



THE NEXT PRESIDENT TRAVELS BY FERRY BOAT  
OVER THE BROAD WATERS OF SAN FRANCISCO BAY

*One week before the 1948 election, Life published this picture of the G.O.P.'s Thomas E. Dewey with the caption: "The Next President Travels By Ferry Boat Over The Broad Waters Of San Francisco Bay." After Dewey lost, a reader asked Life's editor, "How does it feel out on that limb?" The reply: "Crowded."*

# Truman vs. Dewey: The 1948 Election

Chartered jetliners, 30-second TV “spots,” exit polls, and image consultants—all these characterize the contemporary U.S. presidential election campaign. America has come a long way since the last “old-style” contest four decades ago. The year 1948 saw Harry Truman’s surprise victory, now the stuff of legend, over Thomas Dewey. It also marked the first splintering of the Democratic Party over issues of race, the Cold War, and social policy. Since 1948, old regional and class loyalties to each political party have eroded; voters have become less predictable; and the quest for the White House has come to entail a marathon of state caucuses and primaries, staged, it sometimes seems, only for the television cameras. Here, Alonzo Hamby recalls Truman’s early troubles, and Robert Ferrell tells how the 33rd president engineered the last rally of the New Deal coalition.

## THE ACCIDENTAL PRESIDENCY

*by Alonzo L. Hamby*

“He looked to me like a very little man as he sat . . . in the huge leather chair.” Thus, Jonathan Daniels remembered Harry S. Truman waiting to be sworn in as the 33rd president of the United States on the evening of April 12, 1945. Daniels’ general impression was shared by other Americans then and long afterward.

Harry Truman was not, in fact, an unusually small man. When he took the oath of office, he stood about 5’ 9” and weighed 170 pounds. Yet, somehow, to contemporary critics, he always seemed rather less than presidential in stature. His thick eyeglasses and unprepossessing demeanor had much to do with that. So did the fact that he took over the Oval Office that had been occupied for 12 years by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the towering national leader who had just died of a stroke in Warm Springs, Georgia.

At first, however, Americans reflexively supported their new World War II Commander in Chief. In June 1945, soon after the Allies' victory over the Germans (if not yet over the Japanese), a Gallup poll showed that Truman enjoyed an astonishing 87 percent "approval" rating—higher than FDR had ever received. Truman could not have expected such popularity to last forever. How much support would he retain from a fickle public?

A superficial survey of the American experience during the next three years, a time of transition from war to peace, suggests that Truman should have fared rather well. When he took office, it appeared that the bloody conflict in the Pacific would drag on at least until late 1946, costing hundreds of thousands of additional American lives. Instead, Japanese tenacity collapsed during the summer of 1945 under the impact of two enormous mushroom clouds at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On a Tuesday evening, August 14, Truman jubilantly announced the unconditional surrender of the last Axis power.

### No Bugles

A second trauma was also averted. Many, if not most, older Americans had feared that peace and the end of wartime government spending would mean a return to the Great Depression. A *New York Times* headline warned: "5,000,000 EXPECTED TO LOSE ARMS JOBS." Nevertheless, despite a wave of strikes, defense plant layoffs, and the demobilization of up to a million veterans each month, unemployment never approached painful levels. Industries in Detroit, Pittsburgh, and elsewhere rapidly retooled for civilian production and hired ex-G.I.'s.

Truman, in the nature of things, should have received some credit for the nation's postwar economic success. Strange as it may seem, few Americans saw matters that way at the time.

Why?

What is now largely forgotten, even by those who lived through the period, is that most Americans had very rosy postwar expectations—of instant material abundance, of domestic tranquility, of world peace. Yet, at home, it quickly became obvious to millions of citizens that reconversion from war to peace was bringing not a new dawn but a period of surprisingly difficult personal adjustments: temporary unemployment, relocation, shrunken weekly paychecks (due to reduced overtime pay), and chronic shortages that, after V-J Day, suddenly seemed intolerable.

