William Allen White's 1924 Gubernatorial Campaign

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IN 1924, at the age of 56, William Allen White was a nationally known editor, author, and political observer. His early years, however, had provided no hint of certain future greatness. Born in Emporia, February 10, 1868, he grew up in nearby El Dorado, where his parents moved soon after his birth. His father, Dr. Allen White, was a restless man who moved from one business venture to another, often failing but always obtaining a comfortable living from stocks, bonds, and rental properties. William Allen, or Will as he was known during his youth and by boyhood friends the rest of his life, made satisfactory progress at the public schools, but never was an outstanding student. In the same way, his never-completed studies at the College of Emporia and the University of Kansas marked him as an average student but a promising journalist, judging from his work on the university newspaper.1

White began his rise to national prominence soon after his purchase of the Emporia Gazette in 1895. In 1896, after many arguments with his fellow Emporian, Vernon Louis Parrington, an instructor at the College of Emporia, and an angry encounter with a group of 15 local farmer-Populists, White wrote his famous editorial, “What's the Matter With Kansas?” His scathing attack on Populism was reprinted and quoted in scores of nationally known publications, and in the process he was vaulted to a fame that endured for the remaining 48 years of his life.2 Through his support of Progressivism, his association with the Republican party, a close friendship with Theodore Roosevelt, and an often-reprinted tribute to his young daughter, who was killed in a horseback riding accident on an Emporia street, White's fame was reinforced.3

White had an intense interest in politics, but he lacked the

hard-driving, manipulative nature that is characteristic of some politicians. He started many brisk controversies through his editorials, but he always maintained the semidetachment of the country editor. In 1924, for the first and only time in his life, he found a cause that drew him into the active political arena. The issue he brought to the front of the 1924 Kansas gubernatorial campaign by his entry into the race was the Ku Klux Klan.

The Klan enjoyed a national rebirth soon after World War I. Its attack not only on Negroes but Catholics, Jews, and anyone not considered "100% American," appealed to a significant number of citizens who saw the changes in American life in the 1920's as a threat to traditional values. The secret organization emerged as a political topic in Kansas during Gov. Henry Allen's second term, from 1921 to 1923, although it was far from a leading issue.4

The Klan was active in Emporia. A threatening note, later printed in White's newspaper, was sent to an Emporia man who allegedly had beaten his wife. The woman had reported the details of the incident to a man whom she mistakenly thought was a law enforcement officer. Shortly thereafter the husband received the note which boasted of a 500-man Klan membership in Emporia, stated the general aims of the organization, and ended with: "Beware! We warn once." Roland Boynton, local county attorney, then launched an investigation into the Emporia Klan.5

A Klan-supported candidate was elected mayor of Emporia in 1923. When subpoenaed to testify about Klan activities at a hearing on a state ouster suit filed against the organization, the mayor admitted he took the Klan oath, attended Klan meetings, and participated in a national convention in Atlanta, Ga. But he argued that he was not a Klan member since he had not paid any dues.6 Soon after taking office, the mayor appointed a man as chief of police whom Klan members had supported for the position.7 Many Klansmen staffed the local police department. Their influence was so great that reporters from White's newspaper encountered difficulty in obtaining police news and information about Klan activities in Emporia. On several occasions Klansmen threatened reporters with violence or roughly ejected them from Klan meetings.8

White began his anti-Klan attacks in July, 1921, when the first

6. Ibid., May 17, 1923; Johnson, White's America, p. 375.
8. Johnson, White's America, p. 376; Clough, White, p. 149.
organizer came to Emporia. He tried to expose the organization’s members, thinking that publicity would strike a vulnerable spot in the secret order. On one occasion he sent a reporter, Frank Clough, who later became managing editor of the Gazette and one of White’s biographers, to obtain a copy of the register from Emporia’s newest hotel. The hotel was filled with members of a foreign musical organization staying in the city to present a concert that evening, and with a group of Klansmen attending their state convention. White wanted to print all the names on the register since he thought readers could easily distinguish the foreign names from those at the Klan convention. As Clough was copying the names from the register, one of the Klan delegates attempted to take the list. A struggle ensued and continued until the hotel manager intervened and demanded that Clough relinquish his notes. This order was complied with although the reporter protested that the register was public property.

