

# Arkansas Politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century:

## Twelve Elections That Shaped a Century

### I

## Tawdry Populism, Timid Progressivism, 1900-1930

### One-gallus Democracy

Not with a whimper but a bellow did the 20<sup>th</sup> century begin in Arkansas. The people's first political act in the new century was to install in the governor's office, for six long years, a politician who was described in the most graphic of many colorful epigrams as "a carrot-headed, red-faced, loud-mouthed, strong-limbed, ox-driving mountaineer lawyer that has come to Little Rock to get a reputation — a friend of the fellow who brews forty-rod bug juice back in the mountains."<sup>1</sup> He was the Tribune of the Haybinders, the Wild Ass of the Ozarks, Karl Marx for the Hillbillies, the Stormy Petrel, Messiah of the Rednecks, and King of the Cockleburs.

Jeff Davis talked a better populism than he practiced. In three terms, 14 years overall in statewide office, Davis did not leave an indelible mark on the government or the quality of life of the working people whom he extolled and inspired, but he dominated the state thoroughly for

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation from the *Helena Weekly World* appears in slightly varied forms in numerous accounts of Davis's years. It appeared in the newspaper in the spring of 1899 and appears in John Gould Fletcher, *Arkansas* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1947) p. 2. This version, which includes the phrase "that has come to Little Rock to get a reputation" appears in Raymond Arsenault, *The Wild Ass of the Ozarks: Jeff Davis and the Social Bases of Southern Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), p. 68. Davis loved to repeat the description in campaign speeches.

nearly a decade, established the prototype of the caricature Southern demagogue, and inspired the greatest of them all, Huey P. Long, who 30 years later would be the true radical that others only purported to be. Jeff Davis was a model for “the Kingfish,” who when he was 18 marveled at a Davis stump speech. Davis served as a punctuation mark for the great agrarian protest of the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century known as populism, and in Arkansas he tethered that largely ineffectual movement to its more circumspect and effective offspring, progressivism.

As farmers and laborers began to experience the mercies of the free market after the Civil War, the cotton-based economy in the South virtually collapsed. By 1898, the wholesale price of cotton had fallen to 6 cents a pound, from 83 cents in 1865, and nearly half the farms in Arkansas had fallen from owner-operated into tenancy. The economic calamity in the Arkansas countryside and the rest of the South produced random protests and mostly disconnected political movements. Poor Arkansas farmers, white laborers and sometimes blacks organized into first one and then another arrangement — the Grange, the Brothers of Freedom, the Agricultural Wheel, the Reform Society, the Sons of Liberty, the Farmers Club, the Farmers’ Alliance and the National Farmers Union — where their plight was pondered and remedies debated. Political action was sometimes espoused, sometimes eschewed.

When the protest did turn tangibly political, the major political parties were not practical forums. The Republican Party was tainted by the excesses of Reconstruction and the Democratic Party, which had been controlled by conservative plantation owners and merchants since Reconstruction, was furtively if not openly hostile to any change in the status quo. So the protest was channeled to the Greenback Party, the Union Labor Party and, finally, the People’s or Populist Party. As a political movement, the protest crested in Arkansas with the race for governor in 1888, when the Democrats literally had to steal the election. But by the middle of the

'90s, the Democrats had co-opted just enough of the populist agenda to turn back the tide. The Democrats also learned to exploit race, both rhetorically by race-baiting and statutorily, by making it harder for African-Americans to vote and impossible for them to vote in the Democratic primaries, where for another 75 years nearly all elections would be decided. (Davis signed a law institutionalizing the white primary in 1906.)

Although he would later embrace the paranoia of the wildest of the agrarian radicals, Davis was anything but a populist before 1896. He and his father, both lawyers, were part of the elite and well-to-do in Pope County and owing to his fearlessness and oratorical skills he was the go-to man for Democrats in the Ozarks whenever they had to match wits with the radicals or the Republicans. He was picked to debate James H. “Cyclone” Davis, the spellbinding Texas populist. Jeff would say later, probably apocryphally, that “Cyclone” missed the debate because someone had stolen into his hotel room during the night and made off with his wallet and pants. But Davis gradually became disaffected with the bourbon establishment, first when he was forced out of a race for Congress in 1894 by weak support in his own county convention but in earnest when he was touched by the great prairie avenger, William Jennings Bryan. He campaigned for Bryan in the 1896 presidential election — Bryan was the fusion candidate of both the Democratic and Populist parties — and he was picked to deliver the official Arkansas vote to the Electoral College. Davis would later explain the conversion:

You should also remember tht in 1896, when we nominated the grandest and truest man the world ever knew — William Jennings Bryan — for president, we stole all the Populists had; we stole their platform, we stole their candidate, we stole them out lock, stock and barrel. . . Populists, why I used to hate them; but I did not know as much then as I do now; I did not have as much sense then as I have now.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> L. Sharpe Dunaway, Jeff Davis, *Governor and United States Senator: His Life and Speeches* (Little Rock, AR: Democrat Printing and Lithographing Co., 1913), p. 85.

Davis's election as attorney general in 1898, after the death of his front-running opponent, went largely unremarked. But when a suddenly reformist legislature enacted a bill outlawing price-fixing, Davis went after trusts and monopolies, particularly insurance companies, with a zeal never seen before. He became a laughingstock in the business community and he was considered finished. But Davis understood what almost no one else did, that the replacement of the old convention system with popular primaries had shifted the political firmament forever. Davis had absorbed the most invidious strains of populism — racism and virulent paranoia — and it would prove for him and others for another half-century an unstoppable combination.

### **The Election of 1900: A Karl Marx for Hillbillies**

Democratic parties in each of the one-party southern states faced the threat of Populism in the last years of the Nineteenth century. Such was certainly the case in Arkansas where the Agricultural Wheel was the base of the sociopolitical reform movement. As in other states, the Democratic party effectively battled Populism with disfranchisement. But, it was also common for to leaders with Populist leanings to gain power within the party. In Arkansas, the Democrat who played this role was Jeff Davis—Attorney General, Governor, and U.S. Senator.

Davis was born in extreme southwest Arkansas but his family soon moved to Pope County and it was there that Davis would begin his legal career. At age 28, Davis was elected prosecuting attorney. Eight years later, in 1898, after studying closely the speeches of 1896 presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan, Davis entered the race for Attorney General. He had little chance of defeating the head of the University of Arkansas law school, but the leading candidate dropped dead while delivering a speech and Davis—by defeating the token competition left in the race—became a statewide elected official. He used the office to put populism into action by attacking corporate interests in literally dozens of antitrust suits.

His 1900 race for governor, therefore became a referendum on his anticorporate actions.<sup>3</sup> Four conservative Democrats—Little Rock banker and philanthropist John G. Fletcher, Morrilton lumber merchant A. F. Vandevanteer, Delta newspaper editor J. E. Wood, and Fort Smith judge Edgar Bryant—served as foils in Davis's 1900 script. Davis went over the heads of local county elites who generally opposed him to speak directly to rural voters for their votes in the primary election, moving them with emotional rhetoric that combined a sympathy for the plight of rural Arkansans with coarse epithets against his urban and Delta enemies. In his opening speech of the campaign, Davis claimed: "I am not trying to array the country against

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<sup>3</sup> For overview and analyses of Davis's elections, see Richard L. Niswonger, *Arkansas Democratic Politics, 1896-1920* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1991) and Arsenault. For the best collection of Davis campaign rhetoric see Fletcher. See also Calvin R. Ledbetter, Jr., "Jeff Davis and the Politics of Combat," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 33 (1974): 16-37, and Richard L. Niswonger, "A Study in Southern Demogoguery: Jeff Davis of Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 39 (1980): 114-24

Little Rock. There are many noble men and women living there, God bless them. But there is a gang down there that needs cleaning out, and needs it awful bad....I will drive out that gang so clean if I am elected, that it will be like the Red River had run through the town.”<sup>4</sup> He also linked populism to Christian values, stating “The papers may say that nobody will vote for me except the fellow who wears patched breeches and one gallus and who lives up the forks of the creek and don’t pay anything except his poll tax....I want to tell you that there is no great reformation that originated on earth that did not come from the ranks of the humble and lowly. Jesus Christ, when he went out and started the greatest reformation that ever blessed mankind, went to the humble and lowly.” By primary election day, only Vandeventer remained in the race; Davis won every county except Pulaski in a mammoth show of political force.

The Republican party attempted to make a race in the general election against Davis, nominating Republican loyalist and Little Rock insurance agent and banker Harmon L. Remmel. Remmel’s business positions—and a telegram from his bosses at the New York Mutual Life company giving him permission to run—provided an ideal target for Davis’s rhetoric. He closed his successful race (won by two to one) with a message for his constituency that the state government would be theirs, “If you red-necks or hillbillies ever come to Little Rock, be sure to come to see me—come to my house. Don’t go to the hotel or the wagon-yards but come to my house and make it your home....The word ‘Welcome’ is written on the outside of the door, for my friends.”<sup>5</sup> But, no matter the sincerity of his rhetorical populism, it was impossible for Davis to follow through with a populist program because of the conservative control of the legislature.

After 1900, Davis’s campaign rhetoric became increasingly combative and racially focused. His third successful race for governor—in 1904 against two opponents including supreme court Justice Carroll Wood—was perhaps the most colorful in Arkansas history including physical violence and intense personal attacks. The following year, Davis went after an incumbent U.S. Senator and went to Washington to finish his political career. The Populist moment in Arkansas died with Davis in January 1913.

Davis would win three overwhelming elections as governor, over the opposition of most Democratic leaders, newspapers and the business community, each campaign topping the previous ones in the tenor of the invective and bombast and the intensity of the combat. But for six years of militant combat the actual reforms fell far short of the rhetoric. Most notable were an antitrust law that led to several price-fixing lawsuits by Attorney General William F. Kirby, the creation of a juvenile reform school, a few restrictions on working hours and child labor, and the establishment of a railroad regulatory commission that lowered passenger rates, the latter no small achievement in a legislature largely leased by the railroads for half a century. But one of his last acts was to persuade the legislature that the state sat on a big surplus (he counted the value of public school buildings around the state) and that taxes needed to be cut. It would leave

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<sup>4</sup>Fletcher, pp. 246-7.

the state's fiscal affairs in shambles. His political machine was so entrenched and his own appeal to the woolhats still so strong that Davis was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1906. Though Washington anticipated his arrival with curiosity and a little fear he soon became a bore in the Senate and fell quiet. The memory of his glory days was enough to re-elect him in 1912 but he died before taking office again. His seat would be filled for the next quarter-century by a true progressive who would become the most powerful Arkansan ever to serve in the United States Congress.

### **George Donaghey and the progressive tradition**

Real progressivism was late coming to Arkansas. It arrived in 1908 with the election of George Washington Donaghey, a furniture maker and builder from Conway. For eight of the next dozen years, Arkansas elected governors, Donaghey and Charles Hillman Brough, who embraced the idea that government could and ought to improve the health and opportunities of common people, purify the political system and correct the malfunctions and cruelties of the market. Reformist impulses would sputter on after 1920 until the Great Depression but it was only from 1908 through 1920 that governors, legislators and the electorate were generally in sync. Even then, the reforms, while numerous, were often timid and unenforced. Too, low taxation was a central objective of the redeemer constitution adopted in 1874 and a bedrock principle of the Democratic Party. The legislature leaped at every proposition to cut taxes, and even timid proposals to raise taxes, such as Donaghey's notion of uniform property assessments, were rebuffed either by the legislature or the voters. Bold campaign speeches and inaugural addresses and forward-looking laws on education and relief for the needy would prove nearly

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<sup>5</sup> Fletcher, p. 250.

useless when the state lacked cash for even the basic functions of government. It would not be until the last months of the administration of Governor Thomas C. McRae, in 1924, that the legislature was persuaded — partly by federal threat — to raise taxes and make a considerable investment in schools, highways and other services.

While populists were intent on breaking up trusts, which they viewed as the chief malefactors of hard times, and correcting economic distortions in the agricultural system that impoverished small farmers and laborers, they largely distrusted government power that was not unleashed for those ends. Progressives had no such inhibitions. To use the converse of a late 20<sup>th</sup> century maxim, they considered government the solution, not the problem. The progressive movement was largely based in cities and small towns and it was impelled by small businessmen and professional people instead of small farmers.

George Donaghey, the first businessman to become governor, personified the movement. A carpenter and then businessman who built a small fortune in the contracting business, he was something of a brawler but not an orator. Though they would occasionally find themselves in tandem in political contests or on an issue, he was an implacable opponent of Davis, whose excesses he thought embarrassed and isolated the state. In 1908, after first praising “honest George Donaghey,” Davis threw his machine behind William F. Kirby in the governor’s race. Davis left Washington and made a whirlwind 36-day journey around the state castigating Donaghey and urging a vote for Kirby. But he encountered signs in many places that his machine was crumbling and his grandstanding wearing thin. Donaghey would win the Democratic primary with 42 percent to Kirby’s 31 percent and a third candidate’s 27 percent.

A frequent practice in those days was for candidates to appear together in a schedule of visits around the state, sometimes traveling in the same conveyances. In the 1908 campaign, Kirby and two other candidates traveled together but Donaghey went his own way.

The Democratic Party platform, adopted after Donaghey's nomination, and his inaugural speech called for a wide array of progressive reforms: completion of a new state Capitol (a running debate and a recurring scandal for 10 years), women's suffrage, creation of a state board of education, creation of four agricultural high schools, a severance tax on many natural resources, an end to convict leasing, fishing and hunting laws, a tuberculosis sanatorium, a new mental hospital, more money for blind and deaf schools, amending the constitution to grant initiative and referendum powers to voters, campaign finance laws, election reform to give some electoral power to minority parties, greater powers for the state Railroad Commission, regulation of state banks, insurance regulation and creation of a tax commission. The tax commission was especially critical. Its purpose was to equalize wildly disparate property assessments across the state and, thus, improve funding for schools and local governments as well as the state. (Property taxes largely financed state government then.) Donaghey found the legislature generally supportive, although he failed to outlaw convict leasing, the tax commission got no appropriation and legislation calling a special election on prohibition failed. The legislature gave Donaghey extraordinary power on Capitol construction, and the legislature convened in the new but only partially finished Capitol in 1911.

His second term was not quite as ambitious. He sought a workers compensation law, school consolidation, a graduated income tax, a state board of health, and legislative procedural reform. (Weirdly, Donaghey vetoed — something he legally could not do — a resolution ratifying the income-tax amendment to the U. S. Constitution. Over the years he gave various

explanations for the attempted veto.) The legislature never passed legislation to end the scandalous convict-leasing system but, fulfilling his promise to pardon every inmate if the legislature did not pass it, in his final days in office after his defeat for a third term he pardoned 360 convicts. That ended the leasing system.

While he was liberal for his time, nothing in Donaghey's program or the whole progressive agenda was calculated to insure the rights or improve the lives of African-Americans, already virtually disfranchised and their citizenship for practical purposes repealed. He proudly called the Democratic Party "the white man's party" and, in a not-so-subtle bit of demagoguery, called the Republican Party the real home of blacks. Nevertheless, in his second term he did recommend a mild anti-lynching law that would have removed from office a sheriff who allowed a mob to remove a prisoner from his jail and lynch him.

### **The Election of 1910: Progressivism Lite**

The Progressive movement's influence on Arkansas politics was clearly less dramatic than other states, including other southern states. But, one important change to Arkansas's political rules of the game—the adoption of "direct democracy"—serves as a crucial example of (and a lasting result of) Progressivism in the state. Proponents of direct democracy—the initiative, referendum, and recall—argued that taking total decision-making power away from legislative bodies could lessen the influence of special interests and reduce corruption in politics generally.<sup>6</sup> Direct democracy had been advocated by earlier Populists in Arkansas, but it was not until 1910 that Arkansas's voters had an opportunity to consider the inclusion of two aspects of direct democracy—the initiative (the placing of constitutional amendments and acts before the voters via petition of the people) and referendum (the review of legislative acts by the voters at the polls)—in the state constitution.