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*A cheerful Big Three—Churchill, Truman, and Stalin—in Potsdam, July 1945. The Cold War soon began; Truman never saw Stalin again.*

Frustrated Americans, noted John Gunther in *Inside U.S.A.*, saw themselves in a kind of “backwash” from the war years, finding little in the new administration in Washington, or anywhere else, but “greed, fear, ineptitude, fumbling of the morning hopes, shoddy dispersal of the evening dreams.”

In Washington, despite high hopes among liberals, there was stalemate. Peace did not bring a New Deal revival. This should have surprised no one. For all his vast personal popularity, FDR had not been able to win legislative approval of any major New Deal advances after 1938, when an informal alliance of Republicans and conservative Southern Democrats gained de facto control of the nominally Democratic Congress. Roosevelt’s New Deal coalition—big-city Catholics and Jews, organized labor, blacks, poor Southern whites, liberal intellectuals—did not break up, but it was badly eroded.

During the war, the impasse between the White House and Congress had been largely papered over. But in September 1945, when Truman proposed a 21-point program (including guaranteed full employment, increased unemployment insurance, and a boost in the 40-cent minimum hourly wage), a chill greeted him on Capitol Hill. In November, the president’s call for a national health insurance plan fell on deaf ears.

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(Not until 1949 would the president name his reform package the Fair Deal.) Still unsure of himself as FDR's heir, Truman backed off. And he did not strenuously object when Congress eviscerated his full employment bill. It became simply the Employment Act of 1946, shorn of Truman's proposed federal *guarantee* of work for all. What remained was a more flexible commitment to maintain "maximum employment."

Liberals were dismayed. "Alas for Truman," said *The New Republic*, there was "no bugle note in his voice" to rally the public.

### Fixing Up the Ice Box

Dissatisfaction with the president also ran high among the 12 million men and women still in uniform, and among their kinfolk back home. When Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson announced in January 1946 that, partly to maintain adequate defenses overseas, the Army would have to slow its pell-mell demobilization, G.I.'s on Guam burned him in effigy and thousands more rioted at other U.S. bases. Angry letters poured into the White House.

The homecoming, when it finally did come, was blissful for some, disillusioning for others. Many marriages, hastily undertaken in wartime, could not survive the humdrum world of peace. During 1945, the nation registered one divorce for every three weddings—the highest ratio then recorded in America.\* Alarm over this "national scandal" was somewhat tempered by the knowledge that a similar upsurge after World War I had quickly come and gone.

Most new marriages survived, and many did so in the face of considerable material adversity. Young couples discovered as often as not that they could not find a decent place to live or afford a reliable automobile or a chewable beefsteak. All in all, during those hectic postwar months, the American people found far fewer of the tangible rewards of victory than they had expected.

The shortage of housing, a legacy of both war and Depression, was the hardest to remedy. Many young couples doubled up with in-laws or paid unprecedented rents for substandard apartments—or even converted chicken coops. The city of Chicago sold 250 old streetcars for conversion into homes. An Omaha newspaper carried a classified ad that read: "Big Ice Box, 7 by 17 feet. Could be fixed up to live in."

Developer William J. Levitt, future creator of several mass-marketed "Levittowns," was already building the first of his \$10,000 houses in a Long Island potato field (the price later dropped to \$6,900), and the G.I. Bill entitled veterans to low-cost federally-guaranteed mortgages. But the housing shortage would not ease before the end of the decade.

Fearing a burst of runaway inflation, Truman sought to retain wartime price controls, but, in doing so, he disrupted the peacetime market

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\*In 1945, there were 30 divorces for every 100 new marriages, a ratio not to be equalled until 1969. Today there are 47 divorces per 100 marriages.

economy. Radios, cars, clothing, good whiskey, choice cuts of meat—all were in short supply. As black (free) markets developed, government-dictated prices became meaningless. Nylon stockings were better currency than dollars. A Los Angeles radio station sent two people on a trip to New York with no money but a big supply of nylons; they arrived in four days without missing a meal or going without a place to sleep.

Ironically, one opinion survey after another seemed to show that price controls, administered by the Office of Price Administration (OPA), enjoyed broad public support. Americans preferred to blame the economy's ills on another, more obvious phenomenon—a wave of strikes unlike any the nation had witnessed since the Great Depression.

