Anti-Catholicism in the 1920's and Al Smith

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AND AL SMITH

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PREFACE

The origin of this project stems from an episode in the life of my maternal grandfather. An Italian immigrant in a small Michigan community, he found his religion and ethnic origin were a handicap in business and society. In 1927, the local Ku Klux Klan ordered him to close his grocery store and encouraged him to leave town. His reply was emphatically negative. By chance, a short time later, he heard the Klan had planned a rally to take place on the outskirts of town. After packing his Ford with his children and his pocket with his gun, he drove to the site of the rally. Within sight of the flaming torches and cross, he parked the car and left his family to investigate. A short time later he returned to his waiting family and said, "Sono pazzo", or, "They are crazy." Within weeks his business had failed due to a Klan-imposed boycott.

This paper will focus on the general nature of anti-Catholicism in the Twenties and, particularly, its manifestations in the campaign of 1928. The Ku Klux Klan, Protestant fundamentalists, and various politicians generated anti-Catholic animosity which discredited the candidacy of Al Smith. Such a study well depicts the "sono pazzi" of the Twenties.

I am greatly indebted to Dr. Lewis Carlson and the staff of Waldo Library for their patience and assistance.
INTRODUCTION

Anti-Catholicism has a long history in the United States beginning with the colonization of Maryland and continuing, partially due to its Reformation legacy, through the Irish immigration of the 1840's.

But with the advent of the new immigrant, anti-Catholicism became more virulent. The last decade of the nineteenth century exhibited strong anti-Catholic feelings, as evidenced by the popularity of the American Protective Association, an organization whose members swore never to vote for a Catholic candidate. The Association's bias, and that of many non-members, was based on their conviction that Catholics were responsible for the Panic of 1893. By the turn of the century, the emergence of the Progressivism and the return of economic growth signalled the demise of the A.P.A.

As the Progressive movement gained the nation's attention, much but not all anti-Catholic fervor subsided. Unfortunately, the political situation in Georgia, dominated by two competing groups, suggested to Thomas Watson that a strong issue could provide fulfillment of his ambition. Utilizing Watson's Magazine

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2 Ibid., p. 83.
as a mouthpiece, Watson revived religious bigotry and, eventually, became a dominant political force in Georgia.

In 1910, Wilbur Franklin Phelps, publisher of The Menace, began his campaign against Popery. He continually reminded his readers of the sinister threat posed by the Catholics. Circulation of The Menace increased dramatically until it reached over 3 million subscribers. As the new campaign emerged, all the traditional forms of invective were invoked—"ex-priests lecturing on the moral iniquities of the confessional and convent, warnings about Catholic political conspiracies, tales of young girls held captive in convents and the suspicion that Catholics planned an armed uprising." The revival of anti-Catholic sentiment as espoused by these sensationalists found expression in the popularity of such groups as the Knights of Luther, the Guardians of Liberty, and finally, the Ku Klux Klan.

Probably the most important outcome of this campaign was the formation of the new Klan in 1915. Its founder, William J. Simmons, acted upon the suggestion of Tom Watson that the country needed an organization like the "old Ku Klux Klan." But, with America's attention diverted by affairs in Europe, it got off to an inauspicious start. After the war, however, the nation's mood of exaggerated nationalism, economic doldrums, the Red Scare, and renewed immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe gave impetus to Simmon's Klan.

\[3\] Ibid., p. 178.
The Klan vocalized nationalist fears that the foreigners would mongrelize America. The spread of xenophobia and the increased political influence of nationalist organizations resulted in the passage of restrictive legislation. The Immigration Act of 1924 limited the number of immigrants, but it was the National Origins Act of 1927 that discriminated against the Southern and Eastern European.
CHAPTER I
The Ku Klux Klan
1920-28

In the twenties, the Ku Klux Klan increasingly appealed to prospective members through its anti-Catholic pronouncements. Klan salesmen resurrected many old myths about Catholics, such as the allegation that every time a Catholic baby boy was born, a gun and enough ammunition to kill fifty people was buried under the church.¹ These salesmen explained that "a magnificent million dollar palace was being built in Washington, D.C. and was soon to be occupied by the Pope."² It was also rumored that Catholics abducted young girls and confined them in their convents. Alabama produced legislation that provided for periodic inspection of convents in search of captive women.

