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The 1904 Convention

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The 1904 Convention

Where was the Republican National Convention held in 1904?

Chicago -- the Republicans had been holding national conventions since 1856, so the gathering in the Windy City in 1904 was the 14th time they met. Chicago was by far the favorite venue of the Republicans in the first half-century of the party's existence: the 1904 convention that nominated Theodore Roosevelt was the 6th time Republicans met in the Land of Lincoln.



If history is prologue, watch out for a crisis to erupt in the Muslim world during the convention. There was a Middle Eastern crisis in the summer of 1904 involving the last of the Barbary pirates. A Moroccan warrior called Raisuli abducted a man with close American ties named Ion Hanford Perdicaris. Sound familiar? Hollywood resurrected the incident in a 1975 film, *The Wind and the Lion*, in which Raisuli was played by Sean Connery.

Raisuli was by all accounts a charismatic man with a commanding presence. TR did not want to make a mistake in dealing with him. To demonstrate toughness, the president wielded his "big stick." He ordered seven U.S. warships to the Moroccan coast and demanded the release of the victim: "This government wants Perdicaris alive or Raisuli dead," demanded the telegram dispatched to Morocco.

TR used the telegram to great effect at the Chicago convention, reading it aloud to the the wildly cheering delegates. But several unsavory facts surrounding the incident were not revealed to the Republican party faithful or to American citizens that summer. What TR and Secretary of State John Hay discovered -- but did not want to come to light -- was that Perdicaris was not even an American citizen at the time of his abduction. They also did not want it known that the U.S. pressured Britain and France to give in to the kidnapper's demands and pay the ransom. A secret these facts remained until most of the principals were dead and gone; not until 1933 did an historian uncover the real story.

Given the embarrassment it could have caused TR, it is remarkable that this little drama was staged to enliven an otherwise dull convention -- "but," observes presidential historian Lewis Gould, "it made for great political theater and reinforced Roosevelt's image as a man of action."^[1]

TR's display of toughness appealed to the American people, and he easily defeated his Democratic opponent, Alton B. Parker, in the November election.

Exactly one hundred years ago, "Long before there were suicide bombers, Osama bin Laden, or chants of 'Death fo the Great Satan,' a Trenton man named Ion Perdicaris became the 20th century's first American victim of Middle Eastern terrorism."²

(Question from Jack W. of Tulsa, Oklahoma)

[1] Lewis L. Gould, *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 147.

2. From a vivid account of Perdicaris's life and abduction by Jon Blackwell, "1904: 'Perdicaris Alive or Raisuli Dead!'" at <http://www.capitalcentury.com/1904.html>.