In late 1945, unionized workers who had routinely earned eight or more hours of weekly overtime pay during the war boom suddenly faced a return to “straight time,” often at wage levels that, by federal fiat, had not increased since 1942. A labor-management clash was inevitable and, once again, quixotic government policy made it worse.

Truman's advisers (notably the OPA's Chester Bowles) persuaded him to ease controls on wages while attempting to retain most constraints on prices. Corporate America, they reasoned, was fat enough to grant higher wages without raising prices. The unions got a green light.

### Digging Coal with Bayonets

A people hungry for new automobiles watched in dismay in December 1945 as Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers (UAW) led what became a 113-day strike against General Motors, demanding a 30 percent wage increase (to \$1.45 an hour). An old-time social democrat, Reuther was fighting for nothing less, he said, than “a more realistic distribution of America's wealth.” Philip J. Murray's steelworkers' union walked out demanding similar pay raises; so did almost every major national union and thousands of locals in lesser disputes. “Is anybody interested in getting the work done?” asked an editorial writer in the *New York Daily News*.

As these strikes were settled, a pattern of post-World War II labor-management relations emerged that would prevail in major unionized industries until the late 1970s: The big corporations yielded on higher wages, and Washington (usually) did not object when management charged higher prices, thereby passing the wage bill along to consumers.\* (The Consumer Price Index surged by 23 percent from early 1946 through the election year of 1948.) Reuther won his battle for better pay, but lost the war for redistribution.

Nothing, it seemed, could quell the United Mine Workers of America, led by John L. Lewis, the bushy-browed Welshman beloved by the coal-smudged men in the pits and hated by most of the rest of his

\*Other precedent-setting agreements soon followed. The UAW won labor's first automatic cost-of-living adjustment in 1948; the steelworkers secured a pension plan and health insurance in 1949.

countrymen—not least because he had dared to order two walkouts while the nation was still at war. Throughout 1945 and '46, Lewis pulled his men out on one exasperating strike after another, at one point causing factory layoffs in Detroit and Pittsburgh, reduced rail service, and government-mandated “dimouts” in 22 Eastern states.

In May 1946, when both the coal miners and the nation’s railway brotherhoods were on strike, Truman invoked his wartime powers (the nation was still technically at war); he ordered the U.S. Army to seize the mines and railroads. Lewis thumbed his nose at the president. “Let Truman dig coal with his bayonets,” he jeered.

His temper flaring, Truman drafted a speech that he never delivered and probably never intended to, suggesting that it was time to “hang a few traitors.” Appearing before an unusual joint session of Congress, he instead requested authority “to draft into the Armed Forces of the United States all workers who are on strike against their government.” As he spoke, he was handed a scribbled message: The railway brotherhoods, chief targets of his proposal, had ended their strike.

An agitated House of Representatives nevertheless promptly approved Truman’s request by a vote of 306-13. The Senate refused to go along. A few days later, Lewis, signing another fat wage contract, ended the miners’ strike. Having overreacted, Truman wound up with nothing except the doubts of ordinary folk, who questioned his judgment, and the stunned outrage of Big Labor and its liberal allies. Walter Reuther warned that Truman’s antistrike proposal would “make slavery legal”; *The Nation* denounced it as the work of a “weak, baffled, angry man.”

### FDR’s Shadow

Beyond domestic discontent loomed the unsettling vista of a world still beset by struggles for power and influence. Americans, wrote historian William L. O’Neill, “were tired of international crises and wished only to get on with their private lives.” Yet, by 1946, popular expectations that peace and the newly created United Nations would bring a more benign international order were fading.

Once America’s wartime ally, Josef Stalin was now slowly tightening his control over the Soviet-occupied nations of Eastern Europe. By early 1946, Albania and Yugoslavia were already under Communist rule, and it was becoming apparent even to American liberals that the Kremlin would never allow the free elections Stalin had promised in Bulgaria, Rumania, and Poland. The fates of Finland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia were in doubt. The Soviets were aiding Mao Zedong’s Communist revolution in China, appeared to be backing the Communists’ National Liberation Front of Greece, and were holding military maneuvers near the Turkish border, demanding control of the Dardanelles. Only reluctantly would they end their occupation of northern Iran. In March 1946, during a speech in Fulton, Missouri, with Truman by his side, Winston Churchill



*October 1946: New Yorkers line up in downtown Manhattan to buy meat, then a scarce item. As shoppers' patience wore thin, scuffles often broke out. Truman soon lifted postwar price controls on meat, ending the shortages.*

warned that an "iron curtain" was descending across Europe.

