O'DANIEL, WILBERT LEE (1890-1969)

Wilbert Lee (Pappy) O'Daniel, Texas governor and United States senator, was born in Malta, Ohio, on March 11, 1890, one of two children of William Barnes and Alice Ann (Thompson) O'aniel. His father, a Union veteran, was killed in an accident soon after the birth of Wilbert.

Before the boy was five years old his mother remarried and went to live
on a farm in Reno County, Kansas. O'Daniel was educated in the public schools of Arlington, Kansas, and completed the two-year curriculum at Salt City Business College in Hutchinson, Kansas, in 1908. At eighteen he became a stenographer and bookkeeper for a flour-milling company in Anthony, Kansas. Later he worked for a larger milling company in Kingman, rose to the post of sales manager, and eventually went into the milling business for himself. On June 30, 1917, in Hutchinson, he married Merle Estella Butcher; they had three children. He moved to Kansas City in 1919, and then to New Orleans in 1921.
In 1925 he moved to Fort Worth, where O'Daniel became sales manager of the Burrus Mills. He took over the company's radio advertising in 1928 and began writing songs and discussing religious subjects on the air. He hired a group of musicians and called them the Light Crust Doughboys.qv O'Daniel served as president of the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce in 1933-1934. He
organized his own flour company in 1935.

At the behest of radio fans, he filed for governor May 1, 1938. During the Democratic primary campaign in one-party Texas he stressed the Ten Commandments, the virtues of his own Hillbilly Flour, and the need for
old-age pensions, tax cuts, and industrialization.

Continuing his pose as a hillbilly, he acted under the professional direction of public-relations men.

Accompanied by his band, the Hillbilly Boys, and the Bible, he attracted huge audiences, especially in rural areas. In the primary he smashed the other candidates and eliminated the usual necessity of a runoff. He had pledged to block any sales tax, abolish capital punishment, liquidate the poll tax (which he had not paid) and raise old-age pensions, but he reneged on all these promises. He unveiled a tax plan, secretly written by manufacturing lobbyists, that amounted to a multiple sales tax, but the legislature voted it down. Solons laughed at the vaudevillian atmosphere of the O'Daniel administration, but most of his legislative opponents were defeated for reelection.

O'Daniel won again in 1940, after divulging that he had wired President
Franklin Roosevelt that he had confidential information about a fifth column in Texas. No one ever found the traitors. The governor and several Texas

business
leaders began attacking organized labor in the spring of 1941, but most of the provisions of the ensuing O'Daniel Anti-Violence Act were eventually discarded by the courts. O'Daniel began packing the University of Texas Board of Regents with people who wanted to limit academic freedom and ferret out alleged subversion on campus. These regents, along with those selected by his successor, Coke Stevenson,eventually fired University of Texas president Homer Price Rainey and provoked a nine-year censorship of UT by the American Association of University Professors.

As governor, O'Daniel enjoyed little success in putting across his agenda. He was unable to engage in normal political deal-making with legislators, vetoed bills that he probably did not understand, and was overridden in twelve out of fifty-seven vetoes-a record. But he was able largely to negate his ignorance, his isolation, and his political handicaps with masterful radio showmanship.

O'Daniel ran for the Senate in a special election in 1941. He edged his leading opponent, New Deal congressman Lyndon Baines Johnson, in a flurry of controversial late returns. After taking office in August, O'Daniel introduced a number of antilabor bills, all of which were defeated overwhelmingly. In running for reelection the next year, he faced former governors James Allred and Dan (Daniel J.) Moody.

He charged that there was a conspiracy among Moody, Allred, the professional politicians, the politically controlled newspapers, and the "communistic labor leader racketeers" to smear and defeat him. Some prominent conservatives and conservative newspapers, embarrassed by O'Daniel, endorsed New Dealer Allred in the runoff.

But posturing as a supporter of President Roosevelt, O'Daniel hung on to enough rural and elderly voters to win barely. During the war years he and Tom (Thomas T.) Connally supported the Republican-Southern Democratic coalition more often (seventy-four votes) than any other Southern duo in the Senate. O'Daniel was the leading campaigner for the Texas Regulars, a third-party effort to siphon off enough Democratic votes in Texas in 1944 to deny Roosevelt a fourth term. The president carried Texas and was reelected despite O'Daniel's inflammatory "educational" broadcasts. O'Daniel was shunned and ineffective in the Senate.

With public opinion polls giving him only 7 percent support in 1948, he announced that he would not run again since there was only slight hope of saving America from the communists.

He bought a ranch near Fort Worth, invested in Dallas real estate, and founded an insurance company. He attempted comebacks in the Democratic gubernatorial primaries of 1956 and 1958; in the campaigns he ranted

about blood running in the streets because of the "Communist-inspired" Supreme Court decision desegregating the nation's schools. He failed to make
the runoff on both occasions, although in 1956 he carried sixty-six counties with almost 350,000 votes.

O'Daniel died in Dallas on May 12, 1969, and was buried in Hillcrest Memorial Park.

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