

# Dr. Charlie Mayo for President?

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## **Have you ever wondered**

what would have happened if Vice President Hubert Humphrey had defeated Richard Nixon in the 1968 presidential election? Or what if Vice President Walter Mondale had been elected president in 1984 instead of Ronald Reagan?

There was a third moment when history could have been altered by a gifted and politically astute Minnesotan. What if Dr. Charles H. Mayo, who co-founded Mayo Clinic with his brother Dr. William J. Mayo, had run for president in 1924? It could have happened. Some powerful Democrats were courting him.

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*Dr. Charles H. Mayo in surgical gown, about 1925*



*Brothers Charles (left) and William Mayo, who after World War I treated servicemen free of charge*

**“Keep Cool with Coolidge”** was the slogan of the Republicans in '24, who nominated the sitting president on their first ballot. (Calvin Coolidge had been elected vice president in 1920 but assumed the presidency after Warren G. Harding died in office.) The Democrats searched wide and far for a winning candidate. In January they sent two New Yorkers to Rochester, Minnesota, to sound out the possibility of Charles Mayo, then 58, running as the state's favorite-son candidate. Dr. Charlie did not immediately say no to the idea.

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Why, of all people, Charles Mayo? In 1917, after the brothers established the Mayo Clinic as a nonprofit entity independent of themselves and their families, the clinic became the subject of much publicity and the Mayos became media celebrities. Then, in 1920 former President William Howard Taft publicly praised their skill after visiting Rochester, and in 1922 Dr. Charlie's consultation

on First Lady Florence Harding's illness attracted further notice. (On this occasion, he stayed in the White House at Harding's invitation.)<sup>1</sup>

All of this celebrity was further helped by Dr. Charlie's speaking style, which was folksy, rambling, and funny. He liked to address Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, chambers of commerce, businessmen's conventions, banquets, and dinners as well as medical groups, and he spoke on a wide range of subjects, including politics. In this he was well versed, having learned to care and fight for political underdogs from his father, Dr. William Worrall Mayo, who had served as a Rochester alderman and mayor as well as a state senator.<sup>2</sup>

**On February 15, 1924**, newspaper correspondent Charles N. Wheeler reported that Charles Mayo was being “boomed” as a possible dark-horse nominee in preparation for the summer's Democratic presidential convention. “Dr. Mayo, while not taking the proposal too seriously, is in a receptive mood,” said Wheeler. He pointed out that at least two groups would endorse Mayo's candidacy: “the medical fraternity of the country,” which would “rally to him, en masse,” and ex-servicemen.

Dr. Charlie had been a colonel in World War I. After the war, he and his brother offered medical care to about 90,000 soldiers and sailors free of charge.<sup>3</sup>

The presidential election of 1924 came at an exuberant time in American politics, when a decade of partying was in full swing. The major campaign issues included enforcement of the Volstead Act prohibiting consumption of alcohol (Dr. Charlie was for this); the Andrew Mellon tax-reduction program, called by some “tax breaks for the rich” (Mayo also favored this); and eliminating the graft that had flourished in the Harding administration (such as the infamous Teapot Dome scandal). Dr. Charlie was, of course, opposed to corruption of any kind, as was the GOP’s Coolidge.<sup>4</sup>

**From the beginning**, the Mayo-for-president idea called forth puns. An article in the *Redwood Falls Sun* asked, “Being the ablest surgeon in the U.S., wonder if he would cut out graft if sent to Washington?” The *Owatonna Chronicle* speculated, “Probably the attempt to get Dr. C. H. Mayo to run for the presidency is a frank confession that the conduct of government is in need of a little surgery.”<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Charlie’s popularity in Rochester was such that the Republican-aligned *Rochester Daily Post and Record* strongly endorsed him: “If, however, after the prolonged voting that usually characterizes democratic conventions, by any chance of fate the Minnesota nomination should become the party choice we believe that he would make one of the strongest and most popular candidates in the history of the country.” The paper’s Republican editors rallied around the “America is safe with Coolidge” slogan, but they also believed the country “would be equally as safe with Mayo.” Therefore they promised to “pledge allegiance” if he became the Democratic candidate. Many other Republican papers in Minnesota would also support Mayo, they claimed.<sup>6</sup>

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His Abraham Lincoln-type humor would endear him to voters, the editors pointed out, and because he commanded great respect among Minnesotans, people of



*Coolidge campaign headquarters in downtown Minneapolis, 1924. The women in the foreground are registering to vote.*

both major parties would support him. “He is probably the only Democrat who would have a fighting chance to secure the electoral vote of this state. If we must have a Democrat for president, let it be this able Minnesotan.”

The *Post and Record* went on to claim that Mayo would be a strong candidate in the Old Northwest because “he is one of the very few living men who can today save the discontented agricultural states from electing third party sympathizers and radicals.” He knew the farmers’ problems from firsthand experience, the editors said, because he operated one of the largest farms in southern Minnesota. Not only in his home region but across the country—even in the East—they suggested, Mayo would be popular, because “he is well known, admired and beloved by many people.”