In his first campaign for governor in 1908, George W. Donaghey included the adoption of the "I&R" as a key platform plank.<sup>7</sup> Donaghey's candidacy had been encouraged by key players in both the Farmers' Union (the older Populist organization) and the newer organized labor movement in Arkansas; believing that their voice was muted in the elite-controlled legislature, both groups were ardent supporters of direct democracy. Donaghey used the I&R as a way to focus an attack on the legislature which was routinely lengthening its increasingly expensive sessions and against six of whose members bribery charges had been filed related to the

<sup>6</sup> On the ideological movement for direct democracy, see Niswonger, pp. 242-7; Calvin R. Ledbetter, Jr., "Adoption of Initiative and Referendum in Arkansas: The Roles of George W. Donaghey and William Jennings Bryan," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 51 (1992): 199-223; Rod Farmer, "Direct Democracy in Arkansas, 1910-1918," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 40 (1981):

<sup>7</sup> On Donaghey's use of the issue in 1908, see Ledbetter, "Adoption of Initiative and Referendum."

construction of the new state capitol building. After his election, he was able to get a resolution through the legislature that the body would refer a proposed constitutional amendment on the subject to voters in the general election of 1910.

But, the measure was flawed in a key way: sloppily written, the measure would have allowed citizens of localities to propose and vote on changes in the state constitution and to reject at the local ballot box laws passed by the state legislature. The provision became known as the “joker” in the measure by opponents of the I&R. Still, even with this flaw, there was little doubt that the measure would gain the support of the majority of voters in the September 1910 election. The key question: Would it get a large enough vote to fulfill the subtle supermajority requirements for constitutional amendments?

By state supreme court ruling, constitutional amendments had to be approved by a majority of the number of votes cast in the gubernatorial election, a race in which many more voters typically cast votes. The proponents of Amendment 10, therefore, exerted an all-out effort to get this “constitutional majority” for the amendment. Donaghey spent tremendous energy on behalf of the initiative and organized labor and the Farmers’ Union became the most ardent workers on behalf of it. But, because the I&R was on the ballot only in Arkansas in 1910, the campaign became a focus of non-Arkansans as well, including the most famous orator on behalf of Populist causes William Jennings Bryan. Bryan came to Arkansas in the days leading up to the vote and gave 55 speeches over 5 days, capturing the ears of between 75,000 and 125,000 prospective voters.<sup>8</sup> The Batesville *Daily Guard* described Bryan’s visit there: “A stream of wagons, buggies, hacks, and saddle animals began pouring into town last evening and early this morning many more came in until conservative estimators place the number of hearers...at between six and seven thousand.”<sup>9</sup> It was a trip that paid off for the amendment, as areas supportive of the amendment on election day correlated strongly with Bryan’s path through the state.<sup>10</sup>

Overcoming the ardent opposition of the state bar association and the *Arkansas Gazette*, the amendment was passed 92,781 to 38,648; the amendment had achieved the “constitutional majority.” But, the life of the amendment was a messy and litigation-plagued one. In 1912, the state supreme court eliminated the “joker,” deeming it an absurdity. More damaging to the I&R was another 1912 court decision stating that the amendment had not changed the *total* number of constitutional amendments that could be considered in a given election; thus, if the legislature sent voters its limit of three amendments, none could be added via petition. Finally, the court said three years later that the constitutional majority rule applied to amendments considered via the petition process.

To overcome these court limitations, a new I&R proposal was sent to voters in 1920. It passed, but just failed to achieve the constitutional majority. But, in 1925, the supreme court upended precedent in *Brickhouse v. Hill*; the constitutional majority rule was no longer necessary for constitutional amendments coming to the people via petition; thus, the new I&R amendment was rightfully in the state constitution where it remains. As such, Arkansas is a rare southern state with the I&R option open to its people. That said, the use of the I&R process, while used on occasion for progressive goals opposed by the legislature such as state ethics provisions in 1988 and 1990, has been used even more regularly for less progressive ends. Voters over the decades also have used their lawmaking powers to prohibit the teaching of evolution (1928), to place a right-to-work amendment in the constitution (1944), to order all state officials to “oppose in every Constitutional manner the unconstitutional desegregation decisions of May 17, 1954” (1956), to bar state spending “to pay for any abortion, except to save the mother’s life” (1988), and to limit marriage to those between one man and one woman (2004).

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<sup>8</sup> See Ledbetter, “Adoption of Initiative and Referendum” and Farmer on Bryan’s role in the campaign.

<sup>9</sup> Ledbetter, “Adoption of Initiative and Referendum,” p. 217.

<sup>10</sup> For analysis of the demographics of the vote on the amendment, see Farmer.

## **The ascendance of Joe T. Robinson**

His agenda unfinished, Donaghey ran for a third term in 1912 against a two-term tradition that voters had waived only for Jeff Davis. His ambitions would clash with those of another progressive, Joseph Taylor Robinson, who would win that election and go on to become one of the most powerful lawmakers in the nation's history and the most successful and powerful politician Arkansas ever produced — until the 1992 election of Governor Bill Clinton as president of the United States.

Robinson was the son of a farmer who had been an iconoclastic Methodist preacher. Actually, the man had been an ardent Baptist but the church expelled him for the heresy of believing that a man by stern moral living could approach a state of sinlessness. Young Joe decided early that farming was too hard and unrewarding and he studied law. His prowess in the courtroom became legendary; so did his reputation as a loyal Democrat and foe of the populists. He was elected to the state House of Representatives at the age of 21 and quickly gained a reputation as a shrewd deal maker, debater and orator. Only weeks after becoming a lawmaker he nearly passed a bill to allow limited regulation of railroad rates; the railroads managed to kill the bill in the Senate. Then he introduced a far more rigorous bill, creating a regulatory agency similar to the federal Interstate Commerce Commission, but the powerful Iron Mountain Railroad Company stymied the legislation in the House, producing allegations that railroad bribery had defeated it. A legislative committee on which Robinson sat investigated the alleged bribery but exonerated House members.

He would campaign hard for Democrats, including the 1896 and 1900 candidate for president, William Jennings Bryan, earning the sobriquet in several newspapers of “boy orator of

the prairies” because his style and issues were remindful of Bryan.<sup>11</sup> In 1902 he ran for U.S. representative in a redrawn congressional district that embraced mostly unfamiliar country. He was given little chance of winning but although they traveled together around the district he outworked his opponent and won a decisive victory. The progressive movement nationally was in full swing, but the House of Representatives during eight of Robinson’s 10 years in the body was controlled by Republicans — the conservative variety, not Teddy Roosevelt acolytes. As a freshman, Robinson continued his battle to regulate railroad freight charges. “Is it not oppression,” he thundered to the House, “when by unlawful or, at best, questionable means a corporation can fix the price of almost every product consumed by the public?”<sup>12</sup> Unlike most lawmakers from the South, Robinson was tolerant of religious doctrines — he would denounce attacks on Jews, Catholics and other religious groups — and, presaging another great senator from Arkansas, he was an internationalist. In his first session in Congress, he and several other legislators formed a group to advocate world understanding by meeting with elected leaders of other nations and he said the United States had broken faith with the Philippines by failing to grant independence and by placing a tariff on Philippine goods coming into the United States.

Robinson’s ambition was to be a senator and he wanted to run in 1912 against Davis, whose dominion obviously was weakened during his term in the Senate. Robinson had supported Davis for re-election in 1902 but since then they had been implacable foes, particularly when they were serving on opposite ends of the Capitol in Washington. But the risk was great and Robinson chose instead to run for governor. It would be a race among three ambitious progressives. Donaghey decided to run for a third term against the odds and Attorney General Hal Norwood ran, backed by Senator Davis. But Norwood backed out and supported Donaghey

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<sup>11</sup> Cecil E. Weller, Jr. *Joe T. Robinson: Always a Loyal Democrat* . (Fayetteville, Ark.: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), p. 22.

and Davis ultimately backed Robinson. For a race between two men who had been, while not close friends, political allies, the race was brutal and sometimes personal. Donaghey was haunted by three issues: his promised completion of the state Capitol had not been realized; his advocacy of uniform property assessments (an issue that would recur over the next 75 years) was made to appear to be a likely tax increase for working people; and the desperate fiscal condition of state government left by Governor Davis's departing tax cut left the Donaghey administration unable for a time to redeem state employees' payroll warrants at full value. Robinson also guessed right on prohibition. Donaghey was an ardent prohibitionist and Robinson advocated a local-option resolution to the question. Voters in the general election would defeat the prohibition amendment. Robinson won a landslide victory. It was a bitter defeat for Donaghey. A dozen years later, in 1924, he would seek a measure of revenge by trying to block Arkansas's favorite-son vote for Robinson for president at the Democratic Convention.

### **The "Selection" of 1913: An Arkansan Enters the National Arena**

Throughout his political career, Joseph T. Robinson showed an ability to take advantage of political openings that struck his critics as sheer opportunism and struck his admirers as gumption. The key period in shaping his career came in 1911-1913 when in a two month period Robinson held the posts of U.S. Representative, Governor, and U.S. Senator. It was a period of election and "selection" success that gave him the opportunity to become a national leader, including his selection as the Democrats' vice-presidential candidate in 1928, making him the first Arkansan to appear on a national ticket.

After a decade in Congress, Robinson decided that he wanted to take out his former supporter Davis when the Senator came up for reelection in 1912. But, after traveling the state, Robinson determined that Davis remained unbeatable. Instead, Robinson decided that he should seek the governorship held by Governor George Donaghey, announcing that he would seek the office July 4, 1911. Several months later, Donaghey announced he would try to gain a rare third election as governor.<sup>13</sup>

In his announcement speech, Robinson put forward a "good government" platform focused on reducing the power of lobbyists in state government, balanced budgets, and prison reform. But, the expensive Donaghey-Robinson race centered not on these issues but on property taxes and prohibition. Issues were discussed, but the typical personal attacks came to the center of the campaign as the election neared with both men—and their surrogates—slinging mud with equal vigor. However, the Arkansas tradition against third terms did the

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<sup>12</sup> Weller, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> For accounts of the 1912 election, see Stuart Towns, "Joseph T. Robinson and Arkansas Politics, 1912-1913," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 24 (Winter 1965): 291-307; Weller, ch. 5; and Niswonger, pp. 198-202.

ultimate harm to Donaghey and Robinson ran up a huge margin over the incumbent, winning by nearly two to one. He spent the rest of 1912 finishing his duties in Washington and coming home to campaign against the tax and prohibition initiatives and preparing for his inauguration.

Everything in Arkansas politics went haywire on January 3, 1913, however. That morning, Senator Jeff Davis died of a heart attack at his Little Rock home. Since the constitutional amendment requiring a vote of the people for U.S. Senate had not yet been ratified, the legislature would choose the replacement for Davis for a full six year term to begin in early March. While Robinson kept quiet for several days about his plans, it was clear that the U.S. Senate was the job he had always wanted. Robinson would have had difficulty winning a direct election because it was clear that he was putting ambition above the job he had just been hired to carry out. But, legislators—a number of whom who had been elected on his coattails—found it easier to overlook such ambitions. On January 8, Robinson announced that he would seek the office. Meanwhile, he took office as governor and gave a State of the State address laying out an agenda that he hoped to never have to work to enact.<sup>14</sup>

Three other candidates sought the legislature’s blessing. Their first job was to get the General Assembly to send the choice to the voters (with the winner then ratified by the legislature). The Robinson forces, however, stopped that move by one vote. While Robinson was the favorite to win the legislative vote, there was a real sense that he might well lose if he were denied a first-ballot victory with “stop Robinson” forces coalescing behind an alternative candidate. And, indeed, Robinson had difficulty getting over the hurdle, failing to get majorities in either house on the first day of voting. On the second day (January 29<sup>th</sup>), the House and Senate came together with a majority of the 135 total legislators necessary to elect a U.S. Senator. The announced tally showed that Robinson had come up 5 votes short of the majority. But, then, all four GOP legislators shifted their votes to Robinson, bringing him within one vote. Avoiding the literal tackle attempts by managers of the other candidates’ campaigns, legislator Louis Josephs hopped up, was recognized, and shifted to Robinson, giving him the win.

On March 8, Robinson resigned from the governorship to go to Washington to take his new office. But, in doing so, he set off a constitutional crisis in Little Rock and broke a promise that he would stay until the end of the legislative session. Since the office of Lieutenant Governor did not yet exist, the President of the Senate was next in line to be governor. The problem: Two different Senate Presidents would hold the office within a week—one in the present legislative session and another after the session ended. But, Robinson was anxious to get started on his Senate career. It was a career that would last 24 years, until his death in 1937. Along the way, he would be nominated to run as vice-president on his party’s ticket as the “balancer” to “wet” northerner Governor Al Smith of New York in 1928.<sup>15</sup> Even more important was his role as the Senate’s majority leader during Franklin Roosevelt’s first term, a period during which the role of the federal government in American life would be permanently transformed.

But before Robinson could be sworn in as governor, Jeff Davis died, producing one of the most bizarre political twists in state history. (It was reminiscent of the 1906 election to succeed Davis, when the newly elected governor, John S. Little, suffered a mental breakdown

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<sup>14</sup> For the most thorough account of the machinations involved in the legislative “selection” process, see ch. 5 of Weller.

two days after his inauguration and was unable to serve, beginning a long constitutional crisis that was finally settled by the president pro tempore of the Senate, X. O. Pindall, serving as acting governor for the remainder of the term.) On Jan. 8, 1913, eight days before taking the oath as governor, Robinson announced that he was a candidate for the Senate. He was sworn in as governor on Jan. 16 and outlined an ambitious reform program, including a commission to develop a system of highways, most of which was systematically enacted in the seven weeks before he would leave office. On Jan. 29, the legislature elected Robinson to the Senate. On March 8, with the legislature still in session, he resigned to take his seat in Washington, arousing heavy criticism. In two months Robinson had been a congressman, the governor and a senator.

In 24 years in the Senate, Robinson would gain in influence and popularity in the state and achieve almost unparalleled success as a senator although his party was out of power in the Senate for most of his career there. He became the minority leader and then majority leader and was floor leader for Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, for whom he steered most of the New Deal legislation to fruition. For the latter service, he was about to be rewarded with an appointment to the U. S. Supreme Court, his life's goal, when he suffered a heart attack and died while trying to pass Roosevelt's Supreme Court reorganization in the Senate. The plan collapsed after his death. Robinson was the vice presidential running mate of New York Governor Al Smith in 1928, owing partly to his spirited criticism of the anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism that had surfaced in the early stages of the campaign.

With a few aberrations Robinson would hew closely to his progressive ideals in the Senate, fighting for women's suffrage, child-labor laws, union and worker rights, low tariffs, campaign-spending limits and progressive taxation. But one of those aberrations cost the state

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<sup>15</sup> On the 1928 race, see Cal Ledbetter, Jr. "Joe T. Robinson and the Presidential Campaign of 1928." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 45 (Summer 1986): 95-125

dearly. Owing to his friendship and partnership with Harvey Couch, the founder and president of Arkansas Power and Light Co., he blocked a federal hydroelectric project on the Arkansas River. Instead, the project went to Tennessee and created the Tennessee Valley Authority, which produced cheap power and economic development for Tennessee and northern Alabama. Robinson's close association with Couch, C. Hamilton Moses, leading bankers and the business establishment sullied Robinson's progressive credentials in some minds. And, most uncharacteristically, he denounced the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in the 1930s and seemed cruelly unsympathetic to the desperate plight of farmers and laborers in East Arkansas. Like other Southern politicians, Robinson would have to be characterized as a white supremacist but he denounced the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s when nearly every Southern politician was in its thrall.

### **Charles H. Brough and the foundations of education**

The progressive impulses that propelled Donaghey and Robinson were strong enough that they endured and produced some achievement in the legislature or by the initiative process even in a hiatus when the governor (George W. Hays, 1913-17) was either heedless or hostile. Hays was elected at a special election with the help of transparent election fraud. While he allowed some progressive legislation to become law, he fought hard and defeated a bill that required the names of people holding poll tax receipts be published before an election and punishing election fraud by jail terms. The bill would become law by initiative in 1917.

Progressivism reached its zenith with the election of Charles Hillman Brough in 1916. His election was historically remarkable from a couple of standpoints. His father had been a proud Union soldier, and solid Confederate lineage was a staple of Southern politics well into the

century. He had to defend himself against charges that he was a proponent of race-mixing. And in a state with an undercurrent of anti-intellectualism, he was highly educated — he held a doctorate in history, economics and jurisprudence from Johns Hopkins University and a law degree and he was a professor at the University of Arkansas. He was accused of secretly planning to put the University of Arkansas in charge of state affairs. His elegant, polysyllabic phrasing made him a headliner on the Chautauqua circuit but it was less forceful on the hustings. Nevertheless, he was elected and re-elected handily.

