

*William Allen White, owner and editor of the Emporia Gazette, outside his newspaper offices in the 1920s.*

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# “A Pretty Weedy Flower”: William Allen White, Midwestern Liberalism, and the 1920s Culture War

*by Charles E. Delgadillo*

Progressive-era midwestern reformers found political inspiration in regional ideas that elevated material progress and community-oriented values as they advanced a vision of reform in alliance with like-minded individuals across the United States. By the 1920s the national political discourse was steeped in the “culture war” conflicts that were the result of a larger struggle for dominance in society. Americans found it impossible to avoid taking sides in cultural debates ranging from the effects of the surge of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe to the role of religion and morality in public policy. The culture war stifled reform by driving a wedge between reformers in the Midwest, who were predominantly native-born, white Protestants living in small towns, and their counterparts living in the urban, industrial, ethnic, and religiously diverse East. Progress towards the New Deal coalition was impossible as long as midwestern reformers and eastern liberals fought each other in the culture war’s trenches.

Midwestern reformers were in an especially peculiar position, since the same cultural ideas that spurred them towards reform helped fuel the 1920s culture war. Few Americans embodied this dilemma better than the celebrated Kansas newspaper editor, William Allen White, who crusaded for democratic reform even as he fought as a culture warrior in defense of rural civilization. This apparent contradiction perplexed White’s eastern liberal friends, but White firmly believed that midwestern “neighborliness” constituted the cultural foundation of both liberalism and democracy in America. To White, the success of democratic reform depended on protecting midwestern culture against the nation’s increasingly assertive urban population. Ironically, the same cultural concepts that underpinned White’s reform spirit helped drive the regional schism that sabotaged liberal unity, illustrating the difficult task reformers faced in advancing their cause.

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Scholars have been very interested in the cultural conflicts of the 1920s as expressions of rural chauvinism, while the seeds of reform in the Midwest have received less attention. For instance, the ban on the teaching of evolution that led to the Scopes trial and the prohibition of alcohol have been interpreted as attempts to enforce rural values; the murder trial of Italian immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti as an expression of antiforeign hysteria; the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan as a reflection of anxieties about the loss of patriarchal privilege; and the defeat of Al Smith for the presidency in 1928 as the politicization of long-standing bigotry against Catholics. A smaller body of scholarship has examined the democratic implications of efforts to enforce particular cultural ideas, such as the campaign for Prohibition or the efforts to “Americanize” ethnic residents.<sup>1</sup> The story of White’s role in the 1920s culture war contributes to this dialogue by highlighting the encompassing nature of the period’s cultural conflicts, even as White’s vibrant liberalism illustrates the fact that the region remained receptive to reform. Although White’s biographers have recognized his liberal pursuits during the era, they have either minimized his campaign against the urban East or artificially divorced it from his anti-Klan crusade. White’s service as a culture warrior must be examined alongside his liberal activities in order to understand how reform was derailed in the 1920s and how the Midwest became a New Deal constituency in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

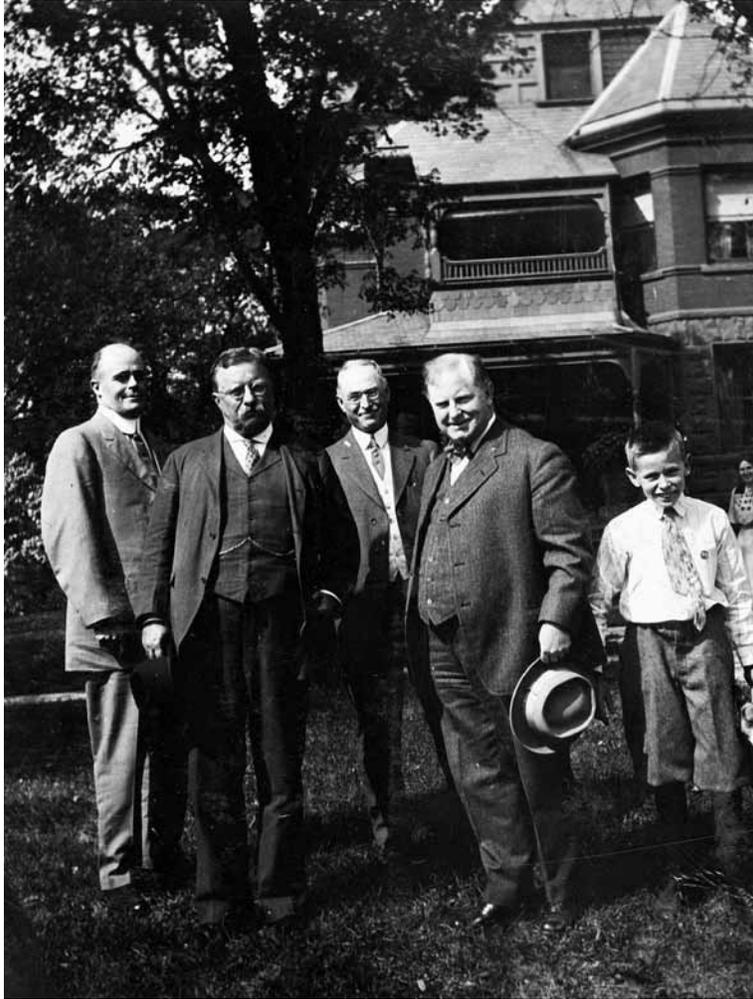
1. See, on the Ku Klux Klan, Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford, 1994); on the divisive election of 1928, Allan Lichtman, *Prejudice and the Old Politics: The Presidential Election of 1928* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); on the antielite tenor of the day, David Horowitz, *Beyond Left and Right: Insurgency and the Establishment* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); on the antiforeign impulse, Moshik Temkin, *The Sacco-Vanzetti Affair: America on Trial* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009); on religion and rural values, Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); on Prohibition, Norman H. Clark, *Deliver Us From Evil: An Interpretation of American Prohibition* (New York: Norton, 1976); on the spokesman for “common” Americans, Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Knopf, 2006); on the aftershocks of the 1924 National Origins Act, Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Makings of Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); Robert Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Jonathan Zimmerman, *Distilling Democracy: Alcohol Education in America’s Public Schools, 1880–1925* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

2. The best political biography of White is John DeWitt McKee’s *William Allen White: Maverick on Main Street* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1975), but the author covers White’s activities from 1926 to 1939 in a single paragraph; see also Ronald Feinman, *Twilight of Progressivism: The Western Republican Senators and the New Deal* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981). The best reconstruction of White’s communitarian rhetoric is Edward Gale Agran’s “Too Good a Town”: *William Allen White, Community, and the Emerging Rhetoric of Middle America* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998).

