

Instant History

By Chuck Ross

Calvin Coolidge was President during an era of prosperity for the country. His philosophy of avoiding governmental interference with business and standing "in the middle of the road" suited the people just fine. There was little doubt that he would be re-elected in 1928.

The Thirty-Sixth Election (1928)

In August 1927, Coolidge stunned the nation when he dropped out of the race, stating simply, "I do not choose to run." He made no public explanation, but privately he told Senator Watson he believed that the times were changing and that he was not the man to cope with the change. Mrs. Coolidge may also have given an inkling when she said, "Papa says there's going to be a depression."

(1) No less than five Republicans and ten Democrats vied for their parties' nomination for President. Who were the final choices?

(2) To offset potential weaknesses, both parties carefully selected the second man on their ticket. Who were the running mates, and why were they chosen?

(3) Who won?

(4) And why?

(5) What part did third parties

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play in the election?

Answers

(1) Despite all the competition, both parties chose their front runners on the first ballot. Herbert Hoover, the secretary of Commerce became the Republican standard bearer, and the "happy warrior", New York Governor Alfred Smith, received the nod from the Democrats.

(2) Because Hoover had backed Coolidge in his two vetos of the McNary-Haugen farm bills, Kansas Senator Charles Curtis, a member of the farm bloc, became his running mate. On the Democratic side, Smith was the first Catholic ever to run for President, and he was known to be less than enthusiastic about Prohibition. To counter, Senator Joseph Robinson of Arkansas, a Protestant and strict prohibitionist, was given the second spot on the ticket.

(3) It was another landslide for the Republicans. Hoover received 441 electoral votes, well over 21 million popular votes, and carried forty states. Smith gained but 87 electoral votes, 15 million popular votes, and only eight states. Not only did Smith lose his home state of New York, but the "Solid South" cracked wide open. The Democrats prevailed in only six Southern states, losing North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Florida, Virginia and Texas to the Republicans.

(4) The big issue was prosperity, and the Republicans had it. Their slogan was "Let's Keep What We've Got" — and they did. Smith was also hurt by his Catholicism and his stand on modifying Prohibition. He was called a "rum-soaked Romanist" and the Reverend Straton was convinced that his election would bring on "card playing, cocktail drinking, poodle dogs, divorce, novels, stuffy rooms, dancing, evolution, Clarence Darow, over-eating, nude art, prize-fighting, actors, greyhound racing, and modernism." It was all very unfair, but had Smith been a Baptist deacon who drank nothing stronger than sassafras tea, it is doubtful that he would have beaten Hoover and his "full dinner pail."

(5) Not very much. The Progressives had died on the vine, the Socialists received only 265,583 votes — as opposed to the near-million they polled in 1912 — and the Communists gathered a paltry 46,896.

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