

**THE IMPROBABLE WENDELL WILLKIE:
THE BUSINESSMAN WHO SAVED THE
REPUBLICAN PARTY AND HIS COUNTRY, AND
CONCEIVED A NEW WORLD ORDER**

(DAVID LEVERING LEWIS)

September 5, 2019

If the word hagiography had not already been coined, it would need to be invented for this book. To David Levering Lewis, Wendell Willkie was a combination of Saint Michael and Saint Francis. He was a world-bestriding colossus, a credit to his country, and a wonderful exemplar of what a Republican can and should be. After reading this book, though, I pick a different progenitor: Judas Iscariot. Willkie was a pocket Judas, true, having more gross vices and less cold malice than the original, but a Judas nonetheless. For Willkie betrayed his wife, his party, and his country. And, like Judas, he accomplished nothing but the designs of his enemies, and left behind only his corpse.

I've long been dimly aware of Willkie, among other reasons because he appeared in Amity Shlaes's outstanding history of the Depression, *The Forgotten Man*, but never knew much about him. Of the unsuccessful politicians of his generation, however, he is by far the most prominent. Why does he live on in our consciousness, and why has he recently experienced a boomlet of attention? After all, his political career lasted less than five years. Before 1940 he was a modestly prominent businessman, and after 1944 he was dead, having lost the only election in which he ran, against Franklin Roosevelt in 1940, and then having badly lost the 1944 Republican primary.

The answer is obvious: the Left, who writes our history, loves Republican traitors. Any Republican is vilified when actually running for office, no matter how moderate or accommodating, though he is vilified less if he makes clear he is not serious about threatening Left hegemony. But if, after duly losing any election he enters, he converts himself into a tool of the Left, he can and will lap up praise and reward for stabbing his comrades in the back and reversing his supposed principles. The best recent example of this is John McCain, but examples are legion, and in these days of Donald Trump, splitter of the Republican Party, multiplying, spawning men such as Mitt Romney. And since being

a traitor is the highest accolade the Left can bestow on a Republican, it is no wonder that Lewis, a man of the Left, sees Willkie in the most positive of lights—even if, to a discerning reader, the light has a reddish hue and is accompanied by the whiff of sulfur.

Let me get complaining about the author and his writing out of the way. Totally aside from its subject matter or its political angle, this is a very badly written book. It's written flatly, and with lots of unnecessary and usually poorly handled five-dollar words. In the entire book we learn almost nothing about Willkie's personal thoughts about anything but politics. Nothing about his relationship with his wife, other than his infidelity. Nothing about his relationship with siblings or children. We do get minute-by-minute descriptions of long-ago political conventions, though. Lewis's political bias shines clearly, as well. Anybody who disagrees with Democrats and their allies, who sought "not political advancement or power, but to serve human needs," is someone who "raves," "warns darkly," is filled with "pent-up malice," and exhibits "feral hostility." Editorially, the book is no better. The same anecdotes are told repeatedly. The pictures are chosen almost randomly and do not serve to illustrate the text. Elwood, Indiana, Willkie's hometown, does not have a railroad station called the "Nikel Plate." It is unlikely that "hoards" of Irish came to America. The hymn is not "Onward Christian Soldier," unless, perhaps, it is a very small army. "Ozymandian" does not mean "very big." The Egyptian mythical creature is a "sphinx"; the breed of cat is "sphynx." The Luftwaffe unleashed a "rain" of fire, not a "reign" of fire. The reader, already annoyed at the hagiography, sighs in pain when slogging through page after page of bad writing.

OK, back to the substance. The history of the Willkie family is, in Lewis's telling, one of liars and shirkers, though Lewis tries to spin it otherwise. Wendell Willkie's grandfather, Joseph Willcke, moved from Germany to America in 1861 after a business deal went sour—but he later made up an vague, implausible claim about having left because of his involvement in the 1848 revolutions (a lie that Joseph Goebbels gleefully exposed in 1940 to embarrass Willkie). Joseph Willcke moved to northern Indiana, where he had several children, but "he was ill suited for farming, and the locals remembered him spending much of his time reading history and philosophy, or playing the accordion, while a son-in-law raised the crops and managed the livestock." In other

words, he was a man who neglected his duties to his family, a tradition his grandson Wendell embraced to the fullest.