The owner and editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, William Allen White, gained a national reputation after the Republican Party circulated his 1896 anti-Populist editorial “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” as part of William McKinley’s presidential campaign. The editorial ridiculed Populist agrarian reformers as “old clodhoppers who know it all” and “hate prosperity,” although White explained decades later that the piece had been “purely an emotional yawp” fueled by his discomfort with Populism’s motley complexion. President Theodore Roosevelt soon led White into the Progressive fold by giving reform an aura of middle-class respectability. White became the highly regarded “Sage of Emporia,” whose observations were sought after by a vast array of social and political elites ranging from literary figures to nearly every president of the era and whose articles were often nationally syndicated. Few other commentators rivaled White’s national voice, which reached the editor’s midwestern neighbors, political elites of all kinds, and millions of ordinary Americans.<sup>3</sup>

White eagerly employed his national voice in support of liberal causes during the reactionary hysteria of the early 1920s, often in conjunction with allies such as Republican Senator William E. Borah of Idaho, political pundit and editor with the *New York World* Walter Lippmann, and editor of the *Nation* Oswald Garrison Villard. White lobbied his friend, Kansas’s Republican Senator Arthur Capper, on behalf of Senator Borah’s bill to make it a criminal offense for government officials to infringe on civil liberties at the height of the Red Scare; along with Lippman he wrote editorials denouncing the deportation of radicals as “un-American”; and he joined Villard on a delegation asking President Warren G. Harding to grant a general amnesty to political prisoners convicted for opposing American involvement in World War I. White was not afraid to stand up for liberal values even when his positions were unpopular, as he did in editorials expressing sympathy for Boston’s striking policemen in 1919, or illegal, as when he was arrested for defying provisions in the Kansas Industrial Relations Act that suppressed free speech during the Great Railroad

3. “What’s the Matter With Kansas?,” *Emporia (Kans.) Gazette*, August 15, 1896; William Allen White to Helen Mahin, June 23, 1922, box 67, William Allen White Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as “White Papers”); White, “Changing Times,” address delivered before the Kentucky State Bar Association, April 8, 1927, box E-2, White Papers; White to Henry Allen, July 29, 1919, box 1, Henry Allen Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; McKee, *William Allen White*, 40–50; White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York: MacMillan, 1946), 279–86; and Sally F. Griffith, *Home Town News: William Allen White and the Emporia Gazette* (New York: Oxford, 1989), 240–41.



*White gained a national reputation after the Republican Party circulated his 1896 anti-Populist editorial "What's the Matter with Kansas?" as part of William McKinley's presidential campaign. White was led into the Progressive fold when President Theodore Roosevelt gave reform an aura of middle-class respectability, and by the 1920s White was in the thick of the culture wars gripping the country. Roosevelt and White are pictured together between 1910 and 1912 at Red Rocks, White's Emporia home. White's son, William Lindsay White, is at the right, and his wife, Sallie, is in the background.*

Strike of 1922. As White told a would-be biographer that same year, these activities had him generally "classed as a liberal Republican, more liberal than Republican" within his own party.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Republican Party was dominated by conservatives during the 1920s, White never considered

4. White to Mahin, June 23, 1922, box 67, White Papers; White to Arthur Capper, February 22, 1921, box 56, White Papers; "Seeing Red," *Emporia Gazette*, January 8, 1920; Oswald Garrison Villard to Fanny Villard, July 21, 1921, folder 4021, Oswald Garrison Villard Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (hereafter cited as "Villard Papers"); "Strikes and Things," *Emporia Gazette*, September 17, 1919; White to the *Nation*, July 24, 1922, folder 4161, Villard Papers; White to William Borah, August 3, 1922, box 65, White Papers; and White, *Autobiography*, 622.

bolting for the Democratic Party. There were sound reasons for White's decision, including the fact that his personal connections gave him great influence in the Republican Party and that the Democratic Party was often as conservative as the GOP on policy issues. The two parties were distinguished by their cultural outlooks and demographics rather than their platforms, and these factors motivated White in his affiliation. The Republican Party in the Midwest was demographically comprised of native-born, Protestant, middle- to upper-class, independent farmers, professionals, and businessmen, and White believed that this meant that "a Republican naturally has an open and constructive mind." In contrast,

the Democratic Party was based on a shaky alliance between the native-born, evangelical, rural, segregated South and the urban, industrialized Northeast, which was heavily populated with Catholic immigrants. White saw both Democratic constituencies as uneducated and servile: Southerners voted for anyone who protected their brutal system of segregation and political machines ruled the urban bloc. The Democratic Party's demographics meant that it could never be a truly liberal institution, according to White, who focused instead on advancing reform through the Republican Party.<sup>5</sup>

White believed that the Midwest was the heart of American civilization, and this made the region the most logical base for his campaign to reform the nation. Kansas reflected America's economic diversity as an important producer of agricultural commodities, fossil fuels, and manufactured goods, including approximately one-quarter of the nation's budding aviation industry. The state was a laboratory for Progressive-era experiments in active government, including publicly owned enterprises, regulations on freight and utility rates, pioneering labor laws, and a public university system that guaranteed admission to all high school graduates. White was proud of these innovations, which he argued were based on the kind of midwestern "country values" and "neighborliness" that also constituted the foundation of American liberalism. For example, White asserted that no midwesterner would allow his next door neighbor's children to toil in unsafe conditions at unfair wages, and he explained the effort to enact reforms such as the living wage and industrial safety as a logical extension of midwestern values. To White, liberalism itself was merely "the application of a neighborly, village-minded aspiration to our national life."<sup>6</sup>

As he often did, White pointed to his own hometown of Emporia as the model of a thriving, neighborly community that America ought to emulate on a national scale. The town was an important regional hub that boasted two colleges, a bustling retail district, and vital repair shops for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe and Missouri, Kansas and Texas, or "Katy," railroads. The economic

depression of the early 1920s had yielded to renewed prosperity that also disrupted Emporia's traditional living patterns as residents built better housing and purchased a myriad of consumer products, paralleling a trend playing out in small towns across America. The *Gazette's* pages reflected this tension between the old and the new, with features on the Bible and tales of farm life appearing next to advertisements for cars, radios, movies, and other luxuries that were increasingly within the grasp of average consumers. Although White was racially tolerant by the standards of his day, he explained that Emporia's success was due in no small measure to the fact that 95 percent of its fourteen thousand residents were native-born whites who traced their lineage to New England's "old revolutionary stock." Based on the cultural dominance of midwestern civilization and the region's prosperity, White proudly declared that anyone who wanted to "belong to the governing classes" in America had to be an Emporian in spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Cultural chauvinism was the dark side of White's faith in the supremacy of midwestern civilization, especially his belief in Theodore Roosevelt's idea that racial factors played an important role in the concept of national citizenship. The crime, corruption, and moral failings associated with America's large cities during the 1920s outraged White, and he authored an article warning that the cities' demographic makeup of southern and eastern European immigrants, which he termed "the low breeds of Europe," posed a dire cultural threat to American democracy. The piece, titled "What's the Matter with America?," claimed that urban disorder was the product of the new immigrants' defective cultures, which lacked "Anglo-Saxon political taboos" against selfishness, corruption, and graft. He likened millions of urban immigrants to rapidly reproducing "political bacilli . . . tearing down the tissue of our institutions" with their alien culture. In contrast, rural society had avoided the problems afflicting the nation's cities because country children were taught proper American values in the home, around town, and in church. White spoke volumes when he pronounced all other national issues "subsidiary to [the] fundamental clash of ideals" between rural civilization and the new immigrants, a conflict that he suggested might be genetically ingrained. The only hope for the survival of liberalism and democracy in America

5. White to Charles Scott, November 27, 1916, letterbook 30, part 2, White Papers; "The Purge Loses," *Emporia Gazette*, September 15, 1938; and White to Harold Ickes, September 26, 1938, box 287, White Papers.

