

Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

Alfred E. Smith: Sidewalk Statesman (by William G. Schofield)

Our three “New York Ambassadors of Brotherhood” titles trace the growth of Catholicism in Manhattan from tiny minority (Pierre Toussaint), to large but mostly poor minority (Archbishop John Hughes), to the largest single religious affiliation in the city, whose members are increasingly prosperous, educated, and rising politically (Al Smith). At this time, anti-Catholic prejudice still ran high through much of our nation (more about that later), but in New York and other urban centers, it was in decline.

Sidewalk Statesman gives us a chance to learn more about historic entities with which many of us are only slightly familiar. These are propped up in the recesses of our memory by no more than vague stereotypes or images from old movies. Let’s start with Tammany Hall, the political “machine” that discovered, groomed, and helped Smith through every New York election. One’s mental associations with it will likely run to “corruption” and “vote-buying.” But a little research into Tammany’s 175-year history reveals more than this. Founded in 1786 as an organization to further the aims of what was then called the Democratic-Republican party, it was influential in the career of Aaron Burr, successfully promoting his election to the vice-presidency in 1800 (Presidents and Vice Presidents were elected separately in those days). Originally somewhat Nativist in philosophy, the Tammany Society began accepting immigrant members in the 1820s. By the 1840s Tammany saw its opportunity and openly courted the burgeoning immigrant population, providing legal aid, citizenship classes, and financial assistance to sick breadwinners and to widows, thereby securing their undying loyalty. The height of Tammany’s power and its greatest scandal occurred before Al Smith was born. Tammany “Boss” William Tweed more or less controlled New York City’s government and building project contracts—graft and corruption were a cancer. This is the era from which the worst of Tammany’s reputation stems. After Tweed’s death in prison, Irish Americans took control of the organization. As our book suggests, there were other, lesser scandals and corruption over the years, but historians agree with our author that Smith was not touched by these. Make no mistake—political “machines” for both parties are still very much in existence today in various forms. Rising to power over others is always fraught with temptation, even for those who begin with high ideals and a wish to truly serve. This is why we must pray for our leaders and act—with our votes—against corruption whenever it occurs.

The Ku Klux Klan is mentioned as a force against Smith’s campaign for the presidency in 1928. Again we are stopped in our tracks: wasn’t the Klan a southern states group that terrorized and intimidated African Americans? Digging deeper, one learns that the Klan was actually three distinct and separate movements across the years. The first one rose immediately after the Civil War. It was a fraternal society for white southern men that quickly grew into a white supremacist insurgency against black citizens and against the federal government. Law enforcement successfully suppressed this Klan less than five years after its founding. The second Klan movement was directly inspired by the D.W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, a romanticized portrayal of the first Klan. This new iteration of the Klan was less concerned with terrorizing African Americans, who at this point were separated and subjugated by Jim Crow laws. This time the Klan turned its primary focus on the perceived threat of Catholic and Jewish

immigrants to white Protestant society. The old Nativism that had died out in New York City was alive and well in rural America—both North and South—and found its new home in the Ku Klux Klan. By the early 1920s, membership was as high as four million—about 15% of white male Americans. (The Klan also championed Prohibition, which was popular in the Midwest and thus a huge problem for Smith’s candidacy). The states of Indiana and Michigan in particular had many Klansmen.

The Klan’s high water mark of political influence came during the 1924 and 1928 elections. Al Smith was appalled by the spectacle of burning crosses that appeared all along his train route as he campaigned in the Midwest. He had not been ready for the virulent hatred of Catholicism that was rampant in America’s heartland. The Klan gradually became discredited after a rise in racial terrorism in the South during the 1930s combined with scandal within the organization. The Klan dissolved in 1944. It would revive for a third time in the 1950s in opposition to the civil rights movement.

Sidewalk Statesman makes a brief reference near the end to Al Smith’s opposition to Franklin Roosevelt’s running for a third term in office. Here is a subject worth further research and indeed, debate. Smith had in fact opposed his former supporter and colleague Franklin Delano Roosevelt during Roosevelt’s first term, taking issue with the vast increase in federal power that came with the New Deal. Most historians, brought up (as we all were) on the myth of the essential goodness of the New Deal, do not know what to make of this opposition and chalk it up to Smith’s resentment over Roosevelt’s winning the presidency on a platform so very similar to his own of 1928. Roosevelt famously stated that “Practically all the things that we’ve done in the federal government are the things Al Smith did as governor of New York.” But Smith’s demurral stemmed less from personal pique than from the Catholic social principles that were dear to him. He felt that Roosevelt’s actual policies differed considerably from what was promised in the Democratic Party platform. Unlike Al Smith’s social welfare initiatives in New York State, the New Deal spent massive amounts of money while making no effort to prevent waste of taxpayer money. The New Deal ignored subsidiarity * by its sweeping regulation of agriculture and industry in areas best addressed by state and local government. Smith also felt that the New Deal pitted capital against labor rather than recognizing and encouraging mutual benefit and cooperation between them. The high excise and income taxes put in place to pay for New Deal initiatives hurt the poor and middle class every bit as much as the rich, since these raised the cost of goods and prevented businesses from hiring more workers. And last, the enormous powers now belonging to the federal government meant a decrease in personal liberty for all Americans and smacked of encroaching socialism.

There is no space here for an analysis of New Deal programs. Certainly there was good mixed with the bad. (Disclosure: this writer has ancestors who in the short term at least benefitted from jobs created by the Civil Conservation Corps, a New Deal program.) But we can read and ponder Al Smith’s objections in a long and eloquent speech he gave in 1936 titled, “Betrayal of the Democratic Party.” The text is available on many websites. It is eminently worth reading since so much of what Smith says can be applied to our own times, where government overreach—often with ostensibly good intentions—results in unintended consequences and a decline in personal liberty.

Most politically aware adults have heard of the Al Smith Memorial Dinner, a white-tie fundraiser held each year by the Archdiocese of New York. After reading *Sidewalk Statesman*,

* “Subsidiarity” is a principle of Catholic social teaching that power in a Christian society should be exercised at the lowest and most local level compatible with the common good.

we see so many reasons why this event so fittingly honors its namesake. Politicians from both sides of the aisle entertain one another with good-natured “roasts,” something Smith, ever the showman, would have enjoyed immensely. The proceeds benefit New York’s neediest children: certainly a cause dear to the heart of the man whose early legislative victories included a program to keep poor widowed mothers from losing their children to institutions. And how appropriate for the Church in New York to uphold the memory of a man who broke through tough barriers to help secure the position of Catholics in American society. But there is a better way to honor Smith, a man who rose politically without sacrificing his Catholic principles. Yes, Catholics have “arrived” in the sense of being accepted in all areas of society. But many of them have blended in too well. They compartmentalize their faith, allowing its moral truths no impact on their public actions. We should reject this kind of weakness wherever we find it, whether in elected leaders or in ourselves. Each of us must resolve to imitate Al Smith in being willing to stick out a bit, willing to uphold our faith in public, and willing to cheerfully accept the consequences of courage, whatever those may be. In other words, like Smith, we should all be “happy warriors.”