

THE RELUCTANT CANDIDATE:

Edwin T. Meredith and the 1924
Democratic National Convention

by
Peter L. Petersen

This thing has got to come to an end," Will Rogers told delegates to the 1924 Democratic National Convention. "New York invited you people here as guests, not to live." For nearly two weeks and seemingly endless ballots, rival supporters of William Gibbs McAdoo and New York Governor Al Smith had deadlocked party proceedings. Night after night weary Democrats filed out of the convention hall at Tex Rickard's old Madison Square Garden and headed for their hotels and a few hours of badly needed sleep before the resumption of another round of monotonous balloting. Never before had a party been so stalemated; never before had one taken so many ballots. And still it had failed to select a presidential candidate.

As the balloting neared the 100 mark, far surpassing the previous record set on the eve of the Civil War, even the die-hards in the Smith and McAdoo camps realized that there was no hope of nominating their first choice. Late in the evening of July 8, the thirteenth day of the convention, Smith and McAdoo met at the Ritz Carlton hotel. The meeting had been arranged by friends of the two men with the specific intent of getting both to withdraw in favor of a mutually

acceptable candidate. Accounts of what happened at the meeting differ, but on one point both Smith and McAdoo agree — the name most prominently mentioned was that of a 47-year-old Iowa publisher, Edwin T. Meredith of Des Moines. Smith ultimately refused to endorse Meredith and the meeting broke up without any agreement. It was not Smith's rejection of Meredith that makes the Iowan's role in the convention unusual, however, but rather that he was even considered at all. Seldom in the annals of American politics has there been a more reluctant candidate.

Edwin T. Meredith first gained prominence as a businessman. Indeed, publicist Bruce Barton once observed that "if an author were writing a novel and wanted to picture as the hero a typical successful American, in the best sense of the phrase, he could find no better model than Mr. Meredith." Born at Avoca in northeastern Pottawattamie County in 1876, Meredith came to Des Moines at the age of 16 to attend Highland Park College. But he soon dropped out of school to go to work for his grandfather, the publisher of the *Farmers' Tribune*, a small weekly newspaper. By the time he was 19,

young Meredith was the owner of the paper, and during the next few years, he gradually increased its circulation and profits. In 1902 he began publication of a new monthly magazine called *Successful Farming*. Meredith filled the pages of his new agricultural journal with practical advice for farmers and took extraordinary precautions to protect his readers from unscrupulous advertisers. So rapid was the growth of *Successful Farming* that within ten years its founder was widely recognized as one of the nation's most innovative and successful publishers — an evaluation still accepted by historians and journalists over a half century later.

In politics, Meredith was a Democrat, a progressive, and a supporter of prohibition. A great admirer of Woodrow Wilson, the publisher unsuccessfully sought office twice in traditionally Republican Iowa. Despite such setbacks, he remained eager to render what he called "public service." And increasingly, particularly after the United States entered World War I in 1917, President Wilson called upon Meredith for assistance. He served on the Treasury Department's Advisory Committee on Excess Profits, traveled to Europe at Wilson's request to meet with various political and labor leaders, and represented the public sector of the economy at the National Industrial Conference in 1919. Although each of these appointments carried with it increased responsibility and prestige, Meredith's nomination to the Cabinet as Secretary



Edwin T. Meredith (courtesy of the Meredith Publishing Company, Des Moines)

of Agriculture in early 1920 came as a pleasant surprise for the publisher.

At the age of 43 Meredith was by far the youngest member of the Wilson Cabinet, and his youth coupled with vigorous and widely applauded efforts to ease agriculture's painful postwar reconversion brought Meredith considerable national attention. Within weeks following his appointment to the Cabinet, observers were suggesting that the Iowan had a promising future in national politics. Iowa Democrats obviously agreed, for they quickly named Meredith



William McAdoo (Culver Pictures)

their favorite-son candidate for the 1920 Democratic presidential nomination. While no one gave the new Secretary of Agriculture much of a chance at gaining first place on the ticket, many thought that he would make an excellent vice-presidential candidate. Events almost proved them correct. Shortly after James Cox had secured the party's presidential nomination at San Francisco, the Ohioan let it be known that he had narrowed his choice for running mate to two men — Meredith and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Although many workers within the Presidential nominee's organization held out for Meredith, Cox finally opted for Roosevelt, believing that the latter's famous name and New York residence were assets too valuable to ignore.