6. William Allen White, "The Blood of the Conquerors," *Collier's*, March 10, 1923, 5-6; and Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 190-220, 246-69.

7. For an extensive analysis of White's use of the Emporia metaphor, see Agran, "Too Good a Town," 77, 93, 116-17; White, "Blood of the Conquerors," 5-6; White, *Autobiography*, 439, 542, 625-27; Griffith, *Home Town News*, 14; "Why KS is KS," *Emporia Gazette*, December 29, 1925; and "Lyon County," *Emporia Gazette*, February 15, 1926.



White believed that the Midwest was the heart of American civilization, from which grew the “country values” and “neighborliness” that constituted the foundation of American liberalism. The crime, corruption, and moral failings associated with America’s large cities during the 1920s outraged White, and he proposed education as a remedy for the cultural infection menacing American democracy. Many of his midwestern neighbors, however, turned to violence in defense of traditional civilization through membership in the reactionary Ku Klux Klan, members of which are pictured here burning a cross in the 1920s.

was to try to teach the new immigrants that “our ideals are better than theirs, or their ideals will overcome ours.”<sup>8</sup>

White’s provocative article proposed education as a remedy for the cultural infection menacing American democracy, but many of his midwestern neighbors turned to violence in defense of traditional civilization through membership in the reactionary Ku Klux Klan. The KKK enjoyed a tremendous resurgence during the early 1920s as an organization of “respectable” Americans that embraced violence as a necessary and proper tool for defending traditional values against immoral urban elites, immigrants, and the working class. The Klan thrived in predominantly homogenous regions comprised of small towns populated by native-born, white Protestants, and its members were most often middle-class professionals, small businessmen, and skilled workers who felt threatened by the rise of large-scale corporate capitalism.<sup>9</sup> Kansas neatly fit this demographic profile, and White was blind to the fact that his own rhetoric of native-born, white Protestant cultural superiority paralleled that of

the Klan. White was confident that Kansans would reject the KKK, and he attacked the group as un-American, antidemocratic, and unneighborly after its organizers arrived in Emporia in 1921. The Klan soon fielded approximately forty thousand members in Kansas and became a potent force in local and state politics across the United States. By 1923 White’s Emporia neighbors had elected a Klan mayor, Klansmen infested the town’s police department, and the *Gazette’s* exposés of KKK activities were met with a campaign of intimidation.<sup>10</sup>

The Kansas Klan faced a serious threat to its activities after White’s longtime friend, Governor Henry J. Allen, initiated legal proceedings to oust the organization for operating without a state charter shortly before his term expired in January 1923. Incoming Governor Jonathan M. Davis, a Democrat aligned with the Klan, was powerless to stop the ouster case because only one of the three seats on the charter board was filled by gubernatorial appointment. Although he pressed his influence with his selection of State Bank Commissioner Roy L. Bone, the two other board members were anti-Klan elected officeholders, Secretary of State Frank J. Ryan and Attorney

8. William Allen White, “What’s the Matter with America?,” *Collier’s*, July 1, 1922, 3, 4, 18, White Papers; and Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

9. Rory McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right Wing Movements and National Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 4–31, 55–75; and Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 1–6, 60.

10. Jack Wayne Traylor, “William Allen White’s 1924 Gubernatorial Campaign,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 42 (Summer 1976): 180–91; White to H. B. Swope, September 17, 1921, box 58, White Papers; McVeigh, *Rise of the Ku Klux Klan*, 4, 25–27; Miner, *Kansas*, 252–57; and MacLean, *Behind the Mask*, xii–xiii, 10–32, 54–73, 99, 158.



*The KKK, which began in America's south in the 1860s but died out by the 1870s, enjoyed a tremendous resurgence during the early 1920s as an organization of "respectable" Americans that embraced violence as a necessary and proper tool for defending traditional values. White was confident that Kansans would reject the KKK, and he attacked the group as un-American, antidemocratic, and unneighborly. But by the early 1920s the Klan fielded approximately forty thousand members in the state and had become a potent force in local and state politics. Pictured are members of Topeka's KKK at a rally in St. Joseph, Missouri, in the 1920s.*

General Charles B. Griffith. Both Governor Davis and the anti-Klan board members were due for reelection in 1924, which meant that the Klan's fate in Kansas turned on the election's outcome. The Republican nominee for governor, Benjamin S. Paulen, had defeated an overtly anti-Klan candidate in the primary, and White, Allen, and other anti-Klan Republicans were outraged when Paulen refused to publicly denounce the KKK. Allen asked White to run for governor as an anti-Klan independent, but White was reluctant to break his journalistic vows by entering politics. Instead, he unsuccessfully sought to persuade others to enter the race.<sup>11</sup>

11. Charles William Sloan, "Kansas Battles the Invisible Empire: The Legal Ouster of the KKK from Kansas, 1922-1927," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 40 (Fall 1974): 393-409; Traylor, "White's 1924 Gubernatorial Campaign," 180-91; "Wants Klan Named in Kansas Convention," *New York Times*, August 24, 1924; White to Charles Scott, September 2, 1924, box 83, White Papers; White to Victor Murdock, August 14, 1924, box 83, White Papers; White to William Borah, November 24, 1924, box 81, White Papers; and White, *Autobiography*, 542, 625-27.

White finally threw his own hat into the ring as an anti-Klan independent in early September, and he made defending American culture his signature issue by denouncing the Klan as the enemy of small-town values and the Constitution. The KKK was a "hooded gang of masked fanatics, ignorant and tyrannical in their ruthless oppression" of Catholics, Jews, blacks, and immigrants. Furthermore, the group's doctrine of intolerance was an assault on the fundamental ideology of the U.S. Constitution, which White summarized as a rurally inspired "charter of freedom, under which men may live with one another under the rule of fraternity and neighborly consideration." He asserted that the Klan subverted the Anglo-Saxon notion of the rule of law by aiming to impose a shadow government that employed "force instead of reason, terror instead of due process of law, and [that] undermines all that our fathers have fought for since free government has been established." White cast his candidacy as an opportunity for Kansans to defend the American political tradition as well as

neighborly tolerance by voting in support of a “governor to free Kansas from the disgrace of the Ku Klux Klan.”<sup>12</sup>

White’s run for the governorship immediately became a national sensation. Walter Lippmann saw it as “the most inspiring campaign being waged in the United States,” and he encouraged the *New York World* to publish editorials and political cartoons in support of White’s heroic effort. *Time* placed White’s portrait on its cover, and a *New York Times* reporter shadowing the White campaign likened the editor to “a middle-aged, rosy faced, baldish St. George” heroically battling the Klan dragon. White crisscrossed Kansas with his family in their Dodge touring car, and he explained to his audiences that he was fighting for “the principle of American freedom that these imperial gizzards, nightly nobility and cow-pasture patriots are out to betray.” He asked Kansans to join him in defense of “law and order under law not under force, for an American civilization—tolerant, neighborly, kind, fundamentally democratic and everlastingly against the wicked reactionary imperialism of the invisible empire.” The survival of the Republic was at stake, because “America cannot remain half empire and half democracy.” White covered two-thirds of the state, delivered 104 speeches, and addressed tens of thousands in crowds ranging from several hundred in small-town communities to over seven thousand in the Klan stronghold of Topeka.<sup>13</sup>

Kansas’s political establishment united in what White called an “unholy alliance” against him. Klansmen burned a small cross in downtown Cottonwood Falls shortly after White announced his candidacy on the steps of the Chase County Courthouse, and hooded Klansmen ominously interrupted services at the town’s African American church in a bid to coerce the congregation to vote for Paulen. White’s campaign banners were vandalized

12. “White Announces,” *Emporia Gazette*, September 20, 1924; “Klanism vs Americanism,” *Emporia Gazette*, September 26, 1924; “White Starts Fight on Kansas Klan,” *New York Times*, September 11, 1924; “W. A. White to Run as Foe of the Klan,” *New York Times*, September 21, 1924; “The Governorship,” *Emporia Gazette*, September 16, 1924; Robert Slayton, *Empire Statesman: The Rise and Redemption of Al Smith* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 211; McKee, *Maverick on Main Street*, 170–71; and White to Borah, November 24, 1924, box 81, White Papers.

