Charles E. Wilson

President 1945-1950, 1940-1942

Charlie Wilson was born in 1886 on the lower West side of New York. At the age of twelve, he left P.S. 32 to take a job as office boy with the Sprague Electrical Works, a GE subsidiary. He was in the seventh grade. Soon, he was made a factory hand and augmented his on-the-job training with night courses in accounting, engineering and mathematics. By twenty-one, he was assistant superintendent of the plant.

In 1923 he was transferred to Bridgeport, with the title of managing engineer. As Bridgeport became heavily involved in the production of appliances, Wilson's duties expanded. In 1928 he became assistant to the vice president in charge of the Merchandise Department, and in 1930 vice president in charge of all appliances.

In December 1937, Wilson was elected executive vice president of General Electric, a new position involving responsibilities for all company departments. Two years later he was elected president of the company, succeeding Gerard Swope.

For two and one half years, Wilson served as a vigorous and imaginative president. Then, in September 1942, with the United States struggling to increase production of war material, Wilson went to Washington, at the request of President Roosevelt, to become vice chairman to the War Production Board. Mr. Swope came out of retirement to resume the duties of GE president.

As wartime boss of the huge U.S. production effort, Wilson achieved some spectacular successes, particularly in aircraft, shipbuilding and munitions. He served in this capacity until August, 1944 when he returned to GE and was again elected a director and president.

In 1946, President Truman named Wilson chairman of the Civil Rights Committee, whose members studied and recommended new civil rights legislation to protect "all parts of our population."

Because of the worsening international situation, an Office of Defense Mobilization was set up in 1950 and in December, President Truman asked Wilson once again to come to Washington and become its director. Concurrently, Wilson resigned his GE presidency and all his directorates.
After having completed 51 years of continuous service with General Electric, Wilson took on a job which was described in Washington as second in importance only to the Presidency of the United States. His public service did not end with that position. In 1956, he became president of the People-to-People Foundation, a non-partisan program promoting international friendship and understanding.

John G. Forrest, writing in the New York Times, said, "Charles Wilson is a big man by any standard, physical, moral, or mental." Mr. Wilson died in 1972 at the age of 85.