

INTRODUCTION

Alfred Emmanuel Smith was born in New York City on December 30, 1873, the first child and only son of Alfred Emmanuel Smith, Sr., and Catherine Mulvehill Smith.¹ Having rather ordinary parents and experiencing an ordinary childhood, Smith was probably indistinguishable among the tens of thousands of children in that urban corner of America. Before entering his teens he suffered the loss of his father; and since he was compelled within a few years to work to help support the family, he did not finish grammar school. A succession of manual jobs carried him through adolescence, and he supplemented the work required of him to earn a livelihood with a promising career in amateur theatricals and an interest in politics.

Politics was virtually a way of life in Smith's neighborhood, and as a politically talented young man he was naturally drawn into active participation in political affairs. After a few years of apprenticeship, Smith in 1895 received his first position, that of process server, as a reward for his activities in the city's 1894 mayoralty election. Smith served in the Commission of Jurors office until he was selected to run for the State Assembly in 1903. Elected easily, he remained in the Assembly until 1915, overcoming the early frustration that he experienced as the result of his insignificance and his lack of understanding of the Assembly's proceedings. During his service in the Assembly, he worked hard at his job and made himself a legislative expert. His colleagues and those who followed the actions of the Assembly were soon aware of his talents, and by 1915 Smith had transcended his early reputation as a Tammany Hall hack. He rose simultaneously in the esteem of the leader of Tammany, Charles F. Murphy, and was rewarded for his service to the organization with the positions, successively, of majority leader, speaker, and minority leader.

In the Assembly Smith supported workmen's compensation, factory and labor laws, conservation measures, insurance reform, criminal-court reorganization, the federal income-tax and women's suffrage amendments, home rule for cities, election reform, a widow's pension plan, and the establishment of a department of food and markets. On many occasions he led the fight for these measures.²

Smith served with distinction in 1915 in the New York Constitutional Convention; in competition with some of the finest minds in the state, he made his mark as an expert in

¹ For the general details of Smith's life, see Alfred E. Smith, Up to Now (New York, 1929); Frank Graham, Al Smith, American (New York, 1945); Oscar Handlin, Al Smith and His America (Boston, 1958); Norman Hapgood and Henry Moskowitz, Up from the City Streets: Alfred E. Smith (New York, 1927); Matthew and Hannah Josephson, Al Smith: Hero of the Cities (Boston, 1969); Henry Moskowitz, Alfred E. Smith: An American Career (New York, 1924); Richard O'Connor, The First Hurrah: A Biography of Alfred E. Smith (New York, 1970); Henry F. Pringle, Alfred E. Smith: A Critical Study (New York, 1927); Emily Smith Warner, The Happy Warrior: A Biography of My Father, Alfred E. Smith (Garden City, New York, 1956); and New York Times, June 29, 1928, October 4, 1944.

² Smith made his Assembly record not only with roll-call votes but also in committee work, debates, and his efforts to prevent subsequent weakening of progressive legislation. See Pringle, Smith, pp. 150-151; Robert F. Wesser, Charles Evans Hughes: Politics and Reform in New York, 1905-1910 (Ithaca, New York, 1967); John D. Buenker, "Progressivism in Practice: New York State and the Federal Income Tax Amendment," New-York Historical Society Quarterly, LII (April, 1968), 152-160; J. Joseph Huthmacher, "Charles Evans Hughes and Charles Francis Murphy: The Metamorphosis of Progressivism," New York History, XLVI (January, 1965), 29-35; Louis D. Silveri, "The Political Education of Alfred E. Smith: The Assembly Years, 1904-1915" (Ph.D. thesis, St. John's University, 1963), passim; Alex Diskint, "Alfred E. Smith, His Contribution as a Legislator to Administration" (M.P.A. thesis, New York University, 1949), passim; and Martin I. Feldman, "The Political Thought of Alfred E. Smith" (Ph.D. thesis, New York University, 1963), pp. 26-42.

both the state's affairs and practical politics. He was again rewarded by the machine in the same year with the nomination for the largely honorary but lucrative position of sheriff of New York County (Manhattan). Smith left this boring post after he was elected president of the Board of Aldermen (a position equivalent to that of vice-mayor) in 1917. The next year he was elected to the office that he would hold, except for a two-year interval, until the end of 1928: the governorship of New York State.³

³ No attempt will be made in these pages to provide a comprehensive account of Smith's many accomplishments as governor, but it should be remarked at the outset that in his eight years as governor, Smith supported an advanced program of reform that put New York ahead of most other states in the eyes of progressives. His accomplishments included the significant expansion of governmental services in education and health; increased protection for the state's labor force, especially women and children; the establishment of a responsible and effective administration through reorganization, the executive budget, and executive leadership; the inauguration of a massive park system; prison reform; rent control; limited state participation in housing construction; and an accelerated public-works program. Smith failed to secure other reform objectives, particularly state control of water-power resources (although he did successfully resist private control). For Smith's record as governor, see Paula Eldot, "Alfred E. Smith, Reforming Governor" (Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 1961), *passim*. Professor Eldot kindly made her revised manuscript available to me; it will be cited as Eldot, MS. See also Bernard Bellush, Franklin D. Roosevelt as Governor of New York (New York, 1955), pp. 29-33; David M. Ellis et al., A History of New York State (revised edition, Ithaca, New York, 1967), pp. 393-406 *passim*; and Daniel R. Fusfeld, The Economic Thought of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Origins of the New Deal (New York, 1956), pp. 92-95.