

The New York Review of Books

A Very Winning Loser

Susan Dunn
NOVEMBER 8, 2018 ISSUE

The Improbable Wendell Willkie: The Businessman Who Saved the Republican Party and His Country, and Conceived a New World Order

by David Levering Lewis
Liveright, 371 pp., \$28.95

“I’d watch Willkie,” wrote the *New York Times* columnist Arthur Krock in February 1939, quoting an anonymous Republican observer who admitted that Wendell Willkie was a “long shot” candidate for the presidency of the United States and “the darkest horse in the stable” for 1940. Readers of the *Times* may have been forgiven for asking, Why Willkie? Some may have wondered, Who is Willkie?

Wendell Willkie was a fireball of energy, tenacity, business acumen, ideas, and ideals. His exuberance is matched by that of David Levering Lewis, the biographer of W.E.B. Du Bois, in his deeply researched and highly absorbing book *The Improbable Wendell Willkie*. Improbable indeed: a Democrat from a small town in Indiana who registered as a Republican only in the fall of 1939; a highly regarded corporate lawyer and the head of Commonwealth and Southern, one of the country’s largest utilities holding companies, who had never run for public office before his nomination as the 1940 Republican candidate for president; a supporter of the New Deal and an internationalist who, while rattling reactionaries and isolationists in his own party, left a stunning legacy of responsible bipartisanship in a time of national and global emergency; and a farsighted pioneer in civil rights.



Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Wendell Willkie campaigning in his hometown of Elwood, Indiana, August 1940

Booth Tarkington, whose native Indiana provided the small-town landscape for much of his fiction, once described Willkie as someone “familiar to us, a man wholly natural in manner, a man with no pose, no ‘swellness,’ no condescension.... A man as American as the courthouse yard.” Yet in 1940 that homespun fellow lived not in Elwood, Indiana, where he had been born in 1892, or in Coffeyville, Kansas, where he had taught high school, or in Bloomington, Indiana, where he earned a law degree in 1916, or in Rushville, where he owned a home and farmland, but at 1010 Fifth Avenue, in a splendid apartment overlooking Central Park. He had moved to New York in 1929 to serve as counsel for Commonwealth and Southern. He had a wife, Edith, who spent much of her time in Indiana, relegated to “spousal formality”; an only son, Philip, who attended Princeton; and a beautiful, talented lover.

That lover was his “Dear Irita, you whom I admire inordinately and love excessively,” in whose apartment he often met nonchalantly with reporters. Irita Bradford Van Doren was the book editor for the *New York Herald Tribune* and the former wife of Carl Van Doren, the Columbia professor and biographer. She was Willkie’s passport to New York intellectual circles as well as to the titans of publishing who hungered for a forward-looking Republican who could challenge Franklin Roosevelt: Helen and Ogden Reid, owners of the *Herald Tribune*; Roy Howard of the Scripps-Howard newspaper syndicate; Russell Davenport, the managing editor of *Fortune* and a major figure in Willkie’s 1940 campaign; and Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*.

Luce was captivated by the straight-shooting, good-looking Hoosier, enthusiastically praising him as “a force of nature.” He put Willkie on the cover of *Time* in July 1939 and October 1940, gave him an eleven-page profile in *Life* in the spring of 1940, and in April 1940 *Fortune* published Willkie’s manifesto, “We, the People: A Foundation for a Political Recovery,” which, Lewis attests, “spoke powerfully to liberal Republicans and disaffected Democrats, to economically sophisticated business interests, conservative midwestern farmers,” and middle-class Americans struggling to stay afloat.

Willkie had first come to public attention only a little earlier, when in 1938 he participated in a debate with Robert Jackson, FDR’s assistant attorney general, on a popular weekly radio show called *America’s Town Meeting of the Air*. Four million households heard what Lewis calls Willkie’s “bravura performance” in defense of business’s contribution to recovery from the Depression. Two years later, in April 1940, with another assured performance on America’s most popular radio quiz show, *Information, Please*, where questions ranged from the Constitution to the life of Matthew Arnold, Willkie gained even more admirers.

In late June 1940, when Willkie arrived at the GOP convention in Philadelphia, he was nevertheless the odd man out. The lone internationalist among staunch isolationists, he had to fight the party establishment, competing against Ohio senator Robert Taft, New York

district attorney Thomas Dewey, Michigan senator Arthur Vandenberg, and even Herbert Hoover, hoping to make an unlikely comeback. Some delegates viewed him as little more than a media creation, while others assaulted him as a Democratic interloper out to subvert conservative principles.

