"Klanspiracy" or Despotism?

The Rise and Fall of Governor Jack Walton, featuring W. D. McBee

*By Brad L. Duren**

In recent times, the United States has witnessed a historic political battle between the executive and legislative branches of the national government. Accusations of misconduct and violation of public trust combined with charges of political maneuvering and personal arrogance to create a circus-like atmosphere that seemed unending. Such battles are nothing new in politics, particularly in the state of Oklahoma. The political battle of wills in 1923 between the colorful, likable Gov. J. C. "Jack" Walton

and a state legislature bent on asserting its power, led by Rep. W. D. McBee of Duncan, proves this claim. Walton blew into Oklahoma politics like a spring thunderstorm. He appeared out of nowhere, struck with a vengeance, and seemingly vanished as quickly as he arrived. "Our Jack," as his supporters admiringly called him, served only ten months in the governorship. His term of office turned into one long war with multiple fronts. Walton simultaneously waged a political conflict with the state legislature, a personality skirmish in the press with legislator McBee, and a battle of wills with the Oklahoma Ku Klux Klan. Just as the meteoric rise of the colorful Walton surprised the political experts, his abrupt fall captivated the nation.

Born on a farm near Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1881, John Calloway Walton moved with his family to Nebraska before settling in Fort Smith, Arkansas, when he was eight years old. According to his friends, Walton's parents instilled within their son a rigid moral code that eschewed a life of personal vice.[1] After graduating from Fort Smith Commercial College, Walton took a job as a railroad timekeeper. The details of his life become sketchy at this point and remain a topic of debate. Walton spent four years in Mexico where he later claimed to have served as Mexican president Porfirio Díaz's presidential train engineer. While in Mexico City, he studied engineering before moving to Kansas City to become a salesman for national supply houses. Walton said that he came to Oklahoma City and entered the water and sewage business in 1904, although his critics asserted that he actually did not arrive until 1915, calling the story nothing but a tall tale spun for political gain. All disputes aside, by 1917 Walton had earned a reputation as a magnificent salesman with a charismatic personality, and a career in Oklahoma politics was the next logical step.[2]

Walton ran a successful campaign for Oklahoma City public works commissioner, serving from 1917 to 1919, and, hungry for a higher office, decided to run for mayor in 1920. Few observers expected him to succeed and many local journalists already hated him, viewing him as little more than a political upstart with delusions of grandeur.[3] Walton ignored the jeers of his critics and launched a laborious campaign, using any and all means to evoke attention, such as hiring a jazz band to attract crowds to hear his speeches. Despite bad publicity from the local press, Walton won the election and became mayor of Oklahoma's largest city. While in office, he made important political allies such as veteran Oklahoma Democrats Charles Ruth and Joel Estes, who both served Walton as

personal and political counselors. Former college professor Dr. Ernest T. Bynum, then working as a federal prohibition prosecutor, became Walton's personal mentor. His relationship with Bynum helped the young mayor hone his personality skills to reap even richer political dividends.[4]

Walton's "everyman" demeanor helped him gain the loyal support of local laborers and farmers. His popularity in such circles brought him to the attention of a rising political coalition, the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League. The league appealed to the disgruntled and oppressed, especially post-World War I depression-racked farmers and laborers. Led by Non-Partisan League refugee George Wilson and Oklahoma socialist Patrick Nagle, the group held its first convention in Shawnee in February, 1922. At a later convention held in April of that year, 751 delegates drew up an eighteen-point platform similar to that of North Dakota's Non-Partisan League, calling for governmental attention to the plight of small farmers. The league, hoping to endorse a candidate in the November gubernatorial election, began to court the charismatic Mayor Walton, as his appeal with farm and labor sectors made him the perfect choice. He joyfully accepted the endorsement of the league and its leaders and began what became one of Oklahoma's most colorful campaigns.[5]

The Oklahoma Democratic Party was fighting for its life in the early 1920s, fearing the loss of farm-labor, anti-Ku Klux Klan, and Catholic support to the Republicans unless it ran a strong gubernatorial candidate in 1922. Party stalwarts Thomas Owen and R. H. Wilson failed to capture the imagination of the very voting segments the Democrats needed if they hoped to win the election. Desperate for a victory, Democratic leaders looked to Walton, the reputed friend of the "common man," as their savior. His endorsement by the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League served him well, and he crushed both Owen and Wilson in the Democratic primary by 50,000 and 35,000 votes respectively. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) unwittingly assisted in his primary victory by endorsing both R. H. Wilson and mandatory public school attendance, the latter issue pushing the Catholic vote to Walton. The Democrats then had their unlikely gubernatorial contender in the form of the "upstart" mayor of Oklahoma City, and Walton hit the campaign trail once again with his jazz band in tow.[6] Large crowds gathered wherever he went, listening to speeches long on content and short on substance, described by one critic as "ill-conceived mouthings." Nevertheless, Walton's enthusiasm and salesmanship impressed the crowds if not

the press or political pundits. Ethical questions plagued him wherever he went, such as his tendency to issue "honorary member of the police" cards to personal friends and prestigious guests who visited Oklahoma City. The press escalated their assaults as well, with reports exposing the use of city law enforcement officials as campaign spokespersons, a clear violation of both law and ethics.[7]