The Red Scare of 1919-1920, with its great emphasis on native-Americanism, also resurrected many of these old fears. It was the threat of international conspiracy that tied Catholics to the tail of the Red Scare but Catholics added a new dimension to the situation; they were foreigners. In the

²Ibid., p. 590.
immediate post-war era immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe flooded into America. Apprehensive nationalists were determined to limit the influx of these undesirables. "Scientific" opinion confirmed the common belief that these foreigners were inferior. Immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe could best be curtailed by a quota based on the concept of national origins. Initially, a stopgap measure was utilized and the 1924 Immigration Act continued the trend toward more limited immigration, but it was the National Origins Act of 1927 which established the quota. Based on a percentage of America's population as comprised in the 1890 census, the quota discriminated against the more recent arrivals.

As a nationalist, 100-percent American organization, the Ku Klux Klan actively supported the limitation of immigration. Remnants of Bolshevism were transferred to the new adversary, as one Klansman put it, "The Klan is not anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, or anti-negro, but merely against Bolshevist and socialist tendencies within these groups." The Klan became a potent political force on the American scene and dominant in such states as Indiana, Oklahoma, Missouri, Texas and Tennessee.

In 1924, the Klan leadership passed from William Simmons to Hiram Wesly Evans, but the Klan remained politically influential, and clearly xenophobic. The new Imperial Wizard's

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opinion of the Catholic immigrant reiterated the Klan position:

So they came to realize that the Nordic can easily survive and rule the increase if he holds for himself the advantages won by strength and daring of his ancestors in times of stress and peril, but that if he surrenders those advantages to the peoples who could not share the stress, he will soon be driven below the level at which he can exist by their low standards, low living and fast breeding. And they saw that the low standard aliens of Eastern and Southern Europe were doing just that thing to us.4

Evans' opinion of the immigrants also encompassed their religion and Evans appealed to his followers on the basis of a narrow patriotism:

When the Roman Catholic Church interferes with our fundamental principles of separation of Church and State, when it interferes with our Rights, . . . . then the institution has challenged the white, native-born Protestant, Christian of America to defend this Republic.5

In the Twenties, the Klan encouraged women to join the Invisible Empire to clean the atmosphere and make America intensely American so there would be no room for un-American ideals.

One influential American who was destined to take issue with the Klan was the Catholic Governor of New York, Al Smith. When Smith was a candidate for the 1924 Democratic Presidential nomination, he led the forces of the Eastern wing of the party for its push for a platform that would denounce the Klan. Another plank was prepared by the drafting committee that offered


a mild endorsement of the Klan. When the Eastern resolution was introduced, Texas countered with a resolution that was defeated by less than one vote. The Smith forces were narrowly defeated, but the fight engendered a bitter schism in the party that would be further aggravated in the nomination.

The split over the Klan plank was divided along regional lines, the South and West eventually defeating the East. The nomination for the Presidency was divided along the same lines, the South and West supported William McAdoo and the East was for Al Smith. The convention was deadlocked through 100 ballots until Smith finally released all delegates. In this heated atmosphere, John Davis, the favorite-son candidate of West Virginia, was nominated. Even though the Klan was no longer an issue in 1928, the bitter split over it would cost Al Smith the united support of his party.

Due to internal scandals, the Klan was less than significant in the 1928 election. The Klan influence of the local or state level remained and provided a reliable barometer of social opinion regarding Al Smith and his religion. In fact, the nomination of Smith brought a slight resurgence of the waning fortunes of the

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Klan reported by Senator Harry B. Hawes:

The Ku Klux Klan which was on its last leg before the Smith campaign started, is being put back on its feet financially, and is being used against the Governor in the border states, . . . . and where the Klan formerly sent out 100,000 copies of the fake Knights of Columbus oath, they are now sending them by the millions.7

Klan leadership hoped to regain their popularity and power through reorganization and exploitations of the candidacy of a Catholic. Klan reorganization was recorded in the Christian Century. It stated that on February 23, 1928, the Knights would remove their bedsheets for the last time and don the garb of the Knights of the Green Forest.8 The effort was in vain. Opposition to Smith remained a local affair.

In Birmingham, Alabama, local Klansmen lynched Governor Smith in effigy and this action was recorded in the Northern press.

As the dummy was brought in, the presiding officer cried 'What shall we do with him?' Loud cries of 'Lynch him' were heard. After the noose was placed around the dummy's neck, a Klan official cut the dummy's throat with a knife, at the same time pouring mequiumchrome down the figure's chest to simulate blood.9

Alabama boasted one of the strongest Klan units which claimed a United States Senator as a member, though J. Thomas Heflin denied their claim. The Klan, however, claimed

7New York Times, 1 October 1928, p. 4.

8"The Klan is Dead; Long Live the . . . .?" The Christian Century, 6 March 1928, p. 305.