Upon hearing of the incident, White wrote a note to one of the hotel directors and sent Clough to deliver it. The note read:

If a copy of the Broadview Hotel register for today is not in our office by seven o’clock this evening, the name of the Broadview never again will be printed in the Gazette except in case of police raids and similar events.—W. A. White.

At six o’clock the hotel manager came to White’s office with the register. The newspaper staff copied the names, and they were printed with a story telling that the hotel was filled with a group of foreign musicians and Ku Klux Klan delegates. In the same issue, White inserted an editorial praising the new hotel and its contribution to the community.⁹

White’s first anti-Klan editorials were timid, appeared infrequently, and stirred little interest, but they formed the foundation for his fight against the organization. Referring to the Klansmen as “shirt-tail Knights,” he believed that their doctrines were founded on an imaginary perception of contemporary affairs and thus could not be struck down by logical arguments. As he saw it, the secret society helped to speed its own demise by the issuance of malicious, absurd statements. He thought that the Klan appealed most to unintelligent youth who had a hunger for action. In his editorials he emphasized that the Klan attempted to do by force what should have been done by reason. At the same

⁹. Ibid., pp. 149, 151-153.
time, he was concerned with the lack of devices that could control
the actions of the membership.10

White's personal interest in the 1924 Kansas gubernatorial con-
test began to grow following the Republican primary in which
Ben Paulen, a conservative, defeated ex-Gov. W. R. Stubbs and
Clyde Reed, the former secretary to Governor Allen. The anti-
Klan vote had gone to Reed and Stubbs, which combined was
larger than Paulen's, but considered singly gave Paulen the edge.
Some observers began to accuse Paulen of being the Klan's can-
didate. These fears soon were strengthened. Paulen was selected
as chairman of the committee on resolutions at the party council.
An anti-Klan resolution received only one vote, and Paulen blocked
an attempt to bring forth a minority report condemning the Klan.

White became convinced that the Republican leadership was
coveting the Klan vote. He charged that Paulen's picture ap-
peared in the store window of every Klan merchant in Emporia.
The Democratic candidate, incumbent Jonathan M. Davis, was run-
ning on an anti-Klan platform, but, like Paulen, would make
no statements denouncing the Klan or any Klan support.11

With neither major party willing to tackle the Klan issue di-
rectly, White decided to persuade a third candidate to run. He tried
unsuccessfully to interest former Sen. Joseph L. Bristow
and former Governor Stubbs in the candidacy.12 White still was
convinced, though, that a third candidate must enter the contest
on a strong anti-Klan platform. The spark for his own candidacy
was ignited at a September 9, 1924, meeting of insurgent Republi-
cans at Lawrence. This gathering, which adopted anti-Klan res-
lutions and heard a speech from White, was the first definite
sign of a movement against the regularly nominated candidates.
No one was selected at the meeting to oppose Paulen and Davis,
but it was a prelude to White's announcement of candidacy a
short time later.13

Following the Lawrence meeting, rumors about White's possible
entry into the contest appeared. These reports brought a quick
response from J. L. Stryker, chairman of the Republican State
Central Committee. He charged that "the Emporia editor has set

10. Helen Ogel Mahin, "William Allen White: A Contemporary Study" (unpub-
lished manuscript, n. d.), pp. 100-103.—Deposited in the "William Allen White Collec-
tion," William Allen White Memorial Library, Emporia Kansas State College; Johnson,
White's America, p. 377.
12. William Allen White to George Marble, August 26, 1924, in William Allen
White, Selected Letters of William Allen White, 1899-1943, ed. Walter Johnson (New
Conscience and a Fresh Klan Outrage," Providence (R. I.) Journal, September 15, 1924,
cutting, "White Collection."
up a straw man in the campaign." Saying that the Klan was not an issue with the major parties, he argued that White intended to enter the race to assist the reelection of Governor Davis. Stryker believed that this was an illogical position for White to take since Davis had made no personal statement on the Klan question. This, of course, was White’s main criticism of the Democrats. While their platform contained an anti-Klan plank, their candidate refused to denounce publicly the secret organization.