Willkie's media backers didn't fail him in what they dramatized as a battle for the soul of the Republican Party. On the day that balloting began at the convention, the entire front page of the *Herald Tribune* consisted of an endorsement of him. In the late afternoon of June 27, after the first ballot, Dewey held the lead, with Taft in second place and Willkie trailing far behind. Slowly but surely, though, Willkie caught fire, and on the fourth ballot he pulled ahead. Past midnight, as the state delegations called out their votes a sixth time, the lead swung back and forth between Willkie and Taft until Michigan sent Willkie up to 499, two votes short of the nomination. Then Pennsylvania cast its votes and the dark horse crossed the finish line. The convention adjourned at 1:30 AM, having settled on a candidate who, unlike Hoover in 1932 and Alf Landon in 1936, had a real chance to defeat FDR. Harold Ickes, the president's interior secretary, warned Roosevelt, "Nothing so extraordinary has ever happened in American politics."

"What, then, brought about the miracle of his nomination?" asked *The New York Times* in an editorial. Its conclusion: "Never in our political history has there been a demand for a candidate that sprang more obviously from a spontaneous wave of public sentiment." In truth, never had a spontaneous sentiment for a presidential nominee been so thoroughly orchestrated. Luce had led the charge; in the aftermath, *Time* crowed that "the people had won." But Hitler, too, may have done his part, since the convention's decision to nominate its only internationalist candidate came just six days after France surrendered to Nazi forces.

What kind of candidate would Willkie prove to be? He spent weeks after the convention vacationing at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado and gearing up his small, politically inexperienced team. Sympathetic Republicans who made the trek to Broadmoor found the campaign's chaos dismaying. Willkie had little idea of the way forward to November. "We let what was the hottest thing in the world go cold," one loyalist lamented.

In mid-August he finally descended from the Rocky Mountains to kick off his campaign. To a crowd in his hometown of Elwood, Indiana, estimated to be as large as 300,000 people, Willkie spoke up as an advocate of the New Deal and an opponent of much of Republican orthodoxy. He declared his support for collective bargaining, minimum wages, maximum hours, federal pensions, old-age benefits, unemployment allowances, and federal regulation of securities markets, banking, and the "forces of free enterprise." But he insisted he could make FDR's alphabet soup of agencies and programs smarter, less expensive, more productive, and infused with less class animus. It was "the intelligent

businessman's long-overdue synthesis of the New Deal at its best and the liberated market economy at its most productive," Lewis writes. In fact, this formula accurately describes FDR's mobilization of industry and labor in 1940 and 1941, as the nation prepared for war.

The elections of 1932 and 1936 had focused almost entirely on domestic policies, but in 1940 what mattered more to Americans was the prospect of being drawn into war in Europe or the Pacific. In Willkie's Elwood address, though he underscored his opposition to direct American involvement in the European war, he called for military preparedness and assistance for the Allies, agreeing with FDR that the loss of the British navy and subsequent German domination of the Atlantic would be a "calamity" for the United States. And echoing the president's recent remarks, he, too, declared himself in favor of compulsory universal military service, explaining that a draft was "the only democratic way in which to secure the trained and competent manpower we need for national defense."

But as the race tightened in the fall, both men decided abruptly to change tack and appeal to the isolationists in their parties who were fearful of American intervention in the war and frustrated and angry that neither of the "Willkievelt twins" offered them an alternative to internationalism. Spouting a reckless panoply of hyperbolic pronouncements and outright untruths, Willkie portrayed FDR as a warmonger who had agreed in 1938 in a phone conversation with Hitler and Mussolini to "sell Czechoslovakia down the river." At another rally he gave notice that "when I am President I shall send not one American boy into the shambles of a European war."

But FDR would not be outdone. Three weeks later, speaking in Boston, he could not have been more emphatic: "I have said this before, but I shall say it *again and again and again*. Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars"—igniting Willkie's outrage against "that hypocritical son-of-a-bitch Roosevelt!" All their last-minute exaggerated claims and promises, Lewis notes, "were the stuff of electoral life or death." But to many millions around the world, it was a life-or-death struggle that was all too real.

In early November, most of the country's major newspapers came out for Willkie, with the *Los Angeles Times* calling him "the indispensable man in this time of national crisis" and the *Hartford Courant* promising that he "will make a truly great President of the United States." Not all endorsements, however, were welcome. "In order to live with myself," as he put it, Willkie sidestepped or disclaimed odious seals of approval from the pro-Nazi German American Bund, the Italian Fascist Organization, the American Communist Party, and Father Coughlin's rabidly anti-Semitic National Union for Social Justice. One of the few newspapers in Roosevelt's corner was the weekly *Chicago Defender*. The nation's largest African-American newspaper praised his advances in "economic and social democracy" and cautioned that "it would be suicidal for the masses to place their faith in Wendell Willkie."

