

Wendell Willkie

Essay prepared by IHS staff

Wendell Willkie was an unlikely candidate for president in 1940 on the Republican ticket. He was an attorney, a businessman, a Democrat (until 1940) and never before held public office.

Born into an unusually accomplished family for the period--both parents were attorneys; his father was also a school superintendent--Willkie grew up in Elwood, completed his education at Indiana University and worked in the family law firm from 1916 until he enlisted in the army during World War I. Subsequently he established himself in Akron, Ohio, serving as an attorney with the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company before entering private practice.

In 1929 Willkie moved to New York City, joined and soon presided over a large electric utility company (Commonwealth and Southern), made headlines and personal converts through his outspoken opposition to TVA (a key element in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs) and became a Republican. Stimulated by the hundreds of Willkie Clubs that sprang up in 1940, he pursued the GOP nomination in the months preceding the party's convention in Philadelphia in June 1940. Nominated by Congressman Charles A. Halleck (R-Ind.), Willkie was chosen on the sixth ballot. His running mate was Charles L. McNary of Oregon.

Willkie waged a vigorous campaign from headquarters established in Rushville, Indiana (his wife's hometown), which began with a huge rally in heat-stricken Elwood in August, but his opposition to Roosevelt's domestic programs, while supporting his foreign policies and refusing to focus on the third-term issue, was lost in the troubled war clouds over Europe. Willkie received 45 percent of the popular vote but carried only nine other states besides Indiana.

His greatest services as a statesman came following America's entry into World War II, when he served as FDR's personal emissary abroad. Willkie reported on his world tour of 1942 in a best-selling book, *One World*, a plea for international cooperation, peace and freedom.