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## ‘Dewey Defeats Truman’ Review: The Truman Show

A month before the election, nine out of 10 U.S. newspapers endorsed Truman’s challenger. Certain of a Dewey landslide, one pollster even stopped polling by September.



Tallying the results of the presidential election on Nov. 2, 1948. PHOTO: CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner  
July 17, 2020 5:18 pm ET

SAVE PRINT TEXT 12

The 1948 presidential campaign is like a great opera. The themes, characters and scenes are so compelling that they resonate again and again: the scrappy, accidental president Harry S. Truman struggling to win election in his own right; the Republican challenger, Thomas E. Dewey, prim and complaisant; the rumbled Henry Wallace and his cryptocommunist enablers; and the race-baiting Strom Thurmond with his Confederate-flag-waving Dixiecrat insurgents.

Remarkably, many of the issues stoking this year’s febrile presidential campaign were already in play seven decades ago when radio and newspapers ruled the media and candidates courted voters from the rear platforms of railcars. There was even talk that the Russians were trying to interfere in the election.

### DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN

By A.J. Baime  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 419 pages, \$30

The saga of the ‘48 campaign has been told many times, notably in David McCullough’s brilliant “Truman” (1992) and in Philip White’s “Whistle Stop” (2014). Now A.J. Baime, a journalist and the author of “The Accidental President,” brings the epic back on stage with “Dewey Defeats Truman: The 1948 Election and

the Battle for America’s Soul,” a straightforward narrative studded with evocative detail and surprising factoids. Did you know that Katharine Hepburn, Frank Lloyd Wright and Charlie Chaplin endorsed Wallace? Or that onetime farmer Truman got behind a mule and plowed a perfect furrow while campaigning at an Iowa agricultural jamboree attended by more than 90,000 folks? Or that Dewey had a mellifluous baritone voice?

Truman’s and Dewey’s contrasting politics and personalities were on vivid display in their campaign truces and their barnstormed the country. “On Truman’s train,” writes Mr. Baime, “it was whiskey and poker. On Dewey’s, martinis and bridge. Truman’s inner circle liked to crack jokes at Dewey’s expense (a common quip was, ‘You really have to get to know Dewey to dislike him’). On Dewey’s train, the name *Truman* was rarely spoken at all.”

Indeed, Dewey’s starchiness—Clare Boothe Luce memorably snarked that he looked like “the bridegroom on a wedding cake”—played a big role in his undoing. A relentless mob-busting district attorney and governor in New York, he’d waged a slashing campaign as the GOP nominee against Franklin Roosevelt in 1944. But running against FDR’s successor, Dewey demurred. He started his campaign late and lulled his crowds with brief, anodyne speeches about “unity.”

His hubris seemed well-founded. Truman had served nearly all of FDR’s fourth term and had, among other successes, enacted the Marshall Plan to rebuild war-ravaged Europe. But he hadn’t won over the country or even his own party. Until the last moment, Democratic powers tried to draft Dwight Eisenhower, the war hero now president of Columbia University, to head their ticket. As the campaign kicked off, Truman’s approval rating had fallen to 36%, and the Roper Poll had him trailing Dewey by almost 15 points. What’s more, Henry Wallace, FDR’s third-term vice president who was sympathetic to Stalin, was expected to siphon enough votes from Truman to give Dewey California, Illinois and New York, while racist Thurmond was sure to slice Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina out of the Democratic Solid South.

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Truman was serene while the pollsters, political scribes, bookies, party satraps and most of his campaign staff were certain he would be crushed on election day. He had an unshakable conviction that the issues he had been pushing and would push—affordable health insurance for all, raising the minimum wage, aid to education, civil rights (including desegregating the armed forces), resistance to Stalinist Russia and storage for farmers’ surplus crops—would trump Dewey’s pallid liberal Republican nostrums. He had a revolutionary campaign plan: He would tirelessly crisscross the country from Labor Day to election eve in his private railroad car, the ornate Ferdinand Magellan, talking unscripted to voters from dawn to midnight.

And, Mr. Baime writes, he had a brilliant ploy: Truman called the GOP-dominated House and Senate back for a special summer session, bombarded them with liberal legislation they refused to pass, then campaigned against the “do nothing” 80th Congress at every whistle stop and big-city rally. “Give ‘em hell, Harry!” the voters shouted back as he harangued them from the rear platform of the Magellan.

The crowds built—20,000 or 30,000 in small Midwestern cities, sometimes at dawn in the rain; 100,000 and more in big-city stadiums and plazas. Challenging the president in the midst of the campaign, the Russians sealed off the American sector of Berlin inside the Soviet-controlled part of Germany, triggering real fear that World War III might erupt. Truman responded with a coup: the Berlin airlift that kept the city from starving.

In October, with the polls still running against him and nine out of 10 American newspapers, including the New York Times, endorsing Dewey, the president sat in the Magellan, Mr. Baime writes, and asked an aide to take notes. He then reeled off the 48 states, their electoral votes, and his predictions. “How many do I have?” he asked. The answer was 340—more than enough to carry the Electoral College. Meanwhile, the Wallace and Thurmond campaigns were shriveling, as splinter-party efforts so often do. Truman hammered Dewey until the last minute. “The Republicans stand for special interests and they always have,” he’d repeat. “The Democratic Party . . . stands for the people. . . . You know where I stand.”

Certain of a Dewey landslide, Roper quit polling in September. On election eve, other polls had Dewey ahead by five or six points. The Times predicted he would get 345 electoral votes, Newsweek 366. Truman had a glass of milk and went to bed early on election night. Awakened at 4:30 a.m., he was told he would likely win—and went back to sleep. The morning brought confirmation. He had beaten Dewey by more than 2 million votes. He swept all but a handful of farm states and the West, winning 303 electoral votes to Dewey’s 189 (Thurmond won 39, denying Truman his predicted 340).

Before the tide turned in the count, the anti-Truman Chicago Daily Tribune printed 150,000 copies of its first edition with the infamous headline “DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN.” A beaming president brandished it later in one of the most famous political photographs in American history. “What do you know?” sighed the crestfallen Dewey. “The son of a bitch won.”

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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