One of Joseph's sons, Herman, married a woman named Henrietta Trisch; and one of their sons was Wendell, born in 1892. Like her husband, Henrietta was a lawyer, unusual for the time (though it shows, contrary to myth, that it was not impossible for women of the time to practice a profession). Her family claimed she was Indiana's first woman lawyer, which Lewis admits is also a myth. Like her father-in-law, Henrietta neglected her duties to the family (four sons and two daughters), ignoring the household and the raising of her children to gratify herself with amusements such as music and reading, leaving the raising of the children to her oldest daughter. "The result was that neighbors increasingly regarded the Willkie homestead as the site of some uncommon if not weird experiment in domestic living." (The children repaid her neglect by putting the backhanded compliment on her gravestone, "She was driven by an indomitable will," while Herman got "He dedicated his life to his children.") The family were putative Methodists, but the parents' real religion was progressivism with a leftist flair. Wendell himself left Methodism for Episcopalianism in high school as a tactical move in pursuit of a girl; Lewis casts this as "romantic impulsivity [that] set the stage for future decisions in which personal considerations trumped declared principles and institutional fidelity." In other words, his hero started betraying for gain early.

Willkie went to Indiana University, first undergraduate, then law school, finishing the latter in 1916. At both places he pushed radical politics; Lewis notes "his notable coup bringing *Das Kapital* and socialist party founder John Spargo's *History of Socialism* to Bloomington," demanding and getting a class on socialism. In 1917, he volunteered for the war, and was commissioned as a lieutenant of the artillery, but the war ended before he was shipped to France, though he fit in marriage to his wife, Edith, a local librarian, before going briefly to France in 1918. Returning to Elwood, he wanted to be a politician, but he was a strong Democrat, and Elwood was heavily Republican. So he moved to Democratic Akron, taking a job as a lawyer for Firestone Tire, and then one at a prominent local law firm. He also rose in the Democratic party, going to the 1924 Democratic National Convention as a delegate.

At that convention, the big issue was the League of Nations and, more broadly, America's presence on the global scene. Willkie was always a firm internationalist. The single quote of Willkie's that Lewis loves the most, citing it repeatedly without inquiring into whether it makes any sense, is "Whatever we do at home constitutes foreign policy. And whatever we do abroad constitutes domestic policy." The Democratic Party, however, refused to endorse internationalism, so Willkie was in the minority. To his credit, Willkie also fought the Ku Klux Klan, at that point among the most important constituents of the Democratic Party. Despite his efforts, the convention refused to pass any resolution criticizing the Klan, which Lewis says was "to be known in history as the 'Klanbake,'" although apparently there is some dispute about whether that term was actually used much at the time.

Willkie quickly became a fixture in the business scene in Akron, acquiring various business interests, in banks and mortgage companies. In 1929, however, he accepted a job offer to be general counsel, in New York, for Commonwealth & Southern Corporation, the largest holding company for electric utilities in the country. By 1933, Willkie was president of C&SC. In the meantime, the economy had crashed, but that did not affect the electric business as it did some other businesses. He was also a delegate to the 1932 Democratic National Convention, where he was a floor manager for Newton Baker, the internationalist candidate. Franklin Roosevelt, less openly internationalist, won the nomination and the election, of course, whereupon like a good Democrat, Willkie aggressively backed Roosevelt.

Soon enough, though, Willkie's business interests came into conflict with Roosevelt's New Deal demands—namely, Roosevelt's desire that the Tennessee Valley Authority replace private electricity generation in the area covered by the TVA. From 1933 to 1939, the C&SC fought the federal government in Congress and the courts, with Roosevelt threatening to break up the C&SC and Willkie trying to get out by selling for a high price. Roosevelt's mastery of guile and Willkie's vanity led to him being easily manipulated by Roosevelt and his "Brain Trust." It was also during this time that Willkie began his long and extremely public affair with that famous woman of letters, Irita Van Doren, which was concealed by the press, who liked Willkie.