Harry Truman stood at the center of all this unwelcome turmoil, domestic and foreign. He usually dealt competently with its manifestations, and at times won some clear successes. Yet, like Jimmy Carter later on, Truman failed in one crucial respect—he was unable to impart a sense of order or a coherent vision to the nation. Often he suffered by comparison with FDR. "What one misses," wrote columnist Max Lerner, "is the confident sense of direction that Roosevelt gave, despite all the contradictions of his policy." Not only did people wonder what FDR would have done if he were alive. Now the joke in Washington was: "What would Truman do if he were alive?"

Some of this discontent was simply a reaction to the new Chief Executive's personal style. An ex-farmer, World War I artilleryman, and failed haberdasher from Independence, Missouri, a graduate of "Boss" Tom Pendergast's Kansas City Democratic machine who spoke, nay, barked in a flat midwestern accent, Truman was a startling contrast to his urbane predecessor in the White House. "Can you imagine a Groton President saying that?" asked one FDR holdover after hearing an earthy Truman wisecrack.

FDR had assembled a White House entourage of bright, often controversial chaps—Harry Hopkins, Robert Sherwood, Thomas Corcoran—many of whom would have shone anywhere. Truman surrounded himself with fellow Missourians, many of them lackluster old National Guard cronies—John W. Snyder, secretary of the treasury, White House aides Eddie McKim, Harry Vaughan, and James K. Vardaman, Jr. (later a governor of the Federal Reserve Board). Only Press Secretary Charles

G. Ross, a former Washington correspondent for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, had any obvious qualifications for his post. The others could have stepped directly from the pages of *Babbitt*.

Liberals in Washington and New York despaired as New Deal veterans quit the new administration, seemingly taking with them the old 1930s idealism. "One has the feeling," wrote an editor of the liberal *New York Post*, "that a poorer and poorer cast is dealing desperately with a bigger and bigger story."

As the 1946 congressional elections approached, Truman managed to confront nearly every major issue in ways that alienated all sides. First, he again called on Congress to pass a New Deal-style domestic program—increased public housing, federal aid to education, national health insurance—thereby antagonizing Republicans and Southern conservatives, who were eager, as Representative Joseph W. Martin, Jr., (R.-Mass.) put it, to remove "the meddling hands of political despots" from national public life. But again Truman failed to persuade Congress to accept his proposals, thereby disappointing the liberals. They felt, as the *Progressive* noted, "that there is no hand at the wheel." Many liberals were convinced, surely in error, that the conservative coalition in Congress would have cracked under the impact of one or two nationally broadcast Rooseveltian radio speeches.

All sides were distressed by Truman's handling of foreign policy. "If Roosevelt were alive," said Senator Claude Pepper, a liberal Florida Democrat, "we'd be getting on better with Russia." For their part, even as they helped slash the defense budget, conservatives assailed the White House's failure to mount an effective challenge to the Soviet advances across Eastern Europe—ancestral homeland to many urban voters in Northern states. Taking the lead, Senator Robert A. Taft, Ohio's "Mr. Republican," accused Truman of "appeasing Russia, a policy which has sacrificed throughout Eastern Europe and Asia the freedom of many nations and millions of people."

### Henry Wallace Defects

No member of Truman's Cabinet had been more dedicated to post-war Soviet-American amity than his secretary of commerce, Henry A. Wallace. An Iowa-born plant geneticist, editor of his family's Des Moines-based magazine, *Wallace's Farmer*, he had been named FDR's first secretary of agriculture in 1933. Ascending to the vice presidency in 1941, he became the leading spokesman of full-throated liberal idealism. He spoke of the war against the Axis powers as a "millennial and revolutionary march" toward a world without fascism, poverty, or hunger—a "Peoples' Century."

