

Washington and Lee Notes

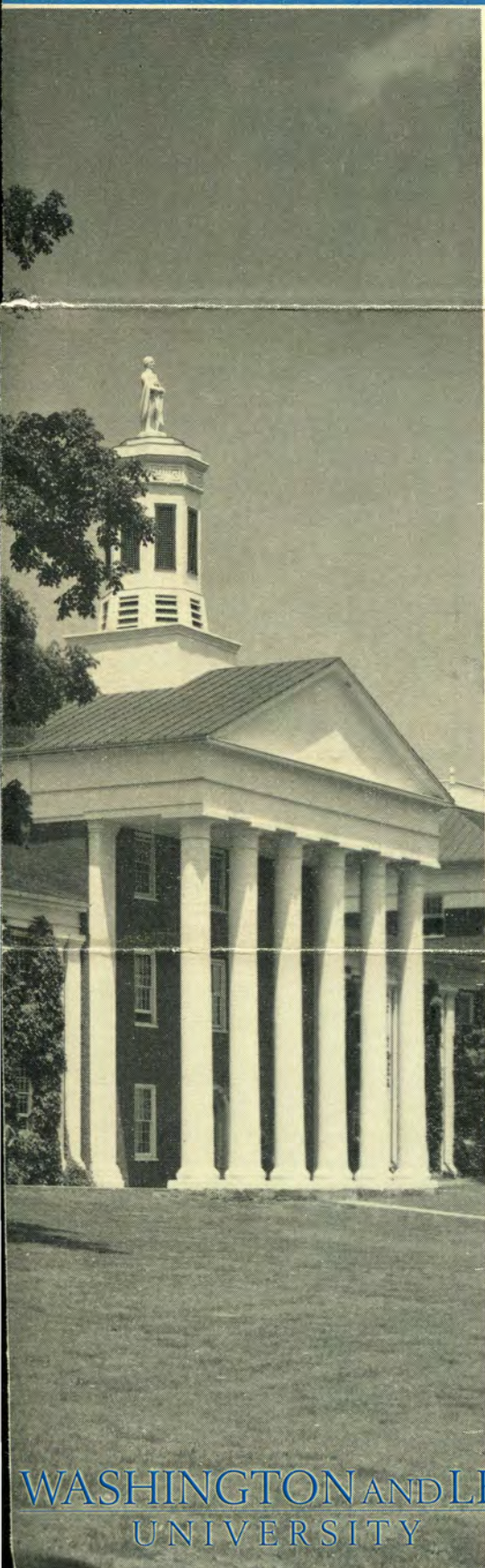
Volume I

May 1956

Number 2

BORN OF A MOCK POLITICAL CONVENTION:

Excitement and Tragedy, Inspiration and Understanding



WASHINGTON AND LEE'S Mock Democratic Convention already has attracted world-wide attention; the tragic interruption of its opening session by Senator Alben Barkley's sudden death and the convention's subsequent postponement have been reported in full.

But the events leading up to the keynote address and the resumption of the convention at Mrs. Barkley's urgent request deserve telling, for to the participants they constitute a never-to-be-forgotten experience, to which the impact of a great political personality brought special vitality and meaning.

Since early November, Convention Chairman Carl Swanson, an intermediate law student from Kansas City, had organized and supervised state and territorial delegations, and had worked with the

press and other committees. Every man in the student body had been assigned to a state delegation. Throughout the winter and during the spring vacation, state chairmen and delegates had been busy at home-state political headquarters, searching for material and information and consulting with party leaders to determine current political trends. For upon the accuracy and acumen of their investigations was to rest the authenticity of each "state's" vote.

As the convention neared, state offices mushroomed in Lexington; posters of the candidates in extravagant dimensions were hung in downtown restaurants and store windows; excitement and political interest grew. Notices of meetings filled the campus paper: "The North Carolina delegation will



Political fever in a holiday atmosphere



meet at 5:45 Monday in the Student Union... The New York delegation will meet at 7:30 Friday in the mezzanine of the Robert E. Lee Hotel... Members of the California delegation will meet at their headquarters opposite Pres Brown's Sport Shop." Students studied papers and editorials with unusual interest. At fraternity suppers and drugstore sessions the talk was of the issues and the nominees.

"States" planned their strategy, built floats, organized their delegations. After the surprising spring primaries, self-appointed campaigners from the ranks of New York, Michigan, Texas, and Missouri carefully planned their tactics and organized "the boom" for favorite sons. By the time classes were over at noon on Monday, April 30, the whole campus was seething with political fever, and beneath the holiday "school's out" atmosphere churned genuine political enthusiasm and new understanding of the political game.

In the hot, humid afternoon a colorful, mile-long parade, with more than ninety marching units,

bands, floats, and drill teams, wound through the crowded Lexington streets. In the lead car with University President Gaines sat Senator Barkley, whose appearance as convention keynoter gave proof to the national political prestige accorded the current mock convention. Virginia's Governor Stanley rode in the second car. Pretty students from nearby women's colleges sat precariously atop paper-tufted floats. An all-girl band dressed in kilts played shrill Scottish music. New Jersey's float proudly displayed Miss America, the national beauty. Little boys and dogs raced beside the displays as the parade moved slowly and noisily from the assembly point on the Virginia Military Institute's parade ground, through downtown Lexington, to the convention hall in the University's Doremus Gymnasium.