9New York Times, 3 October, 1928, p. 3.
him as one of its leading orators in 1928. Addressing himself to the conflict between the interests of America and those of the Catholic Church, he spoke to residual elements of the Klan in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Heflin cautioned that should Al Smith be elected, the destruction of the public school system, unrestricted immigration, and domination of the Pope would ensue. Heflin's claim that his life had been threatened, prompted Governor Smith to provide a police guard for the Senator during his visit to New York.

Oklahoma was another long-time stronghold of the Klan and its trend toward Republicanism was attributed to this Klan influence. The trend was especially strong in the Southern half of the state, where opposition to Governor Smith for his Prohibition views, Tammany connections, and his religion was most keenly felt. In the election, Oklahoma and Texas voted Republican; in the latter instance, for the first time since the Civil War. Alabama's rural counties remained loyal to the Democratic cause and prevented its defection to the Republicans by a mere 7,100 votes. ¹⁰

Even though the Klan had lost much of its political clout by 1928, nonetheless; it still made an impact at the grass roots level on states which had normally voted Democratic.

CHAPTER II

The nomination of a Catholic in 1928 prompted the opposition of some Protestant sects, notably Baptists and Methodists. From the latter group came Bishop James Cannon, Jr. of Richmond, Virginia. A prominent cleric, Cannon was a "dry" advocate who opposed Al Smith because of his self professed wetness and his religion.

Originally, Cannon's opposition to Catholics was reflected in his analysis of the situation in Mexico. Catholics claimed that they were being unjustly persecuted but Cannon dismissed these claims as a self-seeking attempt to gain special privileges. In an address delivered in Washington, D.C., Cannon explained the issue:

Why should there be so much discussion of this question, . . . because the leaders of Roman Catholicism in this country and their obedient, if not to say subservient and fanatical followers, have not only denounced these provisions (Mexican Constitution) and the enforcement of them, and have not only appealed to our State Department to intervene, but have actually gone so far as to introduce, through a loyal son of Romanism, a resolution for the withdrawal of recognition. 1

1 U.S. Congress, Senate, Senator Heflin speaking against intervention in Mexico. 69th Congress, 2nd session, 2 March 1927, Congressional Record 68:5305
Cannon continued his presentation by pointing out that the best interests of Mexico could not be served by the Catholic Church. In addition, he found it appalling that the Catholics should demand exemption from laws that Protestant missionaries observed.

More importantly, Cannon employed the Prohibition issue as a weapon against Smith, oftentimes attacking Smith's religion. In fact, the uniformity of opinion that he attributed to Catholics on the Mexican issue, was in his opinion, a factor in the opposition to the Volstead Act. As Cannon said; "It is a known fact that the attacks in Congress upon the Prohibition law are made chiefly by Roman Catholics or those who represent Catholic constituencies."²

Similarly, Smith's views on Prohibition alarmed Cannon because as the chief executive of New York, his sworn duty was to uphold the Constitution and, yet, he reputedly imbibed alcoholic beverages. In addition, his duty demanded that the Volstead Act be enforced; but Smith's failure to provide rigorous enforcement was in direct contradiction of the Constitution. Cannon concluded that if Smith chose to select which laws to obey, he could easily violate other Constitutional provisions if elected President.

²James Cannon, Jr., "Al Smith; Catholic, Tammany, Wet" Literary Digest October 23, 1928
Finally, as the leader of the "dry" faction in the Democratic Party, Cannon was able to vocalize the demands of his cohorts. The Smith forces sought to placate this group by allowing the insertion of a dry plank into the party platform. The nomination was a foregone conclusion; Al Smith was nominated on the first ballot and Cannon's comment was "Control has fallen to the foreign-populated city called New York, where Satan's seat confessedly is; no subject of the Pope should be President". At the conclusion of the convention, Cannon, nominally a Democrat, felt his only recourse was to join the Republican Party and support Herbert Hoover.

Other fundamentalist clergymen opposed Al Smith and gave vivid expression to their sentiments. In Oklahoma City, Mordecia Ham, a revivalist preacher, cautioned his audience, "If you vote for Al Smith, you're voting against Christ and you'll all be damned."

Still others discounted the Prohibition issue. "I tell you brother, that the big issue we've got to face ain't the liquor question," the Reverend Bob Jones told a Birmingham meeting. "I'd rather see a saloon on every corner in the South than see the foreigners elect Al Smith."

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4 *New York Times*, 3 October 1928. p. 3.