A vegetarian and something of a religious mystic, Wallace was at best an object of amiable ridicule on Capitol Hill, dismissed, as one Democrat later put it, as a man who "always had his thingamajigs mixed up

with his whatchamacallits." At the 1944 convention, Roosevelt had allowed conservative Southerners and the Northern big-city bosses to dump the Iowan from the ticket in favor of Truman, then a second-term U.S. senator and a noncontroversial party loyalist. As a consolation prize, FDR named Wallace to head the Commerce Department.

After FDR's death, many liberals believed that the New Deal torch should have been passed to Wallace. "How I wish you were at the helm," Hubert H. Humphrey, the young mayor of Minneapolis, wrote to the secretary of commerce upon hearing of FDR's death.

Wallace had become increasingly anxious about the new president's foreign policy. He finally unveiled his objections in a September 1946 speech before a mass rally of "progressives" (New Deal liberals, Communists, and assorted radicals) in Manhattan's Madison Square Garden. Some of his ideas presaged those of the McGovern wing of the Democratic Party in 1972. Wallace argued that Truman's "get tough" stance toward the Soviets would only provoke Stalin. "The danger of war," he declared, "is much less from communism than it is from [Western] imperialism." Even worse, Wallace directly contradicted administration policy; he suggested that the United States concede political control of Eastern Europe to the Soviets.

### **No Meat, No Votes**

Wallace's break with Truman made headlines around the world just as Secretary of State James Byrnes was in Europe, reassuring the West Germans that the United States would not abandon them to the Soviets. And, inexplicably, Truman told a reporter off-the-cuff that he had read and approved "the whole speech." A few days later, the embarrassed president was forced to sack Wallace.

It was hard to tell what did more to damage the White House: the ejection of the last New Dealer from the Cabinet on the eve of the 1946 congressional elections, or the revelation that the president apparently did not understand his own foreign policy!

It seemed as if everything that could go wrong for Harry Truman had gone wrong. But more trouble was to come, closer to home.

That summer, Truman had agreed to a compromise with the conservatives in Congress, which effectively ended price controls on most consumer items. The big exception was meat. By October, the great stockyards of the Midwest were deserted, and not a pound of beef or pork was to be found in many stores. As the newspapers noted, indignant cattlemen and feedlot operators had virtually gone out on strike.

The voters were fed up. Four alarmed Connecticut Democrats in the House reported to Truman: "Party workers canvassing the voters are being told by Democrats 'No meat—no votes.'"

On October 14, Truman went on the radio to announce his response. After harshly denouncing the livestock interests, he came to the



*In a rare light moment, Dewey joins a Cavemen Club while campaigning for the G.O.P. presidential nomination in Grants Pass, Oregon.*

bottom line. "There is only one remedy left—that is to lift controls." Delivered in a weary tone, the speech sounded like a notice of surrender.

"If Truman wanted to elect a Republican Congress, he could not be doing a better job," Senator Taft observed happily in a letter to Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York. Soon, the two Republicans would be bitter rivals for the 1948 G.O.P. presidential nomination. But, during the autumn of 1946, the Republicans gleefully united for the congressional campaign behind a two-word slogan: "Had Enough?"

The Gallup poll reported that Truman's "approval" rating had plummeted to 32 percent. To the extent that the Democrats conducted any sort of national campaign that autumn, it was led by the late Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose recorded speeches far outnumbered Truman's broadcasts in the party's radio commercials.

But even FDR could not rally the faithful. On election day, to nobody's surprise, the Republicans won control of Congress for the first time since 1928. The "beefsteak election" gave them margins of 51-45 in the Senate (a gain of 12 seats) and 246-188 in the House of Representatives (a gain of 54 seats).\* "The New Deal is kaput," crowed the conservative *New York Daily News*. However, defeated Democratic

\*Among the many G.O.P. newcomers were Representative Richard M. Nixon of California and Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin. Democrats needed a strong microscope (and a crystal ball) to find an occasional bright spot, such as John F. Kennedy's election to the House by the voters of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

candidates surveyed by the *United States News* generally agreed with a West Virginia candidate who attributed his defeat to local issues, as well as to "dissatisfaction with shortages and also opposition to continuance of [the] present Administration."