Still, Willkie, or political circumstances and the Supreme Court, ultimately managed to get a decent price for C&SC, and the entire episode placed Willkie often in the public eye for much of the 1930s. All this time, Willkie was an ardent Democrat, a "member in good standing of Tammany, New York City's Democratic patronage trough." Willkie's only objection to Roosevelt, the New Deal, and Democrats generally was that sometimes private enterprise might do a better and faster job reaching the same progressive ends. Too much government coercion was bad, if the same ends of more power to the state could be accomplished by private means. In the 1936 election, which Roosevelt won easily against Alf Landon, who "gave the voters insufficient reason to elect a Republican Roosevelt," Willkie did not participate—though, deep in the bitterest part of his TVA fight, he voted for Landon, but always maintained, until late 1939, that he was a Democrat.

So, in 1939, Willkie was an ex-businessman with no relevant political experience, no natural constituency, and no obvious future. How did he become the Republican nominee in 1940? There was no serious talk of him as a presidential candidate, much less a Republican one, until May, 1940. After all, the big question was whether Roosevelt himself would run again, breaking the cardinal, but unwritten, rule that a President could seek no more than two terms in office. The Republicans wanted to win, having waited a long time. One wing of the party, internationalist and progressive, the original "country club Republicans," opposed to the isolationism and anti-New Deal posture of men like Robert Taft and Arthur Vandenberg, wanted "to find a surprise candidate unfettered by shopworn partisan dogma and politically ambidextrous enough to make the reforms of the left palatable to the right and the promised prosperity of the right credible to the left." In other words, they wanted a political trimmer, a man of no fixed beliefs, but vaguely tending left, and impressionable and eager to be liked. They wanted a Dwight Eisenhower, before Eisenhower was prominent. Instead, their gaze gravitated to Willkie, who was being pushed by Frank Altschul, a wealthy businessman and high functionary in the Republican National Committee, whose main activity prior to that date had been spending his money to "urge a liberal platform for Republicans."

A groundswell for Willkie was therefore manufactured by the rich and powerful. Critical to this effort was that Willkie was the overt

choice of important newsmagazines, notably *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*. For example, in May 1940 *Life* featured a fawning, eleven-page profile of Willkie. This reminds me of how immediately before the 2012 election *People* magazine published a similarly fawning profile of Obama and his family, making me wonder how they would stomach doing a similar profile on Romney. I needn't have worried—the next issue merely featured a second fawning profile of Obama and his family, and not a word about Romney. The only odd thing about the push for Willkie by some of the captains of media is that it reminds us that, not that long ago, the news-setting, and the entertainment, media was not the leftist monolith it is today. But it performed similar functions for politicians now as then.

At the Republican convention in Philadelphia (which, unlike the Democrat Klanbake, featured aggressive formal demands for equal rights for African Americans on all fronts), there was the usual maneuvering. This included the sudden death of the man in charge of procedure, and his replacement by a Willkie man, which death Lewis obliquely says was rumored to have been murder by the British, desperate to ensure that the Republican presidential nominee not be an isolationist. (Apparently the British archives on covert intelligence activities in the United States during the World War II period is sealed until 2041.) After many ballots, Willkie carried the day, whereupon he gave a speech, addressing the crowd as “you Republicans.”

In 1940, Willkie, according to Lewis, had a golden opportunity to coordinate and direct opposition to the New Deal. “The GOP’s stunning congressional gains in 1938 off-year elections had revealed a large swath of the electorate grown weary of New Deal regulation and experimentation.” But Willkie was much more interested in endorsing the New Deal and hectoring his party, parroting FDR, with demands that Republicans stop opposing entering the European war. He ran a disorganized, chaotic, lazy campaign, in which he made no real attempt to distinguish himself from Roosevelt. Mostly, to the extent he had a theme, he tried to portray himself as a stronger man than Roosevelt, but he refused to attack Roosevelt at any weak point, and was easily manipulated by Roosevelt into publicly agreeing with the President’s policies, making Roosevelt look strong and Willkie look weak. Most of all, Willkie insisted that his principles demanded internationalism and intervention in Europe;

the “Wilsonian imperative” trumped party. From a strong lead, Willkie steadily lost ground, and then lost the election handily, though in the last two weeks he abandoned his supposed principles and tried to cast himself as the man who could prevent American boys from going to war (which Lewis bizarrely calls “warmongering”). That got him a bump in the polls, but not enough.