Meredith was not overly disappointed by his "near miss" and returned to Washington to complete his tenure as Secretary of Agriculture. With the national Republican victory and the advent

of the Harding Administration in 1921, the publisher was again able to devote much of his energy to business. He first purchased another farm journal, the *Dairy Farmer*, eventually to be incorporated into *Successful Farming*. A few months later, in October 1922, the first copies of yet another publication, *Fruit, Garden and Home*, rolled off the Meredith presses in Des Moines. Renamed *Better Homes and Gardens* in 1924 this magazine soon became one of the nation's major publications in terms of circulation and advertising revenue. Despite his increased business responsibilities, Meredith still found time to speak out on political issues, particularly the problems of agriculture.

Although his friends had repeatedly urged him to seek the 1924 presidential nomination, Meredith consistently refused to consider himself a candidate. But as the convention approached, the pressures upon him increased. Clearly the Democrats were in trouble, particularly because party rules required the vote of two-thirds of the delegates for any nomination. McAdoo's business connections with an oilman involved in the ignominious Teapot Dome oil scandal rendered his chances of an early victory unlikely while many rural and Southern Democrats found Smith's Catholicism objectionable, and they also resented "Al-cohol's" lack of enthusiasm for prohibition. Thus as the possibility of a party split developed in 1924, more and more Democrats saw Meredith as the man to bridge the gap between the supporters of Smith and the group behind McAdoo. Some Eastern party leaders, among them Governor Fred Brown of Maine, were said to be quietly pro-

moting a Meredith "boom" by circulating reports that the Iowa publisher was "acceptable to both McAdoo and Smith." According to such newspapers as the Davenport *Democrat* and the Helena (Montana) *Independent*, Meredith would be "the ideal Democratic candidate." He was "untouched by any scandal," the *Democrat* argued. He was widely and favorably known in all parts of the country. He was a man who understood and could win support from agriculture and business. He could be "urged upon the voters everywhere as a man with whom the interests of all would be safe."

Confronted with such arguments, Meredith was appreciative but somewhat embarrassed. For months he had been working to secure support for McAdoo. In Iowa, for example, he had joined with Clyde Herring in ousting Wilbur Marsh, the state's long-time National Committeeman and a staunch McAdoo foe. At the State Democratic Convention held at Davenport in April, Meredith had managed to get himself elected chairman of the pro-McAdoo Iowa delegation to the National Convention. He saw himself as a leader in the McAdoo camp, not a bridge to the other side. Since he placed a high value on personal loyalty, he was inclined now to fight the Smith forces rather than play up to them in order to become their second choice. Even if he could win the nomination just "by running around a city block," he assured David Rockwell, McAdoo's national campaign manager, he would not do so.

Accordingly, when delegates began to assemble in New York in mid-June, Meredith focused his attention not upon winning the nomination for himself but up-

on acting as leader of the McAdoo campaign and upon securing the "strongest agricultural plank possible" in the party platform. But his main problem was keeping the Iowa delegation in line behind McAdoo once the balloting started. New York newspapers carried stories — leaked to the press by Smith supporters within the Iowa delegation in an effort to split McAdoo and Meredith — that said Iowa would soon desert McAdoo for Meredith. The publisher now found himself in the exceedingly awkward position of fighting his own nomination. Clyde Herring tried to ex-



New York Governor Al Smith (Culver Pictures)