Mayo’s hometown Democratic newspaper, the *Rochester Daily Bulletin*, naturally backed Dr. Charlie for president as well, calling him “a Democrat but not a partisan who puts party above principle.” The editors praised him for being “an original thinker” and “a fearless speaker” whose “vein of humor softens the attack so that there is never any vindictive bitterness.”<sup>7</sup>

**By March, Mayo’s possible** run for president was still bringing forth puns. His friend George Crile, a physician at the Cleveland Clinic, sent him a telegram asking to be appointed “secretary of the interior.” The *Rochester Post and Record* said that Dr. Charlie was needed to “perform the operation that will save democracy from destruction. Graft is the malignant tumor that draws the life blood from the nation’s vitals.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, in May, Dr. Charlie quashed these rumors. In a letter to Charles W. Ward, executive secretary of the Northwestern University Alumni Association, he said that the proposal to run was “flattering, but my job is too big for me as it is.” He was now in the process of “checking the discussion” because “it almost drew me into a political life which is far from my desire.” Since Mayo’s positions on the campaign issues were virtually identical to Coolidge’s, he was evidently never serious about running for president.<sup>9</sup>

**What, then, did the Democrats do** at their convention? They cast ballots 103 times, in contrast to



*After renouncing his chance at the nomination and retiring from his clinic, Charles Mayo (center) shares a car with brother William and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1934.*

the Republicans' one-ballot decision, making themselves laughingstocks to the electorate. In the end they nominated John W. Davis, a former congressman from West Virginia and ambassador to the United Kingdom. More important, he was an ultraconservative lawyer who had represented Standard Oil and J. P. Morgan and Company. Like Coolidge, he was backed by East Coast big-business interests; in philosophy and platform, he, too, presented no alternative to the sitting president. One wag commented, "The Democratic party could be relied upon at the right time to do the wrong thing."<sup>10</sup>

Disaffected farmers, joined by labor leaders, did as the *Rochester Daily Post and Record* had predicted and nominated a third-party candidate, "Fighting Bob" LaFollette from neighboring Wisconsin, who took 16 percent of the popular vote, drawing votes away from both major parties. Davis, with 29 percent of the popular vote, won only 12 states, all in the South. The rest of the nation gave Coolidge 54 percent of the popular vote for a landslide victory. Coolidge carried Minnesota, taking 46 counties and some 421,000 votes. The remaining 41 counties and 339,000 votes went to LaFollette. Davis finished a distant third with 56,000 votes, ahead only of the state's Socialist Industrial and Workers Communist party candidates.<sup>11</sup>

**What if Dr. Charlie had** wanted to run and, with his folksy speaking style, had won the votes of the doctors, soldiers, farmers, and ordinary people of America? What if he had, indeed, become President Charles H. Mayo?

We don't know what kind of president he might have been. We don't know if he would have been reelected, and, if so, whether he would have done better than Herbert Hoover in handling the Great Depression. One thing we do know: Mayo Clinic would have suffered greatly from his absence in those years. Dr. William Mayo retired from surgery in 1928. What a blow it would have been if Dr. Charlie had been in Washington at that time, perhaps campaigning for a second term in the White House.

During the years he did not serve as president, Dr. Charlie continued working, completing thousands of surgeries, until early 1930 when his own medical emergency—a retinal hemorrhage—interrupted what proved to be his last surgery. After this, he served as a surgical advisor and member of the clinic's board of governors until 1932, when he and Dr. Will stepped down from the board.<sup>12</sup>

And so the scenario of Dr. Charlie as president remains a tantalizing "what if." □

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## Notes

This article is based on information in the Charles Horace Mayo Papers, box 97, "Presidential Candidacy 1924" folder, Mayo Historical Unit, Rochester, Minnesota. Queries can be addressed to Nicole Babcock at [babcock.nicole@mayo.edu](mailto:babcock.nicole@mayo.edu).

1. Helen Clapesattle, *The Doctors Mayo* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1941), 577.

2. On W. W. Mayo, see Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, comps., *Minnesota Biographies, 1655-1912* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1912), 499.

3. *Topic* (Timber Lake, SD), Feb. 21, 1924. Wheeler was a correspondent for William Randolph Hearst's Universal wire service, and this article would have appeared in many newspapers.

4. Harding was not personally involved in the scandal, but his friend and Secretary of the Interior, Albert B. Fall, was culpable, having received a \$404,000 pay-off from Mammoth Oil for oil leases in California and Teapot Dome, Wyoming. See Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 709.

5. *Redwood Falls Sun*, Feb. 15, 1924; *Owatonna Chronicle*, Feb. 15, 1924.

6. Here and two paragraphs below, *Rochester Daily Post and Record*, Feb. 5, 1924.

7. *Rochester Daily Bulletin*, Mar. 5, 1924.

8. Crile to Mayo, telegram, Presidential Candidacy folder, Mayo papers, Rochester; *Rochester Post And Record*, Mar. 4, 1924.

9. Mayo to Ward, May 15, 1924, Mayo

papers; Johnson, *History of the American People*, 709.

10. Samuel Eliot Morison, Henry Steele Commager, and William E. Leuchtenburg, *A Concise History of the American Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 583.

11. Morison et al., *Concise History*, 583; Bruce M. White et al., *Minnesota Votes: Election Returns by County for Presidents, Senators, Congressmen, and Governors* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1977), 20.

12. Clark W. Nelson, "Retirement of the Mayo Brothers," in *Mayo Roots: Profiling the Origins of Mayo Clinic* (Rochester: Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 1990), 62.

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*The photo on p. 143 is courtesy the Mayo Clinic; all others are in MHS collections.*



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