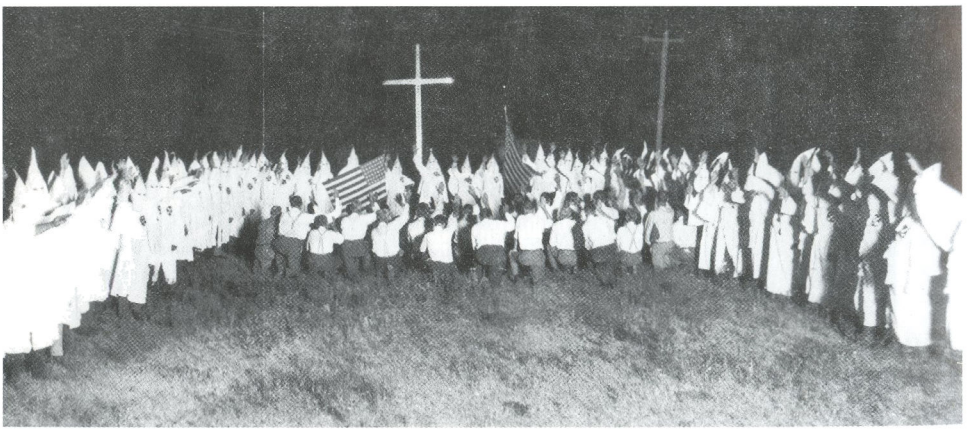
Apparently few voters paid any attention to the continuous attacks and bad publicity, as Walton defeated Republican opponent John Fields by nearly 50,000 votes in the general election. He carried the Catholic, farm-labor, and black votes, leading the way for a Democratic sweep in the 1922 elections. The KKK, though courted by both Walton and Fields, endorsed neither candidate but few observers doubted that many loyal Klan Democrats voted for Walton. Ironically, another man entered Oklahoma politics for the first time during the 1922 elections. A native of Austin, Texas, he had served as a territorial senator, probate judge, and university trustee in New Mexico before moving to Oklahoma in 1913 and opening a law practice in Duncan in 1915. Asked to run for the state legislature by Stephens County Democrats, he agreed on the condition that he did not have to campaign. In January, 1923, William D. "W. D." McBee took his seat in the state legislature in Oklahoma City.[8]

Walton's inauguration as governor on January 8, 1923, was by all accounts a festive event. He decided against an "elitist" inaugural

Governor Jack Walton (p. 468) invited thousands of Oklahomans to his inaugural barbecue (Courtesy Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Library, p. 468; courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society, No. 15944, above).

ball, opting instead for a massive barbecue open to the public at the state fairgrounds. In Jacksonian style, more than 160,000 visitors flocked to the site for a day of food, music, and parades. The menu included "antelope, bear, buffalo, five thousand chickens, deer, ducks, frogs, geese, two hundred hogs, two hundred possums, three thousand rabbits, one thousand squirrels, five hundred beef 'critters,' sweet potatoes, two hundred and fifty bushels of onions, one hundred thousand loaves of bread, and one hundred thousand buns." The multitude topped off their meals with 20,000 gallons of coffee. The barbecue turned out to be not only the party of the year, but also a masterful piece of public relations. Walton entered office with a great deal of popular support, many Oklahomans heralding him as the "working man's governor." Even skeptical, old-line Democrats agreed to give the new governor a chance to prove himself. The enthusiasm was short-lived.[9]

Walton started off on the wrong foot by asking the state legislature for a pay raise, increasing his annual pay from $5,000 to $200,000. The stunned legislators guffawed at what they saw as an outrageous request.[10] Shortly thereafter, the Farmer-Labor League expressed concern over Walton's oversight of their group when he made his official appointments. They also argued that, while education and labor received the governor's full attention, he had overlooked farmers. Sensing their discontent, Walton fired Oklahoma



Some of Walton's problems began when he banned meetings of the Ku Klux Klan such as this one at Lone Wolf, Oklahoma (Courtesy Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Library).

