Wendell Willkie

At the time the Muscle Shoals bill was introduced, Wendell Willkie was president of Commonwealth & Southern (C&S), one of the largest holding companies and the owner of the major utilities TVA would threaten in the Tennessee Valley. He was particularly well suited to lead the opposition, as he was not the expected Wall Street blueblood or stiff corporate suit.

He was born in 1892 in the frontier-like town of Elwood, Indiana, which was just beginning to boom due to the discovery of a large natural gas field. The fourth of six children of educated and ambitious parents, he took pride in his immigrant grandparents, who had come from Germany in the early and mid-19th century. He internalized the family story that a chance for freedom and opportunity had called them to America. His grandmother Trisch crisscrossed Indiana by horseback to conduct revival meetings, emblematic of the radical preachers spawned by the Second Great Awakening, a religious movement that related moralism to social justice. This concern for justice and a gift for oratory were among her bequests to Wendell, while he inherited restless energy and a strong work ethic from his father and paternal grandfather. His mother read law after the fifth of her children was born and was the first woman to be admitted to the Indiana bar, as well as the first woman in Elwood to smoke cigarettes. Her independence, non-conformity, and ambition both for herself and her children helped shape Wendell's individualism. Books, liberal politics, and constant discussion filled the Willkie home, and active dinner table conversations honed his political interests and debating skill.

A political contact arranged a job for him with Firestone Tire and Rubber in Akron, Ohio. Firestone offered its employees generous fringe benefits, including free legal advice, which Willkie was hired to provide. Like Roosevelt, he soon tired of the routine legal work, and he found other outlets for his energy. He began giving political speeches, at first about his war experiences and later in opposition to the re-emerging Ku Klux Klan. He was something of a showman, often jumping down from the stage and pacing the aisle waving his arms. His ability to appear earnest without ever talking down to his audience or taking himself too seriously gave him strong public appeal, again much like Roosevelt.

He became a leader in the Akron Democratic Club and commander of the local American Legion Post, and a prominent law firm offered to hire him at a substantial increase in salary. When he accepted, Harvey Firestone told him, "Young man, I like you, but I don't think you will ever amount to a great deal." "Why not?" Willkie asked. "You're a Democrat," Firestone replied. "No Democrat can ever amount to much."

While making a name for himself, he learned a new type of debating in Ohio courtrooms, a quick-on-your-feet, forceful, sensitive-to-the-jury style that

would later make him stand out as a witness before Congressional committees. He also became an expert in utility law, representing Northern Ohio Power and Light before the Ohio Public Utilities Commission, a body not in the forefront of protecting customers' rights. "He seems to have taken the system much as he found it," according to his friend and biographer Joseph Barnes, "trying to improve it where he could but basically interested in making it work, in serving his clients, and in making money."

When B. C. Cobb, the founder of C&S, wanted to hire a lawyer to ensure that legal policies were consistent among all the companies under the C&S umbrella, he settled on Willkie. Willkie had not thought of leaving Akron, he recalled. "I thought I was fixed for life. I wanted to stay right there." But he accepted Cobb's lucrative offer and moved to New York in October, 1929, settling into a seven-room apartment on Fifth Avenue overlooking Central Park just weeks before the bottom dropped out of the stock market.

In January 1933, three days after Roosevelt's visit to Muscle Shoals, the C&S board accepted Cobb's request to make the 40-year-old Willkie president. A nervous breakdown the following year forced Cobb's resignation in June, and Willkie became, in name as well as in fact, chief executive of the company. He proved he was his own man by promptly replacing four directors from Wall Street with officers from operating power companies, and he abolished the title of chairman as "too damn stuffy. I would have to be dignified."

. . . . By the time of the Muscle Shoals hearings, he had become an old hand at winning over a room. A Midwestern drawl and a sense of humor gave him an air of informality, which he cultivated. He regularly put his feet on a table or threw his leg over the arm of a chair, and *Time* quipped that he could make an expensive suit look like it came from Macy's bargain basement. Hoosier author Booth Tarkington called him "a man wholly natural in manner, a man with no pose ... American as the courthouse yard in the square of an Indiana county seat." No pose? Far from it. As Roosevelt biographer James MacGregor Burns observed, "Inside this rustic form was an urbane New York cosmopolitan."

Willkie had stepped up the level and tone of his public opposition to TVA in the recent months. While his criticism had initially focused on excess generating capacity and duplicative transmission lines, which he argued would threaten his markets, by fall he was persuaded that TVA's rates would also lead to heavy losses for utilities and their investors. In a series of speeches, he began echoing the charges of socialism common among other utility executives. In response to Roosevelt's Tupelo speech, he counterpunched, saying TVA's yardstick was "rubber to the last inch." He also asserted that "tax moneys that are being used to give Tupelo its well publicized 'yardstick' rate" mean "the Tennessee River waters four states and drains the nation."

Expectations that Roosevelt would ultimately run [in 1940] were high enough that no rival Democratic candidate mounted a serious public campaign. Meanwhile, on the Republican side, three leading competitors were gunning for the nomination. Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, Senator Arthur Vandenburg of Michigan, and Governor Thomas Dewey of New York were all isolationists, but Willkie had caught the attention of several influential Republicans seeking a candidate who shared their views on economic and foreign policy. His internationalist perspective appealed to moderates, and his leadership of the utility industry in its battles against TVA and the Holding Company Act had made him the most visible business opponent of the New Deal.

Willkie quietly changed his voter registration to Republican, and in early 1940 he broadened his attacks on the New Deal to issues beyond utilities and began to discuss foreign affairs. A coterie of moderate Republicans from the Eastern Establishment, including influential editors and publishers, actively promoted him and his ideas.

. . . . Throughout the spring he advanced rapidly in the polls of Republican voters, from a mere one percent in March to 29 percent just before the convention, outpolling Taft and Vandenburg combined but lagging well behind Dewey. In June, a week after the German army occupied Paris and a week before the convention in Philadelphia, he declared his candidacy. His sudden rise precipitated attacks from within the party. Senator John Thomas of Idaho said the utility interests have “done enough . . . without wishing their man Willkie on us.” His Democratic background also made him a bête noire to the old guard. Former Senate Majority Leader James Watson, still the unofficial leader of the Indiana Republican party, told Willkie to his face at the convention, “Back home in Indiana it’s all right if the town whore joins the church, but they don’t let her lead the choir the first night.”

While Willkie’s fervent opposition to Roosevelt’s power policies had gained him admiration from Republicans and catapulted him to national prominence, his later support for Roosevelt, especially during the 1942 mid-term Congressional elections, turned the Republican party leadership against him. In 1941 polls had shown he was the leading contender for the Republican nomination for president in 1944, but by 1943 that lead had slipped away. In April 1944, after decisively losing a make-or-break primary election in Wisconsin, he withdrew from contention.

Roosevelt saw in Willkie’s fall from Republican grace a tantalizing prospect to create a powerful new political coalition unified around the pragmatic progressivism that had prevailed in the wartime political struggle. In July 1944 he sent word to Willkie that he would like to talk about joining forces in “the somewhat distant future” to form a new political party that would encompass progressive Republicans and force out conservative Democrats. This intriguing

possibility died with Willkie in October, when he succumbed to a strep infection that had spread to his heart.