Indeed, few other U.S. presidents have been so resoundingly discredited by a single midterm election. Although Dwight D. Eisenhower and all the Republicans who followed him in the White House would have to face a Congress at least partially controlled by the opposition party (except during 1953–55), such divided government was relatively rare before Truman's time. Even President Herbert Hoover's fellow Republicans had managed to hold on to the Senate (but not the House) in the Depression-era election of 1930. Now, Senator J. William Fulbright, an Arkansas Democrat, publicly suggested that Truman appoint Senate G.O.P. leader Arthur H. Vandenberg as secretary of state, next in the line of succession to the presidency at the time,\* then resign. As far as is known, Truman did not even ponder the suggestion. Thereafter, he often privately referred to the Arkansan, a former college president, as "Senator Halfbright."

In part, Truman's refusal to be demoralized was a matter of temperament. If he had failed to impress political Washington and the public during 1945–46, he was not a quitter. He and some of his staff were sufficiently perceptive, moreover, to realize that the 1946 debacle signified, in many ways, a liberation. No longer would the 62-year-old Chief Executive have to try to accommodate a nominally Democratic but conservative Congress. "Nobody here in the White House is down-hearted," Press Secretary Ross told his sister. "President Truman is now a free man and can write a fine record in the coming two years."

### The Truman Doctrine

For the remainder of his term, the man from Missouri functioned as an "opposition president" on most domestic issues—with the 1948 election in mind. He would flail away at the "do nothing" Republican 80th Congress for its attacks on labor unions, for "tax cuts for the rich," for inaction on inflation, for "indifference" to the country's housing needs, for rejection of national health insurance, and for sticking a "pitchfork in the back" of farmers. To put it politely, Truman was not above a little demagoguery (in 1948, he would propose a revival of price controls), but most of his attacks pointed up genuine differences between the two national political parties; and, as often as not, the resurgent Republicans in Congress were content to let Truman sharpen the contrasts.

His first major move, however, received strong bipartisan support

\*Until the adoption of the 25th Amendment in 1967, there was no constitutional provision for the replacement of a vice president who succeeded to the presidency. At Truman's urging, the 80th Congress would alter the presidential succession statute, placing the Speaker of the House and the president pro tem of the Senate ahead of the secretary of state.

on Capitol Hill. In March 1947, having abandoned any hope of achieving a general settlement with Stalin, Truman committed the United States, despite its postwar military feebleness, to an ambitious policy of containing Soviet expansionism. In announcing what came to be called the Truman Doctrine, he told Congress: "I believe it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." Then he requested \$400 million in aid for Greece and Turkey, the former facing a Communist insurgency, the latter a direct threat from the neighboring Soviets.

In June, after a Communist coup toppled a Hungarian government already subservient to Moscow, Truman's new secretary of state, General George C. Marshall, announced, during a commencement speech at Harvard, his now-famous proposal to shore up the beleaguered economies of Europe. In December, Truman formally requested a four-year, \$17 billion Marshall Plan (officially, the European Recovery Program). The Soviets were invited to participate, but refused, and pressured their satellites (Albania, Bulgaria, Poland, Rumania, Yugoslavia) into following suit. American aid came with so many strings attached, proclaimed Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister, that the recipients "would lose their former economic and national independence" to "certain strong powers."

At home, Truman's new Cold War policy—which set a pattern for two decades—raised the specter of costly obligations abroad for an insular society that had long abhorred foreign "entanglements" in peacetime. It drew fire from the Left, led by Henry Wallace (who attacked the "martial plan" as a scheme to prop up "reactionary" regimes), and from the neo-isolationist, economy-minded Right, represented by Senator Taft. Stoutly anti-Communist, but leery of European "adventures," the Senate majority leader sought to scale back the Marshall Plan.