13. Walter Lippmann to Sallie White, October 8, 1924, folder 1277, reel 33, Walter Lippmann Papers, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut (hereafter cited as “Lippmann Papers”); Anne O’Hare McCormick, “Editor White Tilts at the Kansas Klan,” *New York Times*, October 5, 1924; “White States Issue,” *Emporia Gazette*, September 26, 1924; “Shake Off Klan Control is Plea of Independents,” *Emporia Gazette*, October 29, 1924; “At the Crossroads,” *Emporia Gazette*, November 1, 1924; “Nothing Radical in White Platform,” *Emporia Gazette*, October 13, 1924; White to Scott, September 2, 1924, box 83, White Papers; White to Borah, November 24, 1924, box 81, White Papers; and “The Prodigal’s Return,” *Emporia Gazette*, November 3, 1924.

in one town and in another they were removed by law enforcement acting on the mayor’s orders. Organized labor was allied with the Klan and the Democratic Party, and the head of the Kansas Federation of Labor denounced White as a false friend to labor despite the editor’s long record as a workers’ advocate. Paulen left much of his campaigning to Republican surrogates such as prominent attorney John S. Dean, who embodied the fusion of the GOP, the Klan, and business interests. Dean gave speeches on Paulen’s behalf, he represented the Klan in its ouster case before the state charter board, and he was counsel to the Kansas Employer’s Association, which included the state’s largest packinghouses, railroads, and insurance companies. A labor-baiting judge smeared White as a glory hound, a racist, and a demagogue, while another surrogate exhorted Kansans to defeat “William Allen Whiteism and the other isms which come from Russia.”<sup>14</sup>

Although Paulen won the governorship in the Republican landslide of 1924, White’s showing in the race proved that Kansans could be receptive to the liberal rhetoric of tolerance. White finished in third place but was only 33,000 votes behind the incumbent Democratic governor, who lost to Paulen by about 140,000 votes; White’s approximately 150,000 votes were a striking result considering that he had campaigned for less than six weeks on a shoestring budget of just \$476.60. The outcome was a moral victory to White, who believed he had exposed the KKK as a sham, proven that ordinary citizens could stand against it, and taught Paulen that pandering to the Klan had cost him more votes than he gained. Individuals who had suffered under the Klan wrote White thanking him profusely for his efforts, and one supporter expressed the belief that the KKK’s “swaggering boldness is permanently reduced. I think from now on we can live in peace.” White’s high-profile campaign helped to fuel voter turnout that aided the charter board’s anti-Klan majority, which ruled in January 1925 that the KKK was an out-of-state corporation illegally operating without a charter. The ouster case and the

14. “White Continues Fight on Paulen,” *Emporia Gazette*, September 24, 1924; “Calls White an Andy Gump, Says Editor is Not Sincere,” *Emporia Gazette*, October 25, 1924; Sloan, “Kansas Battles the Invisible Empire,” 393–409; “Klansmen Enter Negro Church to Work for Paulen,” *Emporia Gazette*, October 30, 1924; “Unknown Vandals Cut Down White Banner in Iola,” *Emporia Gazette*, September 26, 1924; Charles Isely to White, November 11, 1924, box 82, White Papers; Kansas Federation of Non-Partisan Voters Pamphlet, box 80, White Papers; Harold McGugin to M. F. Amrine, October 26, 1924, box 83, White Papers; White, speech at Concordia, Kansas, September 23, 1924, box E-8, White Papers; “Davis Strikes Back,” *Emporia Gazette*, October 6, 1924; and “Huggins Pulls for Paulen, Hopes White Will be Beaten,” *Emporia Gazette*, October 28, 1924.



The Kansas Klan faced a serious threat to its activities after White's longtime friend, Governor Henry J. Allen, initiated legal proceedings to oust the organization for operating without a state charter shortly before his term expired in January 1923. The Pennsylvania-born Allen started out, like White, as a newspaper owner and editor. After his governorship, he went on to serve as one of Kansas's U.S. senators from 1929 to 1931. The two men are pictured in 1922 on the campus of the Emporia Normal School.

Klan's own missteps contributed to the KKK's collapse, and within a year White exalted that "the Ku Klux Klan in Kansas is a busted community." Eastern liberals such as Lippmann and Villard saw White's effort as a ray of hope in an age of conservatism, and both men solicited White's insights on the Klan phenomenon for their urban readers.<sup>15</sup>

15. Charles Isely to White, November 6, 1924, box 82, White Papers; "Wiped Out," *Emporia Gazette*, August 5, 1926; Traylor, "White's 1924 Gubernatorial Campaign," 180-91; Campaign financial statement, November 3, 1924, box E-5, White Papers; "Kansas at Her Best, Says White," *Emporia Gazette*, October 30, 1924; "Kansas Swatted the Klan," *Emporia Gazette*, November 7, 1924; William Borah to White, November 18, 1924, box 81, White Papers; White to Paul A. Jones, November 13, 1924, box 88, White Papers; White to Walter Lippmann, November 9, 1924, file 1277, reel 33, Lippmann Papers; White to Oswald Garrison

White continued to make headlines in the eastern press as a result of his opposition to some of the more ludicrous expressions of the culture war during the mid-1920s. He ridiculed a local mayor who proposed a morality ordinance banning dancing, asserting in an editorial that "nothing is as dynamic as suppressed desires." In the very same piece, however, White explicitly endorsed the idea that it was acceptable to enact measures "against the barbarism of untaught minorities." He chuckled at Emporia's churchmen after they denounced him for the sacrilege of inviting the town to follow the tallying of World Series scores in front of the *Gazette's* offices following Sunday services in 1926. Two years later the president-general of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) added White to a blacklist of dangerous radicals for his activities in support of civil liberties and against literary censorship and the Ku Klux Klan. Dozens of mainstream individuals and groups were named on the list, including the prominent civil libertarian Clarence Darrow, the Young Men's Christian Association, and the National Catholic Welfare League. White observed that the president-general's list of Jews, Catholics, and liberals was strikingly similar to the Klan's usual targets, and he joked that she had "allowed several lengths of Ku Klux nightie to show under her red, white and blue."<sup>16</sup>

The key issue of Prohibition, however, was no laughing matter to White, who fiercely contested any suggestion of repeal as a serious threat to American democracy. White argued that the rural middle class had prescribed Prohibition as a remedy for the industrial inefficiency and social waste caused by liquor. He scolded those who insisted on characterizing the issue as a moral question, insisting that "in the west the dominant prohibitionists were not the churchmen . . . but the business men" who sought a more reliable workforce. Nevertheless, White's justifications for Prohibition relied on an assortment of moral judgments and rationales. Liquor was a "constant breeder of poverty" because the poor were too weak willed to resist spending their limited resources on alcohol, leaving society to clean up the resulting wreckage.