A&M College president James B. Eskridge and replaced him with Farmer-Labor League co-founder George Wilson. College officials and students adamantly protested the move, with the press around the state joining the chorus. Although pleased with the appointment, the Farmer-Labor League demanded further concessions. Growing weary of the constant demands placed upon him by the group, Walton gradually altered his position on the League. He began referring to League members as "reds" and "radicals" when he lunched with influential Oklahoma businessmen or made statements to the press.[11] An enthusiastic governor, by then hoping for a possible United States Senate run in 1924, moderated the strict farm-labor stance that helped him win in 1922. He sold his modest home and purchased a $50,000 mansion in Oklahoma City, as well as a second residence in Muskogee. Walton no longer resembled the "plain citizen" that won the governorship with heavy farm-labor support. After August, 1923, when Walton fired Wilson as A&M president to alleviate criticism, the Farmer-Labor League abandoned him for good.[12]

Throughout the summer of 1923, scandals continued to erupt and Walton's image suffered further setbacks. In July, W. D. McBee and other critics began escalating their attacks on the governor's conduct, spinning stories of "payroll padding" and misappropriation of state funds. Walton's alleged abuse of the pardon/parole power generated the harshest criticism, particularly in the early fall of 1923, with dissenters highlighting the governor's issuance of 253 pardons and executive orders of clemency between his inauguration and September 9.[13] Former corporation commissioner Campbell Russell initiated the circulation of a petition for a constitutional amendment that would allow the legislature to convene without a call from the governor as talk of impeachment increased in early October. With the Farmer-Labor League and other friends gone, Walton needed a convincing issue to reinvigorate support, rebuild his power base, and avert a political crisis. Hoping that his efforts would appeal to the emotions of Oklahoma voters and give him much-needed political clout, Walton went after the KKK. It was a decision that backfired in ways he never imagined.

The Oklahoma Klan boasted a membership numbering between 75,000 and 105,000 in 1923, and its rolls included the names of many prominent political, religious, and civic leaders.[14] The Sooner State version of the Klan, like its national parent organization, functioned as a defender of Victorian morality, and depending on location, as an advocate of American nativism and white racial supe-

riority. As the state grew increasingly urbanized, many citizens feared a breakdown of the "old ways." The Klan served as a watchdog of community law and order, advertising itself as the defender of old-fashioned morality and traditional American values. Its members resorted to violence on numerous occasions between 1920 and 1923, and few law-abiding citizens dared oppose the order or its principles.[15] Because the Klan appealed to values often held by Oklahomans not directly associated with the hooded order, it not only assured itself support, it sometimes made it difficult to know exactly who was and was not an official Klansman. Considerable numbers of Oklahoma government officials during the 1920s were either Klan members or apologists for the ideas the organization espoused. Some politicians enlisted for political reasons, as the Klan constituted a significant, unified voting bloc. Others claimed they never officially joined the order or courted its ranks for votes. W. D. McBee claimed in 1956 that he "was never a Klansman" and that his "own personal opinion at the time was that it was nothing but a money-making scheme among the higher-ups of the order to fleece the gullible."[16] As of 1923, Klan violence in Oklahoma was on the decline, due in part to crackdowns from its national and local leaders. Klan leaders wanted to present the organization as defenders rather than destroyers of law and order. Still, abuses continued throughout the nation and in Oklahoma, whether "officially sanctioned" or not. It was those abuses that Walton claimed provoked his wrath and forced his hand.

Walton's relationship with the Klan is ambiguous at best. He openly spurned the Klan while mayor of Oklahoma City, but softened his stance after becoming governor. Walton appointed Dr. A. E. Davenport, a known Klansman, as head of the state department of health, a curious move in light of the governor's later pronouncements and actions against the Klan.[17] According to his political mentor, state bank commissioner Dr. Ernest T. Bynum, Walton had attempted to join the local Klan after he became governor only to have his application rejected.[18] Stories circulated throughout the state that in February, 1923, Davenport and Dr. W. T. Tilly, cyclops of the Muskogee Klan, administered the secret oath to Walton in the governor's office. When confronted with the claim, the governor offered a variety of inconsistent responses. He vehemently denied the incident to the press while at the same time telling his close associates that his Klan membership was "purely political." Walton never addressed the discrepancies surrounding the story or the

Klan's listing of him as a "Klansman-at-large," a label that would haunt him throughout his "war on the Klan."[19]

Walton made his first move against the organization in June, 1923, when responding to complaints from citizens of Okmulgee about law enforcement's lackadaisical handling of local mob violence. The governor declared martial law in Okmulgee County and dispatched 400 national guardsmen to the scene. The troops remained there only three days, with the exception of a small group in the town of Henryetta that stayed until July 10. Walton justified the measure as a move against mob violence and never mentioned the Klan by name. The move provoked a mixture of anger and praise around the state, as many observers claimed that the situation did not require such drastic action. The activities in Okmulgee County, combined with other charges of outrageous behavior from Walton, led W. D. McBee to study the 1913 impeachment case against the governor of New York. With the Campbell Russell petition gaining more signatures, discontent with Walton rose among citizens and officials alike. Observers watched and waited to see what the governor would do next.[20]

W. D. McBee played a starring role in politics during his one term in the Oklahoma legislature, including the special session that led to Walton's impeachment (Courtesy OHS).