Brough's two terms produced a larger record of reforms than any governor before World War II and they included economic relief although it was a period of greater prosperity than the state had seen. He took office with a legislature that was largely in sync; it enacted seven-eighths of his proposals, primarily to improve education.<sup>16</sup> The school programs included a compulsory-attendance law, a millage foundation for all educational institutions, an illiteracy commission, county boards of education and a school for the mentally retarded. Like Bill Clinton 65 years later, he talked up the value of education everywhere. "The touch of the teacher is the wand of the modern Orpheus," Brough told a teachers group.<sup>17</sup> At Brough's earnest beseeching, the question of alcohol sales was finally put to rest, for a while, with the enactment of statewide prohibition in 1917.

Women were given the right to vote in primary elections, though not yet in general elections. (A happy byproduct for the governor was an extra 40,000 or so votes in the landslide 1918 primary, from women.) Brough told suffragists that voting rights for women would be "a mighty factor in the education, social, and moral amelioration of our state." He created a state

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<sup>16</sup> Foy Lisenby, "Charles Hillman Brough," in Timothy P. Donovan, Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., and Jeannie M. Whyne, *The Governors of Arkansas: Essays in Political Biography* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), p. 152.

commission to regulate the increasingly powerful public utilities, though it would be repealed as soon as he left office. The legislature passed a law to provide limited financial help to mothers of dependent children and free medical care for the needy. He advocated a comprehensive highway system and greater road funding. Some 2,500 miles of roads were built in his four years by improvement districts that issued bonds and collected roadside property taxes. Contracting fraud and anger over the improvement taxes would soon leave the highway program in shambles.

One of Brough's proposals was a convention to rewrite the state's 1874 Constitution, whose archaic post-Reconstruction strictures were already hamstringing progressive work. The convention's document gave women the right to vote, raised the salaries of constitutional officers, banned alcohol, created juvenile courts, provided for insurance regulation and had fewer restrictions on taxation. But like two subsequent constitutional revisions, in 1970 and 1980, it was defeated by voters, largely on the fear that it would raise taxes.

Although he ritually declared himself a segregationist Brough was the nearest a major politician came to being a racial egalitarian in the first 40 years of the century. Like Robinson, he advocated a sort of paternalism. Blacks, he said, were entitled to have their rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness protected. After the race massacre at Elaine (Phillips County) in East Arkansas in 1919, in which many blacks were slain following rumors that they going to rise up against white farmers, Brough appointed a special commission to promote racial harmony. That was as good as it got for blacks for almost half the century. The all-white primary, the poll tax and the Australian ballot had deprived them of any meaningful participation in the political life of the state, and the judicial system afforded them little protection from the depredations visited upon them by government or society. In some towns, companies were not allowed to

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<sup>17</sup> Michael B. Dougan's *Arkansas Odyssey: The Saga of Arkansas from Prehistoric Times to the Present* (Little Rock: Rose Publishing Company, 1993), p. 343.

employ blacks. The agricultural and mercantile systems forced them nearly everywhere into menial status, and neither major political party and its candidates proposed the slightest step to change that condition. Even the Republican Party early in the century turned its back on African-Americans. The party leadership sought to be “lily white” and national GOP leaders were apt to recognize the lily whites as the bona-fide Republicans. The Republican County Committee in Pulaski County held its meetings in the segregated Marion Hotel so that blacks could not participate.<sup>18</sup> In 1920, the so-called “black and tan” Republicans put up an independent black candidate for governor, J. H. Blount, against the Republican nominee and other candidates.

### **Tom McRae and the advent of modern taxation**

The progressive impulse did not die after World War I, but it had to compete with new social and intellectual forces: a new agricultural depression that put thousands more farmers into tenancy and peonage; a lawlessness that followed the frustration over the decline in people’s economic and social standing, particularly directed against blacks and religious and ethnic minorities; anger over property taxes collected for levee districts and roads; a reaction against political groups from the left that began, of all places, in the Justice Department of President Woodrow Wilson (the socialist father of future Governor Orval E. Faubus was caught in the net and jailed); the rise of the Ku Klux Klan as a political power in the state; a revolt against the modernism reflected in the phrase, “the roaring twenties”; labor turmoil that brought a reaction against unionism; and a general hunch that spendthrift and inefficient government just might be the root of most problems.

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<sup>18</sup> Dougan, p. 319.

All those forces confronted the aging Thomas C. McRae (he was 69 when he took office) when he was elected governor in 1920. McRae was a peculiar and unlikely successful candidate. He had enjoyed a successful political career as a young man starting nearly half a century earlier. He served in the state House of Representatives from Prescott and 18 years in Congress. Then he had a long and bountiful career as a banker and lawyer in South Arkansas. He was something of an iconoclastic banker, writing a rigorous bank regulation law for the legislature and, at the national level, bucking the commercial banking industry by advocating a federal reserve banking system. He supported the progressive initiatives of Donaghey, Robinson and Brough and was a progressive force in the constitutional convention of 1917-18. Advocating better schools, fairer taxation, government economies and a better highway program, he defeated eight candidates for the Democratic nomination and won easily against the two Republicans and the candidates of minor parties. Legislators embraced the ideas of economical government, good schools and better roadbuilding, but revolted at most of the mechanics: a personal income tax and severance taxes on many natural resources; gasoline taxes and registration fees on vehicles to replace some property taxes for roadbuilding; and centralized supervision over highway construction. But he had considerable success late in the second term when Washington withdrew federal aid. At a special session the legislature agreed to centralized control and a 4-cent-a-gallon gasoline tax to build highways and retire the Brough highway bonds. The legislature passed an income tax and then a cigar and cigarette tax for schools but the courts struck the taxes down. In desperation, McRae called another special session in 1924 for education. Pleading with lawmakers, he said a quarter of the state's children attended school less than 100 days a year and high schools were nonexistent in much of the state. Arkansas spent a meager \$23.63 per child a year from all

sources — a little over two dollars from the state — while equally poor Oklahoma next door spent \$64.34 per child.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Klan also rises**

By the end of McRae's term, the Ku Klux Klan had become a powerful force in the state. It had endorsed McRae's opponent, E. P. Toney, in the 1922 primary but he fared poorly. Business leaders and city fathers across much of the state had joined the Klan and it claimed a greater measure of respectability than its previous or later incarnations.<sup>20</sup> It was not so much dedicated to tormenting and frightening blacks (although it did that, too) as to safekeeping the public morals. Local klaverns assumed the role of punishing wifebeaters, womanizers and deadbeat fathers, drunks and, occasionally, wayward women. Klan slates were elected to local offices across the state, including Pulaski County, and Klan support was widely sought. Klan power reached its peak in 1924 and quickly diminished afterward. That year, it endorsed Lee Cazort, formerly a progressive Democrat. Thomas J. Terral, a former secretary of state, was so desperate for some manifestation of Klan approval that, blocked from membership in Arkansas klaverns, he journeyed to Bernice, La., to get a membership so that he could proclaim his Klan bona fides. Klansmen were sufficiently confused that he was elected over the real McCoy, Cazort.

### **The highway imperative**

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<sup>19</sup> W. David Baird, "Thomas Chipman McRae," in Timothy P. Donovan, Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., and Jeannie M. Whayne, *The Governors of Arkansas: Essays in Political Biography* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), p. 163.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Holley provides a splendid profile of the Ku Klux Klan in one typical Arkansas community in "A Look Behind the Masks: The 1920s Ku Klux Klan in Monticello, Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 60: 131–50, 2001.

So unmemorable was Terral's single term — he ventured little and achieved less, ran on lower taxes and proposed higher ones, campaigned on honest and efficient government and was embroiled in purchasing scandals — that voters turned him out of office at the first opportunity. He was the first Arkansas governor to be defeated for re-election to his second “courtesy” term. Arkansas's last two governors of the decade — John E. Martineau (1927-28) and Harvey Parnell (1928-33) — were self-described business progressives who touted better education as the key to progress but achieved primarily a better transportation system. The staggering growth of automobile ownership in the 1920s made highways and the recurring scandals over their financing and construction, the central issue of elections at every level in the last half of the decade. Martineau is credited with being the father of the modern highway system. The “Martineau Road Plan” borrowed \$52 million over four years through state highway notes for road construction, assumed local highway debts and financed roads permanently with a nickel-a-gallon gasoline tax. So big did highways become that by 1932, a full 75 percent of state revenues went to highways.

Martineau quit the office late in his term when President Coolidge, a Republican, appointed him a federal judge and his friend Senator Robinson got him confirmed on the same afternoon. Parnell, the state's first lieutenant governor, elected in 1926, became governor upon Martineau's resignation and was re-elected twice. His 1928 election over young Brooks Hays, whose long and distinguished political career would see as many bitter defeats as happy victories, may have given him political cover for a bolder program. Hays touted an array of progressive ideas: greater education spending, an income tax, hospitals and good-government mechanics, notably a highway audit. Growing bolder in his full term, Parnell proposed a state income tax to pay for construction of educational and medical institutions. In a statement that

would rarely be matched in the state's political history, he replied to a taxpayer's group that opposed his plan:

. . . This state was ninety-three years old the other day and it seems to me that we have waited long enough before requiring those with large incomes and no property or practically none, to pay something for the support of our institutions."<sup>21</sup>

The tax rates and brackets in the Parnell law, which passed in February 1929, would be raised only one time, in 1971, for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century although the tax would become far more productive with the institution of a payroll withholding system in 1965.

## II

### **Reaction and factions, 1930-1948**

#### **J. Marion Futrell and the New Deal**

In the countryside, Arkansas was experiencing depression long before the stock market crash on Oct. 29, 1929. The despair was not owing altogether to cotton prices and farmers' foolish loyalty to the single crop but to the tandem plagues of the market and nature. The cataclysmic flood of 1927, preceded and followed by murderous tornadoes and searing droughts, wrought havoc across the Mississippi Delta and the plains, and in its wake came despair and paranoia. The heavens seemed intent on visiting greater cruelties on Arkansas than on other states in the region. Protests and expressions of desperation, far from eliciting sympathy from a generous society and government, usually encountered resentment and suspicion. On Saturday,

two days after New Year, 1931, three hundred farmers marched into England in Lonoke County shouting for merchants to give them food for their families. They dispersed after getting some bread but the incident made headlines across the country. Governor Parnell, whose philosophy was that education and public services were not so much intrinsically vital as they were tools to make the state appealing to industry, resented the bad publicity. When Senator Robinson and Senator Thaddeus Caraway used the incident to obtain from Congress a \$5 million appropriation for Arkansas relief, Governor Parnell told newspapers that Arkansas could take care of itself. He then had to telegraph Congress that Arkansas really would like to have the help.

The impulse of Governor Parnell and other leaders at Little Rock was the same as President Herbert Hoover's response to the economic devastation of his country: cut spending, hunker down and wait for better days. Neither the governor nor lawmakers assembled at the regular session or a special session in 1932 even talked seriously about any form of relief for suffering residents. Like no other people in the nation's history, Arkansans became dependent on the federal government (and the Red Cross) for livelihood and breath. When the burden of feeding Arkansans became too great for the Red Cross, Congress talked about coming to the rescue but President Hoover, while approving federal aid for feeding livestock, found federal aid for feeding humans unseemly. Senator Robinson, the only major Arkansas official to express outrage over the circumstances, declared: "It is all right to put a mule on the dole but it is condemned, I see, to put a man on parity with a mule."<sup>22</sup>

Parnell left office in utter disgrace, which he did not quite deserve in spite of his seeming insensitivity to the suffering. People blamed him for their troubles, which were hardly his doing.

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<sup>21</sup> Pamela Webb Salamo, "Harvey Parnell," in Timothy P. Donovan, Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., and Jeannie M. Whyne, *The Governors of Arkansas: Essays in Political Biography* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), p. 179.

<sup>22</sup> Dougan, p. 417.

But the electorate was perverse. From the field of seven in the Democratic primary of 1932, voters chose the single candidate who was more conservative and penurious than Parnell or President Hoover, who was so thoroughly repudiated at the same election. During the campaign, Futrell promised to slash state spending by half and put the government altogether on a cash basis. He did cut appropriations in half and he largely achieved the latter with highway refunding bonds, which consolidated all highway debts and began paying them off with fees on vehicle licenses and oil and gas. Futrell thought the 1874 Constitution was too liberal in its taxing and spending provisions and he proposed — and the voters ratified — two constitutional amendments that lifted the threshold for raising taxes to three-fourths of both houses of the legislature and that prohibited the government from borrowing money without voter approval in a statewide election. The two amendments would hamstring the government for generations by clamping future taxes almost exclusively on consumers and forcing lawmakers and the courts into legal contortions to finance the capital needs of government.

Like Hoover, Futrell did not believe it was the government's responsibility to feed people or give them relief from the poverty of age and economic dislocations. People's privations were the product of lack of individual initiative. As for education, it was highly overrated. Governor Futrell wanted to eliminate high schools and save the money because an eighth-grade education was all that any person needed to become a useful citizen. While highway funding was a crisis, he believed, school funding was not. School debt by 1932 had risen to \$32 million, schools had unpaid warrants of more than \$5 million, and a third of the teachers were not being paid in cash. Teacher salaries, already far lower than those in other states, fell from an average of \$595 to \$489 by 1934, Futrell's second year in office.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Dougan, p. 418.

State leaders, however, considered it permissible for the federal government to fill the breach. Congress in 1933 passed the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), which provided matching relief grants for states, and the agency stepped in to help needy people and school districts in Arkansas even without the state government's cooperation. The Roosevelt administration encouraged Arkansas to pay its share and finally, late in 1934, Harry Hopkins, the director of the FERA, gave Futrell an ultimatum. Either appropriate \$1.5 million for its share of relief and educational matching costs by March 1, 1935, or Washington would end federal assistance to the state. Futrell and the legislature agreed to repeal prohibition and legalize gambling and then to levy taxes on liquor and pari-mutuel wagering to provide some money. Legislators also proposed the first levy of a 2 percent sales tax on some commodities. Taxes were anathema to Futrell, who had just got voters to ratify an amendment to make tax increases next to impossible, and he refused to support the sales tax. Since it was a new tax and was not subject to the new three-fourths requirement, it needed only a simple majority in both houses. But without Futrell's blessing the tax bill stalled, the state missed the deadline, and Hopkins halted assistance to 400,000 Arkansans. Fearing riots, Futrell gave in and asked the legislature to enact the tax. Federal assistance was restored. Even with the state's grudging consent to bear some share, the federal government spent \$279,143,021 in Arkansas during the Depression, which accounted for 95.6 percent of all public money spent in the state.<sup>24</sup>

While voters gave a solid plurality to Futrell in 1932 and endorsed his conservative nostrums in the renomination campaign of 1934, they were saying something quite different and radical in a more closely watched election in 1932, a special U.S. Senate primary that furnished the grandest political theatre in the state's history. On election day, Senator Hattie Caraway won

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<sup>24</sup> Dougan, p. 453.

a plurality in 60 of the 75 counties and was elected with 46.6 percent of the 275,000 votes cast, less than 2 percent better than Futrell's vote the same day. People could not have spoken in two more distinctively different voices.

### **The Election of 1932: A “Tornado” Blows Through the State and a Period of Reaction and Retrenchment Begins**

Arkansas U.S. Senator Thad Caraway played a more liberal second fiddle to Joe T. Robinson from the time he was elected in 1920 until his unexpected death in November 1931. Because slightly more than a year was left on his term, Arkansas law required that there be a special election to replace him. Governor Harvey Parnell, hoping to eventually replace Caraway, used his control over the state Democratic party to essentially clear the field for Caraway's widow Hattie—already appointed to fill in his place—to replace her husband until after the 1932 election for a full six year term. She easily won the special election and became the first woman elected to the U.S. Senate.