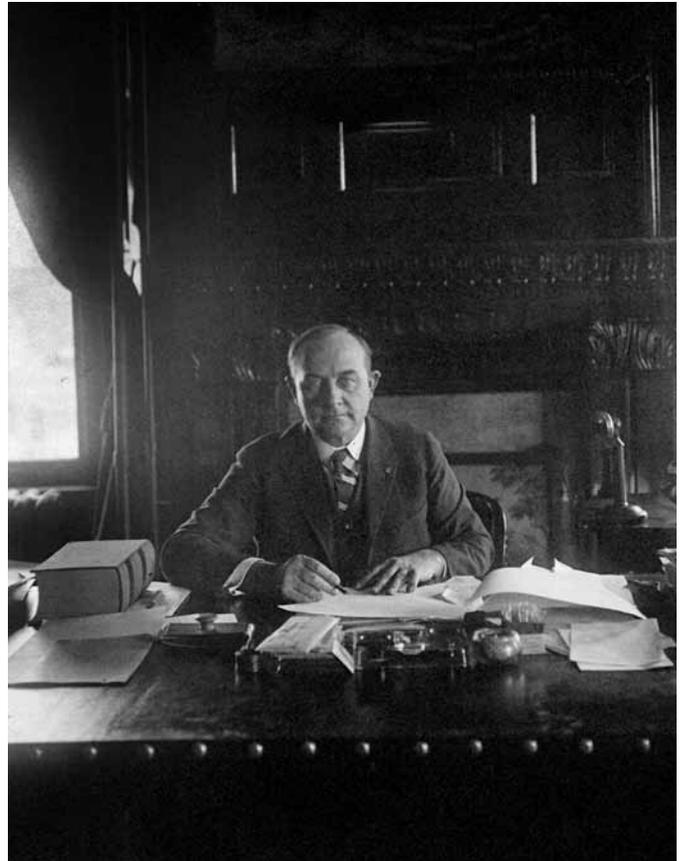
Villard, November 19, 1924, box 84, White Papers; White, "Annihilate the Klan!," *Nation*, January 7, 1925, 7; Villard, Speech to the Penguin Club, Washington, D.C., January 1925, box 130, Villard Papers; and White, *Autobiography*, 631.

16. "The Council Grove Case," *Emporia Gazette*, February 10, 1926; "Sees Klan's Hand in DAR Blacklist," *New York Times*, April 6, 1928; "Emporia Scoreboard Offends Ministers," *New York Times*, October 10, 1926; and "The Blue Menace," *Nation*, April 18, 1928, 422.

Furthermore, he explained that “the rich boozier is a rebel—a militant, insistent lawbreaker,” whose scofflaw behavior encouraged the rest of society to disregard the rule of law. Although White allowed that reasonable people could disagree about the policy of Prohibition, he saw urban society’s tolerance of illegal liquor as an adolescent rebellion against the rural majority’s sober wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

The contest between rural and urban culture was foremost in White’s thinking as the 1928 presidential campaign got underway. White and Herbert Hoover were close friends, and White penned a campaign biography for *Collier’s* that depicted Hoover as the best small-town midwestern America had to offer. Hoover had spent his early childhood in West Branch, Iowa, and White depicted him as a hero who had made a fortune for himself and fueled prosperity at home by installing American-made machinery as a mining engineer overseas. While abroad, Hoover had helped bring order to a chaotic world and demonstrated American character by defending white women in China during the Boxer Rebellion. Finally, White described Hoover as a fine example of American neighborliness as the humanitarian who led the Belgian Relief campaign that helped feed the neutral population of occupied northwestern Europe during World War I. White admitted that his friend was overly “sensitive to personal criticism” and lacked political instincts, but he sought to turn these weaknesses into an advantage by portraying Hoover as an ordinary American untainted by politics.<sup>18</sup>

Hoover’s biography contrasted sharply with that of the Democratic nominee, Alfred E. Smith, who was the son of immigrants raised in the heart of New York City’s vibrant ethnic culture. Smith rocketed through New York’s Tammany Hall political machine, the state assembly, and the governor’s mansion, where he launched an audacious campaign of labor, education, and public utility reforms. White admired Smith as an intelligent, courageous, and sincere reformer who had distanced himself from the Tammany machine that bore him. At the same time, White recognized that the New York governor was the nation’s

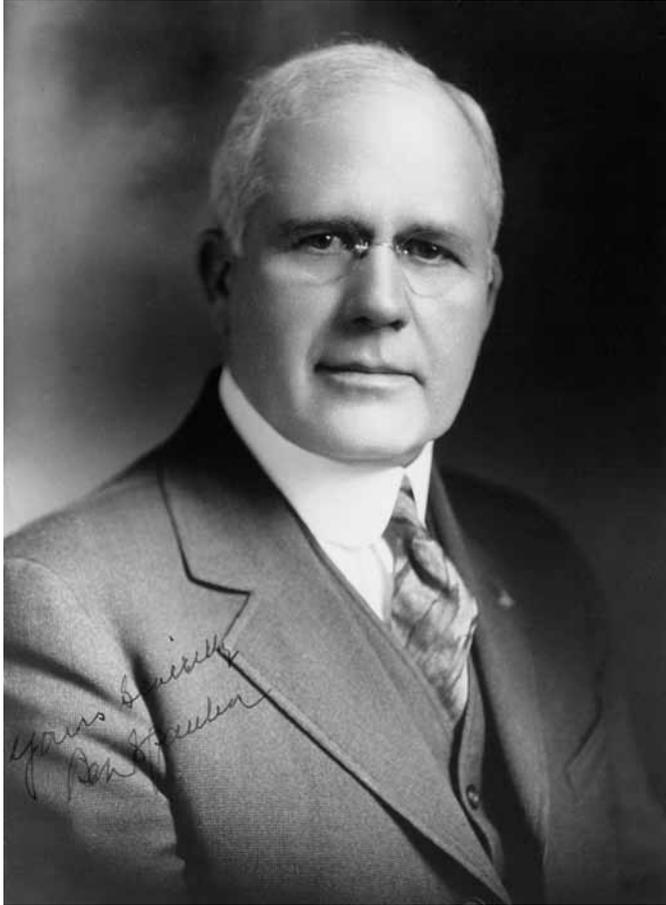


*Incoming Governor Jonathan M. Davis, a Democrat aligned with the Klan, was powerless to stop Allen’s ouster case because only one of the three seats on the charter board was filled by gubernatorial appointment and the other two were held by anti-Klan men. Both Governor Davis and the anti-Klan board members were due for reelection in 1924, which meant that the Klan’s fate in Kansas turned on the election’s outcome. Davis, who was born in Bronson, Kansas, and served one term as the state’s governor, is pictured at his desk signing a bill into law.*

most prominent symbol of a new, urban civilization that presented a “challenge to our American traditions, a challenge which . . . will bring deep changes into our American life.” While White admired Smith as a keen politician with a “national size” character, he rejected Smith’s urban culture and his Tammany pedigree. Walter Lippmann presciently observed that Smith’s fate turned on whether he could convince rural voters that he was culturally qualified for the White House, or at least to set their prejudices aside long enough to vote him into office. As one of rural America’s most prominent liberals, White highlighted the difficulty of this task when he depicted a procession of urban delegates at the Democratic National Convention as a circus “filled with Sullivans, Murphys,

17. On the democratic implications of the Prohibition movement, see Zimmerman, *Distilling Democracy*; “Thoughts on Prohibition,” *Emporia Gazette*, March 12, 1926; “The New Rebellion,” *Emporia Gazette*, July 9, 1926; White to H. L. Mencken, April 29, 1922, box 67, White Papers; and White to Nicholas Butler, July 5, 1928, box 136, White Papers.