At the same time, Dr. I. M. Haldeman, another pulpit electioneer, proclaimed, "The ambition of the Romanists is to make America Catholic... Never since the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg, when the country's fate hung in the balance, has the country faced an issue as grave as this."6

Meanwhile, the Reverend C. L. Fry, addressed the Thirty Fifth convention of the Luther League and revealed his concept of the Catholic problem.

Shall we have a man in the White House who acknowledges allegiance to the autocrat on the Tiber, who hates democracy, public schools, Protestant parsonages, individual rights and everything essential to independence? South America will bear witness against the oppression of Catholic interests down there, and to what Popery has done to her in the last 300 years.7

Reverend Charles Fountain attempted to be more discreet in his opposition to Smith when he suggested, "We would not keep him from the White House on a count of his religious bigotry, but because the Catholic Church is opposed to the principles of democracy."8 Undoubtedly, the most ridiculous example of loyal opposition is one recalled by Smith in his autobiography which said, "In certain churches in the state of Georgia, there was displayed a picture of me attending the opening of the Holland Tunnel." This tunnel was constructed to connect New York and

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New Jersey, but the facts suffered from distortion in Georgia, "... people were convinced that the tunnel connected New York, but instead of ending in New Jersey, it ended in the basement of the Vatican." Protestant opposition to Smith was not confined to the spoken word, or to the scattered articles in the leading periodicals; the Protestant periodicals helped spread the word.

The *Christian Century*, a liberal Protestant periodical, denounced the "whispering" campaign that was spreading false rumors about Governor Smith and his wife, but the editors considered the religious question as pertinent to the election campaign:

The Constitution guarantees that any man who is elected to civil office shall not be disqualified because of his religion. It does not forbid the voter to take a candidate's religion into account in deciding whether to vote for or against him.\(^9\)

This editorial assured readers that if the voter "sees real issue between Catholicism and American institutions and declines to assist the extension of Catholicism by helping put its representative at the head of the Government, he is not an intolerant person or a bigot."\(^{11}\) Moreover, the editors cautioned the voters to evaluate the religious issue and vote


\(^{10}\) "Browbeating the Protestants", *The Christian Century*, 11 October 1928, p. 217.

\(^{11}\) Ibid.
after considering these two questions: "Does the Catholic Church stand for policies of which he disapproves and does it exercise pressure upon its members to secure their support for these policies?"\(^{12}\)

Similarly, other Protestant periodicals expressed opinions on the religious issue. Dr. Charles E. Jefferson, writing in The Christian Index, official organ for the Baptists of Georgia, placed credence in the proposition that American Catholics were controlled from abroad. The Presbyterian Banner of Pittsburgh, confirmed the conclusions of The Christian Index, "Any one has a perfect legal and moral right to vote against a candidate because he is a Roman Catholic if his conscience bids him so to do."\(^{13}\)

The opposition of the Fellowship Forum and Protestant leaders provided guidance and support for fundamentalists throughout America. The campaign against Governor Smith had renewed a religious rivalry that dated to the Reformation period; its legacy of suspicion and bitterness remained in 1928.


\(^{13}\)"Governor Smith's Religion", Literary Digest, 20 October 1928, p. 28.
OTHER FUNDAMENTALISTS

The Fellowship Forum was a publishing outlet of narrow Protestantism that catered to the interests of 100-percent Americans through newspapers, pamphlets, and short books. The Forum was firmly convinced that Catholics intended to replace the constitutional government of the United States with the despotic rule of the Church hierarchy.

In accordance with this belief, the Fellowship Forum provided the American public with valuable information concerning Catholics. In 1927, a European correspondent for the Forum produced a volume that revealed the moral debauchery of the Vatican during the reign of Alexander VI. Author John Bond reveals his attitude in the preface:

Romanism is a growth that cannot bear the rays of the sun. The plain unvarnished truth will put it down every time. There can be no peace nor truce and no compromise with the forces of the Vatican. The fight of the Reformation is still a good fight but no where more so than in our own beloved Republic.14

Bond's intent, as explained in an advertisement, was the presentation of a historical account of how the Pope converted the Vatican into a house of ill-fame.

Bond claimed that the work was based on historical documentation. On the basis of this evidence, he concluded that the corruption of the past remained in the Church in 1928. Other authors found more recent Catholic documents to support their claims of the sinister plans of the hierarchy for America.