On August 10 four men attacked boarding house operator Nate Hantaman in Tulsa after police questioned him about an alleged offense. The attack itself occurred within blocks of the Tulsa police station, making collusion a possibility in the eyes of some observers. Walton threatened to place Tulsa under martial law unless officials made arrests within three days. Hantaman visited Walton's secretary Aldrich Blake, a farm-labor activist and avowed hater of the Klan, in the governor's office on August 13 and showed him the marks he received on his lower body as the result of the attack.

Blake telephoned the vacationing Walton in Sulphur and told him of Hantaman's visit. Before the conversation ended, the governor declared martial law in Tulsa, effective at noon on August 14. Gen. Baird H. Markham marched his 150 national guardsmen into Tulsa, assumed control as commanded, and immediately convened a court of inquiry to investigate local mob violence. As in the Okmulgee incident, no official mentioned the Klan by name, Walton himself claiming that he was "not after any particular organization."[21] The court of inquiry eventually found four men, all avowed Klansmen, guilty of riot and sentenced them to two years in prison. While the ruling was significant in that it marked the first conviction of espoused members of the modern Klan, the case did not end there.[22] With writs of habeas corpus preventing action against all other suspects of mob activity, a group of men kidnapped and beat W. J. Matthews, a young mechanic suspected of auto theft, on August 29. A blatant act of defiance against martial law, the beating occurred less than a block from General Markham's Tulsa headquarters.[23] An irate Governor Walton tightened his grip on what he then claimed was an emergency situation.

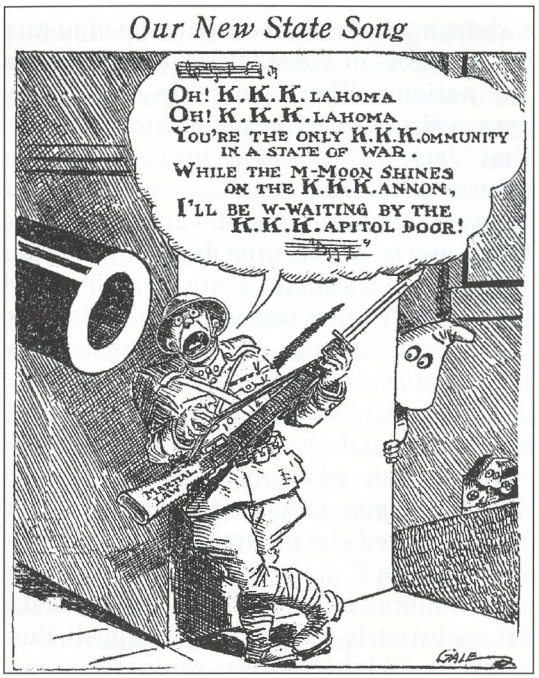
On August 31 the governor declared all of Tulsa County to be under absolute martial law and dispatched 200 additional troops to the scene. Walton also suspended all writs of habeas corpus, a direct violation of the national and state constitutions. Under the advice of secretary Blake and fellow Farmer-Labor associate Patrick Nagle, the governor then went after the Klan directly. Political enemies believed that Walton hoped for intervention from Pres. Calvin Coolidge, no doubt thinking such involvement would garner him national attention and publicity to launch a run for the United States Senate the following year. A federal investigation of Klan activity and an end to attacks by the masked hoodlums could provide the perfect platform. The Oklahoma press apparently did not agree with Walton's decision, attacking the governor's actions with a vengeance, calling them reprehensible and wholly unjustifiable. McBee, ever the master of a colorful phrase, accused Walton of using major surgery to cure a case of the measles.[24]

To some observers, it appeared that the Walton administration was invalidating itself unwittingly, and the governor and his advisors gave credence to such assertions by committing verbal bungles on more than one occasion. Secretary Blake boldly proclaimed that Walton possessed "the power of George III" in Tulsa, while the governor himself promised any Oklahoma citizen a personal pardon "in advance" if they "shot a thug." On September 6, Walton finally at-

tacked the Klan by name, charging them with obstruction of justice and the creation of a "reign of terror" in Tulsa and then dared them to unmask.[25] Although the national Klan leadership kept silent, Oklahoma Klan Grand Dragon N. C. Jewett responded to the governor's charges by stating that "Jack Walton and all his cohorts never will be able to break the power of the Klan in Oklahoma."[26] Hopes for peaceful resolution disintegrated as a state of war then existed between Walton and the Klan, and in the ensuing days the governor continued to pressure the KKK with a stream of official actions and verbal assaults. On September 11 Walton banned all parades and demonstrations by the Klan for the duration of his administration, apparently hoping for Klan defiance so as to justify the issuance of a state of emergency in Oklahoma. Unfortunately for him, the Klan behaved itself, as both national Grand Dragon Hiram Evans and Oklahoma Grand Dragon Jewett ordered compliance with the governor's mandates. The Klan's response to the situation prompted some critics to ask which party posed the greatest threat to Oklahoma—the Klan or Governor Walton.[27]