Since everyone expected Caraway to quietly return to Jonesboro after serving out her husband's term, nearly a dozen Democrats pondered making the race for the supposed “open seat” in 1932; a half-dozen—including former Governor Charles Brough and former U.S. Senator William F. Kirby—had announced by the summer. Then, the day before the filing deadline, however, Caraway decided to run. She wrote in her journal: “Well, I pitched a coin and heads came three times, so because the boys wish, and because I really want to try out my own theory of a woman running for office I let my check and pledges be filed. And now won't be able to sleep or eat.”<sup>25</sup> But, Caraway did not return to Arkansas to campaign until only several weeks remained until the August election. Because she had made her announcement so late, most veteran campaign activists had already signed onto other campaigns leaving Caraway with little in the way of an organization. Something dramatic was going to have to happen to give her a shot at even finishing in the top tier of candidates. That something dramatic was the entrance of Senator Huey P. Long into the race on Caraway's behalf.<sup>26</sup>

By 1932, Huey Long had become a national political force after gaining complete dominance over Louisiana politics in the preceding years. Long's populist ideology in the midst of the Depression, his dynamic campaign oratory, and a political organization that used heavy-handed tactics were the basis of Long's political strength. Just after Caraway announced her intent to run for a full term of her own, Long committed to come to Arkansas to help a woman who showed sympathy for his political ideology. Besides liking Caraway personally and their shared views, Long had his own interests for coming to Arkansas to campaign on another candidate's behalf. He had an interest in showing a vote-getting ability outside of his home state as he began to move towards a possible presidential run in the future and he had a real interest in showing such success on the home turf of more conservative Democratic leader Robinson who he saw as an obstacle to his goals in the Senate.

The Long tour on behalf of Caraway was to last just under a week just before the August 9 primary vote; eventually a final day with six stops in northeast Arkansas was added. In total, over three dozen towns in the state saw the carnival blow through as rural Arkansans saw and heard sound trucks like they had never seen before and heard oratory unlike that since the days of Jeff Davis. Long's speeches combined positive messages about how Senator Caraway (“this little woman”) was a supporter of the redistribution of wealth (and, specifically, Long's “Share Our Wealth” program) and negative attacks on the alternative personified in Senator

<sup>25</sup> Diane D. Kincaid, *Silent Hattie Speaks: The Personal Journal of Senator Hattie Caraway* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 121.

<sup>26</sup> The comprehensive account of the Long/Caraway 1932 campaign is David Malone, *Hattie and Huey: An Arkansas Tour* (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 1989).

Robinson.<sup>27</sup> “You’ve already got one from Arkansas in the Senate who is on the power trust’s pay roll and if you think he is lonesome, maybe you want to elect this other bird to keep him company.”<sup>28</sup> More stops were added and the intensity of the campaign became more frenzied as election day neared; writing in the *Saturday Evening Post*, Hermann Deutsch described the unprecedented Arkansas campaign as “a circus hitched to a tornado.”<sup>29</sup>

The power of that tornado was shown on election day as the votes of her six opponents melted away. Caraway dominated the field, winning 46.6 percent of the vote statewide. Even more impressive was her performance in counties where she and Long had appeared; she won most by strong majorities. Thus, the election of 1932 serves as important instance of the continued vitality of populist sentiments in the state and a historic victory for a woman (repeated in her victory over future Senator John McClellan in 1938) in the state’s politics.

But, more lasting was another message from the 1932 elections: the return of an emphatic reactionary element in state politics. For 1932 saw the election of one of the most conservative governors in history, J. Marion Futrell who would serve two terms. Futrell argued that public education was unnecessary beyond the primary grades and asked the legislature to cease funding schools above the eighth grade. He also obstructed rather than facilitated efforts by the national government to alleviate the widespread human suffering in Arkansas. It was only under a threat by the federal government to cut off all funds that the legislature finally, in March 1935, enacted a two-cent sales tax to provide some state contribution to the national relief effort. And, perhaps most importantly, Futrell was the main proponent for a state constitutional amendment, enacted in 1934, that set supermajority requirements for the increase of any tax except the sales tax limiting the state’s revenue expansion permanently and biasing the state’s tax structure in a regressive direction. Futrell would be followed by other governors, such as Homer Adkins and Ben Laney—who were conservative on both economic and racial matters; they governed with equally conservative Democratic legislatures as one-party rule was cemented in Arkansas

### **Interlude: Carl E. Bailey**

By 1936 everyone who was anybody in politics was a New Deal Democrat, but there were those who believed in the New Deal and those who were aggrandized by it. It was not always easy to make the distinction.

Among the former were Brooks Hays, the eternal reformer and, in those days, eternal loser, and Attorney General Carl E. Bailey. Bailey was catapulted into statewide office by his prosecution of A. B. Banks, the head of a banking empire that crashed early in the decade. He accepted deposits in a bank he knew to be insolvent. Bailey aligned himself with Hays, a liberal and persistent gadfly of the power structure, which included Senator Robinson and Homer M.

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<sup>27</sup> Malone, p. 82-3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75,

Adkins, who directed federal patronage in Arkansas for Robinson. The Bailey-Adkins feud would define state politics for a decade.

When Hays ran for the Fifth Congressional District seat in 1934, the power structure supported David D. Terry, who won a close election in which ballot fraud seemed rampant. Two years later, Bailey thwarted the establishment by winning the attorney general's office. He endeared himself with the public with another sensational case. When Hot Springs officials arrested and then released on token bail Charles "Lucky" Luciano, a gangster who had fled New York to avoid arrest for prostitution, Bailey directed the State Police to arrest him and take him to Little Rock. Bailey then revealed that he had spurned a \$50,000 bribe to see that Luciano was not extradited to New York.

In the 1936 Democratic primary, Bailey defeated the establishment candidate and others although with a plurality of only 31.9 percent (the runoff law had been repealed). On inauguration, Bailey threw down the liberal gauntlet. He opposed the "puppets of privilege" and supported the relief efforts of the New Deal, including Social Security, and he believed it also was the state's obligation.

What good is the right peaceably to assemble to a child so crippled that he cannot look forward to a normal life? What good is freedom of the press to the harassed, careworn mother of hungry, tattered, fatherless children? Of what use is freedom of speech to the aged, who through the miscarriage of an economic system they do not understand and are not responsible for, find themselves in the declining years of a respectable life without the means of support?<sup>30</sup>

He announced that his administration would try to solve economic problems, not sit on them. He supported government-subsidized rural electrification, free school textbooks, penitentiary reform and a civil-service system for state employees to end the spoils system. The

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<sup>29</sup> Hermann Deutsch, "Hattie and Huey," *The Saturday Evening Post*, 15 October 1932.

<sup>30</sup> Marvin DeBoer, *Dreams of Power and the Power of Dreams, The Inaugural Addresses of Governors of Arkansas* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1988), p. 861.

legislature approved the civil-service bill but two years later, the merit system having proved to be unpopular with legislators, it was repealed. The Welfare Department was overhauled so that the state qualified for all federal assistance programs. His top priority was to refinance the state's highway bonds at a lower interest rate, which would save the state \$20 million. But Adkins's "federal faction" sued and tied up the refinancing until a bond market slump late in the year rendered the plan unfeasible. Bailey tried again in 1939 but Adkins again tied up the refinancing in court. By then, Bailey and the Adkins phalanx were in outright war. Bailey believed Adkins, who managed federal patronage as collector of internal revenue, was using the distribution of federal jobs to undermine him. Each would win a few battles and lose a few.

### **The special Senate election of '37**

Senator Robinson's sudden death in July 1937 presented Bailey with a dilemma. He had rebuked Governor Futrell for trying to avoid a primary to fill a congressional vacancy, but this was a chance to go to the Senate, his dream, and Senator Robinson's elevation to the Senate in 1913 by his own virtual self-nomination was a precedent. So Bailey arranged for the Democratic State Committee to designate him as the Democratic nominee for a special election. The maneuver caused general outrage, and opponents scheduled a rump convention to nominate an independent Democrat to run against Bailey. U. S. Representative John L. McClellan of Malvern seemed to be the choice but after a tour of the state, McClellan backed out at the last minute and returned to Washington, reportedly because sufficient money for the race had not been pledged. A friend of U. S. Representative John E. Miller of Searcy tracked him down in the night on a vessel in the Chesapeake Bay, where he was fishing with Senator Millard Tydings of Maryland, and told him to return to Arkansas immediately. Miller flew to Little Rock, courted arriving

delegates to the rump convention from an adjoining hotel and received the nomination. Miller opposed and Bailey supported Roosevelt's court-packing plan, and Bailey pledged his unstinting support for Roosevelt and the New Deal. Adkins, whose power actually increased with Senator Robinson's death, threw the faction's support behind Miller and he won.<sup>31</sup> Miller would not finish the term. In 1941, President Roosevelt appointed him United States judge for the Western District of Arkansas.

### **War, reaction and retrenchment**

After six years of rearguard action, Adkins took on Bailey frontally in a race for governor in 1940, and he won easily, helped by the solid vote of thousands of federal employees. His first act was to take the Bailey highway bond-refinancing plan that he had blocked, rework it and push it through the legislature. The federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation bought the whole \$136 million bond issue. Roosevelt and the New Deal accounted for much of his political clout, but Adkins, who won his first public office, sheriff of Pulaski County, on the Ku Klux Klan slate, was not philosophically attuned with New Dealers. The next eight years, under Adkins and Governor Ben T. Laney, a Camden businessman, were among the most reactionary of the century, though not all the punitive laws that were enacted were their initiatives.

With economic circumstances improving, owing partly to the industrial mobilization after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the political climate changed and Adkins reacted to it. Atkins felt the groundswell against the cronyism that characterized government, which Hays and Bailey had attacked in the '30s. Atkins promised to take higher education out of politics, which he would proceed to do inadvertently, by his own political manipulations. He had the University of Arkansas fire its young president, J. William Fulbright, whose mother, a Fayetteville

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<sup>31</sup> Calvin R. Ledbetter Jr. (2004) provides an excellent account of the race in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 63: 1-23. Also, see Ernest Dumas's series on the Senate race in the *Arkansas Gazette*, 27 December 1970, and 3 January

newspaper publisher, had supported Bailey. Fulbright would ultimately end Adkins' political career, and the voters would ratify a constitutional amendment actually insulating colleges and universities from such machinations.

The war and a modicum of prosperity produced new social unrest. Union organizing and strikes at wartime industries brought reaction and suspicion and charges that they were communist-inspired. East Arkansas planters and businessmen were particularly inflamed and there were suspicions, first born in the '30s by the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, that outside agitators were stirring up blacks and pushing social equality. The legislature passed an anti-violence bill, directed chiefly at the more militant Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and Adkins let it become law. Threats of violence in a labor dispute, if they were promoted by union and not management, were felonies punishable by prison terms. Planters and businessmen drafted a constitutional amendment to prohibit the closed shop and the voters ratified it in 1944, forever neutering the labor movement in Arkansas.

Union labor was not the only object of vilification. When the federal government set up internment camps in Arkansas to quarantine Japanese Americans during the war, Governor Adkins strenuously objected, not because the rights of American citizens were being abridged but because he did not want people of Japanese descent in Arkansas. He relented when it was put to him that it was the state's patriotic duty to accept the internees and he was assured that they would be kept under guard and immediately removed from the state after the war. Adkins wanted all children of Asian ancestry barred from white schools, and the legislation nearly passed. Attorney General Jack Holt directed the Health Department not to issue birth certificates

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1971. The articles rely heavily on interviews with John E. Miller and a political associate, R. Max Allison.

to children born in the camps. Adkins signed legislation in 1943 barring anyone of Japanese ancestry from owning land in Arkansas, which was subsequently declared unconstitutional.

Politicians were not the only ones hostile to the unfortunate citizens interned at the camps. Adkins objected to any defense plant in the state employing any American citizen of Japanese descent. The Arkansas Medical Society kept any licensed Arkansas doctor from treating people in the camps and tried to prosecute a Tennessee doctor whom the federal government imported to tend to the sick at Rohwer and Jerome camps.

African-Americans, though native-born Arkansans, fared no better. President Roosevelt in 1941 issued an executive order outlawing racial discrimination in federal job training and in industries with federal contracts. Adkins, embracing the ancient states' rights doctrine, declared it unenforceable in Arkansas. When the United States Supreme Court outlawed the all-white primary in a Texas case, Adkins said "[t]he Democratic Party in Arkansas is a white man's party" and he asked the party to change its rules to thwart the ruling and to limit black voting and participation by requiring people to sign an oath to support the permanent separation of the races.<sup>32</sup> He tried to rally Southern states to petition Congress to limit federal jurisdiction and to hold a constitutional convention to reverse the primary ruling. The next year, 1945, Adkins and the new, like-minded governor, Ben T. Laney, won legislation creating a double primary, one for races for federal offices where blacks could vote and another for state and local offices, where only whites could vote. It, too, would be struck down.

Laney, a millionaire who won the nickname "Business Ben" because he boasted that his credentials were of a businessman not a politician, won the office by what can only be described as a bizarre circumstance. In the first Democratic primary, he narrowly edged J. Bryan Sims, the

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<sup>32</sup> Dougan, pp. 466-7.

state comptroller, But in the runoff, Sims withdrew with no explanation other than he thought he would not win. Though Laney proposed very little in his two terms, they were historic in one sense. Following through on his promise to introduce efficiency and order to state government he persuaded the legislature to pass a bill that revolutionized the taxing and spending order. The Revenue Stabilization Act, enacted in 1945, channeled taxes into a single fund and money would be appropriated from that fund among state programs according to priorities that the legislature would establish every two years. The stabilization plan, which prevented deficit spending, became the cornerstone of Arkansas fiscal policy. Although he campaigned against low taxes, he did push through a handful of small tax increases that restored stability to the government. Laney also produced another landmark fiscal reform, a constitutional amendment in 1948 that took ad-valorem taxes from the state government and gave that unlimited tax source to schools.

But race made Laney's reputation. After President Harry S. Truman's sweeping civil rights message to Congress in 1948, Governor Laney became a leader of Southern resistance. He opposed Truman's proposed antilynching law (the United States Senate in 2005 would apologize for its failure in 1948 and in other instances to outlaw lynching) and other proposals for ending the poll tax. He chaired an organization of Southern governors resisting the party's civil-rights advocacy when the Democratic national convention included a strong civil-rights plank in its platform. But he declined to have his name put into nomination against Truman, and when the segregationist Southerners organized to put up their own Dixiecrat ticket, Laney quietly bowed out. He would not accept the group's nomination for president or vice president, but he halfheartedly supported the Dixiecrat ticket in Arkansas. Sidney S. McMath, a liberal who won the nomination for governor in the summer, campaigned for Truman, who carried Arkansas easily against the Dixiecrats and Republican Thomas E. Dewey.

## Renewed federal influence

While no one would ever match the influence that Senator Robinson had wielded in Congress for a generation, the war period saw the elevation to federal office of men who would over a quarter-century aggregate remarkable power in Washington for small rural state. In 1938, the Harvard-educated county judge of White County, Wilbur D. Mills, was elected to the congressional seat surrendered by John Miller when he was elected to the Senate. Mills became chairman of the Ways and Means Committee and fashioned the tax laws and historic Medicare and Medicaid legislation in the 1960s. When Miller took a federal judgeship in 1941, Congressman John L. McClellan of Malvern won the hotly contested Senate seat. He would later chair the Permanent Investigations Committee, which conducted high-profile hearings in the 1950s and '60s, and eventually chair the Appropriations Committee.

### The Election of 1944: Family Fued

Hattie Caraway would serve two full terms of her own in the U.S. Senate, but her attempt to gain a third term never got off the ground; and, there was no Huey Long to come to the rescue in 1944. Nicknamed “Silent Hattie,” Caraway had made history with her successful candidacy, but she had little in the way of legislative accomplishments by the time the 1944 election approached. Caraway’s standing was so weak by the time of the election that the real battle was between two other figures that represented the two most potent factions in the mid-century Arkansas politics: the Adkins faction and the Bailey faction. It was a brutal battle eventually won by the Bailey candidate in the race, Congressman J. William Fulbright.

Born in 1905, Bill Fulbright had lived a charmed life during his first four decades, with one important flaw in his resume that set the stage for the drama of the 1944 election. Fulbright’s family, based in Fayetteville, owned various businesses in the city including the dominant newspaper. When Bill Fulbright was in his late teens, his father died unexpectedly, but his mother Roberta moved into the leadership of the family business conglomerate. Most visibly, she became the hands-on leader of the newspaper that was eventually renamed the *Northwest Arkansas Times*. Under her leadership, the newspaper grew significantly and Roberta Fulbright’s column “As I See It” became an important voice in the region. From that position, Roberta became a vital player in city, region, and state politics. And, the health of the state’s flagship university, in Fayetteville, was foremost in her analysis of state politics and politicians.<sup>33</sup>

Bill Fulbright became a star athlete for the University of Arkansas, was selected a Rhodes Scholar, and went on to finish a law degree before returning to Fayetteville’s law school to teach. Then, in 1939, the presidency of the University suddenly became open due to the death of the officeholder. At age 34, Bill

<sup>33</sup> On Roberta Fulbright’s career and role in politics, see Dorothy D. Stuck and Nan Snow, *Roberta: A Most Remarkable Fulbright* (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 1997).

