Ross meant well. ("... A misquotation set in the wrong locale at the wrong time," NBC newsmen Lloyd Dobyns, '57, wrote to *Time* magazine, "which must set some sort of Best Record for Most Errors in Shortest Space.")

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It is Henry Mencken's "Law of Millard Fillmore's Bathtub" that does it to us and to everyone.

It snuck into print once, and it's been there ever since. Our boss, however, possibly alone among the whole populace, knew we and everyone were wrong then, wrong now, and likely to be wrong forever. That's why he's the boss.

So after who-knows-how-many repetitions of the error, we were prodded actually to go to a primary source. (Apparently, no one else had had a similar notion for years, either. It took two days to track down our own recording of the Last Words.)

And here is the Straight Truth, finally. Alben Barkley was at Washington and Lee (Lexington, Virginia), on April 30, 1956, to speak to the student body's Mock Democratic Convention.

But he never said he would rather be a servant in the house of the Lord than sit at the feet of the mighty, and then keel over. Almost, but not quite.

The problem is with the feet. If one is a servant in anyone's house, after all, one has no choice but to sit at the feet of the mighty.

It was just a little more than three years after the end of the Truman administration, after the end of Barkley's vice presidency. The man who coined the word Veep confessed to his student audience that once upon a time, he'd aspired to even higher office. But, he said, no longer did he entertain such ambitions. ("They could go further and do worse," he quoted Thomas B. Reed, "and it seems they will.")

Someone in the audience yelled, "Aw, come on, y' ole firehorse!"

BARKLEY: "I think I'm sufficiently alert to present conditions to know that all fire apparatuses are now automotive, not horse-drawn. [Laughter and applause] But I no longer have any personal interest [in standing for highest office]. I have served my country and my people for half a century... . I went into the House of Representatives in 1913 and served fourteen years; I was a junior Congressman; then I became a senior Congressman; and then I went to the Senate and became a junior Senator and then I became a senior Senator, and then I became majority leader of the Senate, and then vice president of the United States. And now I'm back again as a junior Senator. [Laughter] And I am *willing* to be a junior. I'm *glad* to sit on the back row.

"For I would rather be a SERVANT [Barkley is thundering by now] in the HOUSE OF THE LORD than to sit in the seats of the mighty." Sit in the seats. SIT IN THE SEATS!

Don't believe any other version, whether datelined Lexington in Kentucky or Virginia.

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—R.S.K.
Convention Outlook Today
Changes in the National Political Process Increase Pressure on W&L Mock Delegates

The presidential nominating convention—it's almost as old as the American political process itself. Demonstrations, waving banners, platform debates, and floor bargaining are everyone's first thought when they hear talk of the quadrennial event. Washington and Lee's Mock Convention is no different. Our emphasis on realism is a total commitment, from media coverage and floor decoration to keynote address and roll call votes.

But what of the current status of national political conventions? Politicians and political observers alike have called for convention reform for years, and indeed alumnus John W. Davis, who had been the consensus during the 1912 Democratic National Convention (the one that required 103 ballots to select its nominee—W&L alumnus John W. Davis, who had been the choice of the Mock Convention earlier):

There is something about a national convention that makes it as fascinating as a revival or a hanging. It is vulgar, it is ugly, it is stupid, it is tedious, it is hard upon both the higher cerebral centers and the gluteus maximus, and yet it is somehow charming. One sits through long sessions wishing heartily that all the delegates were dead and in hell—and then suddenly there comes a show so gaudy and hilarious, so melodramatic and obscene, so unimaginably exhilarating and preposterous that one lives a gorgeous year in an hour.

So goes the irony of national conventions.

But the days of small bands of national "kingmakers" who bargained in smoke-filled rooms to choose the party's presidential nominee are probably gone forever. Stronger pre-convention politics and newer centers of power as well as changes in the mass media have combined to deny a convention the deliberative power it once had.

The style of campaigning for delegate votes before the convention, begun by John N. Garner in 1960, has become the standard. The crucial bargaining and trading of support increasingly takes place before the convention. The advent of direct primaries to choose and commit delegates to presidential candidates (as opposed to the non-committal or "beauty contest" primaries) has increasingly made the convention outcome known in advance. Indeed, the Republicans have nominated their candidate on the first ballot at every convention for 30 years (it took New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey three ballots to get the 1948 nomination), although the 1976 Republican National Convention came surprisingly close to a second ballot with the Ford-Reagan contest.

With political power increasingly decentralized, state and local political leaders have found their abilities to manipulate convention decisions severely curtailed. In addition, the news media have increasingly turned the convention process into an entertainment spectacular—intended for television audiences as much as for the delegates. And with the level of newspaper and television coverage, the likelihood of "dark-horse" candidates receiving a nomination has become less likely—and far more dangerous politically.

But this decline in the national convention process has made the Washington and Lee Mock Convention even more credible and more challenging. Political research plays a greater role at Mock Conventions today than ever before. Although 34 states will hold primary elections in 1980, only 17 will be held prior to the Mock Convention, and several are still of the "beauty contest" variety. This pre-convention pressure puts a premium on accurate, detailed research based on thorough contacts and monitoring. For although the decision of the Republican National Convention may be evident just prior to its meeting in Detroit, the race will assuredly be open at Washington and Lee on May 9 and 10.

Craig Cornett, senior major in politics and economics from Camp Springs, Md., is one of the three co-chairmen of the 1980 Mock Republican Convention. He's been on the scene since the dust cleared on the 1976 affair, and is the resident sage on matters political. In his spare time (such as there is), he is vice president of W&L's circle of ODK, the leadership fraternity, is a member of Pi Sigma Alpha (politics fraternity) and the University Federation, and is a national fellow of the Center for Study of the Presidency. Last month he was one of 19 undergraduates chosen for inclusion in the 1979-80 volume of Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges.
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