Walton's political strength suffered a powerful blow in the midst of his attacks on the Klan, as by early September, Campbell Russell's petition was on its way to Oklahoma City, containing more than enough signatures demanding consideration of the amendment that would allow the convening of an emergency session of the state legislature. Walton had all petition signatures checked for authenticity, an antagonistic move that prompted Russell to request a grand jury investigation of the action. He questioned the governor's handling of the petition, particularly his use of state employees to verify signatures, and also charged that Walton had overstepped his authority in approving such an investigation. District Judge George W. Clark honored Russell's request and ordered the convening of a grand jury on September 17. All the while, McBee and other state legislators continued their attacks in speech and print on the governor's abuse of his office and his violation of the "will of the people." The deteriorating circumstances drove a nervous governor to extreme measures, and on September 23, 1923, amidst claims of what he called a "Klan conspiracy," Walton placed the entire state of Oklahoma under martial law.[28]

Once again, Oklahoma journalists accused Walton of overreacting and political grandstanding. Fighting for his political life, he next took action that baffled the nation. Walton ordered the National Guard to set up machine guns at both the county courthouse and the capitol building and forbade both the grand jury and state



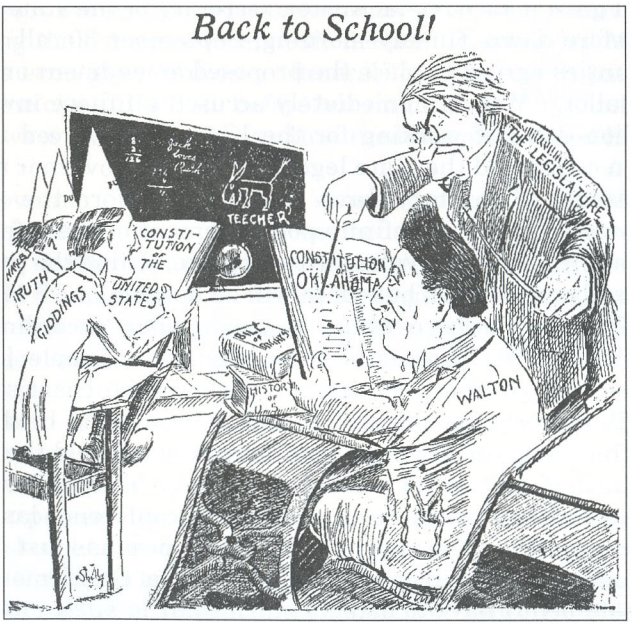
Political cartoonists found plenty of fodder for the editorial pages of their newspapers during the impeachment of Governor Walton (Untitled, undated cartoons, W. D. McBee Papers, Archives Division, Oklahoma Historical Society).

legislature from convening. Fearing for personal safety, the grand jury failed to convene.[29] Yet state legislator McBee refused to accede to Walton's actions. On September 20 McBee and sixty-four other legislators met on the eleventh floor of the Skirvin Hotel in Oklahoma City and issued a proclamation modeled after the Declaration of Independence. The writers accused Walton of "repeated injuries, usurpations, and blunders . . . establishing an absolute tyrany [*sic*] and absolute despotism over this commonwealth." They argued that due to these extreme circumstances, the legislature could constitutionally convene without a call from the governor, and they announced their intention to gather at the capitol at noon on September 26.[30]

Walton and McBee began waging a war of words in the press that would last for several months. The governor responded to the legislative proclamation with his usual flair, labeling the Skirvin gathering as a meeting of irate Klansmen and calling McBee a "known leader" of the Duncan Klan. He then threatened to have the National Guard arrest or shoot any legislators who gathered at the capitol on September 26.[31] McBee responded to Walton's threats by

saying that he "would go to jail or hell if necessary in the impartial discharge" of his "official duty."[32] For the next five days, the governor continued to assert to the press that the legislature would not be allowed to convene as the "Invisible Empire" was an "enemy of the state" and any session of the "Klan legislature" constituted defiance of state law and "an attempt to break the peace."[33] McBee answered that he vowed to stay in Oklahoma City "until Walton was ousted or I was shot."[34] The sixty-eight members of the legislature, determined to convene without violence, entered the capitol building one by one as announced on September 26. When national guardsmen turned them away in the hallway, the men attempted to gather both in the rotunda and on the capitol steps. Guardsmen dispersed them from both locations at gunpoint, forcing the representatives to return to the Skirvin Hotel.[35]