White accused Paulen of having Klan support. In answer to this charge and White’s rumored entry into the race, Stryker issued an excerpt from a July 12, 1924, Paulen speech in which the Republican candidate said:

There have been certain statements made that I am a member of the Ku Klux Klan. I want to say at this time such a statement is untrue. If I am elected I shall be the governor of all the people of the state and not of any clique or group and I shall see that the laws of this state and the rights of our people shall be enforced and protected without regard to race or religion.14

White interpreted the phrase “at this time” to mean that Paulen at that moment was not a Klan member but could have been one in the past or might be one in the future. In reply to Stryker’s statement, White charged that Paulen was skirting the issue by refusing to declare simply whether or not he had Klan support. In reference to Paulen and in typical White language, the Emporia editor asked: “What right has he to pollyfox around the cow pasture? I dare him to use the short simple words that will cut loose his klin [sic] supporters.” 15

The same day, September 11, 1924, White sent nomination petitions out over Kansas, with the exception of his own city and county, to test the possible support for a third candidacy. The petitions were necessary to place an additional name on the state ballot since the major parties already had selected their candidates. In issuing the petitions, he levied his usual criticism of Paulen and also contended that the Republican candidate was turning the state party organization away from the national candidates, Calvin Coolidge and Charles Dawes, who opposed the Klan. He needed 2,500 signatures but soon had received 10,000.16

On September 20 White announced his gubernatorial candidacy as an independent, declaring that he entered the race to win and that the major issue was the Ku Klux Klan.17 Friends and ac-

15. Ibid.
William Allen White (1868-1944) became concerned about the threat of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1920s, and ran for governor in 1924 primarily to dramatize his position.
Ben S. Paulen (1869-1961), whom White believed had Klan support, defeated White and Governor Davis in the 1924 election to become Kansas' 23d governor.

Jonathan M. Davis (1871-1943), incumbent governor in 1924 and an unsuccessful candidate for reelection, whom White charged with neglect of the Klan issue.
quaintances sent letters of congratulations and encouragement. Julian Harris, editor of the Enquirer-Sun of Columbus, Ga., and son of Joel Chandler Harris, wrote of his fight against the Klan through his newspaper. He sympathized with White's cause in Kansas saying that the Klan was a vicious and un-American organization. Pastor Charles Sheldon also expressed support, and mentioned threats that had been made against him since he had begun to denounce the organization in his sermons. Hamlin Garland was less enthusiastic, commenting that he believed White was on a brash adventure.\(^{18}\)

Reaction from newspaper editorial writers to White's candidacy was mixed. In Kansas, a writer for the Topeka Daily Capital believed White would enliven an otherwise dull campaign and turn national attention toward Kansas. The view was expressed in the Coffeyville Journal that the Ku Klux Klan was not the leading issue of the time, and White's entry into the campaign was a slap at the primary system. Charles F. Scott, prominent southeastern Kansas editor, observed in his Iola Daily Register that White's action would lead to the defeat of Ben Paulen. Scott also believed that White and other Republicans were justified in their criticism of the omission of the Klan issue from the party council. But he felt that Paulen and other leading Republicans were sincere in their belief that the Klan would not be a topic in the campaign. Finally, Scott argued that White did not want to be governor, but would serve well if elected.\(^{19}\)

Nationally, the feeling was expressed in the New York World that White was providing a useful service to the country by opposing the Klan, and a writer for the Ohio State Journal of Columbus remarked that it was important for at least one state to debate the Klan question openly. On the negative side, an article in the Christian Science Monitor declared that White could have found a more important topic than the Klan. A writer for the Omaha Bee noted that he could see "nothing a-tall the matter with Kansas, but there must be something dreadful the matter with ol' Bill White."\(^{20}\)

The Kansas Republican leaders were strongly opposed to their fellow party member's actions. They were not afraid that he would win, for they believed his chances of becoming governor were slight.