No doubt a vain man like Willkie was disappointed. But what he really wanted was to be relevant, so he quickly made himself available to Roosevelt as a tool for Roosevelt’s ends. (In the understatement of the century, Lewis says “[A] taint of opportunism would come to dog Wendell.”) He endorsed whatever legislation Roosevelt wanted, needing only a little flattery from the President to do whatever was wanted by the Democrats. Among other betrayals, he eagerly worked with Roosevelt to defeat the formidable Republican congressman Hamilton Fish and replace him with a Democrat. (Their joint effort failed.) Roosevelt mostly wanted Willkie out of the way, so he sent him on an around-the-world trip in 1942 to meet world leaders and act as Roosevelt’s errand boy, notably by giving him a hand-written letter to be handed personally to Stalin. We are never told what the letter said, but we are told that Willkie first lost it, and then, having found it, forgot to give it to Stalin (presumably because he was drunk—Willkie drank like a fish, in addition to smoking three packs a day). Lewis, who incredibly actually endorses Lincoln Steffens’s infamous claim about Russia that he had been “over into the future and it works,” muses that Willkie must have been impressed at Soviet accomplishments when he toured Soviet power stations surprisingly “reminiscent of his own CS&C power stations,” which is no surprise at all, since as Thomas Hughes narrates in *American Genesis*, they were built by Americans to American plans. At no point in his life, naturally, did Willkie ever express any material objection to Soviet Russia, and he enjoyed his time with the Russians, who had his number and ran circles around him.

The most interesting part of the trip seems to have been Willkie’s fumbling attempt to have an affair with Chiang Kai-Shek’s formidable wife, who, like everyone else with whom Willkie met, easily manipulated him (though she may also have slept with him). But, after he came home, Willkie managed to release a bestselling book, *One World*, about his trip—probably mostly, or all, ghostwritten by Van Doren. (The

book left out Willkie's dalliances with prostitutes in Baghdad, of course, something he probably didn't share with Van Doren.) The success of the book kept him, to Roosevelt's irritation, in the public eye, which was mostly what Willkie wanted out of life. Roosevelt needn't have worried—Republicans, tired of Willkie's shortcomings, and of behavior such as Willkie coupling opening his campaign with the “release of a taxation plan calling for a drastic tax increase that added eight billion dollars above the revenues captured by FDR's budget request,” quickly made clear they had no further interest in him, and that was the end of his campaign.

Naturally, Willkie refused to endorse the Republican candidate, Thomas Dewey. In one last manipulation, to keep Willkie on the sidelines, FDR privately dangled the carrot, post-election to be sure, that he and Willkie could form a new third party, which Willkie would lead after FDR's (clearly not-far-off) death. (Lewis, apparently drunk, as his hero frequently was, when he wrote about this episode, calls Roosevelt's effort “the far final horizon where the parliament of humankind must be built.”) Willkie was about to join the group “Republicans for Roosevelt” (there was not a “Democrats for Dewey”; there are only ever betraying Republicans, never betraying Democrats). But, after a series of heart attacks caused by his vices, he died in October, 1944. And, after claiming without any rationale that had he lived the Republicans and the country would have been very different, not imperialistic and not devoted to the Cold War, Lewis ends his book abruptly.

What's the lesson? Well, there isn't one, except for conservatives to learn, to their sadness, for the umpteenth time, the truth of Robert Nisbet's evergreen dictum, “Rootless men always betray.” Since the entire project of the Left is to destroy the roots of our civilization, something that has come into much clearer focus over the past twelve months, that's a problem. I suppose the logical follow-up question is why politicians on the Left never betray in the same way as Wendell Willkie, John McCain, Mitt Romney, the George Bushes, and many more. The answer is probably that politicians on the Left are not rootless—in fact, given that the Left is wholly gripped by a common ideology, they are very rooted, just with very different, poisonous roots. Buttressing this, there is no personal reward for politicians on the Left to betray, given that unlike betrayers on the Right, they cannot obtain any rewards for

doing so, since the Left controls all the commanding heights of our society, for now. A person on the Left who switched to, or aided, the Right as so many Republicans aid the Left would merely be blasted with obloquy and personally destroyed. This implies that the way to solve this problem is to, finally, after a century, adopt the tactics of personal destruction always used by the Left. Too bad, but as I said, before Sohrab Ahmari did, the only way out is through. When they are driven from our society, then we can have nice things again.