In 1928, the Fellowship Forum published, *Proof of Rome's Political Meddling in America*, devoted to revealing the international Catholic conspiracy. This polemic sought to prove:

> In America, Roman Catholicism is active, aggressive, seeking to "make America Catholic" and to achieve that end is employing every means that comes to hand: through propaganda and the use of the press. Through priestly activities, the influencing the minds of the young, through proselyting, for all of which it is expending enormous amounts annually.¹⁵

Unknown to most Americans, the central agency for the pursuit of these goals was located in Washington, D.C., under the title of the National Catholic Welfare Conference. Although the Conference was composed of American-Catholics, it allegedly received instructions from the Apostolic Delegate. The Delegate was an envoy for the Vatican in Washington. According to the Fellowship Forum his role was to direct the conspiracy and relay the directives of the Pope to the Conference.

One of the chief ambitions attributed to the Catholic program was the elimination of all immigration restrictions. As agents of the Pope, these foreigners would facilitate the acquisition of power, and the Forum warned that the American policy is America for Americans which the free inflow of aliens would destroy.¹⁶

Other fundamentalists found their way into the mainstream press, spawned by the candidacy of Al Smith. Some suspicious persons questioned Smith's apparent dual allegiance, and its possible ramifications should he be elected. Atlantic Monthly invited a New York attorney, Charles Marshall, to prepare a statement on Al Smith. His article entitled, "An Open Letter to the Honorable Alfred E. Smith", petitioned Smith to state his position on the Catholic doctrine that supported the union of Church and State. In his reply, Smith stated that there could be no conflict between his religion and the government, because they were concerned with two distinct aspects of life: one provided social order and the other spiritual comfort.

Marshall also wrote a book on the subject entitled, The Roman Catholic Church in the Modern State, basing his argument on historical documents, encyclicals and the Syllabus of Errors.

Marshall concluded that the interests of government and Church conflicted in the "twilight zones" of education and marriage.  

Others came to the same conclusion. Theodore Schroeder felt compelled to continue Marshall's line of inquiry, as he found Smith's reply evasive and unclear. In his book, *Al Smith, the Pope, and the Presidency*, Schroeder postulated that if Smith were the independent candidate that he claimed to be, he should simply state that his religion would not interfere with any Presidential duties. Schroeder reasoned that Smith was not an independent candidate because he relied on Father Duffy to compose the reply to Marshall. Smith was, Schroeder concluded, afraid to offend the clergy or to contradict Church doctrine.

Marshall and Schroeder aimed their comments directly at Al Smith but there were others who were more concerned with the Catholic Church in general. Winfred E. Garrison, author of *Catholicism and the American Mind*, explained the features of the Catholic religion that conflicted with the principles of Americans. In Garrison's opinion the Catholic Church exercised two types of authority, one spiritual and the other political. This overlap was due to the interests of the Church in matters that could

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18 Edmund B. Chaffee, "On Understanding the Catholic" *Outlook*, 8 August 1928, p. 596.

19 Ibid.
not be clearly defined, such as education and marriage. The political involvement of the Church was in basic conflict with principles of the Protestant American. Garrison concluded that the relations of the Protestant churches to the Catholic was governed by Catholic insistence on the submission of the Protestants and thus, due to fail. Christian Century Book Club featured Garrison's effort as the June (1928) Book of the Month. Its timely publication coincided with the nomination of Al Smith.

Another timely publication was the reprinting of Benito Mussolini's, *The Cardinal's Mistress*. Written in his youth, Mussolini's American publisher resurrected the old work to cash-in on the revival of interests in Catholics. Mussolini's effort was of questionable literary value, but the intensity of interest carried the novel through two editions. The images that Mussolini developed of the Cardinal and other clerics reinforced the common perceptions of Catholic hierarchy.

These fundamentalist publications defined Catholicism and its role in America. This definition had an important impact upon the candidacy of Al Smith.
CHAPTER III

POLITICIANS

Of all the political personalities who opposed Al Smith in the 1928 campaign, none was more blatantly anti-Catholic than Senator James Thomas Heflin, a Democrat from Alabama. Convinced that Smith represented the Roman Catholic political machine, Heflin uncovered evidence to support his conclusions. The encroachments of the Catholics had reached into the government and were directed to the eventual displacement of America's constitutional government by the rule of the Catholic hierarchy.

Heflin made particular reference to the situation in Mexico. The conflict there, between the Catholic Church and the government of Mexico, had stimulated the interests of American Catholics in the internal affairs of Mexico. These concerned Catholics hoped that the United States government could provide sufficient influence to alter the conduct of the Mexican government. But, Heflin concluded that this interest concealed a plan of serious import for the country.

The intent of the Catholics was to generate a state of war between the United States and Mexico, concluded Heflin. "My purpose is to prevent the United States Army from fighting religious battles in foreign countries," explained the Senator.