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18. Julian Harris to White, September 20, 1924; Charles Sheldon to White, September 24, 1924; Hamlin Garland to White, October, 1924; see, also, E. Walker Stevens to White, September 20, 1924; John B. Greenslet to White, September 23, 1924; Myron A. Waterman to White, September or October, 1924, all in "White Collection."


But they were disturbed by what they viewed as an upsetting of their party machinery. The revolt by one of Kansas’ most famous Republicans, in a state traditionally weighted strongly to the Republican side, endangered the reputation of the state organization.21

Kansas Congressman Homer Hoch, who chose to support Paulen for many of the same reasons some newspapers did, expressed the party’s objections to White’s stand well. He believed Paulen was a man of high character who would be a good governor. He felt Paulen was not affiliated with the Klan and had ignored the Klan issue earlier in the campaign because the other candidates did also. In addition, he viewed White’s campaign as a threat to the primary system and a boost for Governor Davis’s chances.22

Soon after his candidacy announcement, White set out on a hectic speaking tour that took him to all parts of the state. His sole means of transportation during the campaign was a 1919 Dodge touring car driven by his son, William Lindsay White, then in his 24th year and known as “young Bill.” The editor’s wife, Sallie, also traveled with him during part of the campaign.23

White officially opened his campaign September 22 with a speech at Cottonwood Falls. Plans had been made to hold the event in the courtroom of the picturesque courthouse, but the overflow crowd of 1,500 persons necessitated a move to the front lawn. From the courthouse steps White delivered a strong attack on the Klan and its influence on the Republican party, charging that Paulen was selected to run for governor as a Klan-backed candidate “... when a flock of dragons, kleagles, cyclops and fieries, came up to Wichita from Oklahoma and held a meeting with some Kansas terrors, genii and whangdoodles.”24 In his characteristic-ally colorful language he went on to assert that several weeks later “the cyclopses, pterodactyls, kleagles, wizards and willopus-wallupes began parading in the Kansas cow pastures passing the word down to the shirt-tail rangers that they were to go into the Kansas primaries and nominate Ben Paulen.”25 Soon after the speech three men in a car threw a burning cross of sticks and oil-soaked burlap onto the town’s main street. The men quickly

22. Homer Hoch to White, October 10, 1924, “White Collection.”
25. Ibid.
drove away, however, and the dispersing crowd paid little attention to it.  

Through late September and early October, White confined his speeches to attacks on the Ku Klux Klan. Then in an October 13, 1924, speech delivered in his boyhood home of El Dorado, he outlined broader and more detailed goals for his possible term of office. In opening his speech he noted the large support he had received in his anti-Klan fight, and argued that his backing was coming from all political quarters. He pledged to maintain a moderate position in view of his diverse support and his campaign theme, opposition to the Klan. In pursuing the few reforms he sought, he stated that it would be better to alter or strengthen existing laws than to pass a large amount of new legislation.

He did advocate some new measures. Specifically he called for: (1) a revision of the banking laws to give contributors to the guaranty fund protective information and some control “of the situation as changing local and general economic conditions affect the banking situation in the state”; (2) the taking of state colleges “out of politics”; (3) an amendment to the primary election laws prohibiting minority nominations and preventing groups of voters from participating in the elections of parties other than their own; (4) the passage of a child labor amendment and a bill authorizing aid to hospitals with maternity wards; (5) a law empowering the Kansas supreme court to create emergency conciliation courts to settle disputes between labor and management; (6) economy in government, with the realization that tax reduction was the responsibility of the state legislature, not the governor; (7) a re-adjustment of railroad rates for farm products.

During the autumn, White explained in greater detail through campaign speeches his views of the Klan. He asserted that the Klan and the large corporations were co-members of a conspiracy to control Kansas in the interest of the giant companies. As evidence, he claimed that John S. Dean, attorney for the Klan and the Associated Industries, had campaigned for Ben Paulen and the Republican State Central Committee advocating the defeat of the child labor amendment. The Associated Industries was an organization of Kansas corporations that opposed welfare legislation.