As delegates and visitors crowded into the auditorium, hilarious students in a mood of compressed excitement waved state placards and cheered. Student Body President Ellis Drew of Anderson, South Carolina, called the meeting to order. A temporary roll was presented, committees were appointed, and the call given for nominations for temporary chairman. A delegate from the "State of California" (Townsend Oast, from Portsmouth, Virginia, and chairman of the 1952 mock convention) rose to nominate Senator Alben W. Barkley; the seconding speech came from the Virginia delegation.

Amid tumultuous applause, the Senator, having been introduced officially by Governor Stanley, stepped vigorously to the platform, banged the gavel, and launched into a good-humored partisan speech, full of scorn for Republican "stagnation," loyal praise for Democratic "progress"—exactly what was called for to give flavor and authenticity to a mock Democratic con-

vention. With a full-armed gesture he knocked over a microphone. "That's nothing," he quipped, "to what will happen to the Republicans in November."

The "old pro" obviously was enjoying himself in his oft-repeated role as Democratic keynoter. And a thousand young men in the audience, catching the spirit, reacted to almost every sentence with enthusiastic applause.

Barkley recited his long association with the Democratic party and his many terms of service in Washington, and stated with a smile that he was once again a junior senator, taking a back seat. "But," he said, clearly and with deep conviction, "I had rather be a servant in the house of the Lord than sit in the seat of the mighty."

Then he dropped his head, took a step backward, and fell to the floor, dead.



Shared enthusiasm

THE AUDIENCE SAT STUNNED and silent. After long minutes the Senator was taken from the hall and the assembly dismissed.

In the balcony were several stu-

dents who had been serving as reporters, along with professional representatives of many newspapers and the wire services. Until the Senator's collapse, this student press,

with the rest of the "mock" convention, had been in a sense "play-acting." But at this instant it stopped being a game and became press reporting of the first order.

.and suspended sessions



John K. Jennings, a senior from Nashville, Tennessee, was tape-recording the session for "Home Edition," the School of Journalism's nightly radio program. When Senator Barkley collapsed, he, like everyone else, froze for a moment. Then hastily he picked up his microphone and, with the sounds of confusion and grief in the background, gave a description of the stunned audience, the scramble to call a doctor, the removal of curtains around the rostrum to give the Senator air. Continuing on his own initiative, he rushed his recording, the only one complete with commentary of this sort, to Roanoke, where the Columbia Broadcasting System received it eagerly and used it throughout the evening.

Other students showed equally good reportorial poise and alertness. Philippe C. Labro, a French exchange student, had stationed himself in the press gallery to take notes which he hoped to make into a story for one of the wire services not represented in Doremus Gymnasium. After the sudden collapse and pronouncement of death, he rushed to a telephone and called that wire service in Richmond. Despite a heavy French accent, he was able to communicate the essential facts to the reporter at the other end of the line. His account appeared on the front pages of many American newspapers the next day.

Lloyd A. Dobyns, Jr., of Newport News, Virginia, had been assigned to the convention as assistant to the Director of Publicity. All evening and into the night he was indefatigable as he tracked down information which reporters from outside the area would have had great difficulty obtaining. The professional reporters had high praise for him and for the student group



PRESIDENT GAINES

"Measure up to the obligation upon you"

as a whole. As Charles R. McDowell, Jr., '48, one of four Washington and Lee alumni covering the convention said, "The boys acted more like professionals than the professionals."

CHAIRMAN CARL SWANSON and three other Convention leaders represented Washington and Lee at Senator Barkley's funeral in Washington. Upon their return they and University officials weighed carefully Mrs. Barkley's admonition, "Don't let the boys stop the wonderful convention. Senator Barkley wouldn't have wanted it that way." Unanimously they agreed to continue the meetings.

In reopening the convention, Dr. Gaines said of the Senator, "He came to us at great sacrifice. He had had twenty-five invitations to speak in Virginia in April, but he came to Washington and Lee because of his intense admiration for the authenticity of the Mock Con-

vention. . . . I know you will measure up to the obligation upon you, for the eyes of the nation are focused on this convention and on this University community."

Student delegates met the challenge. In a swirl of political oratory they nominated their candidates. Floor demonstrations which followed each speech were loud and spirited. Balloting began, with the clerk droning the roll. And interest mounted as the answering counts came from each state and votes for leading nominees accumulated. Finally, after five presidential and two vice-presidential ballots, Adlai Stevenson and Tennessee's Governor Frank Clement were chosen as the 1956 Democratic nominees.

AND SO THE CONVENTION was over, its final sessions a fitting climax to the fun and frolic and to the undercurrent of serious purpose, the evaluation of issues and men, and the awakening awareness of procedures necessary to place these men in nomination. Behind were the drama and the tragedy and the period when mature judgment and exceptional ability were demonstrated so effectively.

Still vivid was the picture of Senator Barkley as he stood at the rostrum, enjoying the coiled enthusiasm of his young audience, as he admitted to the old enchantment of politics with a graphic self-characterization, "The old firehorse has heard the bell."

Planning, execution, enthusiasm, and drama—all these were essential elements of the 1956 Mock Political Convention which became a unique tribute to the man who had so aptly described its opening session with, "This is really exciting."

Photos by BORTHWICK, JUHRING, PAXTON