On November 5, the political amateur was crushed by the consummate professional. Even a more competent campaign would have been hard pressed to defeat the man who had already won two presidential elections by landslides. Willkie took ten states to FDR's thirty-eight and won five million fewer votes. FDR's son James heard his father say, "I'm happy I've won, but sorry Wendell lost." Indeed, compared to the resentful and antagonistic Republicans who would dog Willkie for years, Lewis writes, "Franklin Roosevelt might have been said to be Wendell Willkie's best supporter."

Despite his defeat, Willkie remained the titular leader of the GOP. The columnist Walter Lippmann believed that Willkie envisaged himself as, in Lewis's words, "a transformational leader rather than a mere politician possessing transactional skills," and he may have felt liberated by loss and unconstrained by the compromises and transactions that political office requires. A mere week after the election, in an unusual Armistice Day talk, he "reconceived the meaning of political partisanship," Lewis claims. "We have elected Franklin Roosevelt President. He is your President. He is my President," Willkie declared, imploring fellow Republicans not to "fall into the partisan error of opposing things just for the sake of opposition"—an admonition, as Lewis remarks, that "sounds depressingly relevant to early twenty-first-century Republican politicians."

Willkie didn't stop there; his commitment to constructive bipartisanship continued for the rest of his life. He joined Roosevelt in a quasi partnership that Lewis calls a remarkable "*pas de deux*." In late December he applauded FDR's call for the US to become the "arsenal of democracy." When the Lend-Lease Bill to extend desperately needed aid to the British was introduced in Congress the following month, he declared that "democracy cannot hope to defend itself in any other way" and warned that the GOP "will never again gain control of the American government" if it continued to present itself as an isolationist party.

On the eve of Roosevelt's third inauguration in January, Willkie went to the White House to discuss his upcoming fact-finding trip to England. James Roosevelt recalled overhearing "great bursts of laughter" in the Oval Office, where his father and Willkie were meeting. Three days later, Willkie left for England. Roosevelt had given him a personal note for Prime Minister Winston Churchill that contained a verse from Longfellow:

*...sail on, O Ship of State!
Sail on, O UNION, strong and great!
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate.*

In London, Willkie met with Churchill, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, and Labour Party leader Clement Attlee, as well as King George VI and Elizabeth, who revealed over

high tea and scotch their displeasure with the isolationist views of former US ambassador Joseph Kennedy. The British people, after months of German bombardment, were desperate for a sign of support from the United States. Along came Willkie, with his “ebullient approachability,” appearing in devastated neighborhoods in East London, Coventry, Liverpool, and Manchester. One woman recalled his sudden arrival in an underground air raid shelter in London: “People rose from their beds and applauded.”

The trip was cut short by a telegram from Secretary of State Cordell Hull, asking that he return immediately to Washington to testify in Congress in favor of Lend-Lease. Following the recent testimony of Kennedy and Charles Lindbergh opposing the legislation, it was all the more urgent for Willkie to try to marshal Republican support. On February 11, with the huge Senate Caucus Room “packed beyond capacity,” Willkie drew on his mission to Britain to warn the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Americans had not yet “fully grasped the extent of the crisis, or their responsibility with regard to it” and said that if Britain were defeated “the totalitarian powers will control the world.” While frankly admitting that “no man can guarantee to you that the policy of aid to Britain will not involve the United States in war,” he nevertheless stressed the necessity of aiding the last standing democracy in Europe with supplies, ships, planes, and armaments. When one hostile senator asked about the biting remarks he’d made about FDR during the campaign, Willkie casually brushed that aside as mere “campaign oratory.”

In March 1941 the Lend-Lease Bill, which Churchill called “the most unsordid act in the history of any nation,” became law. Willkie, with his passionate conviction that aid to Britain was essential to the defense of the United States, helped persuade ten Republican senators to support the bill, ensuring it was a bipartisan measure.

Sometimes Willkie outperformed his partner in the White House. In the fall of 1941 he demanded outright repeal of the 1939 Neutrality Act, not just repeal of sections of it, as FDR had requested, and publicly expressed frustration with FDR’s “feeble and futile policy” of following the people instead of leading them. He challenged GOP senators and representatives to end the neutrality charade “so that no man here or abroad may doubt where our party stands on the issue of survival of freedom.” Just three weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the House and Senate finally voted to junk the Neutrality Act, but in the House only twenty-two Republicans out of 132 voted for repeal, and in the Senate just five of twenty-six. Still, Roosevelt expressed gratitude to Willkie for “rising above partisanship and rallying to the common cause.”