White also charged that Davis had been elected governor after promising to reduce taxes and abolish the industrial court, a labor-

27. Ibid., October 13, 1924.
management mediation board, although he failed to keep his word. The editor promised that if he were elected governor, he would not order any workers to jail under the industrial court laws for striking or calling a strike. He also pledged to request a repeal of the industrial court laws by the legislature and the formation of a new industrial court that would protect both management and labor, free speech, free assembly, and the free dissemination of information about industrial disputes. 28 This new court was the same as pledged in his El Dorado speech of October 13.

White’s interest in industrial disputes partly stemmed from his conflict over a 1922 strike with then Gov. Henry Allen. During a national railroad strike that year, Kansas strikers printed large posters expressing support for their cause which were designed to be placed in merchants’ windows. Governor Allen, a close friend of White’s, threatened to order the arrest of anyone displaying the signs. In protest to what he thought was a violation of free speech, White kept a poster in his newspaper office window. Allen filed charges against White, but the attorney general refused to prosecute, much to the editor’s chagrin since he had hoped to test the issue in the courts. The entire controversy led White to write his Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial, “To an Anxious Friend.” 29 In light of this controversy it is easier to understand White’s request for a revision of the industrial court laws.

White made a special plea to the women of Kansas for support. Citing his backing of the child labor amendment and the bill to provide aid to hospitals with maternity wards, he pledged to appoint women to any state agency dealing with women in educational, charitable, or penal institutions. He also promised to operate a nonpartisan administration in which Democrats could retain state jobs as long as they performed satisfactory service. 30

Throughout the campaign White centered his criticism on Paulen rather than Davis. It seemed to him that Paulen was suppressing the Klan issue while Davis simply was ignoring it. 31 In response to this assault on their candidate, the Republican State Central Committee published attacks on White in hopes of discrediting him. One of the assertions made in these publications included the charge that White’s supporters had burned the cross at Cotton-

wood Falls at the beginning of his campaign to dramatize the Klan threat. The Republican leadership also accused White's backers of planning to break up one of his meetings with a barrage of eggs. The most controversial incident mentioned was the discovery of a letter on a street in an unspecified Kansas town. White allegedly wrote the letter to Fred Trigg of the Kansas City (Mo.) Star. It was written in a discouraged tone, and in it White was supposed to have accused Trigg of unwisely convincing him to run for governor. One of the extracts printed in the Republican releases read:

DEAR FRED:

This is a rotten job you have wished on me. I had to hold a meeting yesterday on the sidewalk because so few people came out it would have looked silly to have held it in the hall. . . . If I can get out 75,000 votes, we will have Ben on the shelf. But if by any chance I am elected governor, I will have to put a cross on the state house dome, and wire the Ku Klux Klan to keep the niggers away from the state house. Catholics, Jews and niggers are about all the support I have got. . . .

After the letter was brought to public attention, White labeled it a forgery. He called upon the Republican State Central Committee to produce the original letter or deny its existence, neither of which was done. Paulen refused to comment on the letter during the campaign, but after the election he apologized for the incident. White did not believe the Republican leaders wrote the letter, but he thought they purchased it.

A number of rumors accompanied White's campaign. One charged that the editor would withdraw from the race if Paulen would promise to appoint White's fellow Republican and friend Clyde Reed as chairman of the Utilities Commission or promote him for a position on the Interstate Commerce Commission. Another rumor stated that White and the Kansas City Star "crowd" had controlled several preceding administrations. They feared they could not control Paulen and for that reason White was opposing him.

At least one story apparently reduced White's vote. The evening before the election a rumor was circulated in a black section of Lawrence to the effect that White would disfranchise blacks if elected. Paulen received a sizable majority in that precinct, a noteworthy fact, since the black vote could have been expected to go to Davis or White.

