

# Wendell Willkie

Statesman (1892 – 1944)



Born in Elwood, Indiana, Willkie was a graduate of Indiana University and the Indiana University School of Law. After serving in World War I, he moved to Akron, Ohio, and in 1919, Willkie married librarian Edith Wilk.

In 1929, Willkie became a legal counsel for the New York-based Commonwealth & Southern Corporation, the nation's largest electric utility holding company. He became C & S's president in 1933. Willkie was a delegate to the 1932 Democratic Convention, eventually supporting FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT. In 1933, President Roosevelt proposed the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a government agency that would compete with private power companies, including C & S. Willkie opposed the TVA as his company was unable to compete with the federal government, and he was forced to sell C & S properties in the Tennessee Valley to the TVA in 1939. That year Willkie formally switched parties.

The three leading candidates for the 1940 Republican nomination were Senators Robert Taft and Arthur Vandenberg, and Thomas E. Dewey. All three men had campaigned vigorously. Willkie seemed an unlikely candidate as he was a former Democrat, but he had received backing from media magnates. Key supporters were OGDEN REID of the *New York Herald Tribune*, RUSSELL DAVENPORT of *Fortune* magazine, Roy Howard of the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain and JOHN COWLES and GARDNER COWLES, publishers of several newspapers and *Look* magazine.

Willkie consistently spoke of the need to aid the British, in direct contrast with the other leading Republican candidates, who were isolationists. With the surrender of France on June 25, 1940, and the belief that Britain was under imminent threat of invasion, the Republican Convention opened in an atmosphere of unrest. Governor HAROLD STASSEN of Minnesota, the keynote speaker, announced for Willkie and became his official floor manager. On the sixth ballot, Willkie received a majority of the ballots cast and won the nomination, a victory that is considered to be one of the most dramatic moments in the history of American presidential conventions.

On election day Roosevelt received 27 million votes to Willkie's 22 million. Willkie carried just ten states.

Willkie became one of Roosevelt's most unlikely allies, calling for greater support for controversial Roosevelt initiatives such as Lend-Lease. Willkie again sought the Republican nomination in 1944 but withdrew. By the time of his sudden death in October 1944 Willkie had endorsed neither Dewey nor Roosevelt.