### Reviving the Draft

Overall, however, "containment" and aid for Western Europe won general assent from the broad center of American politics. Truman gained support from liberal internationalists in both parties, as well as from the Eastern press. Governor Dewey endorsed the Marshall Plan, without neglecting the opportunity to ritually chastise Truman and FDR for earlier "surrendering 200 million people in Middle Europe into the clutches of Soviet Russia." Senator Vandenberg spoke out, warning his Republican peers that without the Marshall Plan, "aggressive communism will be spurred throughout the world." Many liberal critics fell silent after a Soviet-backed coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 eliminated the last non-Communist government in Eastern Europe and stirred American fears of further Soviet advances. In March 1948, the Senate approved the unprecedented U.S. aid measure by a vote of 69 to

17, the House by 329 to 74. Not long afterward, Congress reluctantly revived the draft.

On the domestic front, Truman began the painstaking reassembly of FDR's New Deal coalition. His first decision was to mend relations with the then-powerful chieftains of U.S. organized labor.\* Repairs were needed. Shortly after the 1946 elections, he had further angered them (but delighted other Americans) when he hauled John L. Lewis into court during another coal strike. The government won a stunning \$3.5 million judgment (later reduced) against the union.

In June 1947, the G.O.P.-controlled Congress presented the president with an opportunity to regain the favor of labor leaders when it passed the Taft-Hartley Act. Taft-Hartley banned the closed shop and imposed other restrictions on unions; the unions rather hysterically called it a "slave labor bill." Truman promptly vetoed it. It was, he said, an attack on the workingman. Even as Congress overrode his veto (with Southern Democrats joining Republicans), liberals cheered the president for his stand. "Mr. Truman has reached the crucial fork in the road and turned unmistakably to the left," wrote journalist James Wechsler.

### Zigs and Zags

Another, more far-reaching decision was to take up the cause of Negro civil rights. Never an advocate of inter-racial social mixing, a son of the upper South, Truman was nonetheless a sincere believer in equal opportunity and equality before the law. And he knew that while the New Deal had won blacks over to the Democratic Party (without actually promising or delivering much in the way of civil rights), there was no guarantee that they would not return to the party of Lincoln.

After the 1946 election, Truman had appointed a presidential commission on civil rights. In October 1947, with Truman's endorsement, it published its report, *To Secure These Rights*, which called for, among other things, an antilynching law, abolition of the poll tax, a voting rights act, an end to segregation in the armed forces, and a ban on Jim Crow segregation in interstate public transportation.

Issued during what was still an era of monolithic white supremacy in the South, of casual bigotry and social segregation in the rest of the country, *To Secure These Rights* seemed a revolutionary document. It was to serve "for a generation as the basic statement of most of the goals of civil rights advocates," historians Donald McCoy and Richard Reutten later wrote. However, in 1947, it did not seem to help Truman. It was nearly the last straw for many Dixie Democrats. "The present leadership of the Democratic Party will soon realize that the South is no

\*In 1947, labor unions were near the peak of their power, representing one-third of all U.S. nonfarm workers. Organized labor's fears of the Taft-Hartley Act proved to be exaggerated; it maintained its enrollment strength through the 1950s. Membership has since dropped to 17.5 percent of the nonfarm work force.

### THE REPUBLICANS IN 1948

“Only a political miracle or extraordinary stupidity on the part of the Republicans can save the Democratic party, after 16 years in power, from a debacle in November.” So said *Time* early in 1948, reflecting the persistent conventional wisdom of that election year.

Scenting the first G.O.P. presidential victory in two decades, seven Republicans were vying for the nomination. Then as now, the party was divided, though not as badly as the Democrats. Representing the moderate, internationalist Eastern Establishment was New York’s Governor Thomas E. Dewey, who had been the G.O.P.’s forlorn hope against FDR in wartime 1944. The party’s conservative Old Guard backed Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio.

There were several dark horses: California’s liberal governor, Earl Warren; General Douglas MacArthur, hero of the war in the Pacific; Michigan’s Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg, backer of the Marshall Plan; Speaker of the House Joseph W. Martin, Jr., of Massachusetts; and Harold E. Stassen, former governor of Minnesota.

Most newsmen and politicians regarded Dewey, nationally known, as the front-runner, even though he failed to stir the party faithful. “You can’t make a soufflé rise twice,” observed one Washington wag. The nomination would not be decided until the Republican convention in Philadelphia that June. So unimportant were primaries in 1948 that only Dewey and Stassen entered the opening contest, in New Hampshire on March 9, and Dewey never set foot in the state. Nevertheless, Stassen lost.

