



THE DARKEST HORSE

JOHN W. DAVIS, THE COMPROMISE CANDIDATE WHO COULDN'T

by Stan Bumgardner, e-WV Editor

HEADING INTO THE 1924 DEMOCRATIC

National Convention, Clarksburg native John W. Davis was one of the longest of longshots to capture his party's presidential nomination. But he probably thought his odds were better than 103 to 1.

Davis (1873-1955) was the son of one of West Virginia's founders, John J. Davis, who first voted for Virginia's secession from the Union in 1861 before flipping to support statehood. His son John William attended the best schools, practiced law in Clarksburg, and formed critical business and political ties with Wall Street. He led the state Bar Association, served in Congress, and crafted key provisions of the 1914 Clayton Anti-Trust Act, which despite his Wall Street connections, cracked down on big-business monopolies. In the legislation, he supported unions—not always a popular stance back home at the time—writing, “The labor of a human being is not a commodity or article of commerce.” He served as U.S. solicitor general under President Woodrow Wilson, ambassador to England, and president of the American Bar Association—all before age 50.

By 1924, only two Democrats had been president since the Civil War: Grover Cleveland (1885-89, 1893-97) and Woodrow Wilson (1913-21). The Democrats' other stalwart, William Jennings Bryan, had been defeated three times and was nearing the end of his career and life. In sports terms, the Democrats had a short bench from which to choose.

When Republican President Warren G. Harding died in office in 1923, his vice president, Calvin Coolidge, ascended to the White House—and “Silent Cal” was heading the Republican ticket in 1924. At first glance Coolidge seemed like a shoo-in for re-election, but upon closer examination he looked more beatable. While he had successfully distanced himself from the infamous Tea Pot Dome scandal and the economy was booming, other Harding scandals still dogged his credibility.

Coolidge's opponent would be picked at the Democratic National Convention at New York's Madison

Square Garden during the sultriest days of summer. Conventions at the time were more than the rubber stamps into which they have evolved: Primary elections were relatively new and, until the 1950s, played virtually no role in party nominations. The power to nominate presidential candidates belonged to the convention delegates.

1924's Democratic odds-on favorite was William McAdoo, Woodrow Wilson's original treasury secretary and son-in-law. With the backing of labor, McAdoo won the few Democratic primaries held that year, but his own financial scandal made him politically vulnerable in the area where Republicans were weakest. Progressive Democrats saw him as a populist demagogue who had led the nation into World War I. Worse still, his pro-segregation stance attracted the Ku Klux Klan's public endorsement, which McAdoo readily accepted, widening the party's internal split. A contentious convention was in the making.

McAdoo was still the front-runner when the convention gavelled in on June 24. His main opponent was New York Governor Al Smith, who ran mostly on an anti-Prohibition platform. The Klan opposed Smith's politics and religion—he was Catholic. The Klan, a racist secret society formed after the Civil War, had experienced a resurgence of political and social power in the 1920s. Of the 1,237 delegates assembled in the Garden, none were Black, and the Klan would play an oversized role in determining the eventual nominee. New York Daily News columnist Joseph A. Cowan referred to the event as the “Klanbake” and to McAdoo as the “kandidate.”

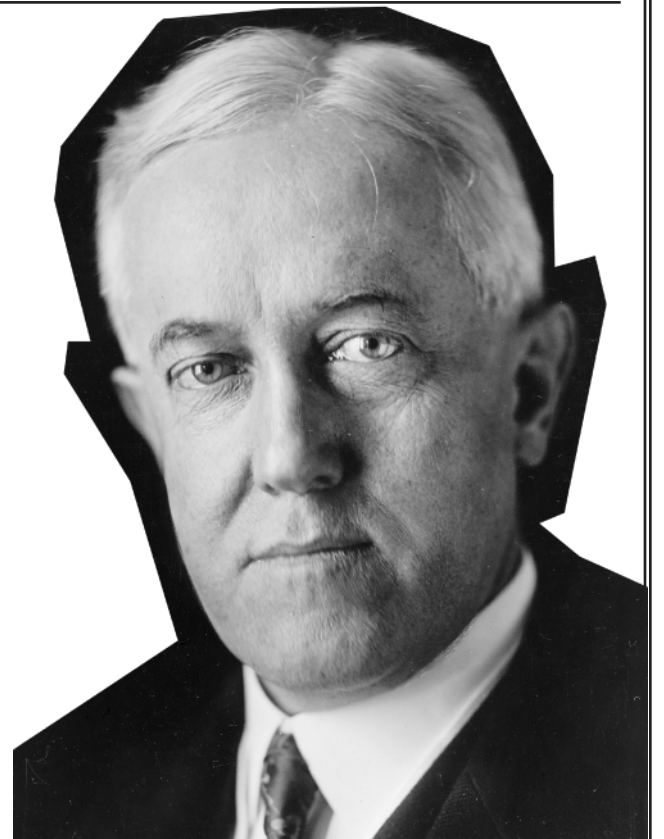
Journalist H. L. Mencken wrote, “There may not be enough kluxers in the convention to nominate McAdoo, but there are probably enough to beat any anti-klan candidate.” At his peak, Smith barely made it past the halfway mark to the nomination and never received more than one vote from a former Confederate state. Likewise, McAdoo continually failed to reach the required two-thirds majority. The convention was deadlocked.