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1 New York Times, 22 January 1928, p. 27.
As evidence, Heflin cited the reports of the Knights of Columbus National Convention which called upon its membership to raise one million dollars for the purpose of influencing the public opinion. "I am calling upon my country to wake up and use preventive measures now", Heflin urged.

In his research, Heflin discovered that the Catholics' position was due to a secularization of the Mexican nation. Catholic clergy had exploited the Mexican people for years, concluded Heflin.

Think of that, Senators! Priests claiming to speak in the name of the Son of God holding up these poor Indians and taking money from them, charging a fee to permit the soil to produce a crop. And the Indians are taught to believe that the soil will not produce until a priest has blessed the ground. The secularization was long overdue, declared Heflin, because it was needed to make Mexico a modern state.

Heflin was convinced that his opposition to the Catholic plan would have serious repercussions. He claimed that the Knights of Columbus had threatened his life and "a priest named Belford suggested that thugs ought to waylay me and mob me as I went away from the Capitol." The attack that Heflin

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2U.S. Congress, Senate, Senator Heflin speaking against intervention in Mexico. 70th Congress, 1st session, 26 May 1928, Congressional Record 69:10079

3Ibid., 2 March 1928, 68:5303

4Ibid., 17 May 1928, 69:8940
anticipated took an unexpected form and came from an unexpected source. A Hearst-inspired scandal alleged that Heflin had received funds from the Mexican government for opposing intervention.

The Hearst documents incriminated three other Senators; Norris of Nebraska, Borah of Idaho, and LaFollette of Wisconsin. Hearst claimed that Heflin had received $350,000; however, further investigation proved that the Hearst documents were forgeries. Heflin claimed that the forgeries were the handiwork of the Catholic propaganda machine because "ninety-five percent of America's papers are controlled by the Roman Catholics." He explained that Hearst was influenced by his wife, a Roman Catholic and who was, in turn, a pawn of the Jesuits.

Heflin found additional evidence of the Catholic Conspiracy and he duly notified the Senate. He noticed that the color scheme of the President's Room in the Capitol building had been changed. "The long green curtains that fitted in so tastefully and beautifully have been replaced with Cardinal's red." Heflin believed that Catholics had altered the room in anticipation of a Smith victory. Heflin continued, "They've not only put their colors in the President's room, but they're flying the

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6 U.S. Congress, Senate, Senator Heflin speaks against the candidacy of Governor Smith. 70th Congress, 1st session, 17 May 1928, Congressional Record 69:10081
Roman cross over our battleships and they've got the cross and rosary on our dollar bills."

It was the Catholic plan for the development of a majority that particularly alarmed Heflin. The plan, he thought, called for the convention of blacks and the eventual elimination of immigration restrictions:

It has been shown that Roman Catholic Whites and negroes are now worshipping together in the same Catholic Church. You are a Roman Catholic, Governor Smith, do you endorse that? If you do, you are for social equality; you are attacking the great principle of white supremacy.

Heflin hoped to convince the delegates to the Democratic Convention to withhold support from Smith by playing upon prejudice. He was certain that if Smith were elected, "the doors of this country would be open to the unfit hordes of foreign lands, the criminal refuse of Europe." Heflin predicted that Smith would not receive the nomination and emphasized that, should Smith be nominated, he would leave the party. Al Smith, the "anointed of the Pope," was nominated on the first ballot at the Houston convention and Senator Heflin promptly bolted to the Republican Party.

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8 U.S. Congress, Senate, Senator Heflin speaks against the candidacy of Governor Smith. 70th Congress, 1st session, 17 May 1928, Congressional Record 69:10083

9 Ibid., 19 January 1928, 69:1782

10 George Tindall, Emergence of the New South: 1913-45, (Louisiana State University Press, 1967)
Heflin was confident that Smith would not be elected but to insure his defeat, Heflin continued to expose the Catholic's plans for America. Other defectors from the Democratic party joined the Hoovercrats; Senator Furnifold Simmons and ex-Senator Robert L. Owens of North Carolina and Oklahoma, respectively. Their opposition was based on the Prohibition issue but elements of anti-Catholicism crept inexorably into their midst.

The defection of these prominent Democrats legitimized opposition to Al Smith in the South. The influence of these persons serves as a partial explanation of the divergence from the South's normal voting pattern.

In return for his action, the Democratic party denied Heflin its nomination for the Senate in 1930.
REPUBLICANS

The Republican party was not exempt from religious prejudice in the campaign of 1928. Official party pronouncements condemned the slurs and rumors concerning Smith's religion. Herbert Hoover stated repeatedly, "Neither I nor the Republican party want on that basis (religion)." Some overzealous partisans did seek support for their candidate on the basis of religion.