Fulbright was named president of the university by a board of trustees under the influence of Governor Carl Bailey. A key supporter in Bailey's political career had been Roberta Fulbright. When Bailey sought a third term, his opponent Homer Adkins made the governor's involvement in the workings of the university a key issue. From the pages of her newspaper, Roberta Fulbright ridiculed Adkins throughout the campaign. When Adkins stopped Bailey's hope for an unusual third term, Bill Fulbright's tenure as president came to a swift end. At age 36, Bill Fulbright's resume showed that he had been fired from his first full-time job. But, the battles between the Bailey faction (and, specifically, the Fulbrights) and Adkins were not over. The Senate race of 1944 would mark their final large-scale skirmish.

First, though, Bill Fulbright would regain his footing by winning a vacant northwest Arkansas congressional seat in 1942. While he made a mark during his congressional stint by his work on international affairs, Fulbright's attention quickly turned to the Senate seat when it became clear that Adkins would attempt to gain the post. While Fulbright had ideological differences with Governor Adkins, it was a political battle that was more personal than issue-based. As Fulbright later explained his decision to run, "Here was the fellow that had fired me out of the University. I would be very unhappy being a congressman with him in the Senate. I figured, hell, I would just as soon go back home. I don't know whether I really thought I had a chance to win."<sup>34</sup> After cementing the support of Bailey and his major financial allies, Fulbright decided that he indeed had a chance to defeat Adkins despite the potency of the Adkins machine.

Building upon his northwest base, Fulbright used the Bailey network and the University's alumni around the state who often were community elites. As Fulbright began to gain traction as the campaign got underway in the spring of 1944, Adkins began to fight back with one of the most brutal campaigns of the century. Speaking to rural audiences, Adkins called "British Billy" Fulbright a "nigger-lover," a communist sympathizer, beholden to organized labor, and a draft dodger. In the midst of the war, the charges about Fulbright's potential avoidance of military service became the most injurious and the Fulbright campaign finally felt a need to fight back, presenting testimony that there had been no special treatment for Fulbright by his draft board and that he had been classified III-A (deferment due to dependents).<sup>35</sup>

Just as the Adkins and Fulbright campaigns intensified their attacks and counterattacks, a shock occurred when one of the state's richest men, Colonel T. H. Barton of El Dorado, decided that he would try his hand at politics just before the end of the filing period. The Barton campaign became one of the best-funded extravaganzas in state history as he bought the entire Grand Old Opry cast for the duration of the campaign. While Barton had limitations as a candidate and had no real issues on which to run, the politics of entertainment were potent in shaping vote choices in 1944 Arkansas. As one woman from Paris said, "Well, I was leaning toward Fulbright but I went out there and saw that Minnie Pearl and she really swayed me toward Barton."<sup>36</sup>

In the first primary vote, Fulbright showed surprising strength leading the Governor by 15,000 votes. Adkins squeaked past the novice Barton for the other spot in the runoff. And, the incumbent finished a weak fourth after an invisible campaign. Fulbright had a lead and, when Caraway's votes came nearly entirely to Fulbright, there was little much doubt that he would lose the runoff. Fulbright ended up with exactly a 32,000 vote margin in the first of five elections as U.S. Senator. During that 30 year period, Fulbright would become one of the most respected and most despised national figures especially after the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee broke with Lyndon Johnson on the Vietnam War. In 1974, making a race for a sixth term, Fulbright was demolished by Governor Dale Bumpers an opponent whose staff included many former Fulbright supporters and who voiced his respect for the Senator. But, with Fulbright perceived as aloof and out of touch with Arkansans, the race was never a close one as the charismatic Bumpers rolled to an overwhelming victory.

<sup>34</sup> Randall Bennett Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 90.

<sup>35</sup> On the dynamics of the campaign, see Weeds, pp. 90-100, and Lee Riley Powell, *J. William Fulbright and His Time: A Political Biography* (Memphis, TN: Guild Bindery Press, 1996), pp. 23-8.

<sup>36</sup> Woods, p. 97.

Fulbright, fired from the presidency of the state university, was elected to Congress in 1942 and then in a bitter match with his tormentor, Homer Adkins, he was elected to the Senate in 1944. Senator Caraway, seeking a third term, and a millionaire oilman, Col. T. H. Barton, were eliminated in the first primary. Fulbright, a Rhodes scholar, would become chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and, as the father of the Fulbright scholars program and a critic of American foreign policy in the 1960s, one of the most revered men in the world. Brooks Hays of Russellville, rebuffed by the powers for more than a dozen years, was elected to Congress in 1942 and served with distinction until his defeat by a segregationist write-in candidate in 1958 because he had not supported the governor in a confrontation with the federal government over desegregation of Little Rock Central High School. Hays would be an adviser to presidents and would run for office two more times unsuccessfully. Other congressmen elected during that period — E. C. (Took) Gathings of West Memphis, James W. Trimble of Berryville (1944), William F. Norrell of Monticello (1938) and Oren Harris of El Dorado (1940) would each serve more than two decades and accumulate seniority and considerable power in the House of Representatives.

### III

## Reform, Race and Reaction

### Sid McMath and the GI revolt

The war to preserve democracy and freedom imbued in people — if not the average citizen at least the returning soldiers — a new idealism and a realization that status-quo Arkansas was not an exemplar of the vibrant democracy they were supposed to be fighting to keep. Few people voted in Arkansas, either because of lethargy, legal bars or a sense that it made little difference and ballots anyway were apt to be manipulated to achieve a predetermined outcome. Graveyard voting and other forms of election fraud were standard subjects of jokes. Also, men who trained and fought outside the state's and nation's borders were exposed to the idea that life actually could be better and freer.

Manifestations of the resurgent reform spirit were almost immediate. In Hot Springs, long controlled by the corrupt political machine of Mayor Leo T. McLaughlin, returning veterans formed the Government Improvement League to do battle with the McLaughlin machine. The leader was a Marine hero of Guadalcanal, Sidney Sanders McMath, a charismatic lawyer with rare oratorical gifts. McMath ran for prosecuting attorney and fellow GIs ran for other positions in city and county government, but Democratic election officials, using fraudulent poll tax receipts, counted all the GI candidates out except McMath. Prosecutor candidates also ran in neighboring Montgomery County and because telephone lines were out of order McLaughlin's men could not determine how many votes they needed there to ensure McMath's defeat.<sup>37</sup> The defeated GIs then ran as independents in the general election. McMath challenged thousands of

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<sup>37</sup> McMath, p. 172.

poll tax receipts controlled by McLaughlin and devised an artifice to get the case out of the hands of local judges and into the federal court of Judge John E. Miller. McMath's team produced evidence of massive fraud and Miller canceled 1,607 poll taxes, almost a fourth of the electorate. GIs in the ensuing election swept every county office and the circuit judgeship. McLaughlin was indicted by a grand jury but a petit jury in neighboring Montgomery County acquitted him. But McLaughlin soon resigned.

The GI revolt spread across the state and their slates won in several counties and cities. In 1948, McMath's popularity swept him into the governor's office against a field that included former Attorney General Jack Holt and James "Uncle Mac" McKrell, a flamboyant radio evangelist. Holt sought to make race the defining issue of the runoff campaign and hinted that McMath was a secret integrationist. But McMath's energy and style on the campaign trail were matchless. Handsome and square-jawed, he barnstormed the state in a white panama hat, blue suit and bright red tie.

### **The Election of 1948: The GI Revolt**

The post-WW II GI Revolt—which reached its high point in the election of Garland County's Sid McMath as governor in 1948—both marked a distinct break with the politics of the past in Arkansas and, just as importantly, served as an important bridge to a significantly modernized Arkansas government and politics led by an invigorated executive branch. Like other veterans, McMath found it bizarre to risk his life "fighting for freedom" in the War, only to return to a locale where basic democratic freedoms were sharply limited.<sup>38</sup> The politics of the Garland County that McMath left to go to War was remarkably similar to that present when he returned: Hot Springs Mayor Leo T. McLaughlin's machine hummed along unchanged. In a hard-fought battle—as McMath later said, "in a way, it was much more treacherous than the war against the Japanese"—the McLaughlin machine was defeated by the band of returning soldiers in 1946.<sup>39</sup> The Garland County "Revolt" became a model for similar actions against other county-level fiefdoms in the state and McMath used the fame that he gained to go statewide when the governorship opened in 1948.

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<sup>38</sup> McMath, Sidney S. *Promises Kept: A Memoir*. (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 2003), p. 179.

<sup>39</sup> McMath, p. 163.

Nine candidates filed for governor, but four candidates received more than 98 percent of the votes.<sup>40</sup> The key issue turned out to be highways. While all the candidates favored additional construction, only McMath favored the issuance of bonds to pay for an expansive road program. Two other candidates—former Attorney General Jack Holt and former internal revenue collector Horace Thompson—favored “pay as you go” financing. The fourth major candidate, folksy radio preacher James “Uncle Mac” MacKrell, talked little about issues; as he said, “You know what Governor Laney has done. You know what his two predecessors did. I know I can’t be any worse than any of them.”<sup>41</sup> Showing the appeal of personality in traditional Arkansas politics, “Uncle Mac” came within an eyelash of making the runoff against McMath. But, because McMath had his own personal appeal and had the support of both major party factions (the Bailey and Adkins factions), he gained a solid lead in the first primary. Importantly, McMath was the first Arkansas candidate to burnish his image into the minds of Arkansans using a modern means of visual communication, in this case the famous “comic book.” Huge numbers of the multipage “The Story of Sid McMath,” with drawings of the strikingly handsome McMath by famed Arkansas political cartoonist George Fisher that easily could be turned into the images in one of today’s thirty second television advertisements and text accompanying the pictures that reads like a script from those same ads (e.g. “As a combat soldier in the Marines, McMath won Silver Star for bravery...Led assault on Bougainville...”), were published and spread throughout the state. Before voters ever interacted with McMath—if they ever did—they had an image of him that bordered on the superhuman (“Newsboy, Soldier, Fighting Prosecutor, Governor!”). It was Holt who sneaked into the second vote by edging MacKrell. Holt recruited “Uncle Mac” to manage his runoff campaign and became more aggressive on the race question in the second round; these two factors made the vote close, but the moderate McMath chose to ignore the race issue and won the runoff by 10, 257 votes.

After a successful reelection campaign in 1950, McMath’s political career was unhinged by a scandal; the “McMath highway scandal” of 1951-52 was the first modern, media-driven political scandal in the state. Opinions differ about the origins of the scandal. McMath’s autobiography is clear that its roots were in retributive actions by AP&L officials angry about McMath’s good will towards the electric cooperatives who were serving the rural areas about which McMath cared so deeply; other analysts argue that some administrative shenanigans in McMath’s administration were fundamentally to blame.<sup>42</sup> All agree that the scandals—that resulted in zero convictions following three different grand jury examinations of the subject—were minor by any standard. But, it became a permanent political albatross for McMath in his 1952 race, in which he was upset by Francis Cherry, and in later races. No matter, the McMath governorship enhanced cosmopolitanism and openness in Arkansas government and showed that politics could be an effective and positive change agent in the lives of Arkansans. Purposeful politics had always been overwhelmed by a dominant view that politics was really meaningless entertainment with the resulting protection of the *status quo*. In a four-year governorship, as he worked on road construction, rural electrification, and education, McMath continually expressed his belief that state politics should have a purpose.

Highways had again become the dominant political concern. McMath pledged to get the state out of the mud and dust and promised specific highway projects around the state. Arkansas

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<sup>40</sup> On the 1948 campaign, see V.O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1949), pp. 189-195, and James Lester, *A Man for Arkansas: Sid McMath and the Southern Reform Tradition*, pp. 36-62.

<sup>41</sup> Key, p. 190.

had not built many roads or maintained them since the 1930s because of the cost of financing the highway debt from the '20s and '30s and then the diversion of resources during the war. McMath delivered on those promises by pushing through a highway bond program. In his four years, the state spent \$72 million building 2,995 miles of primary and secondary roads, more than any governor in the state's history.

McMath had developed a close friendship with President Truman during their 1948 campaigns. Truman visited Little Rock in 1949 and marched with McMath in a celebrated parade, and the men kept a correspondence through the remainder of their tenure. He attracted national attention as a progressive New South governor. His administration created the first fissures in the solid wall of segregation. McMath tried unsuccessfully to pass an antilynching law and repeal the poll tax, and when the legislature refused he asked the Democratic State Convention in 1950 to invite blacks to join the party. The delegates removed the word "white" from party rules. He halted the diversion of money into white schools that was earmarked for black schools and obtained higher appropriations for the state's public black institution of higher learning, Arkansas Agricultural and Normal College at Pine Bluff. For the first time, African-Americans were appointed to formerly all-white state boards and commissions.

While the highway program was McMath's signature achievement, it also proved to be his downfall, aided by the enmity of the state's most powerful industrial leader. McMath's account would always be that C. Hamilton Moses, the president of Arkansas Power and Light Company, angry at McMath for his efforts to help rural electric co-operatives gain approval to build a plant to produce electrical power at Ozark, engineered an investigation of the state highway program by a special commission that included prominent enemies of the governor. Its

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<sup>42</sup> On this issue, McMath and Lester provide the most expansive comparative analyses; various other analysts also take sides in this debate.

audit was highly critical of the Highway Department and the McMath administration, raising charges that the McMath administration was corrupt. The investigation coincided with McMath's campaign for a third term. The taint of scandal sullied McMath's image as a fearless reformer. An array of prominent politicians from different regions ran in the Democratic primary: Congressman Boyd Tackett of Texarkana, his old nemesis Jack Holt of Russellville, Attorney General Ike Murry of Little Rock, and Francis Cherry, a stately and reserved chancery judge from Jonesboro who promised conservative and honest government. Moses's law partner, Senator McClellan, worked for McMath's defeat. McMath was forced into a runoff with Cherry, who produced the most innovative gimmick in a campaign of gimmickry. Cherry took to the radio for a 24-hour "talkathon" on five Little Rock radio stations, answering questions called in by listeners until his voice was only a whisper. He repeated the talkathon for shorter periods in other parts of the state. The three men who were eliminated in the preferential primary endorsed Cherry and he won.

But Cherry proved to be an ineffectual leader and, while artless and candid, he was often inept in legislative relations and public utterances. His two major initiatives got him into deep political trouble. He pushed through the legislature a proposed constitutional amendment to uniformly assess all property statewide at 100 percent of its market value and with millage limits, but the proposal seemed so unpopular because of claims that it would raise people's taxes that Cherry tried to divorce himself from it before the 1954 election. Keeping his promise to cut the fat out of government, he condemned welfare "deadbeats" and his welfare department lopped 2,300 people from the welfare rolls in four months, which made him seem insensitive to the

plight of the poor.<sup>43</sup> He earned the enmity of the poultry and livestock industry by standing firm against legislation to exempt feed, seed and fertilizer from the sales tax.

### **Orval Faubus and the politics of race**

By 1954, the liberal and conservative forces gathered for a rematch of 1952. McMath mustered his forces for a grudge fight with Moses, Arkansas Power and Light and McClellan, who was up for a third term. Vastly overmatched in money and organization, McMath received 43 percent of the vote.

Minutes before the filing deadline, a young gubernatorial aide and highway commissioner in McMath's administration, Orval Eugene Faubus of Huntsville in northwest Arkansas, filed against Cherry. Cherry's missteps brought out unhappy voters from the left and right but Faubus barely squeezed into a runoff. Cherry's campaign unearthed the fact that Faubus as a youth in the 1930s had attended Commonwealth College at Mena, a defunct self-help school that was tainted by Marxist influences. Faubus at first denied it but when proof of his attendance was produced he said he had left the college promptly upon discovering its leanings. But the issue smacked of McCarthyism and it seemed to backfire for Cherry. Sympathy for Faubus helped propel him to a narrow victory.

