



## PROFILES IN COURAGE

Teacher's Guide

# OSCAR W. UNDERWOOD

### CREDITS:

Starring Sidney Blackmer and Victor Jory. Written by David Karp. Directed by Lamont Wilson. Associate Producer, Michael Ritchie. Produced by Gordon Oliver and Robert Saudek Associates. Inspired by John F. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book. **50 minutes.** Guide prepared for Social Studies School Service by Robert D. Barnes, 1983.

### OBJECTIVES:

- To explore the role of party conventions in American history.
- To examine the power and influence of pressure groups in our society.
- To discover the practices and beliefs of the Ku Klux Klan, and its use of violence and terror in a democracy.
- To understand the meaning of moral courage.

### BACKGROUND:

In 1866, in Pulaski, Tennessee, a former slave trader and Confederate General, Nathan B. Forest, organized a "social club" that was to become the most notorious and feared secret organization in America, the Ku Klux Klan. Riding at night and wearing robes and hoods to conceal their identity and terrify their victims, their primary aim of discouraging Negroes from voting was accomplished through intimidation, beatings, and murder.

In 1871, Congress passed a law known as the Ku Klux Act, empowering the President to declare martial law where the secret organizations were deemed "in rebellion against the government of the United States." After scores of arrests, fines, and imprisonments, the Klan's power was broken. By 1872, the Klan had almost disappeared.

Resurrected on Thanksgiving night, 1915, the Klan included as targets Negroes, Jews, and Catholics. At the 1924 Democratic Presidential Convention, as

many as 500 or more of the delegates were Klan members or sympathizers.

### SYNOPSIS:

Oscar W. Underwood, Democratic senator from Alabama, came to the 1924 Democratic Convention in New York City as the strongest potential compromise candidate. There were 16 candidates and none of them had the strength in the early balloting to get anything close to the 732 votes needed for nomination.

Aware that the nomination could be his, Senator Underwood nevertheless sponsored and came within one vote of getting the Convention to adopt an anti-Klan platform. Despite his leadership of this proposal, many of the Klan's supporters at the Convention were willing to back Underwood when candidates McAdoo and Smith faltered after 100 ballots. With the tide running his way on the 102nd ballot, all that he had to do was agree not to single out the Klan for further criticism. Oscar W. Underwood refused the bargain on principle. John W. Davis became the Democratic nominee on the 103rd ballot. Underwood was not even renominated to the Senate. He had forfeited his political career.

### VOCABULARY:

The following words and phrases appear in the program. Teachers may wish to check for student understanding:

bigotry	minority plank
Waldorf Astoria	alienate
Madison Square Garden	salt of the earth
precipitate	redundancy
dark horse	uninhibited
staying power	Imperial Wizard
Teapot Dome	tail wags the dog
heresy	squelch
Ku Klux Klan	favorite sons

platform committee            vindicate

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. Long after the Convention was over, Charles Carlin, Underwood's campaign chairman offered an apology: "I served you badly.../I made a mistake... Oscar, you could have been President." What was Underwood's response? What qualities did Carlin exhibit as a campaign manager? How would you evaluate his contribution?
2. When Carlin suggested that Smith would not get the nomination even after 20 ballots, one delegate replied that in the summer heat of Madison Square Garden, the convention could not possibly last that long. Why did it take 103 ballots to nominate a candidate? Can you think of several contributing factors?
3. What were Underwood's stated reasons for attending the 1924 Convention? Is a political convention an appropriate place to bring up controversial issues? Explain. What "two marks" did Underwood identify as hampering his chances for the nomination?
4. Has the Democratic party ever given the Presidential nomination to a Southerner? How did Andrew Johnson, a Tennessee Republican, and Lyndon Johnson, a Texas Democrat, become American Presidents?
5. Carlin was told: "The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan are ready to make your candidate President of the United States." Was the Klan in a position to "deliver" on this boast made to Carlin? Explain. What were the Klan's conditions? Considering their power and influence at the Convention, would you characterize these conditions as harsh or reasonable? Support your position.

**ACTIVITY:**

In the classroom hold a political convention. You may choose to hold two, one for each major political party. Propose and vote on party platforms. Try to address some of the major political issues of the day. After the exercise, evaluate. Were the positions taken realistic? Were there squabbles and disagreements? How were conflicts resolved? What issues do you think Republicans and Democrats will address in their next conventions? Learn about the

constituencies of the two parties.

**FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION:**

1. Carlin explained that 1924 had the potential of being a "good year for Democrats." There is "a bad smell of oil on the White House, Teapot Dome oil," he continued. What was Carlin talking about? Find out about Teapot Dome. Who won the 1924 election? What were the issues?
2. The party convention has been called a "personnel-selecting agency, passing upon qualifications of a...President" in one moment, and an "Indian war dance" in the next, with no one able to tell when it will become a parliament, and when it will become a mob. Alistair Cooke has described a convention as "a chess tournament disguised as a circus." Find out about political conventions. When were they first held? Who makes the rules? How are the delegates selected? Have conventions changed much in recent years? What major differences are there between the 1924 convention and conventions today?
3. In 1964, the Democratic Convention was dominated by the issue of civil rights for black Americans. Mississippi sent two separate delegations. Find out what happened. Learn about Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Delegation.
4. Is the Ku Klux Klan still active and effective as a force of violence in the United States today? Find out what happened in Greensboro, North Carolina, in November, 1979, when Klansmen and members of the Communist Workers' Party clashed.