Mrs. Mabel Walker Willebrandt, Assistant Attorney-General of the United States addressed a convention of Methodist ministers in Springfield, Ohio. Her speech attracted national attention because she urged the ministers to unite for the purpose of defeating Al Smith.

There are 2,000 pastors here. You have in your churches more than 600,000 members of the Methodist Churches in Ohio alone. That is enough to swing the election. The 600,000 have friends in other States. Write to them. Everyday and every ounce of your energy are needed to rouse the friends of prohibition to register and vote."

Willebrandt's duty with the Justice Department was limited to the prosecution of violations of the Volstead Act. In this capacity she was often called upon to speak on the Administrations


efforts to enforce Prohibition, but her duties did not include partisan politics. Willebrndt's suggestion that the convention endorse Hoover appeared to violate Hoover's position on the religious issue. Her attempt to exploit the religious rivalry prompted Governor Smith to attack her on the grounds of religious tolerance.

Willebrandt explained that she was not opposed to the Governor's religion, but rather his stand on Prohibition. At another conference of ministers, she reinforced this view:

Prohibition is a moral issue which churches have long espoused. It was he (Smith) who injected this moral issue into the campaign. It was, therefore, his act that drew the churches into this campaign. He is hiding behind his own church because he is afraid to come out and face the record he has made as the champion of liquor traffic.13

Both conventions endorsed Herbert Hoover for President, but Mabel Walker Willebrandt's speeches had given the Republicans a black eye.

There were other Republicans, as well, who exploited the religious issue, among whom was Oliver D. Street, Republican National Committeeman of Alabama. Street authored a pamphlet entitled, Governor Smith's Membership in the Roman Catholic Religion and Its Proper Place in the Campaign. It warned of

13 "Willebrandt's Appeal", Literary Digest, 29 September 1928, p. 15.
closing ties between Church and State.

The Roman Catholic Church traditionally and historically has always stood and does now stand for certain political, civil and social principles. Among these purely political principles are the union of Church and State, with the State subordinate to the Church; opposition to freedom of thought and conscience; opposition to freedom of the press.14

Street directed the distribution of the pamphlet and concentrated its circulation in the South. This effort to persuade democrats to vote for Hoover led Street to the conclusion that, "In a struggle in Smith's breast between the Democratic party and the Roman Catholic Church for the control of Smith's actions, the Democratic party would find itself impotent."15 Democrats demanded the immediate dismissal of Street. Dr. Hubert Work, Chairman of the Republican National Committee, allowed Street to continue at his post but ordered him to discontinue the circulation of the pamphlet.

Another committee member's activities brought the taint of scandal to the Republican party. Mrs. Willie Caldwell of Virginia was accused of employing scare stories about Catholics in a door-to-door campaign. She felt that her actions were in

14 "Governor Smith's Religion", Literary Digest, 2 October 1928, p. 2.
15 Ibid.
accordance with Hoover's sentiments because he "wanted women to save the country from Rome and Rum." With these minor exceptions, the Republican party and Herbert Hoover were able to remain aloof from the religious issue.

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CHAPTER IV

SMITH, THE SOUTH, & WHISPERS

Since the Civil War, the South has been a staunch supporter of the Democratic party. As in previous elections, the Democrats hoped to use the "Solid South" as a springboard to the White House, but suspicion clouded the candidacy of Al Smith.

Ernest Hamlin Abbott, editor of Outlook, viewed the situation in the South with some misgivings. Abbott decided to survey some of the South's leading citizens because he was convinced that, "Smith will lose a larger number of Southern votes because of his religion than political leaders are willing to admit." Opposition to Smith's religion, he felt, was a derivation from the Anglo-Saxon heritage of the South's original settlers, who traditionally believed that no Catholic could legally be President.

In response to Abbott's query, George Fort Milton, editor of the Chattanooga News, insisted that Smith's nomination would shatter the Solid South.

\[footnote{William H. Crawford, "What Will the South Do to Al Smith?" Outlook, 2 November 1927, p. 275.}\]
Wade Harris, editor of the Charlotte, North Carolina Observer, believed that the religious prejudice against Smith was so strong that none of the Southern States, except Florida and Louisiana, would vote for him.2

The party split of 1924 contributed to Smith's problems in the South. Many of his most vehement opponents were from the South; Bishop Cannon, Senator Heflin, and Senator Simmons. Opposition to Smith was so strong that North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia voted Republican for the first time.3 Smith made the worst showing for a Democratic candidate in the South since the Civil War. Initially, Smith failed to realize the extent of his opposition and did not consider his religious background to be a relevant issue in the campaign.