#### **The Election of 1954: Down from the Hills**

Arkansas's tradition was that governors would serve two terms—governors usually got their second term with little difficulty and governors generally lost if they attempted to overstay their visit in Little Rock. Orval Faubus, son of a socialist, former local elected official, and (thanks to his ally Sid McMath) a former state highway commissioner and McMath staffer from the mountains of Madison County, felt that Governor Francis Cherry was vulnerable in his race for the second, "courtesy" term in 1954, however. Those with political power attempted to dissuade Faubus from the race. Kingmaker W.R. "Witt" Stephens told him, "You wait two years

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<sup>43</sup> Timothy P. Donovan, "Francis Adams Cherry," in Timothy P. Donovan, Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., and Jeannie M. Whyne, *The Governors of Arkansas: Essays in Political Biography* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), p. 221.

and we'll be for you. You run this time and we'll beat your ass."<sup>44</sup> Twenty minutes before the deadline, Faubus filed for the race.

Focusing on the rural areas where he was most at ease, Faubus ran a populist campaign that focused on Cherry's stingy welfare department, the governor's support of increased property tax assessments, rate increases favored by the governor's utility supporters, and Cherry's veto of a bill that would have removed the sales tax on animal feed and farm seed. Faubus shocked observers by gaining over a third of the vote in the first primary. And, with the help of two minor candidates, Cherry was denied the majority vote needed to avoid a runoff. Faubus had been right about Cherry's vulnerability.

But, the runoff campaign became brutal as the Cherry campaign and the press brought Faubus's past—specifically his links to the socialist Commonwealth College in Mena during the 1930s—front and center. Trying to take advantage of the waning "Red Scare" atmosphere in which the campaign took place, Cherry provided evidence of Faubus's attendance and campus leadership roles at Commonwealth and spent hour after hour on statewide radio talking about the subject and, by extension, questioning his opponent's loyalty to the country. But, Faubus fought back hard. As the chief Faubus biographer Roy Reed sums up the Faubus reaction during the runoff, "he and his campaign workers told seven outright lies, nimbly layered, as it developed, into an artful pattern of evasion and dissembling."<sup>45</sup> Faubus claimed that his election as student body president at the school occurred on his first day on campus, that he had spent only a handful of days on campus after he realized the political agenda of the curriculum, and that he had never enrolled in a class. With the aid of emotional rhetoric by Faubus, the dissembling worked as Faubus—a WWII veteran—was perceived as the victim of a political smear by a desperate governor. Faubus edged Cherry by 6,585 votes in an election with typical ballot count shenanigans on both sides (104 percent of the registered voters in Madison county cast a vote, for instance). It was the start of a political dynasty.

But, the Faubus machine was cemented by his performance during another crisis—the Little Rock Central crisis of 1957. Showing the volatility of the desegregation issue in the state, the racial moderate Faubus had faced a stronger-than-expected challenge from Jim Johnson, the militant segregationist leader of the opposition to the desegregation at Hoxie, in 1956. Faubus's attempt at a third term in 1958—already a challenge because of the "two-term" tradition—would be made more difficult if he did not take a step to the right on race. The court-ordered desegregation of Little Rock Central High provided Faubus that opportunity as he stood up to the federal government in that battle. While losing that skirmish, Faubus solidified his standing in the state (and gained national respect). He would go on to reelection in 1958 and for three terms thereafter, along the way establishing the most dominant political machine of the century in the state. By the time of his final inauguration—in 1965—the state's preeminent political cartoonist portrayed *everyone* and *everything* in the legislative chamber—men, women, mouse, podium, and microphone—as having the distinctive face of Faubus.<sup>46</sup>

Little in Faubus's past suggested that he would be anything other than a progressive in the McMath mold. His father, Sam Faubus, was an ardent and active socialist. He was arrested in 1918 for distributing seditious literature opposing U.S. involvement in World War I. Young

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<sup>44</sup> Roy Reed, *Faubus: The Life and Times of an American Prodigal* (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 1997), p. 83.

<sup>45</sup> Reed, p. 96.

<sup>46</sup> See Reed, p. 307.

Orval was known to accompany his father on some engagements to promote socialism. He attended Commonwealth College after reading about it in socialist tracts that came to his father's house and he went to Little Rock to defend the school at a legislative hearing, but none of that was known at the time. He enlisted in McMath's campaign after hearing him speak in Madison County. While he briefly raised racial segregation as an issue early in the race for governor, he soon backed off after criticism by the *Arkansas Gazette*. One of his first initiatives after his nomination in 1954 was to put the first African-Americans on the Democratic State Committee. In the 1956 campaign, when his opponents demagogued the race issue in the wake of the U. S. Supreme Court's school desegregation order in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Faubus took a muted and, for the time, a moderate stance on integration. In his first two terms he would offer a moderately progressive program of tax reform that produced a liberal increase in aid for education

That changed in the fall of 1957. Always a pragmatist, Faubus saw political ruin and opportunity when Little Rock Central High School prepared to open under a desegregation plan approved by federal courts. He planned to seek a third term in 1958. Segregationists in Arkansas and elsewhere in the South — notably Governor Marvin Griffin of Georgia — were pressuring Faubus to do something to thwart integration of the high school in the capital city. On Sept. 2, 1957, Faubus sent the National Guard to the school to block the entrance of nine black students. The ensuing struggle with the courts and the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower ended in the integration of the school under the eye of federal troops but Faubus won the hearts of most Arkansans for standing up to the federal government. His re-election was ensured until after an unprecedented six terms he finally decided not to run again in 1966.

If his reincarnation as a leader of Southern resistance to racial equality seemed out of character, the re-emergence of Little Rock and Arkansas as seedbeds of intolerance was equally discordant with their past and future. For his part, Faubus in later years would insist that he never opposed racial equality or integration but that he had only sought, successfully, to force the federal government to shoulder its constitutional obligation. Aside from ensuring his own re-election for years to come, Faubus's successful use of race had other ramifications. In 1958, a segregationist supporter of Faubus, with the governor's furtive help, defeated Congressman Brooks Hays in a write-in campaign based upon Hays's peacemaking efforts in the Central High showdown and Jim Johnson, a segregationist lawyer who had authored a constitutional amendment to prevent race-mixing in 1956, was elected to the state Supreme Court. But after defeating Attorney General Bruce Bennett, a flamboyant white supremacist, in the Democratic primary in 1960, Faubus began to mute the race issue. In his last years in office he tried to associate himself with President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. His only serious threat in the Democratic primary came in 1962, when McMath, who had denounced his old protégé for trying to thwart court-ordered desegregation, barely missed a runoff with him.

Except for the fleeting success of Jim Johnson, a firebrand segregationist who ran for governor in 1966, even subtle race-baiting would never again play a successful role in a major Arkansas election.

## IV

### **Real Reform (1966-1990)**

#### **Liberal Republicanism and Its Reconstruction of the Democratic Party**

Winthrop Rockefeller, who seemed to be the bad seed of John D. Rockefeller's spawn, arrived in Arkansas in 1953 to get away from a spectacular divorce that captivated New York newspapers and from a patrician family that looked down on his playboy lifestyle. An old Army buddy from Arkansas invited him, and Rockefeller stayed and bought more than 900 acres atop Petit Jean Mountain. Although Rockefeller was a Republican, Faubus appointed him chairman of the state's industrial development commission. He was credited with bringing large investments and new jobs to the state.

No Republican had been elected to a statewide office or to Congress in almost 100 years, since the end of Reconstruction, and outside a few sparse mountain counties none had gained seats in the legislature or local elective offices. Winthrop Rockefeller was almost the personification of the reasons why that was so: Republicans were supposed to represent trusts, banks, big corporations, great wealth and black equality.

Rockefeller thought many of the state's problems could be traced to a century of undisputed one-party rule and his publicly stated goal was a two-party system. In 1964, he ran for governor against Faubus, who had easily won the Democratic nomination for a sixth term. Rockefeller's image had sharply altered. He had used his wealth to endow new schools, scholarships, an arts center and other charities, and he was credited, even by Faubus, with bringing hundreds of industries and tens of thousands of new jobs to the state. Rockefeller spent heavily on television, radio and newspaper advertising and forced himself to campaign furiously

for months at coon suppers, fish fries, courthouses and the baking streets of small towns in every part of the state. Aides followed him everywhere with Polaroid cameras and handed people snapshots with their hands in the grip of the sweat-drenched Rockefeller's big paw. Polls showed the race was close but a few days before the election Faubus produced photographs of overturned headstones in an abandoned cemetery in Lonoke County. He said Rockefeller's bulldozers had "desecrated" the cemetery and he hammered the issue until the election. Rockefeller was nonplussed and was skeptical that such a desperate charge could have the slightest effect on voters. Faubus later thought it was pivotal because it reinforced doubts that the Yankee was sensitive to the values of Arkansans. Faubus received 57 percent of the vote. The next day, Rockefeller announced that he would run again in 1966 and he would find success in the second race.

### **The Election of 1966: A "Black Sheep" Upends a Machine**

Looking to escape from the public scrutiny of a troubled personal life and looking to use his wealth to "create something of his own," Winthrop Rockefeller left New York and established a residence in Arkansas in 1953 by purchasing 900 acres atop Petit Jean Mountain on which to build a cattle ranch. Within months, Rockefeller also became involved in philanthropic work in the poor state. "[B]ecause of the magic of the name," Governor Faubus appointed Rockefeller to become the first chair of the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission (AIDC). Especially after the Little Rock Crisis led to a harm to industrial development, Rockefeller inevitably moved towards more explicit political statements and activities including endorsements of state Republican candidates. In early April 1964, Rockefeller resigned from the AIDC and announced he would be a GOP candidate for governor.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> On Rockefeller's move to Arkansas, see Cathy Kunzinger Urwin, *Agenda for Reform: Winthrop as Governor of Arkansas, 1967-71* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1991), pp. 16-29.

Faubus was indecisive about whether to run for a seventh term in 1966 but on March 21 announced that it was time to retire. Eight Democrats entered the primary for the Democratic nomination including the two state supreme court justices—“Justice Jim” Johnson and Frank Holt—who would face each other in the runoff. Holt was the establishment candidate, gaining the support of many of Faubus’s campaign financiers, but he came out of the first vote nearly 13,000 votes behind Johnson. Much as had Faubus in his first race, Johnson—the leader of the state White Citizens’ Council in the 1950s—went directly to the voters in the rural areas and escaped attention by the media. Johnson criticized the scandals of the Faubus machine, ridiculed his opponents, and emphasized that it time for a return to “old values.” Holt became aggressive against Johnson in the runoff, calling him a “purveyor of prejudice,” but—because of ties to the machine—failed to net all of the votes of the reform candidates who failed to make the runoff. Johnson actually increased his margin over Holt from the first primary.<sup>48</sup>

Rockefeller ran the same reformist campaign he had in 1964 and made even more aggressive overtures to African-American votes. In contrast, Johnson ran as a militant segregationist, refusing even to shake the hands of black voters during the campaign.<sup>49</sup> Johnson used similar tactics as those employed by Faubus in 1964, adding epithets of his own, including regularly calling Rockefeller a “prissy sissy.”<sup>50</sup> Given the choice between what Johnson represented (further instability, racial disharmony, possible adverse economic consequences) and what Rockefeller represented (racial peace and economic progress), the voters narrowly (54 percent) gave Rockefeller the governorship. The Faubus machine—while maintaining adherents in the state legislature that would stymie Rockefeller’s legislative proposals—was dead at a statewide level and reform had arrived in Arkansas.

Rockefeller had a slate of Republicans to run with him. Maurice L. “Footsie” Britt, a World War II Medal of Honor winner, was elected lieutenant governor, and John Paul Hammerschmidt of Harrison, a businessman, was elected to the House of Representatives from Northwest Arkansas, the first of 13 terms.

When he addressed the legislature in January 1967, however, he could count only three Republican faces among the 135 members and relations quickly went downhill, especially in the Senate. Although he called for a new “Era of Excellence” he cautiously offered only a modest legislative program and little of consequence became law. For much of his first term, he was embroiled in controversies that brought worldwide attention. A State Police investigation of the state prison, which found brutality, bribery and extortion, was released the day Rockefeller took

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<sup>48</sup> On the primary and runoff campaigns, see John Robert Starr, *Yellow Dogs and Dark Horses: Thirty Years on the Campaign Beat* (Little Rock: August House, 1987), pp. 80-84.

<sup>49</sup> For analysis of the racial politics in the 1966 race, see Earl Black, *Southern Governors and Civil Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 269-71.

office. He said the prisons were barbaric and he hired Thomas O. Murton, a temperamental and idealistic academic criminologist, to run Tucker Prison Farm and then the whole penitentiary system. With media from all over the world watching, Murton unearthed bones on prison acreage that he suggested were the remains of murdered prisoners. It was a pauper's cemetery that preceded the prison. Rockefeller soon fired Murton for insubordination. He continued to pursue prison reform, but the carnival further soured relations with legislators, who had been proud of having the least expensive prison system in the country. Rockefeller had promised to end wide-open illegal gambling at Hot Springs and his State Police director led raids on gambling houses and destroyed slot machines in a giant bonfire. He had battled the state Game and Fish Commission and joked that God apparently was on his side when he heard that one of his adversaries on the commission had died. At a special session he had won passage of the state's first minimum-wage law and the legislature set in motion the first constitutional convention since 1918. Still, though his term had been colorful it was far short of the revolution that he had promised.

His coalition seemed to be in jeopardy when he sought re-election in 1968. Jim Johnson and his wife, Virginia, ran as a team, she for governor and he against Senator Fulbright. The organizational candidate for governor was Marion H. Crank of Foreman, the speaker of the House, a pragmatic, knowledgeable dealmaker who had no history of racism. He was a small-town merchant who had found himself on the payroll of W. R. "Witt" Stephens, the powerful industrialist and financier, after guiding Stephens's novel gas-pricing law through the House in 1957. Virginia did well enough on the stump but proved to be a wooden campaigner. The dynamo in the campaign was Ted Boswell, a silver-haired trial lawyer from Bryant who attacked

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<sup>50</sup> Starr, p. 86.

the Democratic machine. On election night, Crank led the ticket and Johnson eased into second spot and the runoff ahead of Boswell, owing, according to rumors, some late-night vote shifts from Bruce Bennett, who made his last race before his indictment in a financial scam.

Crank won handily and without Jim Johnson's baggage but ample money he seemed a good bet to win. But the *Arkansas Gazette* reported that Crank had put his wife and children on the House payroll and that his Democratic running mate, Representative Bill G. Wells of Hermitage, had done the same. It seemed to be a reminder of a big reason that people had voted for Rockefeller. He had no reason to steal or stick his head in the public trough.

In his second term, Rockefeller offered the daring program that he had held back in his first. He proposed the boldest program in the state's history: a comprehensive tax program that would raise the general revenues of the state by 50 percent and earmarked for public schools, colleges and public health. The keystone was an increase in personal income taxes that would raise the top rate on high incomes from 5 to 12 percent and eliminate taxes on the working poor. Some legislators said it was easy for a rich man to advocate taxes. He answered them at a joint assembly:

I am angered when I hear it implied that because I and my family are blessed with material things it is easy for me to make bold proposals. Nothing could be further from the truth. My family was blessed with something infinitely more important — with compassion and a deep sense of obligation to others. So long as thousands of our people go to bed hungry or in pain, or in hopelessness, every night, nobody in Arkansas, myself included, has the right to be callous or indifferent.<sup>51</sup>

The vote in the Senate was 3 for, 31 against. Not much of the program became law.

The stunningly progressive tax program alone would mark Rockefeller as one of the most liberal governors in Southern history. Ironic for a Southern Republican, his record was far more expansive. He fathered the minimum wage. He opposed the death penalty and, as a last official

act, commuted the sentences of all 15 prisoners on death row. Only months before his re-election in 1968, he stood on the Capitol steps, arms linked with black leaders, sang a civil rights anthem, condemned the bigotry that had killed Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and pledged a new determination to end discrimination in public life. His regulators drove hundreds of insurance companies chartered by Faubus out of the state and cracked down on sleazy securities dealers.

A new state constitution, Rockefeller's primary goal, was not achieved. The Constitutional Convention, whose delegates were elected in 1968, drafted a charter that removed obsolete provisions like a ban on dueling, gave the state flexible powers to tax and borrow and new powers to local governments. Both Rockefeller and his opponent in the fall of 1970, strongly endorsed the new charter but it was defeated. Opponents said it would raise taxes.

Neither did he bring about a competitive Republican Party and the two-party system that he had said was the state's salvation. The triumphs turned out to be personal and the gains fleeting. Rockefeller had assembled a full slate of Republican candidates for state office in 1968 but only he and Britt were elected. After the 1970 election, the party would not have a single statewide officeholder and its quotient in the legislature would be back to four.