These divisions were intensified by the drenching humidity inside and outside the hall. The convention descended into frequent chaos and occasional fistfights. After day one, The New York Times noted that “antagonisms had already reached the point where the 13,000 gallery spectators were spitting on the delegates, who were screaming, jeering and waving their fists at one another.”

As the process dragged on, Mencken predicted, “Everything is uncertain in this convention but one thing: John W. Davis will never be nominated.”

Davis was a “favorite son” candidate. States historically nominated one of their own, more as a symbolic show of respect than to win. But former West Virginia Democratic party chair Clem L. Shaver saw an opening. He realized Davis was possibly the only candidate who could unite enough delegates from the opposing factions to reach two-thirds. Ironically, Davis wasn't even West Virginia's first choice. Martinsburg's Newton D. Baker, Wilson's secretary of War during World War I, had declined the offer. Favorite sons typically faded quickly once the voting started, but Davis gained a little traction on day one. Through 15 ballots—with no candidates nearing two-thirds—Davis doubled his small following from 2.8% to 5.6%, far behind the frontrunners but inching ahead of 1920's failed candidate, Ohio Governor James M. Cox.

In every corner of the Garden, the McAdoo and Smith camps wheeled and dealt to get their respective candidates over the top. In the end, though, these efforts fomented more resentment. Through 87 ballots, Davis's



support was still capped at about 6%. Word started spreading, though, on the convention floor and in Manhattan speakeasies, that Davis might be the only candidate with a plausible path to the nomination.

The convention reached critical mass on day ten—July 4—when an estimated 20,000 Klansmen rallied in New Jersey and burned Smith in effigy. New York's governor knew he couldn't win but stayed in the race to block McAdoo.

On July 8, in a meeting at the Ritz Carlton, the two consented to give up their bids and end what The New York Times had dubbed a “debacle.” Even at this point, the two couldn't agree on a compromise candidate and left it up to the delegates, who reluctantly coalesced around Davis.

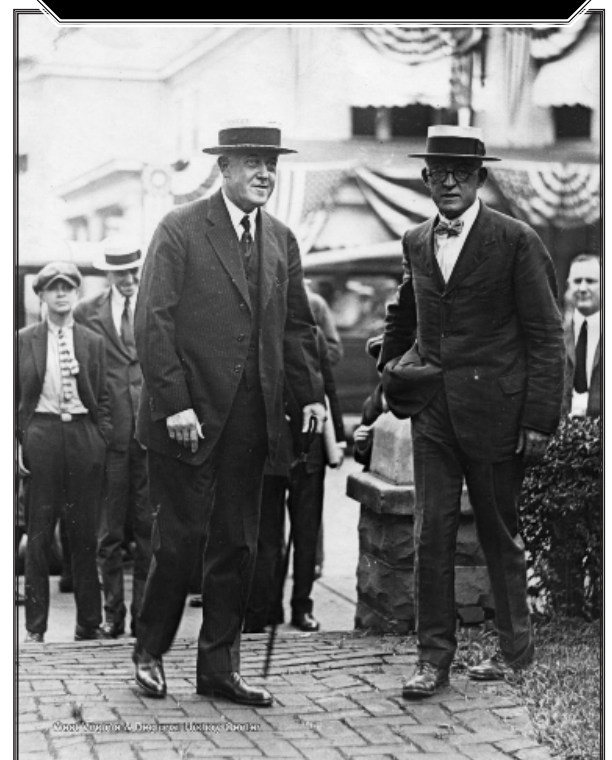
Davis first edged ahead of McAdoo on the 100th ballot, took the overall lead on the 101st, and captured the nomination on the record 103rd ballot—on day 16, another humiliating record. Sixty candidates had received at least one vote. His running mate was Nebraska Governor Charles W. Bryan, brother of three-time also-ran William Jennings Bryan.

(continued on back)

TOP LEFT: Caricature of Davis from the Brooklyn Daily Eagle newspaper, 2 July 1924. At bottom of this page is a headline from the same.

TOP RIGHT: Portrait of Davis. Library of Congress.

BELOW: Davis on the 1924 campaign trail in Clarksburg. West Virginia & Regional History Center, WVU Libraries.