In the early months of 1927, the first ripples of curiosity surfaced in the press, but these ripples did not reach Al Smith. H. L. Mencken explained Smith's reticence:

The plain truth is that Al, as a good New Yorker, is as provincial as a Kansas farmer. He is not only not interested in the great problems that heave and lather this country; he has never heard of them.4

Smith was very sensitive about his religion but, with great reluctance he replied to the questions of C. C. Marshall.


At that point, Smith felt that his reply would satisfy the demands of the intellectually curious and allow interest in Catholicism to subside. Smith's attempt to disarm the issue boomeranged. Catholicism and Smith's relation to it became a featured topic for discussion in the press. "Should a Catholic be President?", they asked. "Will Smith's religion conflict with his obligations if elected?", they pondered.

Stanley Frost, a Washington journalist, pursued the ultimate question, "Will there be a Catholic Party?" in *Forum* magazine. Frost found the formation of a Catholic party to be possible and probable, "its success depends on whether the Catholic Church does in fact control or strongly influence the votes of its communicants." The interest of the press reflected an abiding interest in Catholicism, an interest shared at the grassroots level.

The potential Catholic party captured the public imagination and became an added feature in the "whispering" campaign. The whispers were a spontaneous development and contained information about Catholics, Al Smith and his wife. One such whisper confirmed the suspicion that the Smiths were alcoholics. Reportedly, the Governor was drunk so often that two men were required to

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follow him in case he should fall, and Mrs. Smith was unfit to live in the White House because she drank so heavily.

The whispering campaign resurrected many of the old myths. It was rumored that should Smith be elected, there would be priest-rule, he would abolish public schools and Catholicism would become the national religion. On the other hand, it was rumored that should Smith be defeated, war between Catholics and Protestants would ensue.6

The efforts of Jacob Raskob and Senator Joseph Robinson to counter the whispers campaign were ineffective. Smith's aides withheld derogatory materials to prevent any embarrassing actions by the Governor. These aides advised Smith to avoid the religious issue, but their efforts could not prevent Smith's outburst in Oklahoma City.

As the Smity party approached Oklahoma City, a line of flaming crosses became visible to the Governor. Angered, Smith revised his prepared text and launched his strongest statement on religious intolerance. Smith blasted the Ku Klux Klan, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Mrs. Mabel Walker Willebrandt, and "all other forces that appeared to be taking part in such an un-American and undemocratic campaign."7

6New York Times, 2 October 1928, p. 5.
Will Rogers sought to explain Smith's speech:

Al Smith explains that if elected President all Protestants would not be exterminated; that even a few of the present Senators would be retained, including Tom Heflin; that the Knights of Columbus would not replace the Boy Scouts and Kiwanis; that mass would not replace golf on Sunday morning; and those that were fortunate enough to have meat could eat it on Friday.

It's no compliment to a nation's intelligence when these things have to be explained.\(^8\)

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\(^8\)Will Rogers, *The Auto-Biography of Will Rogers*, ed.
CONCLUSION
THE RELIGION ISSUE

The trends and events of the 1920's indicate the pre-
valence of conservativism and reaction of America. These
characteristics contributed to the popularity of the Klan and
fundamentalism. These trends combined with the historical
animosity between Protestants and Catholics helps explain the
prevalence of anti-Catholic sentiment in this decade.

This synthesis was of particular importance to Al Smith,
whose candidacy encountered intense opposition on the basis of
religion. Anti-Catholic prejudice was exacerbated by the
exaggeration of the issue. This emphasis on the religious
issue influenced the immediate post-election analysis, which
confirmed the primacy of the issue in Smith's defeat.

Further research tends to relegate the religious issue
to a less significant role. The consensus of opinion indicates
that the religious issue was influential in the rural areas of
the North. The South contained the most vocal opponent of
Smith and reflected this opinion in the election, but anti-
Catholicism was reflected in the voting of the urban dweller
rather than the rural voter.
The election of 1928 can be considered an ideological battle, liberalism versus conservativism. The incumbency of the Republican party throughout the decade is attributable to the strength of America's conservativism. Smith's candidacy challenged the status quo but the Republican trend presaged a victory for Hoover.

Although the religious issue was not the prime factor in the election; it was representative of the mood of the Twenties. Anti-Catholicism contained elements of nationalism, xenophobia, and fundamentalism.

The decline of these attitudes enabled Al Smith to be nominated but contained enough viability to present a forceful opposition to a Catholic candidate.
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