The legislators arrived at the hotel to find it filled with armed men, some of them in uniform and some in civilian attire. According to McBee, when he, his wife, and son returned to their room on the eleventh floor, nine men with guns were stationed in the hallway outside his door. When he unlocked the door, one of the men asked him if he was W. D. McBee and he answered in the affirmative. "Well," the man continued, "you can go in that room and stay if you



want to. But once you're in, you can't come out." McBee unlocked the door, stepped into the room and then back out again. Locking the door, he sent his wife and son to the lobby before turning to the men in the hallway and stated that he would come and go as he pleased. "If you have any orders from a kangaroo governor, try to enforce them. Are you men officers? Arrest me then." When none of the men answered, McBee returned to the lobby and contacted National Guard commander General Markham about the incident. Further inquiry revealed that Governor Walton had hired fifty-four men from Chicago to "keep the peace," placing them under the leadership of his close friend, Carter County sheriff Buck Garrett. After Markham and a few of his troops ordered the men out of the hotel, the legislators returned to find their rooms ransacked and planted with bottles of whiskey.[36]

With the legislature in disarray, the problem of the Campbell Russell petition remained. On September 28, Secretary of State R. A. Sneed ruled that the proposed petition amendment "was legally initiated," paving the way for a fight to get the proposal on the October 2 election ballot. Walton attempted to block the question, but the state supreme court overruled him on September 29. McBee presented a prepared "go ahead" statement for the amendment to Oklahoma attorney general George F. Short, who signed the document and gave it to W. C. McAlister, secretary of the state election board. Before dawn Sunday morning, September 30, all seventy-seven counties agreed to place the proposed amendment on the October 2 ballot.[37] Walton immediately accused all those involved in the petition drive of working for the Klan.[38] Convinced that the Klan then controlled the state legal system, the governor reverted to his threats of military force. The night before the election, Walton proclaimed an indefinite postponement of the referendum and threatened potential voters with violence, telling the press that "there may be bloodshed, but there will be no election."[39] McBee attacked Walton's "newborn whim" by saying that "according to the governor's apparent process of reasoning, these people [of Oklahoma] are just petulant children, and should be chastised," and then McBee proclaimed that the election would be held.[40] Most county officials ignored the governor's threats and held the election as scheduled. Despite a few minor incidents, no bloodshed occurred, and a dejected Walton's election night press conference lasted only a few seconds. "The fight on the invisible empire has just started," he proclaimed. "I am still governor of Oklahoma. Gentlemen, that is all the statement I have to make."[41]

The election results left no doubt as to the attitudes of Oklahoma voters, as 209,452 favored the amendment while 70,368 voted in opposition. McBee announced that the people had soundly "repudiated" the Walton administration, refusing to accept a "precedent established by the self-elevation of a man to the position of monarch or dictator over the people who elected him to public office." The national press made their own telling remarks about the Oklahoma election results. The *New York Times* proclaimed that "Oklahoma has spoken."[42] Its crosstown rival, the *New York Tribune*, declared the repudiation of "the patent medicine orator who thought he was Napoleon."[43] The *Washington Times* took a similar position, describing how "Oklahoma's gamecock governor was plucked at the election booth and found to be mainly feathers and fuss."[44]

McBee, armed with the signatures of sixty-eight legislators, issued a call on October 5 to convene the legislature at noon on Wednesday, October 17, 1923.[45] As Walton continued to call the election a Klan plot to oust him from office and take control of Oklahoma, McBee lashed out at the governor's accusations in the press. He stated that the only Klan issue in Oklahoma existed "in the hallucinations of a distorted brain."[46] Walton's cries of "Klan" whenever anyone opposed him, McBee observed, provided "a perfect smokescreen for [his] financial and political maneuverings."[47] Many Oklahomans just wanted the mess to end with some state residents demonstrating their disgust in comedic fashion. Disgruntled Muskogee residents even gave Walton a "funeral" complete with parade and twenty-one cap-gun salute before burying him in effigy in the Muskogee sewers with a headstone that read "he proclaimed himself to death."[48]