### **The Election of 1970: More than "A Shoe Shine and a Smile"**

Progressive Dale Bumpers' rise from obscurity to a place in the Democratic runoff for governor where he defeated the architect of the Old Guard, Orval Faubus, followed by a November political demolition of Republican incumbent Governor Rockefeller had numerous consequences that went beyond 1970.<sup>52</sup> Rockefeller was running for a third term he had said he would never seek, but, certain that voters were as outraged as he at the legislature's refusal to embrace a progressive program, he thought he needed to give voters the opportunity to send that message. The race in the first Democratic primary was, clearly, for second place. There was never much doubt that former Governor Faubus, making a comeback attempt, would lead the field.

<sup>51</sup> Ernest Dumas, "WR's Inaugural Address Makes Plea for Tax Plan" *Arkansas Gazette*, 15 January 1969.

<sup>52</sup> For an excellent overview and analysis of the 1970 gubernatorial race, see Randy Sanders, *Mighty Peculiar Elections: The New South Gubernatorial Campaigns of 1970 and the Changing Politics of Race* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002). See also Starr, chapters 14 and 15.

The key questions were whether Faubus's lead in that primary would be insurmountable and which of the seven other candidates—mostly reformers of differing degrees—he would face in a runoff.

As Bumpers would often recount in the decades to follow, when the 44-year-old Charleston attorney came to Little Rock to file for the race (with a filing fee raised from the sale of a herd of cattle) his name recognition was less than one percent. But, Bumpers had access to a political weapon that others before him had lacked. Using money borrowed from family members, Bumpers hired Memphis-based advertising consultant DeLoss Walker. The telegenic Bumpers' successful use of short advertising spots evidenced the rise of the television era in Arkansas politics. His reformist message and his literal and figurative "fresh face" boosted his poll standing as the primary vote neared and a last minute flurry of television ads allowed him to eke out a second-place finish in the primary—and a place in the runoff—by only 4490 votes over Attorney General Joe Purcell. Because Faubus had received only 36.4 percent in the first primary, the odds were suddenly against Faubus, whose divorce and remarriage to a younger woman had bogged down his campaign.

In the runoff, the Faubus campaign—low on money—charged Bumpers with questioning a literal interpretation of the Bible in his Sunday School classes ("What about the Bible, Mr. Bumpers? If the Bible isn't all true, can any of it be true?") and being "soft" on stopping forced school busing.<sup>53</sup> But, Bumpers kept his cool and impressed more and more voters as he met them in stops around the state, and Walker kept making and putting up television ads featuring his talented client. Bumpers defeated Faubus going away, winning 58.7 percent of the runoff vote.

The Rockefeller campaign had assumed that they would face Faubus in the general election; now they faced another reformer and, particularly in light of Rockefeller's failures with the legislature and erratic personal behavior, the logic for a Rockefeller third term fell away. Rockefeller spent millions in the general election, but the spending—and Rockefeller charges that Bumpers was little more than "a smile, a shoeshine, and one speech"—did little to stymie Bumpers' momentum; indeed, the "excessive spending" gave Bumpers an opportunity for regular populist jabs at the multimillionaire.<sup>54</sup> Political scientist Jim Ranchino found that while Delta African-Americans stayed loyal to Rockefeller, the other key component of the Rockefeller coalition—progressive urban voters—returned home to the Democratic party; the overall Bumpers margin was 61.7 percent to 32.4 percent.<sup>55</sup> Upon entering office, Bumpers quickly was able to get passed the core of the Rockefeller reform agenda; for that performance, a 1998 survey of Arkansas's historians and political scientists ranked Bumpers as the "greatest" Arkansas governor of the century.<sup>56</sup>

Bumpers' primary victory evidenced the rejection of the traditionalism of Faubusism and a rise of moderation within the Democratic party that would propel the party to victory upon victory in statewide races in what Diane D. Blair has termed the "Big Three" era of Bumpers, Pryor, and Clinton. But, that moderation had been forced by a Republican, Win Rockefeller. As Bumpers later said, "If there had not been a Winthrop Rockefeller, I am not sure there would have been a Governor Dale Bumpers, a Governor David Pryor or a Governor Bill Clinton."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Starr, p. 121.

<sup>54</sup> Starr, p. 122; Urwin, p. 184-5.

<sup>55</sup> Alexander P. Lamis, *The Two-Party South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 124.

<sup>56</sup> Research of Cal Ledbetter and C. Fred Williams reported in Bob Lancaster, "The Great One," *Arkansas Times*, 28 August 1998.

<sup>57</sup> Urwin, p. 203.

The two-party system was a shambles, but Rockefeller had done what he had set out to do, destroy the old Democratic Party order built on favors and patronage. He had assumed that the Republican Party would step into the void, and he did not calculate the natural dynamics of democratic politics. With the old leaders vanquished and powerless, the Democratic Party simply refashioned itself with a new breed of leaders.

Bumpers picked up much of Rockefeller's ditched program, including a reorganization of the entire executive branch of government that Rockefeller had never even introduced, tinkered with a few of them and pushed all of it through the legislature along with a highway-building program and expansion of medical training programs. The taxes he raised infused large sums into teachers salaries, a statewide kindergarten program, free high school textbooks, education for disabled children, a system of community colleges and technical schools and large capital improvements at every college, health institution and state park. At the end of the century, political scientists and historians would rank Bumpers as the best governor of the century. He would be followed in the office by three Democratic governors in the same mold — David Pryor, Bill Clinton and Jim Guy Tucker. Only one interlude, the single two-year term of Republican Frank White, would clutter the nearly seamless 26-year rule of progressive Democrats.

### **Changing the Guard in the Senate**

By 1974, Arkansas's two senators, J. William Fulbright and John L. McClellan, had between them spent 72 years in Congress, 62 in the Senate. They were chairmen of two of the most important committees in Congress. Representative Wilbur D. Mills of Kensett chaired the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee. Arkansas was said to have the most prestigious

and powerful delegation in Washington. In four years all would be gone, replaced by young and more liberal politicians, and the state would have one of the least experienced contingents in Washington.

McClellan, a foe of unions, had conducted televised hearings on union racketeering and sided predictably with management on labor legislation. David Pryor, a young lawyer and newspaperman from Camden, had been among a small band of Young Turks in the state legislature who bearded Governor Faubus at the peak of his power. In 1966, he was elected from the Fourth District to Congress, where he broke ranks with Southerners and voted for civil rights and unionizing legislation. Backed by unions, he took on Senator McClellan in 1972. McClellan won after a bitter campaign fought over Pryor's union political action committees. McClellan said "national labor bosses" were pumping money into Pryor's campaign; Pryor responded that they were nickels and dimes that came from the overalls of working people.<sup>58</sup> Although McClellan won, Pryor matched him almost vote for vote in the preferential primary and he was forced into a runoff. A widely watched televised debate, in which the old senator seemed to get the best of the young challenger, was perhaps the decisive factor in the election although McClellan was able to pay for one of the most intense get-out-the-vote efforts in the state's history.

Pryor's powerful showing and gracious concession impressed the big financial backers of McClellan and two years later he was easily elected governor over Faubus, making his second comeback attempt, and an ailing Lieutenant Governor Bob Riley. Succeeding Bumpers, Pryor found that Bumpers had fulfilled most of his agenda, except for a new constitution, and had committed all the money in the treasury. He spent four years keeping the state afloat during a

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<sup>58</sup> Ernest Dumas, "McClellan Charges Labor has 'Pryor Commitment'," *Arkansas Gazette*, 3 June 1972.

deep recession. He began the mechanics for another constitutional convention, the driving passion of his public life, but that constitution, too, was rejected by voters in 1980.

Bitter division over the Vietnam War had weakened Fulbright. While most of the public eventually came around to Fulbright's view that the war was futile and would achieve no good ends for the United States, there was lingering resentment over his criticism of American conduct of the war, which many viewed at the time as unpatriotic. Also, many believed that Fulbright's preoccupation with the war and international affairs left Arkansas needs unattended. Still, many were proud that the state was represented by a man who was celebrated and revered around the world for his intellect and vision.

Weary of perpetual obligations and stress of running the state government, Bumpers decided at the last minute in 1974 to run against Fulbright, who had dispensed organizational help to him in his first race for governor. As in his earlier campaigns, Bumpers offered not a word of criticism and a modicum of praise for his foe. He said it was time for a change and he believed the seniority system, Fulbright's strong suit, discouraged innovation and change. Polls showed that voters tended to prefer Bumpers by almost 2 to 1. Fulbright spent \$2 million on the campaign, Bumpers less than a fifth of that and he won by almost 2 to 1.

Four years later, Pryor would duplicate the feat, defeating two sitting congressmen — Jim Guy Tucker of Little Rock and Raymond H. Thornton of Sheridan — for the seat of McClellan, who had died the previous year. But the election was not as easy for Pryor as Bumpers. Bedeviled by recession, Pryor's gubernatorial record was lackluster while Tucker and Thornton had been saluted for their achievements in short durations in the House, Tucker for his work on Social Security reform and Thornton for his stance on the impeachment of President

Richard M. Nixon. Philosophically, there were no discernible differences among them. But Pryor, as in every race he would run, enjoyed a wide margin in likability.

### **The Election of 1978: One for the Ages**

The seniority of Arkansas's congressional delegation during the middle of the century served the state well in terms of federal projects and policies beneficial to the state. But, those long careers—including Senator John McClellan's six terms (35 years) of service—had stifled the ambitions of many Arkansas politicians. Thus, when McClellan announced in 1977 that he would retire from the Senate (followed only weeks later by his death), it allowed political ambitions to come to the surface, creating a 1978 U.S. Senate race of monstrous dimensions.<sup>59</sup>

Three talented Democrats—Governor David Pryor, central Arkansas Congressman (and former Attorney General) Jim Guy Tucker, and south Arkansas Congressman Ray Thornton—entered the race and created energy that resulted in a record turnout in the May primary.<sup>60</sup> Pryor's charming personal style and solid performance as governor for four years made him the early favorite. However, the more progressive Tucker used his base in the Little Rock media market and Thornton (best known for his service on the special House Watergate Committee that included votes for President Nixon's impeachment) employed the financial and political connections of his uncle Witt Stephens to create a three-way race that ended in a near photo finish on primary night. Pryor received just over 34 percent of the vote to lead the ticket, but it would be the next day before the second place finisher—Tucker—was certain.

While leading the ticket, Pryor had failed to meet the expectations that came with being a sitting governor. In reaction, the Pryor campaign became more aggressive in the two-week runoff campaign, pointedly questioning Tucker's commitment to "those values we treasure in Arkansas" as evidenced by his "northern liberal" voting record.<sup>61</sup> Tucker had little ammunition with which to attack the governor and the support of Thornton helped Pryor to a solid 55 percent victory in the runoff. From that victory Pryor would go on to serve three full terms in the Senate, using a masterful personal style that made him the most popular Arkansas politician of the contemporary era.<sup>62</sup> His popularity served as an important weapon in his son Mark's successful race to fill the "Pryor seat" in the U.S. Senate in 2002.<sup>63</sup>

Overshadowed by the high-octane Senate race was the rise of a future U.S. President, Attorney General Bill Clinton, to the other preeminent statewide office. Clinton swamped four other candidates with an unprecedented 60 percent of the first primary vote in the Governor's race. And, showing the continued dominance of the Democrats in Arkansas state politics, neither Pryor nor Clinton broke a sweat in the general election where voter turnout lagged behind the more consequential primary. Pryor began his house hunt in

<sup>59</sup> For an overview of the 1978 Senate race, see Starr, pp. 158-9.

<sup>60</sup> A fourth minor candidate did enter the race, but received only 8,166 votes.

<sup>61</sup> Diane D. Blair and Jay Barth, *Arkansas Politics and Government: Do the People Rule?*, second edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), p. 341.

<sup>62</sup> On Pryor's personal style as Senator, see Richard J. Fenno, Jr., *Senators on the Campaign Trail* (Norman, Okla.: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 281-282.

<sup>63</sup> On Mark Pryor's employment of his father's image in the 2002 campaign, see Blair and Barth, pp. 351-352.

Washington only weeks after the runoff victory on his way to gaining 76.6 percent of the general election vote and Clinton received 63.4 percent against the GOP nominee.<sup>64</sup>

Wilbur Mills, who never had a serious opponent in 36 years, ended his brilliant career sadly. In 1972, he made a halfhearted run for president, entering the Democratic primary in several states but entering the convention only with Arkansas's favorite-son votes (two delegates bolted and voted for others). Two years later, he made headlines when he was caught cavorting with a stripteaser near the Capitol. He admitted alcoholism and did not run again in 1976.

### **Bill Clinton and the politics of personality**

It was clear in the spring of 1974 when a young law professor at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville came to the Capitol to file as a candidate for Congress in the mountainous Third Congressional District that personal politics of a distinctly higher order was at hand. Tall, good-looking and solicitous, William Jefferson Clinton engaged everyone around him on a random stroll through offices. Two evenings later, at the traditional Democratic rally at Arkansas Tech University at Russellville sponsored by the Pope County Democratic Women's Club, the chattering crowd of partiers fell silent when it was Clinton's turn to speak. They had never seen nor heard of Bill Clinton but his gait, posture, mellow voice and the easy cadence and precision of his sentences put the whole crowd in thrall for the allotted two minutes of his talk. Clinton said nothing worthwhile but he got the best ovation of the evening. Older politicians like Pryor and Bumpers marveled. Clinton would win the Democratic primary and lose, barely, to the popular Representative John Paul Hammerschmidt in the general election, but a star was born. His natural gift for retail politicking and phenomenal memory for names and connections made

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<sup>64</sup> Lamis, p. 126,

him a one-man campaign organization. He would meet someone fleetingly in a bank lobby and ten years later hail him in a crowd. The memory would prove to be capacious enough not merely for a whole state but a whole country. Twenty-two years later, campaigning for re-election for president of the United States, he would arrive at any city in the country and hug a dozen women in the crowd, grasp the hands of nearly everyone around the platform and recall something personally about each one. On the day after his defeat in November 1974 he was anointed as the future leader of the state.

In 1976, Clinton ran for attorney general, won easily and began to plot his next move. His ambitions were national and he wanted to run for the open U. S. Senate seat of the late John L. McClellan in 1978 but the field was full with Governor Pryor and Congressmen Tucker and Thornton. The governor's office was his for the taking, and he took it. He defeated four Democrats in the primary with 59.6 percent of the vote and the Republican candidate with 63 percent.

His charm worked in the legislature, too, although he had to make accommodations with the trucking industry, which fought his ambitious highway plan, which included high registration fees on heavy rigs. To pass the tax program, he agreed to shift much of the tax from big trucks to ordinary motorists. Anger over higher-priced "car tags" and fees on pickup trucks would defeat him in 1980. Bankers, the forestry and wood industries, the poultry industry and Arkansas Power and Light Company were angered either by the governor's spoken attitudes or his policies and they poured money into the campaign treasury of his Republican opponent in 1980, Frank D. White. White, a cabinet appointee of Governor Pryor, wanted to start a political career but by the time he decided to run it was too late to raise money and get an even start in the Democratic primary so he filed as a Republican for governor, which gave him more time to organize and

raise money. White seized on the car-tag issue, an obvious winner, and also on a riot by Cuban exiles sent to Fort Chaffee in Arkansas's western border by President Jimmy Carter, whose friendship Clinton had touted. White said the Cubans would be taking jobs away from native Arkansans and that Clinton had not stood up to his pal, the president, when Carter reneged on his promise not to send more Cubans to Arkansans. The Cubans, many of them from Cuban jails, had arrived on U.S. shores in a massive boatlift. Of 839,000 votes cast, White won by 32,000.

Almost immediately, Clinton began working on a comeback. Still a political neophyte and surprised by his victory, White blundered frequently by sheer candor and he had no program ready for the legislative session that began two months after his election. Moreover, the country had fallen into a deep recession, leaving the state with stagnant revenues, rising demand for services and an unemployment rate that soared to 12.8 percent by the end of his term.

Exemplifying his blundering, White ceremoniously signed a law requiring that the biblical account of creation be taught anytime that evolution was introduced in Arkansas classrooms. It might have been a popular act in a religiously fundamental state, but White remarked that he was not familiar with the working of the bill because he had not read it when he signed it. While governors routinely sign a thousand bills a session without reading them, it is impolitic to acknowledge it. Clinton campaigned assiduously in 1980, apologizing for his arrogance and overzealousness anytime that someone ventured criticism of his first term. In the Democratic primary, he defeated Tucker and former Attorney General and Lieutenant Governor Joe Purcell. He defeated White by 75,000 votes.