18. William Allen White, “The Education of Herbert Hoover,” *Collier’s*, June 9, 1928, 8–9; “The Sunrise Trumpet,” *Emporia Gazette*, June 18, 1928; “Norris, of Nebraska, Snorts at Convention,” *Emporia Gazette*, June 16, 1928; and Lichtman, *Prejudice and the Old Politics*, 5–8.



The 1924 Republican nominee for governor, Fredonia-native Benjamin S. Paulen, had defeated an overtly anti-Klan candidate in the primary, and White, Allen, and other anti-Klan Republicans were outraged when Paulen, pictured in the mid-1920s, refused to publicly denounce the KKK. Allen asked White to run for governor as an anti-Klan independent, but White was reluctant to break his journalistic vows by entering politics.

O'Tooles and Guadellis and Greeks, with names that sound like a college yell."<sup>19</sup>

Governor Al Smith's biography alone made him unpalatable to the Democratic Party's rural constituencies, but his stance as an unapologetic anti-Prohibitionist posed a potentially insurmountable obstacle to party unity. The Democrats managed to finesse the issue with a platform plank calling for an "honest effort" to enforce Prohibition, but Smith reignited the controversy when his nomination acceptance note stated that he intended to enforce the

19. William Allen White, "Al Smith, City Feller," *Collier's*, August 21, 1926, 8, 9, 42, 43; William Allen White, *Masks in a Pageant* (New York: MacMillan, 1928), 467; "Editorial Correspondence," *Emporia Gazette*, June 26, 1928; Walter Lippmann, "The Sick Donkey," *Harper's* 155 (September 1927): 415–21, Lippmann Papers; and Slayton, *Empire Statesman*, 30, 84–85, 129–33, 169–74, 240.

law while pressing for its modification. Prohibitionists, or "Drys," such as White were astounded. The editor noted that the candidates were both honest men with similar platforms, and Smith's action had made Prohibition the campaign's central issue. White launched an editorial fusillade that ranged far beyond the liquor question by claiming that Smith had served Tammany Hall in voting for bills that favored liquor, gambling, and prostitution as a New York state legislator. Tammany Hall had launched Smith's career, and White explained that rural Americans opposed him because "his record shows the kind of president he will make—a Tammany president" willing to sacrifice his principles for political gain. White asserted that a President Smith would "menace American ideals and threaten the institutions of our fathers. Smith must be beaten if America remains America."<sup>20</sup>

The editorial went unnoticed nationally until White reprised his comments in a speech launching Hoover's Kansas campaign on July 12. The press focused on White's charges that Smith's record on saloons, gambling, and prostitution made him a threat to America's "whole Puritan civilization," and Smith responded that "Mr. White has brains and ought to know better." The *New York Times* chirped that ending Prohibition was the best way to restore "Puritan civilization" because the Puritans were heavy drinkers by modern standards. White retorted that the Puritans had also persecuted Quakers and hung witches, but their positive contribution was "an orderly individualistic civilization" that "moralized its economic issues," as he claimed Americans had with Prohibition. Although he conceded that Smith was courageous, intelligent, and audacious, White alleged that these attributes were dangerous unless tempered by midwestern morality because they made it possible for Smith to "chloroform the people so that the Tammany chain will be forged upon them." As White wrote one local Democrat, he might have supported a candidate like Smith if the New York governor had "been born out here in our country. I wish he did not have the sour beer smell of Tammany in his clothes."<sup>21</sup>

20. "Editorial Correspondence," *Emporia Gazette*, June 30, 1928; "Smith Amends the Platform," *Emporia Gazette*, July 2, 1928; "Not Obey—Observe," *Emporia Gazette*, July 6, 1928; "Al Smith's Record," *Emporia Gazette*, July 7, 1928; and Slayton, *Empire Statesman*, 196–99, 256–75.

21. "White Calls Smith Menace to Nation," *New York Times*, July 13, 1928; "Smith Strikes Back," *New York Times*, July 15, 1928; "Gov. Smith vs. William Allen White," *New York World*, July 18, 1928; "Puritan 'Bill' White," *New York Times*, July 14, 1928; "Al Smith Denies Charges," *Emporia Gazette*, July 14, 1928; "Tammanizing America," *Emporia Gazette*, July 21, 1928; and White to Paul Jones, July 20, 1928, box 138, White Papers.



*White finally threw his hat into the ring as an anti-Klan independent in early September 1924, and he made defending American culture his signature issue by denouncing the Klan as the enemy of small-town values and the Constitution. This cartoon, titled "A Real American Goes Hunting," was drawn by Rollin Kirby and published by the New York World during the campaign. Although Paulen won the governorship in a landslide, White's showing in the race proved that Kansans could be receptive to the liberal rhetoric of tolerance. The outcome was a moral victory to White, who believed he had exposed the KKK as a sham and proven that ordinary citizens could stand against it.*

White planned to spend several days in New York City before sailing for a much needed vacation to Europe in August, and he longed for the opportunity to give Smith "another wallop" on the candidate's home turf. The Republican National Committee (RNC) and a church group provided White with research aides to dig into Smith's record, and the editor released their report upon his arrival in New York City on July 29. However, he withdrew his allegations pertaining to gambling and prostitution the next day after Lippmann, their mutual friend, informed White that Smith had sound policy reasons to vote against the measures in question. Lippmann believed that White had seen the light, and

he assured another mutual friend that the Kansan was merely guilty of "carelessness, an attempt to make good on his carelessness, an amateur investigation and muddle-headedness. He's a sweet fellow and I think he was very contrite." White saw things differently, explaining that he had withdrawn the charges as "a chivalrous gesture" after Lippmann told him that Smith's "wife and daughter were weeping" about the allegations. White sailed for Europe and the controversy subsided until his friend Henry Allen, formerly the governor of Kansas and now the RNC's publicity director, leaked a private cable from White reasserting the charges. The editors of the liberal journal the *Nation* were amused, quipping that "what Mr.