The governor and his advisors sensed that public sentiment had turned against them, but they seemed unwilling to retreat from their path. Blake, Bynum, and Walton devised a plan to offer the governor's resignation in exchange for legislative passage of a rigid anti-Klan bill. Walton apparently hoped such a move would salvage his prestige and allow him to run for the United States Senate seat as a martyr.[49] He then issued a call for a special legislative session of his own to convene on October 11 for the sole purpose of proposing legislation against "lawlessness by masked mobs."[50] When presented with Walton's proposal, representative Alex Singletary eloquently expressed the response of many legislators by asking "who in hell asked him to resign?"[51] Although the legislature agreed to Walton's October 11 date, unfortunately for him, they planned to address the issue of impeachment first. The editorial page of the

Daily Oklahoman urged the legislature to "get rid of Klan and King at the same time," advice that more than summed up the sentiments of many tired Oklahomans.[52]

In the days prior to convening, the legislature rejected Walton's offer for compromise. In an official statement to the press, McBee said that "J. C. Walton made this bed" and he would have to "lie in it," asserting that no one asked the governor to resign and no one would accept his attempts to "establish himself as a martyr."[53] When the Ninth Legislature finally convened in extraordinary session on October 11, their first item of business was to elect McBee as house speaker for the special session, due in part to his high profile throughout the scandal. That afternoon, the representative body passed a resolution accusing Walton of "willful neglect of duty, corruption in office, incompetency, and offenses involving moral turpitude."[54] McBee appointed a special committee of twenty-two legislators, led by Wesley Disney of Muskogee County, to investigate the charges. Walton's advisors, feeling the heat, decided it would be best for the governor to resign and avoid a thorough investigation of his administration. Blake drew up the governor's resignation letter for official presentation on October 12. Walton's lawyer Viness E. Riddle exploded when he learned of the plan. Upon hearing of Riddle's reaction, advisor Charles Ruth told Walton that Riddle believed Blake and Bynum had placed him in an unnecessary position. Convinced by Riddle and Ruth that he had been tricked, Walton fired Blake and Bynum, charging his two closest advisors of betraying him in "his Klan fight."[55]

In the meantime, McBee became a type of folk hero with the Oklahoma press. Newspaper stories described him as a former "cowboy on the Mule Shoe Ranch" who "once lived in a sod hut on a New Mexico homestead."[56] The *Daily Oklahoman* sang his praises in a story that characterized McBee as "Mr. Average Man" who became another "Patrick Henry overnight."[57] The common man legislator had taken a stand against tyrannical despotism and won the battle. On October 22 the general investigating committee filed its written report with the legislature. After ten days of impassioned testimony, the committee compiled a list of twenty-two counts against Walton, with the first sixteen counts focusing on administrative corruption and the final six charges centering on Walton's martial law abuses. With McBee firmly in command of the debate, the house adopted the charges and sent them to the state senate. Senators voted to suspend Walton immediately until the trial ended, with Lt. Gov. Martin E. Trapp serving as "acting governor."

The senate officially convened as a court of impeachment on November 1, 1923.[58] After eleven days of harsh accusations, colorful testimony, and two fist fights, the senate found Walton guilty on eleven of twenty-two charges, acquitted him of five others, and dropped six charges that they considered "ambiguous." The short but colorful reign of "King Jack I" came to a dramatic end.[59]

Jack Walton waged a war against the legislature and lost. What made him go to such lengths? Some observers perceived him as "blind and naked ignorance enthroned."[60] Were they right? Walton's former advisor Ernest Bynum described him as a man who failed to listen to sound advice, preferring to rely on his "untutored impulses."[61] Such impulses led to his removal from office after he decided to declare war on what was considered a very real threat, the Ku Klux Klan. But Walton's battle plans suffered from an overabundance of political corruption, questionable motives, and political ineptitude. In the eyes of many observers, Walton's oppressive methods as governor rivaled the violent tactics of the very Klan he claimed to fight. His decision to fight oppression with suppression in turn alienated even his most ardent supporters. Walton's charges of "Klan" every time someone disagreed with him made a mockery of the problem of mob violence. In retrospect, the battle between Walton and the legislature, particularly his war of words with W. D. McBee, was as personal as it was political. Both men had large egos and stubborn streaks (a trait not uncommon among politicians of the time) which they displayed during the fracas at the expense of political allegiances. Many old-line Oklahoma Democrats no doubt resented Walton's populist appeal and his unconventional rise to power outside of traditional political circles. McBee went to his grave asserting he was never a member or pawn of the Klan, a claim that remains unanswered to this day. Yet even if every legislator had been a member or puppet of the hooded order, it fails to justify Walton's outrageous actions or validate his claims of a "Klan conspiracy." Some of the governor's strongest critics were members of the Klan, but others never linked to the secret organization, such as Wesley Disney and George F. Short, played prominent roles in the movement that brought about Walton's dismissal. They claimed that they simply sought to bring under control a government official who had abused the power and authority of his office.