West Virginia & Regional History Center

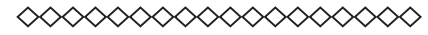
Davis (right) and Franklin Delano Roosevelt campaign in Clarksburg in 1924. Roosevelt was first struck down by polio in 1921, and the 1924 Democratic National Convention was the stage for his major reentry into politics. The American public knew of Roosevelt's polio diagnosis from the beginning, but he was able to mask the full extent of his lower body's paralysis for the next two decades. West Virginia & Regional History Center, WVU Libraries.

In the end, only the South voted for Davis. While the Davis-Bryan ticket captured every state from the former Confederacy (plus Oklahoma), it lost the rest, including West Virginia and even Davis's hometown, Clarksburg. His 28.8 percent share of the national vote remains the lowest ever received by a Democrat for president, including 1860, when the party splintered on the eve of the Civil War.

After the election, Davis returned to his legal career and was widely regarded as one of the nation's top attorneys, arguing 141 cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. The Roaring '20s and Republican political

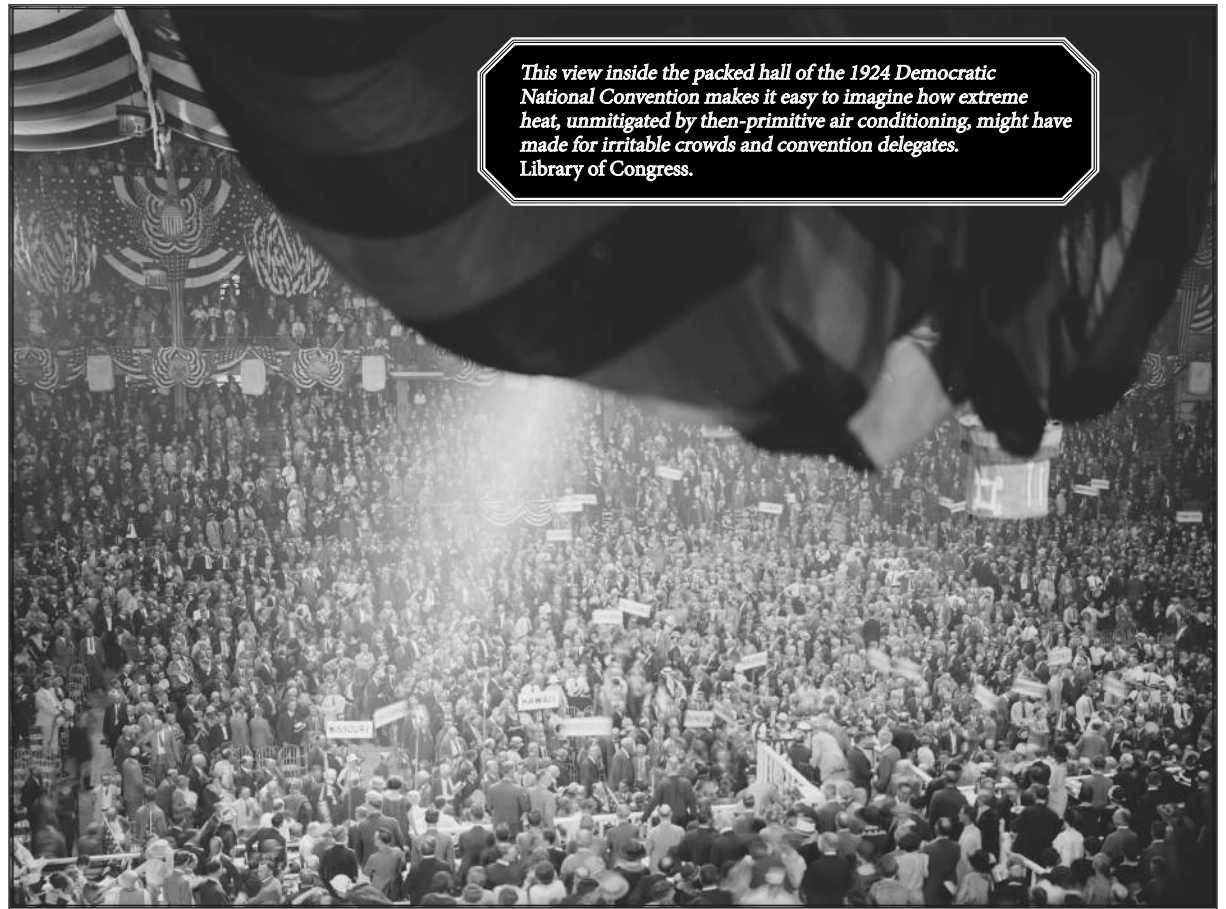
dominance came crashing down with the stock market in 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression. Although Davis remained a Democrat, he despised the party's liberal tilt under Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. This was an unpopular take among Democrats: with FDR, Democrats would win the White House for 28 of the next 36 years, with only Republican Dwight Eisenhower interrupting the streak.