White ended his campaign November 2 with six speeches in

32. Topeka Daily Capital, October 15, 1924.
34. Charles F. Scott to White, September 21, 1924, "White Collection."
Wichita, the last of which was delivered in the Forum, one of the largest structures in the state at that time. That night he returned to his home in Emporia. His entire campaign expenditures amounted to only $474.60. Each Monday he had withdrawn $25.00 from his bank account for the week’s expenses. During his tour he usually received food and lodging from friends to reduce costs. He made a total of 104 speeches and traveled 2,783 miles during his six-weeks campaign. He had no staff, except his son and the Gazette employees, and he lacked campaign literature and a head-quarters.36

Despite his late entry into the race, his opposition to both major parties, and the lack of an organization, White received 149,811 votes. This was far from enough to win, however, as Paulen drew 323,403 votes, and Davis received 182,861. White’s cause was not a total loss for three anti-Klan Republican candidates up for re-election, Att. Gen. Charles B. Griffith, Secretary of State Frank J. Ryan, and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jess W. Miley, received winning margins.37

After Governor Paulen assumed office he showed no favoritism to the Klan. When Attorney General Griffith opposed the granting of a charter to the organization, Paulen made no protest. The State Charter Board refused to grant a charter to the Klan, which was a significant blow to the organization since the state supreme court had ruled that it could operate only with a charter. Nevertheless, White continued an intermittent harassment of the Klan. In 1926 he wrote that “the kluxers in Kansas are as dejected and sad as a last year’s bird nest, afflicted with general debility. . . .” By this time the Klan was in its final stages of decay, and White had fairly squeezed the subject dry.38

The motives for White’s candidacy are puzzling. Did he run to expose the Klan or to become governor? In announcing his candidacy he stated, “I have filed my petition for governor and am in this race to win.” But in a letter written shortly after the election, White confided to Sen. Charles Curtis that he did not want to win the race nor did he expect to. White’s son, William L. White, observed in retrospect that his father hoped to win but was wise enough politically to realize his chances were slim.39

37. Zornow, Kansas, p. 239; Rich, White, pp. 248-249, 256.
It seems that William Allen White's main goal was to lodge a protest against the Klan that would draw national attention. He was imaginative and looked for a new way to dramatize an issue he felt sincerely and deeply about. With a well-established reputation and an expressed aversion to holding public office, White jumped into the gubernatorial race. To increase the impact of his own dramatic cause, opposition to the Klan, he chose to enter the contest late—as an independent, but a Republican at heart, in a traditionally Republican state—and center his attack on the regularly nominated Republican candidate. Naturally, a minor political storm was created. But this was all the better for it gained publicity for White's campaign, and he stood to lose nothing politically by bolting his party, for he was not a professional politician. He never offered substantial proof that the Republicans had Klan backing. But the story of mysterious Klansmen assembling in Wichita to determine the fate of Kansas politics entertained audiences and produced more headlines for White's cause.

White could not resign himself to the prospect that he probably would finish third in the election. He knew there was a slight chance that he might win the office. Therefore his secondary goal was to become governor. After a time his audiences began to tire of stories about "kleagles, dragons, cyclops, and whangdoodles," so in order to increase his chances of winning, White broadened the scope of his campaign, when in October, he outlined in the El Dorado speech his goals beyond opposition to the Klan. While he still tried to defeat the Klan by laughing it down, more serious overtones began to enter his campaign.

White's candidacy substantially reduced the Klan's strength in Kansas. His campaign aided the reelection of Attorney General Griffith, a strong opponent of the Klan. Griffith's stand against the Klan led to the denial of a charter to the secret order which in effect made it illegal as an organization. White brought the Klan issue into the open, and one of his most gratifying experiences was the receipt of letters from members of minority groups who began to get better treatment after his fight.40 Aside from the assistance he gave in limiting the power of the Klan, White managed to turn the 1924 gubernatorial race into a wild, exciting contest. And he added a new aspect to the life of the man known affectionately to his contemporaries as the Sage of Emporia.

40. See White to A. E. Holt, November 11, 1924, in White, Selected Letters, p. 245.