*The contest between rural and urban culture was foremost in White's thinking as the 1928 presidential campaign got underway. White and Herbert Hoover were close friends, and White took up his pen to tout Hoover as the best small-town midwestern America had to offer. He also hosted this dinner in the garden at Red Rocks on July 18, 1927, where the editor introduced Mr. Hoover, then a member of President Calvin Coolidge's cabinet, to his fellow Kansas newspapermen. White and Hoover sat next to one another at the back of the gathering (Hoover just beneath the lower window of the two-toned house in the background and White to his right). Photograph courtesy of the Kansas Collection, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, Lawrence.*

White plainly needs is a rest cure in some Swiss resort, until he recovers his ordinary political judgment, not to say sanity."<sup>22</sup>

The campaign intensified in White's absence, and the *Nation* observed that the editor's allegations against Smith survived in the form of vicious pamphlets distributed anonymously "by the hundreds of thousands" in the Midwest. The charges became part of a "whispering campaign" that the *Nation* described as

rumors and innuendo meant to smear Smith based on "two prejudices—those against Catholicism and against Tammany Hall." Smith's candidacy opened the solidly Democratic South to Hoover's appeals, and both sides employed vicious, bigoted campaign tactics in an effort to gain an advantage. Pro-Smith Democrats claimed that Hoover would place African Americans in control of the South if the Republicans won, while Hoover's supporters spun lurid tales of Papal domination, ecclesiastical immorality, and urban vice in denouncing Smith. Anti-Catholic bigotry was particularly effective in the South, where negative attitudes about Catholicism were so widespread that even pro-Smith liberals fully accepted the idea that the Catholic mind was too heavily regimented to be capable of independent thought. Both the Prohibition and Tammany Hall issues fit neatly into this anti-Catholic

22. Walter Lippmann to Felix Frankfurter, August 2, 1928, folder 429, roll 10, Lippmann Papers; White to Helen Mahin, December 18, 1928, box 138, White Papers; Untitled article, *Nation*, August 15, 1928, 148; "The Hoover Whispering Campaign," *Nation*, September 28, 1928, 263; "Smith Strikes Back at White's Charges," *New York Times*, July 15, 1928; "White Withdraws Part of Charges," *Emporia Gazette*, July 31, 1928; "White Withdraws Smith Vice Charges," *New York Times*, August 1, 1928; "White Now Stands By Smith Charges," *New York Times*, August 15, 1928; and White, *Autobiography*, 634.

narrative, and Hoover's campaign wielded all three against Smith in the South.<sup>23</sup>

The same midwestern ideas of neighborliness and orderly government that had spurred White's anti-Klan run in 1924 motivated him against Smith in 1928, and he obliged Hoover's request to return to the battle upon returning from Europe in October. Although White never mentioned Smith's Catholicism, he did not need to because his rhetoric about Tammany and Prohibition played into widespread cultural biases against Catholics. Indeed, as soon as he disembarked in New York City, White declared that "Tammany is like the Ku Klux Klan in robbing a man of his individuality and deadening his conscience," echoing charges that many applied against the Catholic Church as well. Speaking requests quickly poured in, and White focused his energies on a Southern tour attacking Smith as the enemy of rural neighborliness and America's founding principles. White's stump speech acknowledged that both candidates were exceptional men, but he claimed that Hoover was "a farm boy" with "the American mind" and Smith was imbued with "the Tammany Mind." Americans ought to vote for Hoover because American civilization was built on rural values, which White summarized as "orderly, moral, healthy, neighborly, kindly, with just and equitable relations between all citizens rich or poor." White's brief argument for Hoover was that the Republican was best suited to preserve the nation's founding principle of millions of voters casting free ballots as well as its cultural "ideals of probity, of neighborly kindness."<sup>24</sup>

The vast majority of White's speech was dedicated to attacking Smith and his "Tammany Mind." Tammany Hall challenged the American doctrine of political individuality by operating a rival system that demanded strict obedience from its lieutenants and block voting by the lower classes, with votes paid for with "charity rather than justice." The elevation of a Tammany man such as Smith to the highest office in the land threatened to "infect

23. "The Hoover Whispering Campaign," 263; John T. McGreevy, "Thinking on One's Own: Catholicism in the American Intellectual Imagination, 1928-1960," *Journal of American History* 84 (June 1997): 97-131; Slayton, *Empire Statesman*, 284-87, 300-9; and Lichtman, *Prejudice and the Old Politics*, 59-76, 245.

24. Agran, "Too Good a Town," 136-38; "White Links Smith to Tammany 'Evils,'" *New York Times*, October 20, 1928; White, speech at Independence, Kansas, October 19, 1928, box E-8, White Papers; "Retracted Nothing," White Says at Home," *New York Times*, October 2, 1928; White to Henry Allen, October 18, 1928, box 135, White Papers; "A Personal Word," *Emporia Gazette*, October 2, 1928; and Herbert Hoover to White, July 24, 1928, box 71, Campaign and Transition Series, Herbert Hoover Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.

the Nation" with the Tammany rot. White summarized the question before the voters: "shall the government of free men exalting a free conscience in government survive on this continent, or shall we Tammanize America?" Prohibition was merely "the symbol which dramatizes the issue," because the rural majority had enacted it as an economic measure to improve society. Tammany rejected Prohibition because the law represented "a conscience in politics, the rule of the majority, the obedience of the minority, [and] fundamental rights" without favor. White reasserted that Smith had stood with Tammany on the saloon question in the New York legislature on every occasion, straining credulity by claiming that this recapitulation was intended to show "how Tammany perverts its followers," not to "pretend that any moral turpitude lurked in these votes." Smith would "stand in the White House as he has stood in Albany," and White begged his rural audiences to "save the America of our constitution, a free unbought, unbossed America" from the "gang of Tammany hoodlums" that would ride Smith's coattails into the White House.<sup>25</sup>

**A**nti-Smith hysteria helped to elect Hoover by an overwhelming margin, and the echoes of the divisive campaign reverberated through the liberal ranks. Editor Villard severed his friendship with Senator Borah after the Republican old guard paid Borah's expenses to campaign for Hoover, while the GOP shunned White's liberal Republican friend Senator George W. Norris, a Republican from Nebraska, for having actively campaigned for Smith. Lippmann spoke for many eastern liberals when he stated that Hoover's win was a "victory of economic conservatism and of political and religious fundamentalism," while the *Nation* noted that "from the beginning of the campaign there has been a group to which he emphatically owes his success: Prejudice, Bigotry, Superstition, Intolerance, Hate, Selfishness, Snobbery, and Passion." The "whispering campaign" against Smith had shown Villard that the attitudes of "dense ignorance and prejudice of the Scopes case in Tennessee, which we had flattered ourselves was limited to backwoods districts, are in reality to be found in every American community." Villard cited the fact that Hoover had not felt compelled to sound a single note of disapproval against this bigotry as proof that a wide

25. White, speech at Independence, Kansas; "A Very Personal Matter," *Emporia Gazette*, November 5, 1928; Lichtman, *Prejudice and the Old Politics*, 59-61; and Slayton, *Empire Statesman*, 258-59, 312.