The scene on the floor of the convention, 1924. (Culver Pictures)

plain. "Of course we are all for Meredith," he said, "but it would be suicidal to shift to him at this time. If the psychological time comes we'll get behind Meredith and push him strong, but just now and for a long time to come the Iowa vote is going to McAdoo." To restrain his enthusiastic friends, Meredith finally threatened to withdraw his name if it should be put in nomination against his wishes. Ironically, as the deadlock between Smith and McAdoo continued, Meredith's control of the Iowa delegation tightened rather than diminished. When it became obvious to almost everyone that neither Smith nor McAdoo could win the nomination, many saw an improvement in Meredith's chances. But since the publisher's nomination would require the support of

the McAdoo leaders, the Iowa delegates were reluctant to alienate them by breaking away too soon.

And so the convention went on — and on. Rowdies in the galleries (planted by the Smith forces) jeered every mention of McAdoo's name, and members of the Ku Klux Klan in the Texas delegation threatened to demonstrate their opposition to the Catholic Smith by burning a cross at the convention entrance. The party gathering had become, in the words of Arthur Krock, a "snarling, cursing, tedious, tenuous, suicidal, homicidal rough-house. . . ." As the horrible deadlock continued, Democrats grew desperate for a means of escape. Some of them turned to Meredith, now widely viewed as a possible compromise candidate. Party leaders, ordinary delegates,

and newsmen sought him out. Would he break with McAdoo? When did he plan to announce his candidacy? Meredith said he had come to New York with the intention of seeing McAdoo nominated and nothing had happened to change his mind.

Meredith's unyielding support of McAdoo, which pleased some delegates, made him totally unacceptable to the Smith partisans. It did not come as much of a surprise when Smith, at the Ritz Carlton meeting, rejected McAdoo's suggestion that they both step aside in favor of the Iowan. After leaving the hotel, McAdoo announced that he was releasing his delegates. Though not withdrawing his name, McAdoo said that he would now leave his "friends and supporters free to take such action as in their judgment may best serve the interests of the party." Earlier, Franklin D. Roosevelt had read a statement saying that Smith would step aside when McAdoo did. Consequently, on the one hundredth ballot, there was for the first time significant voting for several dark-horse candidates. The ballot was inconclusive. The hour was well past midnight. The leaders were anxious to regroup their forces, and under these circumstances, the fatigued Democrats finally voted for adjournment until noon.

While most of the delegates attempted to rest, the party leaders hurried into conferences. At the Vanderbilt Hotel, Meredith, Herring, and Gavin McNab, the head of the California delegation, gathered with McAdoo. By now newspapers were carrying the story that Meredith would have the support of the McAdoo forces when the balloting resumed. At the same time reporters de-

tected a growing boom, seemingly with the encouragement of the Smith people, for John W. Davis. And there was some support, observers noted, for two other possibilities, Oscar W. Underwood and Thomas J. Walsh. Before July 9, Meredith consistently refused to take his own chances for the nomination seriously. Nor had he ever really thought of himself as having the ability and experience that the Presidency demanded. Now, influenced by the urging of his friends, Meredith erased some of this self-doubt and was willing at least to accept the nomination. But because of his previous loyalty to McAdoo he had repeatedly discouraged the development of any semblance of a personal organization, even declining offers of support



William Jennings Bryan (Culver Pictures)

from Oklahoma and Colorado delegates once the convention started. Thus, when his "moment" came, he had no one, with the possible exception of the amateurish Herring, to push his cause.

The speculation, moreover, that Meredith would become the candidate of the McAdoo bloc proved to be unfounded. Instead of acting as a unit, the bloc simply broke apart. A bitter and frustrated McAdoo seemed interested only in fleeing to Europe on the first available ship. Many of his floor leaders had also given up the fight. In the end, only William J. Bryan, the party's thrice-nominated presidential candidate, appeared to be exerting much effort on Meredith's behalf. The Iowa publisher, he told reporters, was "one of the best of the progressives," one that was distinctly preferable to Davis. And, in a way, this was the kiss of death. Bryan's power to influence the Democratic Party had long since passed. He had been hooted and jeered by the ill-mannered convention galleries and he now was anathema to many delegates.