Willkie also greatly surpassed the president in his unflagging commitment to civil rights. Where Roosevelt felt trapped by the Democratic Party’s electoral reliance on Southern whites, Willkie was free to passionately take the lead in the fight for racial equality.

Speaking to the NAACP's annual conference in 1942, he denounced America's "race imperialism," linking the nation's "willingness to exploit an unprotected people" to the global struggle against oppression. The goal of the United States at home and abroad, Willkie declared, must be "to liberate, not to enslave."

In late August 1942, Willkie and an entourage of twelve, including Gardner Cowles Jr. and Joseph Barnes of the Office of War Information and several representatives of the armed services, flew out of Mitchel Field on Long Island in an Army Air Corps B-24 heavy bomber with a six-man military crew. The *Gulliver* would take them to Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, the USSR, and China. It was a self-appointed mission, but one swiftly embraced by FDR, who believed, Lewis comments, that it "could help make a crucial difference to the war's outcome."

Willkie's trip as Roosevelt's de facto ambassador became a 31,000-mile odyssey, at times resembling what a reporter called a publicity "blitzvisit," but he also conducted substantive talks with world leaders. In Beirut, the temporary capital of Free France, he and his companions were harangued for several hours about the grandeur of France by General de Gaulle in a room adorned with a bust of Napoleon and a statue of Joan of Arc. "She saved France," the general curtly informed his guests. "I will save France. Good day, gentlemen." Next came Palestine, where two separate delegations, one of Jews, the other of Arabs, held discussions with Willkie to press their cases. In Baghdad, Willkie helped Iraq's prime minister draft a formal declaration of war against the Axis, while in Tehran young Reza Pahlavi bluntly suggested that American military personnel train his army in order to improve his chances of remaining in power.

Iraq was important for its oil reserves and Iran for the southern route to Russia for Lend-Lease shipments. But the highest stakes were in the Soviet Union, which had become a crucial ally of the United States and Britain. During Willkie's long meeting in Moscow with Stalin, whom he described as having "a hard, tenacious, driving mind" that shot out questions "like a loaded revolver," the dictator angrily demanded an Anglo-American second front in Europe. The Soviet Union, he rightly complained, was left to face the full, savage force of Hitler's armies and couldn't survive without more planes, trucks, explosives—more everything. A few days later, at a conference with American and British journalists just before a farewell banquet in the Kremlin, Willkie obligingly called for "a real second front in Western Europe at the earliest possible moment." The report of his speech "landed like a grenade," in Lewis's words, in Washington and London, where the second front was a sore issue between the Americans, eager for it, and the British, wary of facing Hitler head-on.

Willkie set off more alarm bells in China when he declared to a radio audience that "mankind is on the march.... The colonial days are past." His call for "an end to the empire of nations over other nations"—a viewpoint FDR shared—prompted Churchill to

announce in the House of Commons that he had no intention of presiding over “the liquidation of the British Empire.” Upon his return to the US in October, Willkie met with FDR in the White House, but after the controversies he had stirred abroad, their meeting this time was not marked, Lewis writes, by the old “congeniality.”

Willkie put his international experiences into a book called *One World* (1943) that had, the poet Carl Sandburg remarked, a “bull’s eye title.” It was a publishing phenomenon that sold more than a million copies in its first seven weeks. “If I had ever had any doubts that the world has become small and completely interdependent,” Willkie wrote on the first page, “this trip would have dispelled them altogether.” He wanted to dispel those same doubts in his fellow Americans and stir them to commit themselves to “the creation of a world in which there shall be an equality of opportunity for every race and every nation.”

But Willkie with his inclusive vision was a prophet without honor in his party. One Democrat remarked that Republicans hated Willkie even more than FDR, and his drive for a second presidential nomination in 1944 was easily stifled by the party’s old guard. At the Republican convention in June, Willkie was refused a speaking role and offered only a seat among “honored guests.” Afterward, he agreed to work with Roosevelt to realign the two parties and “form a new, really liberal party in America.”

That was not to come to pass, for on October 8, 1944, just a little more than a year after the publication of *One World* and a few months after the Republican convention, the dark horse suffered a fatal heart attack. Yet as Lewis persuasively argues, Willkie’s decisive legacy to postwar politics was the gradual, grudging acceptance by the party that disowned him of the bipartisanship and internationalism he fervently advocated. Tragically, we are now witnessing reckless assaults on the international institutions and accords that the United States itself created and that have endured for seventy years. Willkie and *One World* remind us how necessary that world order is to the US—and how precious and fragile.