Larger than life, surrounded by an aura of guarded omniscience, and armored with a genial affable style, Herman B Wells reinvented Indiana University as a significant participant among the nation's public research universities. The story of this twenty-five-year transformation has been ably told in the third and final volume of Thomas D. Clark's fine institutional history, *Indiana University: Midwestern Pioneer, Years of Fulfillment* (1977), but the full biography of its prime mover has, until now, remained something of a mystery.

Wells, president from 1937 to 1962 and university chancellor until his death in 2000, proved remarkably adept at deflecting close observation of his personal life by continuously living in public spaces, working for multiple and distinct groups in different places, and often managing multiple assignments and responsibilities at the same time. Out of this incredibly active existence, Wells developed a seemingly limitless and dynamic network of friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and collaborators who insulated him from most close observation, with the possible exception of perhaps a few confidants with an admirable commitment to discretion. These characteristics make the challenge of a biographer especially difficult. Fortunately, James H. Capshew's *Herman B Wells* brings exhaustive research, careful analysis, sympathetic but clear-eyed assessment of his subject, and a deep understanding of Indiana University to this challenge.

Although Wells's biography has its beginning in small-town Indiana, by 1930 the narrative quickly becomes the story of the university, the man, and their unbreakable and symbiotic relationship. It tells of how Wells, before even completing his graduate work, had leveraged his rapidly expanding network of colleagues and

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associates from his IU undergraduate days, his extensive banking connec-
tions, and his graduate experience at the University of Wisconsin into a fac-
ulty appointment in the school of business. From that moment on, Wells
never permitted his ambitions, enter-
prises, or interests to break that organ-
ic and sustaining connection between
man and institution. His focus always
remained on Indiana University, and
once appointed president in 1937, his
campaign to bring IU into a degree of
parity with the better institutions of
the upper Midwest succeeded because
his strategy for personal advancement
relied on and sustained a comple-
mentary strategy for the institution's
advancement.

Capshew's thorough account
allows us to recognize that both man
and institution came from provincial
small-town Indiana backgrounds. By
the time their histories merged, both
had created successful, locally focused
reputations as effective, charming, and
reliable servants of the political and
economic interests of the Hoosier
state. Part of Herman Wells's genius
lay in his recognition that a Bloom-
ington base for himself and his uni-
versity would be insufficient to sustain
his and the institution's ambitions.
For IU to take a significant position
within the community of major uni-
versities, the university and its presi-
dent required, in addition to a strong
Hoosier foundation, a substantial
involvement in activities of national
and international significance. For the
university, it meant finding, attract-
ing, and sustaining a faculty of nation-
al academic distinction. For the pres-
ident, it meant creating the
opportunities to serve in significant
roles not just on state but especially
on national and international com-
missions, agencies, and organizations.
Through the exceptionally focused,
energetic, and effective pursuit of
institutional distinction and personal
engagement, Wells drove his univer-
sity and himself to unprecedented
heights of achievement.

This biography, respectful of the
man and his legacy, provides a fine
account of the joint transformation of
the university and its leader. Wells's
own autobiography, Being Lucky:
Reminiscences and Reflections (1980),
in its graceful self-effacing reinvention
of the past, nonetheless underscores
the core message of this biography.
Wells and his university enjoyed a for-
tuitous combination of conditions and
circumstances that made this story
possible. Absent any element, the
magic would have dissipated.

First, and always, there was the
man himself. Wells's talent for effec-
tive, focused, and practical work on
behalf of many groups and organiza-
tions built both a reputation for util-
ity and a wide network of appreciative
coworkers, collaborators, and patrons
who frequently mobilized to support,
manipulate, and lobby on their col-
league's behalf. Wells left little to
chance and personally pursued the
people, issues, and policies necessary
for success. Although clearly a man
with a keen appreciation of his own
worth, he always found a means of giving others an honored place at the table. As this biography shows, Wells consistently sought participation and leadership in successful enterprises that related to or provided leverage for Indiana University.

These personal qualities coincided with a moment in IU's history when the institution and its board, along with many of the university's constituencies, recognized that the long presidency of William Lowe Bryan (1902-1937) had left the university a good undergraduate institution but behind the levels of quality visible in the expanding graduate programs and research focus of its midwestern competition. The strong, flexible, and even indulgent support that Wells enjoyed from his board throughout his long term facilitated a rapid reconstruction of faculty talent and positioned IU to capture significant advantages from the processes and consequences of World War II.

Although Wells articulated a philosophy of a faculty- and student-centered institution, Capshew's biography shows that his management relied on strong presidential authority delivered primarily through trusted associates who would fight the retail battles of academic management. Wells, in the meantime, travelled the state, country, and eventually the world with the message of IU's significance and distinction, personified by its genial, charming, and effective president. Wells and his associates personally recruited the faculty and selected the administrators, deans, and department chairs who would give new direction and energy to the university. He consulted widely but kept the ultimate decisions on priorities, policies, and people in his own hands. Wells's knack for attracting loyal and competent colleagues to manage his plan for institutional development left him time and space to assume national and international roles. By making himself indispensable, he built the reputation and visibility IU needed to maintain and improve its position among its competitors. This fine biography, when read with Clark's more institutionally focused history, provides a truly comprehensive picture of the inner workings of the institution and of the exceptional leadership role of its president.

Herman Wells lived in an era in which respect for academic leadership, a political and social commitment to the expansion of research university capability, and a strong recognition of a common purpose of university and national achievement thrived. Perfectly adapted to his time, and aided by good fortune and his own talents, he succeeded beyond his dreams and became an IU icon. Wells and his university ultimately set an unbeatable standard for transformational accomplishment.

This biography, with its depth of research and its careful analysis, provides Indiana University's admirers with a clear understanding of the man and his complex engagement with his university. Capshew's work relies on
an extraordinarily thorough exploration of documents, oral histories, interviews, and related books and articles. He gives readers a clear view of Herman Wells’s trajectory through academic and public space. His careful work allows us to see the president’s values expressed through his actions, policies, and decisions, and provides us with a remarkably detailed understanding of Wells’s skillful management of potentially controversial issues, careful cultivation of individuals, and strong defense of academic values.

Wells wrote little that could be called personal introspection. The record contains dictated messages—each with a carefully thought-out purpose—prepared to achieve intentional results. His exceptional charm and warm personality led people to believe they knew him well, but everyone believed he was their personal friend. Capshew’s close reading of the documentary and oral history record provides many remarkable insights into Wells’s personal life, his commitment to his fraternity, his personal engagement with the defense of Alfred Kinsey’s controversial enterprise, his careful but steadfast efforts to improve race relations on campus, and other similar issues of the era. Sometimes the most telling comments appear in the valuable and extensive footnotes. Even so, I wish that Capshew would have attempted an even closer interior analysis of his subject’s motives and personal opinions, but perhaps the man was so completely his public self that such speculation would not help us understand him better. In any event, Capshew’s work is a fine biography of an extraordinary individual, and we are in his debt for this definitive perspective on Herman B Wells.

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**Blood and Smoke**

*A True Tale of Mystery, Mayhem, and the Birth of the Indy 500*

By Charles Leerhsen


The first Indianapolis 500, held May 30, 1911, ranks as one of the most significant moments in the history of automobile racing. In this page turn-