On the 101st ballot, Meredith received only 130 votes, nearly 50 of them traceable to Bryan's influence with the Texas and Nebraska delegations. Much of the previous McAdoo strength went elsewhere. California, for instance, gave the Iowa publisher only three votes. On the next ballot, Meredith's total slipped to 66 while both Davis and Underwood made gains. Reluctantly many of the McAdoo people now swung behind Davis. At the conclusion of the 103rd ballot, the West Virginian stood at 575, enough to set off a stampede. All across the convention floor, delegation leaders, many standing on chairs, were shouting "Mr. Chairman! Mr. Chairman!" The

Iowa delegation, first to be recognized, announced that it wished to shift its vote from Meredith to Davis. Other delegations followed suit, and when the changes were recorded, Davis had a final total of 844 votes. After 14 weary days, the party had a presidential candidate, and jubilant delegates clogged the aisles of the Madison Square Garden convention hall, as pleased with the prospect of going home as they were with the nominee.

Following Davis' nomination, those who were eager to bring the convention to an end urged that its chairman, Senator Thomas J. Walsh, be nominated for Vice-President. Walsh, however, his "bushy eyebrows" bristling "like a cat's back at the sight of a dog," questioned the wisdom of acting on impulse. He called for a vote to adjourn until 8:30 in the evening, and although reporters believed that "the noes had it by far," he banged his gavel and pronounced the motion carried and adjourned the session. Davis then met with members of the party hierarchy at the Manhattan Club. They decided that second place would have to go to someone from the agricultural "West," and Davis first offered the position to Walsh, who seemed to be the convention favorite. When Walsh declined, saying that he preferred to continue his work in the Senate, Davis turned to Meredith, who told him that they should get "a man who can carry his State." Iowa, he pointed out, was Republican, and there was "no hope" of its "going Democratic." George Brennan of Illinois then suggested the Governor of Nebraska, Charles Bryan. There appeared to be no one else in sight; and since the delegates, anxious to bring the convention ordeal to an end,



"A New Lochinvar out of the West" was the caption on this J. N. "Ding" Darling cartoon from the Des Moines Register. Meredith advances on the Democratic citadel in 1926 — unfortunately he died before the next convention. (courtesy of the J. N. "Ding" Darling Foundation and the Ding Darling Collection, University of Iowa Libraries)



John W. Davis (Culver Pictures)

were growing restless, Davis reluctantly accepted Brennan's suggestion.

In all probability, Meredith would have made a stronger vice-presidential candidate than Charles Bryan. Like the nominee, he was from the West, a progressive, and a dry, thus fulfilling the requirements that party leaders felt to be essential. In addition, Meredith's identification with the Wilson Administration, his well-known sympathy for agriculture and labor, his "poor boy makes good" business career, and his connections with the press, particularly with farm journals, would have been valuable assets that Bryan did not possess. And finally, he would not have offered the target to the opposition that Bryan did. Throughout the campaign,

many Republicans would choose to ignore Davis and attack Bryan, the "Western radical," some going so far as to conjure up visions of a Bryan sitting in the White House. Scare tactics of this sort would have been much less effective if Meredith had been on the ticket. While most historians agree that Davis could not have won with a different running mate, it is likely that he would have garnered more votes with Meredith at his side.