*Hoover's biography contrasted sharply with that of the Democratic nominee, Alfred E. Smith, who was the son of immigrants raised in the heart of New York City's vibrant ethnic culture. Smith rocketed through New York's Tammany Hall political machine, the state assembly, and the governor's mansion. White admired Smith as a sincere reformer, but recognized that the New York governor was the nation's most prominent symbol of a new, urban civilization that presented a "challenge to our American traditions." Before long, White was actively campaigning against Smith. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.*

swath of the population was not considered to be fully American.<sup>26</sup>

White was disturbed by the most egregious examples of racial and religious bigotry that had been used against Smith during the campaign, but he was blind to the inherent intolerance in his rural triumphalism. Instead, White exalted that the White House had been saved from Tammany Hall, although he did concede that he had

26. Walter Lippmann, radio statement, November 6, 1928, box 232, Lippmann Papers; "Hoover Wins," *Nation*, November 14, 1928, 510; Walter Villard to Ramsay MacDonald, December 6, 1928, folder 2411, Villard Papers; Oswald Garrison Villard, *Fighting Years: Memoirs of a Liberal Editor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1939), 469; Slayton, *Empire Statesman*, 268, 321-24; and Lichtman, *Prejudice and the Old Politics*, 25.

reservations about Hoover's thin skin and his deification of prosperity. Ever the optimist, White cited the president-elect's prosperity mantras as heralds of flowering liberalism because they reflected a desire to advance social justice by lifting all boats. Lippmann was in Kansas City two weeks after the election delivering a speech on the American people's complacency about prosperity, and the two grew reacquainted. White was certain that Lippmann had enjoyed himself, but Lippmann reported that he

found the experience extremely depressing. White surely is about the best thing that the Middle West and the small town in the Buick-radio age has produced. And judged by any standard of civilized liberalism it's a pretty weedy flower. He made me feel as if defeating Al Smith had in it an enterprise about equivalent to heaving a stray cat out of the parlor.

Lippmann consoled himself with the observation that Hoover liberals such as White were anti-Smith rather than pro-Hoover, and he hoped that they would see the light after Hoover began to implement his agenda.<sup>27</sup>

Reform-minded midwesterners such as White played an important role in defeating Al Smith in 1928, but the outcome also laid the foundation for the New Deal liberal coalition. While Lippmann mourned the defeat, he recognized that Smith had "started something" by tallying a greater share of the popular vote than any Democrat since Woodrow Wilson.<sup>28</sup> Smith contributed to the coming of the New Deal by winning America's cities for the Democratic Party, which Franklin D. Roosevelt then incorporated into a political coalition with the Solid South in 1932. Several of White's midwestern liberal Republican friends became New Dealers after campaigning for Smith in 1928, including Harold Ickes and George Norris, and midwestern liberals continued to play an important role in the New Deal coalition for the next fifty years. Resolving

27. White to Henry Haskell, November 20, 1928, box 137, White Papers; Walter Lippmann to Herbert Croly, November 21, 1928, folder 303, reel 7, Lippmann Papers; "Hoover and Progress," *Emporia Gazette*, November 6, 1928; White to Harold Ickes, November 23, 1928, box 41, Harold Ickes Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Walter Lippmann, speech at Kansas City, November 15, 1928, series 6, box 231, Lippmann Papers; MacLean, *Behind the Mask*, 92-97; Lichtman, *Prejudice and the Old Politics*, 63-64; Slayton, *Empire Statesman*, 284-86; and Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, and Co., 1980), 249.

28. Walter Lippmann to White, November 7, 1928, folder 1277, reel 33, Lippmann Papers.

the culture war that had liberals siding with conservatives was an essential step in the movement towards New Deal liberalism, and the fact that White's midwestern liberals had invested all their hopes in Hoover set them up for a realignment when the realities of his presidency proved their faith to be misplaced.

The crisis that shattered the Hoover myth was not long in coming, because the patina of everlasting prosperity that Lippmann had discussed in Kansas City concealed a deadly rot. Even White noted in April 1929 that the American economy was built on a "foundation of sand," and in May he wondered "when will the sleeper awake?" By a twist of fate, White and Lippmann were dining together in New York City on the evening of October 29, when the great crash of the New York Stock Exchange inaugurated the Great Depression. White chaired the local branch of a Hoover administration initiative to coordinate private relief as a response to the Depression, and he watched as his hard-working Kansas neighbors starved in December 1930. Increasingly fearful that hunger would lead to revolution, White penned editorials begging Hoover to demonstrate leadership and praising the innovative state relief programs of New York's governor, Franklin D. Roosevelt. The editor recognized that Roosevelt was a rising star who could achieve the presidency, but he worried that the governor's opposition to Prohibition might derail his candidacy if he ran for the White House in 1932. Lippmann was stunned when White wrote him frankly admitting that Prohibition, the issue that White had claimed epitomized rural superiority, had been a "sort of stalled car in the road" that had wrecked liberal cooperation and had to be repealed as soon as possible.<sup>29</sup>

**W**as White's midwestern liberalism "a pretty weedy flower?" White's reform ideology was based on midwestern values, and these values spurred him against the Ku Klux Klan in 1924 and Al Smith in 1928. Both the Klan and the Tammany Hall system that produced Smith functioned as machines that subverted American values by demanding obedience to a hierarchical organization. The Klan pursued its goals through intolerance and terror, while Tammany Hall used favors and corruption to achieve its agenda. Both violated White's midwestern affinity for

29. "A Foundation of Sand," *Emporia Gazette*, April 19, 1929; "Stop, Look, Listen," *Emporia Gazette*, May 8, 1929; White to Walter Lippmann, January 9, 1931, folder 2226, reel 98, Lippmann Papers; and "The Need of a Leader," *Emporia Gazette*, December 13, 1930.



*Walter Lippmann, a political pundit and editor with the New York World, was a friend of White's, who supported the Kansan in his 1924 gubernatorial run against the KKK. Lippmann was also friends with Al Smith, and he encouraged White to rethink his affiliation with Hoover and his deification of prosperity. Despite the strain put on their friendship by the 1928 election, Lippmann noted that "White surely is about the best thing that the Middle West and the small town in the Buick-radio age has produced." Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.*

neighborliness, individualism, and good government, but Smith also fed White's cultural apprehensions about the rise of urban America. Liberalism could not "flower" as a coherent political movement as long as cultural issues spurred its adherents to make war on each other, but Lippmann was mostly correct. White and other midwestern liberals realized their mistake almost immediately after they discovered what Hoover *would not do* during the Great Depression. The emergency forced reform-minded midwesterners to set aside their cultural apprehensions, revive their alliance with eastern liberals in support of efforts to grapple with the Depression, and evolve into New Deal liberals.<sup>30</sup>

30. Feinman, *Twilight of Progressivism*, 91.

Like many older liberals, White eventually grew suspicious that FDR was too given to political expediency, and they feared that this constituted a weak foundation for lasting reform. Concerns about Roosevelt's methods did not reflect opposition to the New Deal agenda, however, and White celebrated measures such as the Social Security Act and the Wagner Act protecting labor's right to organize as long-overdue remedies that would restore prosperity by expanding access to middle-class living standards. Although White remained a Republican, Roosevelt spoke volumes when he quipped before an Emporia crowd during the 1936 campaign that he was

pleased to have "Bill White's support for three and a half years out of every four." By supporting New Deal policy and working to advance New Deal Republican candidates such as Kansas's pro-New Deal governor, Alfred M. "Alf" Landon, White and other midwestern liberals helped to create the bipartisan constituency that sustained the New Deal order for nearly fifty years. Still, just as the seeds of midwestern liberalism had survived the 1920s culture war, so did midwestern apprehensions about the challenge posed by changing cultural norms during the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> [KH]

31. Agran, "Too Good a Town," 151; White, *Autobiography*, 639–40; "Roosevelt Wins," *Emporia Gazette*, August 26, 1935; Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, 6, 60; on liberal discomfort with FDR see Otis Graham, *An Encore for Reform: The Old Progressives and the New Deal* (New York: Oxford, 1967).