The defeat and re-election were chastening and educational for Clinton. Instead of omnibus reforms, he would tackle only one issue at a time, and he would co-opt strong economic interests, not beard them. By the end of his long tenure as governor, the poultry, trucking,

banking, agricultural and utility interests and much of the forestry industry were all part of his team. And he developed a consensus behind bold undertakings before going forward.

Thus, in 1983 he began to sell the public and then the legislature on sweeping and costly reforms of public education, including a one percent sales tax increase. He appointed a committee, headed by his wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, to develop tougher standards that schools had to meet. She conducted public hearings across the state to receive ideas and promote changes. The state Supreme Court in the spring declared the schools unconstitutional because the programs were not equal among schools. That provided Clinton the opening that he had expected. He called a special legislative session in the fall of 1983, and the lawmakers approved many school bills, including a sales tax increase and a controversial requirement that every teacher pass a test of basic skills to continue teaching. The state Board of Education adopted the standards written by Hillary Clinton's committee. The crusade for better schools brought Clinton national recognition.

In 1985, Clinton changed the focus to economic development and the legislature approved a bundle of bills aimed at improving the climate for investment. They included tax breaks for expanding Arkansas manufacturers, new state financing mechanisms for industry and a central authority for state and local bond issues that would bring Wall Street investment houses into the state market.

His re-elections in 1984 and 1986 were foregone against weak competition, including Frank White and Orval Faubus, both of whom made final comeback bids in 1986. He would make incremental changes the rest of the decade, trying for modest tax increases to raise spending on education against business resistance and legislative reluctance.

As the 1990 election season approached, there were signs the electorate was tiring of the 10-year governor. The legislature, which once did his bidding, was growing obstreperous. Other ambitious politicians were restive. Steve Clark, the dimpled, square-jawed attorney general, let it be known that he intended to run for governor at long last. He had been a constitutional law student of Clinton at the University of Arkansas. Jim Guy Tucker, defeated in tight races for the U.S. Senate and governor, geared up to run. Sheffield Nelson, the former head of the state's largest gas utility and known as a somewhat liberal Democrat, had bided his time until Clinton moved on. U. S. Representative Tommy Robinson of Little Rock, a flamboyant former lawman, was itching to run. It would be one of the wildest elections of the century.

The *Arkansas Gazette*, prowling through state expense vouchers, would catch Clark fudging on his credit-card expenses. He was indicted and convicted and resigned from office. Clinton toyed with leaving office to work full-time on a presidential campaign, but announced that he would run again. Tucker soldiered on but, finding his financial backers in flight, he announced that he would run instead for lieutenant governor. Knowing the odds of winning in a party where all of the party organization were Clinton loyalists, Nelson became a Republican. National Republican strategists, recognizing Clinton as a potential candidate for president in 1992, persuaded Robinson to switch parties with the promise of support for a gubernatorial race. He announced his conversion with President George H. W. Bush.

Nelson and Robinson would meet in the first high-profile Republican primary in the state's history. The bitter race would tear friendships and political alliances asunder. Robinson's close friend and political backer, Jerry Jones, the millionaire owner of the Dallas Cowboys football franchise, openly backed Nelson, who had given Jones lucrative gas contracts when Nelson ran Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company. Robinson's nasty attacks on Jones caused Jones's

daughter, who was Congressman Robinson's chief of staff, to resign. Many Clinton supporters, fearful of the swashbuckling Robinson's popularity in rural areas, moved to the Republican primary on election day and voted for Nelson, which would provide Nelson with at least part of his small margin of victory. Clinton easily defeated Thomas C. McRae IV, great-grandson of the progressive governor of the '20s and a brainy but ponderous politician. For the first time since 1980 Clinton faced an opponent who could match his fund-raising and campaign chest. Nelson accused Clinton of raising taxes more than a hundred times and of having his sights set on national office and not the needs of Arkansas people. Finally, Clinton vowed to serve the four years and not to run for president. He won with surprising ease with 57 percent of the vote. To his misfortune, so did Tucker.

### **The Election of 1990: Prelude to a Presidency<sup>65</sup>**

When Tommy Robinson, the conservative populist Democrat from central Arkansas, switched parties in a high profile announcement at the White House in late July 1989, the high-octane gubernatorial election of 1990 got underway. The party switch was orchestrated by President Bush's political advisor Lee Atwater who, according to sources, saw Governor Bill Clinton as a dangerous future foe for the President and saw Robinson as best candidate to defeat Clinton in a general election. What was not anticipated by Atwater, or anyone else, was a competitive Republican primary that would be Robinson's undoing. Sheffield Nelson, another lifelong Democrat and former CEO of Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company, announced a month after Robinson that he too was a Republican who wanted to be governor. Because of the roles of several other high-profile Arkansans, including the two men's one-time mutual friend Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, the GOP primary for governor became, in the words of national commentator Mark Shields, "at least a miniseries, a morality play and maybe even a novel, teeming with treachery, vengeance, ambition, busted friendships and truly colorful characters." While Robinson showed strong appeal in rural Arkansas, Nelson won the primary with 54.3 percent by running up margins in the urban areas of northwest Arkansas and Little Rock where the bulk of Arkansas Republican primary voters lived.

While tamer than the GOP "morality play," Democratic gubernatorial politics had its own twists and turns including the early announcement and departure from the race of Attorney General Steve Clark whose spending of state money on extravagant dinner dates and trips led to criminal conviction. But, the dynamics of the race were driven by Bill Clinton, indecisive until the last minute about whether he should seek another term. Only three months before the primary vote, Clinton called a press conference to announce his plans. It was a race for four more years as governor.

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<sup>65</sup> On this campaign, see Jay Barth, Diane D. Blair, and Ernie Dumas, "Arkansas: Characters, Crises, and Change," in Alexander P. Lamis, ed., *Southern Politics in the 1990s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), pp. 167-170.

Clinton's announcement immediately pushed out of the race Jim Guy Tucker who, since his campaign for governor in 1982, had built a private fortune in real estate and cable television. Tucker opted for an easier race for lieutenant governor instead. Not awed by Clinton, however, was Tom McRae—the grandson of a former governor—who ran an aggressive progressive campaign against Clinton in the primary but came up short, his defeat assisted by a public berating by First Lady Hillary Clinton just as McRae was showing momentum. The “Ten Years Is Enough” theme employed by McRae was also used by Sheffield Nelson in the fall. Nelson's campaign attempted to portray Clinton as a liberal tax-and-spender whose years as governor had had little tangible benefit for Arkansans. While Clinton had his closest general election race since the 1982 comeback victory, he still won 57.5 percent of the vote against Nelson.

During a fall debate when the race appeared closer than it would turn out, Clinton had promised to serve out his four-year term if reelected. It was a promise that he would quickly find a need to break. Less than a year after the 1990 election--after a “listening tour” around the state in which Clinton claimed he had received permission to break the pledge—he began what appeared to be a quixotic race for President in October 1991. Just over a year later, however, Arkansas would have its only U.S. President.

Clinton's most stubborn critics in the legislature also fell in the election or did not run, propelled by a court-ordered redrawing of legislative district lines in 1989 to give African-Americans a reasonable chance of election in regions where they in a majority. Indeed, more blacks were elected in 1990, and the legislative results everywhere strengthened Clinton's hand. He was able to pass legislation that had languished in earlier sessions. They included a one-half percent increase in the sales tax for education, along with new college scholarships and a state residential high school for science and mathematics scholars. The heads of big corporations joined Clinton in pushing for a corporate income tax increase to turn some of the state's vocational high schools into technical colleges. Motor-fuel taxes were raised to intensify roadbuilding. Lower-income residents were relieved of state income taxes, and other excise taxes were levied to support services for the elderly. It was easily the most productive legislative session in 20 years. To his surprise, his agenda was finished, Clinton said, so he could break his promise to finish his four-year term. In the fall of 1991, he launched his campaign for president.

## V.

### **A Two-Party Arkansas, 1990-2000**

#### **Accidental leadership**

Having guessed the future correctly in the spring of 1990, Lieutenant Governor Tucker became governor in December 1991. In 1994, he would defeat Nelson for a full term. But by the election, Tucker was under investigation by the independent counsel who was investigating a number of accusations of misconduct by Clinton and his associates before and after he took public office and during his presidency under the name of Whitewater. Although Tucker had no public or private associations with Clinton, Tucker eventually was indicted and convicted on charges stemming from private investment deals in the 1980s. Tucker was both bolder and more impatient than Clinton. He advocated large-scale consolidation of school administrative functions, directed the drafting of a new state constitution and proposed the largest highway construction program in history by far. The school plan met fury in the countryside and fell on deaf ears in the legislature. His personal popularity sapped by the shadow of impending prosecution, Tucker's espousal of the new constitution and the highway plan dragged them down to lopsided defeat in special elections. When the jury handed down its guilty verdict on May 28, 1996, Tucker announced that he would vacate the office on July 15. He tried to change his mind that day, causing a momentary constitutional crisis, but friends persuaded him that he could not prevail and that the outcry would be so pervasive that he could not govern.

While the Republican Party rapidly gained parity and often dominion in other Southern states from Texas to Virginia after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, no such trend developed in Arkansas. Even after the spectacular victories and organization effort of Winthrop

Rockefeller late that decade and Frank White's fluke election in 1980, Arkansas would remain for nearly the rest of the century the purest Democratic state in the country. The accident of three charismatic Democratic politicians in a row — Bumpers, Pryor and Clinton — may have forestalled the natural development that occurred in the rest of the traditional Democratic South. At any rate, the party made gains glacially, and rapidly in Northwest Arkansas, where retirees and an entrepreneurial and managerial class migrated in a development boom revolving around the giants Wal-Mart and Tyson Foods. The Republican vote and the number of GOP officeholders increased slightly at every election and by the 1990s, Republicans occasionally enjoyed success in heavily Democratic southern and northeastern Arkansas.

Although political expediency and not ideological conviction impelled Sheffield Nelson and Tommy Robinson to switch parties in 1990, their captivating race emboldened others to run for office as Republicans and there began to surface a small reservoir of talent for higher office. The nearly unbroken reign of Republican presidents from 1969 until 1993, particularly the popular Ronald Reagan, got conservative-leaning people accustomed to Republicanism. Still, it would be perverse accidents — principally Clinton's election and Tucker's conviction — that would break the dam and give the party a measure of statewide parity. An overblown scandal over the operations of the cooperative bank and postoffice that were run for members of the U. S. House of representatives caused repercussions in Arkansas. Two Democratic congressmen were defeated in the primaries of 1992 but the winner in South Arkansas, Bill McCuen, was so unsavory by the general election that a zany upstart Republican, Jay Dickey was elected to Congress from the most Democratic region of the state. The popular veteran John Paul Hammerschmidt retired in the Third District but state Rep. Tim Hutchinson of Bentonville, a conservative Baptist minister, kept the seat in Republican hands. although it was the first close

race there since 1972. In 1996, when Pryor chose to retire, Hutchinson defeated a competent but lusterless Democratic candidate, Attorney General Winston Bryant.

Rev. Mike Huckabee, born and reared in Clinton's hometown of Hope, possessed some renown as the president of the Arkansas Baptist Convention when he ran for the Senate against Dale Bumpers in 1992. Articulate and engaging but, despite his clerical traditions, not averse to a little mudslinging, Huckabee ran a creditable but losing race against Bumpers. He suggested that Bumpers promoted moral decline by voting for appropriations for federal arts and humanities grants. When Tucker took office in 1992, a special election was called to fill the vacant lieutenant governor's position. Huckabee filed and awaited the Democratic primaries for his foe. The midyear primary and election attracted little attention and few votes. Nate Coulter, a young Harvard-educated lawyer who had never held office, emerged from the Democratic primaries. Since the lieutenant governor has no substantive duty but to preside over the Senate when it is in session and when he is inclined, the issues are boring or frivolous. Blacks, a mainstay Democratic constituency, were particularly uninterested in a race that could mean nothing to their condition or futures. Coulter could arouse little partisan enthusiasm for his cause. For Republicans and for Baptists everywhere, the young preacher represented an opportunity and a cause. Huckabee won a close victory.

### **The Election of 1993: Two-Party Politics After the "Big Three"**

Never in Arkansas has an election for a down-ticket, primarily ceremonial post had the ramifications as did the special election for lieutenant governor in the summer of 1993. Brought about by the elevation of Jim Guy Tucker to the governorship after Bill Clinton's election as President, the victory of Republican Mike Huckabee in an unexceptional race ultimately to the election of the longest serving Republican governor in Arkansas history, the rise of the GOP's first true political star, and—along with demographic shifts—the cementing of a lasting two-party system in contemporary Arkansas.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> On the race, see Barth, Blair, and Dumas, pp. 176-8.

Democrat Nate Coulter, a party activist and attorney from Little Rock, used a vigorous grassroots campaign to tap into the organizations of two men for whom he had worked, Bill Clinton and Dale Bumpers. The 33 year old introduced himself to voters by focusing on the adoption of teenage curfews and a state government audit and surprised observers by leading a diverse field of six, including 1990 gubernatorial candidate Tom McRae, in the early June first primary. Coulter then rolled to an easy victory against McRae in the runoff.

Huckabee, the GOP's 1992 U.S. Senate nominee and past president of the nearly 500,000 member state Southern Baptist convention, avoided primary opposition then edged Coulter by gaining 50.8 percent of the vote in the late July general election. Democrats, who saw the outcome as more a Democratic "loss" than Republican "victory," attributed Huckabee's narrow victory to uniquely favorable circumstances: greater name recognition than his Democratic opponent and the dynamics of a small-turnout special election where the more committed Republican and religious following were certain to turn out. But, credit must also be given to an impressive advertising campaign that charged that Coulter was simply the latest product of the "Democratic machine." In contrast, Coulter's general election advertising was less effective, particularly a late ad that questioned the presence of Janet Huckabee, the wife of the GOP nominee, on the campaign payroll. The Huckabee campaign successfully turned the ad against Coulter through his own response featuring a passionate Huckabee—with pained wife at his side—criticizing Coulter for his "attack" on her.

The ramifications of the special election began to show themselves in 1996 when Governor Tucker was convicted of two felony counts by the federal jury in the so-called "Whitewater" trial. Huckabee, having won reelection to the lieutenant governorship in 1994, was in the midst of a campaign for the U.S. Senate at the time. But, Tucker immediately announced after the conviction that he would leave the governorship on July 15 and Huckabee abandoned the race. When Tucker changed his mind about the resignation just minutes before Huckabee's planned swearing in, followed by several hours of machinations on all fronts, Huckabee showed grace during the tense events. He was rewarded with immediate approval by the Arkansas public. His media skill and his ideological synchronicity with the Arkansas public led to easy election in 1998 and a tighter reelection—against the state's first woman nominee for governor, Democrat Jimmie Lou Fisher—in 2002. While the GOP remained disadvantaged in the state, particularly at the local level, Huckabee's successful governorship, rooted in the 1993 election, had helped cement the party as a real alternative in state politics. As a Democratic operative said about the 1993 in retrospect, "Watershed, wasn't it?"<sup>67</sup>

When Tucker was forced from office in July 1996, Huckabee was elevated to governor and he immediately impressed with his firmness and dignity. He would be a cautious chief executive at first but he would grow bolder. While he espoused conservative values on such issues as abortion, school prayer and gay rights in speaking engagements at home and outside the state, at the Capitol he was anything but an anti-government conservative. One of his first acts was a dramatic expansion of federal-state medical insurance for children and in budget crises he

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<sup>67</sup> On the special election's ramifications, see Barth, Blair, and Dumas, pp. 183-4 and 191-2, and Blair and Barth, pp. 72-6.

would resist cutting benefits for the needy. For the first time since Sid McMath in 1949, he used the state's credit to rebuild the Interstate highway system and subsequently advocated even greater use of debt to build infrastructure. Though sometimes under the lash of court orders, he would push tax increases for education, parks, tourism promotion and wildlife programs.

But though, unlike some predecessors, Huckabee was an unabashed Republican and openly supported a few Republican legislative candidates, his political innovations were more personal than partisan. Many in the party, particularly a faction in Northwest Arkansas, believed he was inattentive to advancing his party. Patronage was more personal than party-driven. Still, by the end of the century the Republican Party was expansive enough that, like the Democratic Party, it could be riven by factions.