

# SMITH

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ALFRED Smith was defeated in the presidential race before it began; he was defeated before he was nominated; in fact, it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that he was defeated some fifty-five years ago. Alfred Smith was not an "available" candidate; not because of the Pope, nor the beer barrel, nor the Tammany tiger, though these all lessened the candidate's vote-producing power by appealing to certain well-recognized stereotypes, but because he lacked availability of a different, more insidious and recondite kind. His name was Smith.

The acute observer will note that unusual names are becoming more important in American politics. They were not always important. George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, Andrew Jackson, had common, unpretentious names that would occasion no comment in any walk of life. Button Gwinnett seems to have possessed the only peculiar one, and his fame rests chiefly on the fact that he was so ashamed of his startling abnormality that having once placed his signature to the Declaration of Independence, he scarcely ever ventured to write it again. But the fashion soon began to change, (probably when Quincy was inserted between two such unassuming words as John and Adams), and to-day one condition of political success in the United States seems to be a name which will either command or woo the attention of an impressionable electorate. A dull colourless name is likely to spell the political doom of its owner, while a striking and virile one will do more for him than a striking and virile personality. The good name will of itself pull the candidate out of the rank of mediocrity, and will indicate that he was marked for fame and honour from the moment of his christening. The reputation of being the people's friend, the appeal of the barefoot boy or of the log-cabin, the ability to carry large doubtful States—these become almost unimportant when compared with the political efficacy of an unusual name.

Sceptics should be soon convinced by a review of a few names of successful candidates. Consider, for example, the uniqueness of George Wharton Pepper, Philander Knox, Boise Penrose, Gifford Pinchot—to indicate a few politicians selected at random

from Pennsylvania. A few weeks ago, when a man known as Smith proved unable to carry the State of New York, one called Franklin Delano Roosevelt showed how it could be done. Glance at the successful presidential candidates of recent years: Grover Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Warren Gamaliel Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover; none of these is quite normal, and the majority are almost unique. Grover Cleveland and Calvin Coolidge are onomatopoeic: they seem to possess a peculiar ruggedness and solidity which one associates or is expected to associate with the men themselves. No one except Roosevelt could have lived down the obloquy of Theodore as a Christian name; but once he had done so, the prefix became a distinction, though it is to be remembered that Roosevelt himself had a preference for the more descriptive "Teddy". The resonance of the pair of dissyllables of Wilson's name was singularly suited to the aloofness and austerity of the college professor and idealist. The alliteration of Calvin Coolidge, Woodrow Wilson, and Herbert Hoover, while it seems at times reminiscent of the vaudeville stage, adds nevertheless a touch of distinction, and gives the names a driving force which they would not otherwise possess. Nor has this been entirely fortuitous. Vermont frugality was apparently responsible for the simple alliteration in Coolidge's name; but political shrewdness and foresight seem to deserve the credit with Wilson and Hoover. The Democratic president originally signed himself Thomas W. Wilson, but he soon discovered the flaccidity of this, and he dropped the "Thomas" with such success that even *Who's Who* is unaware of its existence. H. Clark Hoover would have furnished weak ammunition for an election, while Herbert Hoover is so persuasive that the public is rapidly forgetting that the President-elect ever had a middle name.

The political psychologists behind Alfred Smith realized their candidate's vulnerable spot, and undoubtedly did their best to protect it by diverting the public attention to other things. They emphasized his humble origin with "The Sidewalks of New York"; they had him pose for countless photographs with wife, children, children-in-law, and grandchildren; they made the brown derby more famous than the Chamberlain flower. They helped him to drop the "Alfred" and to popularize the "Al"; but, finding that this was insufficient, they tried the truly heroic remedy of distracting attention from the old name and rechristening the candidate "The Happy Warrior" and "The Man with the Brown Derby." But a man with the name of Smith never had a real chance; though had the managers contented themselves with booming Emanuel

Smith instead, they might conceivably have done better. It is probable, however, that any effort would have failed to charm the electorate in competition with the enticing syllables of "Herbert Hoover". The slip which had been made at the start half a century ago could never have been overcome, unless one assumes that the Republicans might have been so short-sighted as to nominate a Jones.

These reflections indicate a future which is indeed alarming. Ambitious parents, who hope to see their child or children in the White House, will no longer make great sacrifices to train and to educate them, but will concentrate instead on the much more difficult and serious problem of giving them names with political potentialities. They will begin a search for the fantastic and grotesque with a zeal and an intelligence already excessively developed by cross-word puzzles, with the result that the names of the next generation will surpass the most sonorous chapters of the *Book of Numbers*. Such a catastrophe will doubtless bring its own relief: the common names having become rare, political availability will possibly reattach itself to them, and the era of a John Adams and a Thomas Jefferson will return. Such a surmise clearly leads to the conclusion that Alfred Smith was born ahead of his time—an opinion which, singularly enough, has been held by many people in the United States since the Sixth of November.