Meredith, when he joined Davis at the Manhattan Club, had realized that an offer of second place was a strong possibility. His name had been mentioned before, and once Davis had begun to loom as a likely presidential nominee, it had been mentioned frequently. On July 2, for instance, Senator Thomas Heflin of Alabama was reported to have predicted that the eventual compromise would be Davis and Meredith. The publisher's decision, then, was considered beforehand, and he would recall that it was "the hardest thing" he had to do during the entire convention. His friends, his family, and many of the Iowa delegates had urged him to accept, and acceptance, he acknowledged, "would have been quite a victory for Iowa . . ." especially for those on the delegation who had followed his every wish throughout the tedious balloting. For this reason, he had been at one stage "almost disposed" to accept. But somehow, he had not been able to shake the conviction that doing so would be a "mistake," one that would involve too

great a sacrifice in convenience, finances, "political future," and "everything else." "I may have an exaggerated idea of the matter," he told a press conference upon his return to Des Moines, "but I feel that in giving my attention to publications going into the homes of 1,500,000 families, doing what we can for the progressive thought of the country, right living and better methods, I am rendering a greater service than I could possibly render by presiding over the Senate of the United States."

Although the publisher and many of his Democratic friends could not say so publicly, there was the widespread feeling that Meredith was fortunate in not being a member of a ticket so obviously doomed to defeat at the polls in November. He was still young and his supporters reasoned that he would likely have a chance at the nomination sometime in the future. But such was not to be. In the years following 1924, his health began to fail. On June 17, 1928, only a few days before the Democratic National Convention opened in Houston, 51 year old Edwin T. Meredith succumbed to complications resulting from acute hypertension.

One final question. If he had enthusiastically sought it, could Meredith have gained the Democratic presidential nomination in 1924? The publisher obviously thought so. In a letter to Clyde Herring, written shortly after both men had returned to Des Moines from New York, Meredith took friendly exception to Herring's assertion that there were

only 300 potential Meredith votes at the Convention. "You and I know," Meredith insisted, "that regardless of whether it was Meredith, Cordell Hull, Walsh, [Carter] Glass, or [Joseph T.] Robinson, had the McAdoo fellows united a couple of days earlier on some candidate and gradually built his vote up that he would have received far more than 300 votes and that there would have been a real chance for his nomination." Whether Meredith's view was an

Note on Sources

The Edwin T. Meredith Papers of the University of Iowa Libraries, Special Collections, Iowa City, were of primary importance in the preparation of this article. Other manuscript sources consulted include the William Gibbs McAdoo Papers and the William Jennings Bryan Papers, both housed in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The *New York Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor* contain detailed, day-by-day accounts of the lengthy 1924 Democratic National Convention, while the *Des Moines Register* followed the activities of the Iowa delegation. Richard C. Bain, *Convention Decisions and Voting Records* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1960) has a convenient summary of the prolonged balloting. A recent study of the Democratic party during the 1920s is David Burner, *The Politics of Provincialism: The Democratic Party in Transition, 1918-1932* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968). Burl Noggle, *Teapot Dome: Oil and Politics in the 1920s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962) is the standard work on the oil scandal, while David H. Stratton, "Splattered with Oil: William G. McAdoo and the 1924 Democratic Presidential Nomination," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, 44 (June 1963), 62-75, and Lee N. Allen, "The McAdoo Campaign for the Presidential Nomination in 1924," *The Journal of Southern History*, 29 (May 1963), 211-28, trace the impact of the scandal upon McAdoo's presidential ambitions. Alfred E. Smith, *Up to Now: An Autobiography* (New York: The Viking Press, 1929) mentions the rejection of Meredith as a compromise nominee. For a broad view of Meredith's political career, see Peter L. Petersen, "A Publisher in Politics: Edwin T. Meredith, Progressive Reform, and the Democratic Party, 1912-1928" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1971). A grant from the West Texas State University Committee on Organized Research assisted in the preparation of this article.



T. J. Walsh addresses the convention. (Culver Pictures)

accurate assessment of delegate sentiment during the closing days of the convention is, of course, impossible to determine. But on one essential point there can be little disagreement. As long as Meredith remained a reluctant can-

didate, one unwilling actively to seek support, his chances of securing the presidential nomination were almost nil. In modern American politics, such an honor is rarely handed to someone who does not reach for it. □