After a long legacy in politics and law, Davis is now best remembered less for his crushing loss in the 1924 election and more for the last case he brought before the high court. In 1952, he argued to continue school segregation in South Carolina as part of *Briggs v. Elliot*, one of four cases folded into *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. In May 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned public school segregation. The diminished Davis died in Charleston, South Carolina, 10 months later.



Davis launched a whistle-stop national tour, while Coolidge campaigned relatively little. "Silent Cal's" personal popularity, the nation's economy, and party divisions left over from the Democratic convention sapped any momentum Davis might have gained. Voter turnout in the general election was historically low in part because the "Davis Compromise" had dissatisfied nearly all Democrats. Davis had tried to placate opposing Prohibition factions, appealing to both the "wets" and "dries," and walked a fine line on racial issues, despite having defended Black voting rights as solicitor general. The path to victory was fading fast.

Making matters worse for Davis, Wisconsin Republican Robert M. LaFollette had left his own party to revive Theodore's Roosevelt's Progressive coalition from 1912. LaFollette's third-party entry took a greater toll on Davis than Coolidge. In the general election, LaFollette won only his home state but garnered nearly 17% of the vote, more than half of Davis's total.



This view inside the packed hall of the 1924 Democratic National Convention makes it easy to imagine how extreme heat, unmitigated by then-primitive air conditioning, might have made for irritable crowds and convention delegates. Library of Congress.

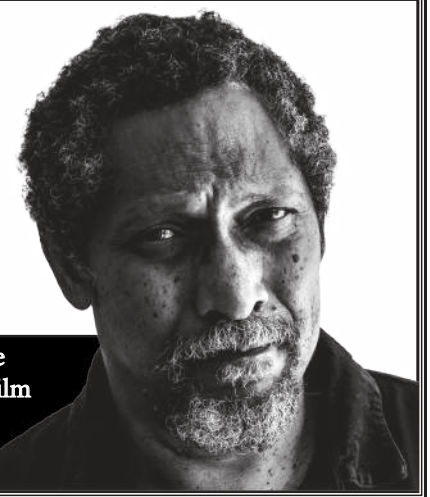
EVENTS OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2024

Visit the EVENTS tab at wvhumanities.org for the most up-to-date information!

- Oct 3- **Born of Rebellion - Civil War and statehood traveling exhibit installed across all five Pocahontas County public libraries. Open during regular public hours.**
- Nov 11
- Nov 13- **BORN OF REBELLION open at Greenbrier Historical Society, Lewisburg, during regular public hours.**
- Dec 16
- Oct 8 **"Art in the Libraries" WVU Program Retrospective - Multi-disciplinary panel discussion, WVU Downtown Campus Library, Morgantown. 4pm**
- Oct 8 **2024 Election Roundtable - Panel discussion with scholars from WVU, University of Delaware, Penn State, WVU Mountainlair, Morgantown. 5pm**
- Oct 12 **Author Talkback with William Pancoast - WV Mine Wars Museum book discussion, Matewan. 4:30pm**
- Oct 17 **PERCIVAL EVERETT, 2024 McCreight Lecture in the Humanities - Novelist and poet, live and in person. Open to**

- the public, free admission. Followed by refreshments, books signing. Capitol Theater, Charleston. 7pm doors open, 7:30pm lecture start
- Nov 2 **Early Mining Voices: The Stealey Tapes - Public presentation and discussion of interviews with early-20th century coal miners of Tucker County, Blackwater Falls State Park Lodge, Davis. 2pm**
- Nov 19 **Historian Michael Neiberg - Amicus Curiae Lecture, Marshall University, Brad D. Smith Foundation Hall, Huntington. 7pm**
- Various **History Alive! See the Events tab at wvhumanities.org for upcoming presentations!**

SAVE THE DATE! The 2024 McCreight Lecture speaker is Pulitzer Prize finalist Percival Everett, author of *Erasure*—now the Oscar-winning film *American Fiction*. Don't miss this October 17 event in Charleston! Watch www.wvhumanities.org for details.



The West Virginia Humanities Council, an independent nonpartisan nonprofit, is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Council is supported by the NEH, the State of West Virginia, and contributions from the private sector. The purposes of the West Virginia Humanities Council are educational, and its mission is to support a vigorous program in the humanities statewide in West Virginia. The Broad Side is © 2021 by the West Virginia Humanities Council. All rights reserved. Copyright of individual articles is retained by their respective authors. Images used with permission. Additional graphics and layout obtained from Vetcezy.com.

1310 Kanawha Blvd. E
Charleston WV 25301
304.346.8500

West Virginia Humanities Council
BRIDGING TRADITION & TOMORROW

50 YEARS
1974-2024