W. D. McBee served only one term in the Oklahoma legislature, returning home to Duncan in 1925 to resume his law practice and serve as part owner of a Lawton oil refinery before drifting into historical obscurity. He did manage to attack Walton one last time

when the former governor, in his run for United States Senate in 1924, accused McBee of taking Klan money during his term as a state legislator. The fiery Duncan lawyer offered $1,000 to anyone who could prove that such a claim, from what he called the mouth of "the arch-fiend of anarchy," had any basis in fact.[62] Despite his impeachment and removal from the office of governor, Jack Walton won the Democratic nomination for United States Senate, only to lose the race to Republican W. B. Pine by 145,000 votes. A second attempt for the Senate in 1936 fizzled at the primary level. Walton did manage to win a seat on the Oklahoma Corporation Commission in 1932, a position he occupied from 1933 to 1940. He then retired to private life and died November 25, 1949, in Oklahoma City at the age of sixty-eight. It is doubtful that McBee sent flowers.

ENDNOTES

* Brad L. Duren is Instructor of History at Oklahoma Panhandle State University, Goodwell. He is a Ph.D. Candidate in History at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater.

[1] Thomas D. Isern, "John Calloway Walton, 1923," in *Oklahoma's Governors, 1907–1929: Turbulent Politics*, ed. LeRoy H. Fischer (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1981), 115–116.

[2] Sheldon Neuringer, "Governor Walton's War on the Ku Klux Klan: An Episode in Oklahoma History, 1923 to 1924," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma,* 45 (Summer, 1967): 156.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Isern, "John Calloway Walton," 116.

[5] William D. McBee, *The Oklahoma Revolution* (Oklahoma City: Modern Publishers, Inc., 1956),4–5.

[6] Ibid., 18; Neuringer, "Walton's War," 158.

[7] McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 22–24.

[8] Ibid., 24–36.

[9] Isern, "John Calloway Walton," 120; McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 33.

[10] McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 37.

[11] Neuringer, "Walton's War," 159.

[12] Ibid., 159–160; Isern, "John Calloway Walton," 123–124.

[13] McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 34.

[14] Neuringer, "Walton's War," 155; Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 131.

[15] Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan*, 19.

[16] McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 16.

[17] Isern, "John Calloway Walton," 124.

[18] Ernest T. Bynum, *Personal Recollections of Ex-Governor Walton: A Record of Inside Observations* (Oklahoma City: E. T. Bynum, 1924), 73.

[19] Isern, "John Calloway Walton," 124.

[20] Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan,* 41–42; McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 54–58.

[21] Neuringer, "Walton's War," 160–163.

[22] Isern, "John Calloway Walton," 127–128.

[23] Ibid., 128–129; Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan*, 144.
[24] Isern, "John Calloway Walton" 128; McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 70.
[25] Neuringer, "Walton's War," 163–164; Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan*, 144.
[26] Jewett quoted in *Daily* (Oklahoma City) *Oklahoman*, September 8, 1923.
[27] Neuringer, "Walton's War," 165.
[28] Isern, "John Calloway Walton," 129; McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 69–71.
[29] Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan* 147.
[30] *Daily Oklahoman*, September 20, 1923.
[31] Isern, "John Calloway Walton," 131.
[32] McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 83.
[33] *Daily Oklahoman*, September 22, 25, 1923.
[34] McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 84.
[35] Isern, "John Calloway Walton," 131.
[36] McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 115.
[37] Ibid., 116–118.
[38] *Daily Oklahoman*, October 1, 1923.
[39] Quoted in Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan*, 149.
[40] *Daily Oklahoman*, October 2, 1923.
[41] Ibid., October 3, 1923.
[42] *New York Times*, October 3,1923.
[43] *New York Tribune*, October 3, 1923.
[44] *Washington Times*, October 3, 1923.
[45] *Daily Oklahoman*, October 7, 1923.
[46] Ibid., October 4, 1923.
[47] McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 51.
[48] *Daily Oklahoman*, October 5, 1923.
[49] Isern, "John Calloway Walton," 132.
[50] Quoted in Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan*, 151.
[51] McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 143.
[52] *Daily Oklahoman*, October 7, 1923.
[53] Ibid., October 10, 1923.
[54] Isern, "John Calloway Walton," 133.
[55] *Daily Oklahoman*, October 12, 1923; Isern, "John Calloway Walton," 133–134.
[56] *Daily Oklahoman*, October 11, 1923.
[57] Ibid., October 14, 1923.
[58] Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan*, 152–153.
[59] For a comprehensive account of the house debates and senate hearings, see McBee, *Oklahoma Revolution*, 150–176.
[60] Bynum, *Personal Recollections*, 56.
[61] Ibid., 88.
[62] *Duncan* (Oklahoma) *Banner*, July 11, August 15, 1924.