

When Just Fine Wasn't Good Enough

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Pennsylvania is arguably the largest state in the union to produce the fewest number of presidential or vice presidential nominations. This indisputable if unpleasant legacy cannot be far out of mind for the thousands of state GOP delegates and supporters who gather in St. Paul for the 2008 Republican National Convention.

There, once again, as occurred in Denver during the Democratic Convention and as has occurred with numbing monotony throughout American history, no Pennsylvanian will be named to a national ticket. In fact, over some 220 years of national history, a single president and a single vice president have been elected from the Keystone State. One has to go back to 1880 to locate a time in which a Pennsylvanian was even nominated by a major party for either office.

This part of the story—one state's enduring dearth of presidential candidates—is a familiar chapter in the saga of state presidential history. But a lesser known tale is the role state politicians sometimes played as "kingmakers" in selecting presidential candidates. For Pennsylvania, the kingmaker role was an instance of invention inspired by exigency.

From the end of the Civil War until the New Deal, Pennsylvania was a one-party state that voted Republican in election after election. Consequently national Republicans had no incentive to nominate a Pennsylvanian for president, because the party couldn't lose the state. Likewise the Democrats didn't nominate a Pennsylvanian because they couldn't win the state. Pennsylvania politicians, confronted with this partisan catch 22, concluded, not unnaturally, that if they couldn't be kings themselves, they would be kingmakers.

Often enough; however, forays into king-making worked not as planned. One such instance, for example, was 1880 when, despite the collusion of fabled Republican state leaders Simon Cameron, Donald Cameron, and Matthew Quay, Pennsylvania's would-be kingmaker party bosses failed to win a third nomination for Ulysses S. Grant.

Another instance of king-making gone awry occurred in 1900. In that election two party bosses, Tom Platt of New York and Matthew Quay of Pennsylvania, conspired to get the independent-minded Governor Theodore Roosevelt out of New York and out of their hair. Their plan was to "kick Roosevelt upstairs" into the vice presidency on a ticket with incumbent William McKinley—there he would have little to do and no power to do it.

But their scheme backfired spectacularly. By orchestrating Roosevelt's nomination for vice president, Platt and Quay became inadvertently the most successful kingmakers in American history. Within the year McKinley was dead, shot by an assassin, and Roosevelt was in the White House, unfortunately for Platt and Quay—exactly what they tried to avoid.

A third instance of king-making undone brings us into more modern times: the 1952 election featuring a fierce GOP nomination battle between war hero General Dwight D. Eisenhower and conservative icon Ohio Senator Robert Taft.

Pennsylvania's would-be kingmaker was GOP Governor John Fine, a relatively obscure single-term governor. Fine found himself something of a political celebrity after being featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* in a story entitled "President Maker." The story, in advance of the 1952 Republican National Convention, suggested that Fine, as titular leader of the Pennsylvania delegation, was poised to be a kingmaker at the convention. *Time* speculated that Fine could deliver sufficient delegate votes to decide the nomination contest between Eisenhower and Taft.

And the role of kingmaker seemed one much to Fine's liking. Elected governor in 1952, he began his political career in the Luzerne County Republican organization, an efficiently run, patronage-suffused operation, which he eventually came to head while serving two terms as a county judge.

The nomination contest presented Fine with one of the most critical decisions of his political career. The Pennsylvania delegation was divided between Taft and Eisenhower, but Fine controlled enough delegates (about 30) to swing the delegation to either side. And Pennsylvania's delegation could well prove decisive in the close convention battle between Eisenhower and Taft.

Back home state voters seemed to much prefer Eisenhower. Spring primary voters had recorded a resounding 8 to 1 vote margin for him running against Taft. Moreover, Eisenhower had Pennsylvania connections. A grandfather who had lived in south central Pennsylvania in the 19th century and a younger brother, Milton, who was president of Penn State, gave Eisenhower substantial ties to the state. The general had also purchased a farm two years earlier in Gettysburg that was being renovated for his use.

Fine was oblivious to all these factors pushing him toward Eisenhower. Instead he held stubbornly to his stance of studied neutrality, refusing to publicly state a preference for any candidate. Then during a key moment in a credentials fight at the convention, he lost his composure altogether. He attempted to obtain a recess from the convention chair, was denied his request, and promptly launched into a violent temper tantrum that was caught on national television.

For Fine matters only got worse. When the first ballot roll call began a few days after the embarrassing credentials fight, the governor wasn't even in the hall. Instead according to journalist Paul Beers, he was having the second of his two scotches with former Congresswoman and author, Clare Booth Luce.

Belatedly he made it to the floor, by then apparently planning to give the votes he controlled to Eisenhower. His plan, a classic convention ploy, was to intervene at a critical junction in the vote count, putting the general over the top with Pennsylvania votes.

But frustrated and flummoxed, he could not get recognized to cast the votes putting Eisenhower over the top. And so it was another state that finally delivered the majority nominating Eisenhower, much to the dismay of a stunned Fine and a dismayed state delegation.

In the end Fine simply found himself overmatched in a high stakes chess game he neither understood nor played well. Initially the game looked promising for him. But he had played it too closely to the vest, was

overtaken by events, and ultimately lost total control of the situation. The county judge turned governor was playing in a league well beyond his ability.

Fine later was widely criticized in the national media for his behavior at the convention and for his failure to navigate more skillfully the rocky shoals of national politics. He left the convention, according to observers, a broken man and soon slipped into political obscurity—another would-be Pennsylvania kingmaker, this one trumped by his own king.

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