But then a political bombshell exploded. In the April 6 Wisconsin primary, General MacArthur (who attended a Milwaukee high school in his boyhood) had been the five-to-one favorite. But Stassen, wrote journalist Irwin Ross, worked the state like “a Fuller Brush man canvassing a high-rise apartment house,” traveling in a specially-equipped Greyhound bus. Only Dewey campaigned (briefly) against him. The result: Stassen won 19 delegates, MacArthur eight, Dewey zero. Suddenly, the New Yorker looked vulnerable.

Stassen, anathema to most party leaders, had adopted what was, at the time, a novel strategy. For more than a year, the tall, charismatic, 41-year-old Minnesotan, a self-described “liberal,” had been campaigning full time for the nomination, hoping that a few surprise primary victories would touch off a Stassen stampede in Philadelphia.

Before the Nebraska primary, on April 13, Stassen surprised reporters and

longer “in the bag,” declared Governor J. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina. Soon, he would try to lead the “Dixiecrats” out of the party of Jefferson, Jackson, and FDR.

Dewey, Taft, and other leading contenders for the 1948 Republican presidential nomination largely kept silent on racial issues. Although Dewey had supported civil rights in New York, he and other national Republican politicians were reluctant to alienate Southern whites, especially whites already upset by Truman’s stand on Taft-Hartley.

enraptured Corn Belt Republicans by proposing to outlaw the American Communist Party. He captured 43 percent of the Nebraska vote, embarrassing Dewey and the absentees—Taft, Warren, and Vandenberg. *Business Week* described “Your Next President: Harold Stassen.” Then came Pennsylvania (April 27), where, virtually unopposed, he triumphed again. Stassen stumbled only when he boldly challenged Senator Taft in his home state of Ohio—thus violating a taboo that had kept rivals out of primaries in Dewey’s New York and Warren’s California. Taft won all but nine of the 23 contested delegates.

The do-or-die test for Dewey was the Oregon primary on May 21. Following Stassen’s example, he traveled the state by bus, stopping to shake hands at every crossroads where a crowd could be gathered. In a national radio debate, held in Portland, Dewey pooh-poohed Stassen’s proposal to outlaw the Communist Party: “I will never seek votes that way from free Americans,” the *New Yorker* declared.



*Stassen, Martin, Dewey, Taft, and Warren.*

Stassen lost. When the Republicans gathered in Philadelphia one month later, it was pretty much a Dewey-Taft race. The governor had proved his mettle in Oregon, capturing 52 percent of the vote. On the eighth floor of Philadelphia’s Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, Dewey’s well-organized team skillfully corralled delegates. Representative Charles A. Halleck of Indiana, thinking that he had been promised the vice-presidential slot, swung his state’s delegation behind Dewey. Others followed.

When the first ballot was taken on the afternoon of June 24, Dewey fell only 114 votes short of the 548 he needed. Taft had 224 votes, Stassen 157, Vandenberg 62, and Warren 59. A second ballot brought Dewey closer to victory. During an afternoon recess, Taft desperately telephoned Stassen from the Benjamin Franklin Hotel to ask for his delegates. The Minnesotan refused. It was all over. That evening, on the third ballot, Dewey won by acclamation. Surprising Charles Halleck, Dewey picked Earl Warren as his running mate.

In Washington, Harry Truman remarked in private that Taft or Warren would have been stronger candidates. Dewey did not worry him. “Before this campaign is over,” he vowed, “I will take the mustache off that fellow.”

Despite all his troubles, Truman’s “approval” rating in the polls had risen well above 50 percent, propelled by his foreign policy decisions and the fading of the irritations of postwar reconversion. The economy was healthy; most shortages had ended; labor unrest had quieted.

But then the president began to stumble again. Another batch of mediocre appointees, mounting discontent among whites in the South, and Henry Wallace’s announcement in December 1947 that he would launch a “peace” candidacy for the White House—all of these hurt.

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Overshadowing all else was the president's old handicap—he did not behave like a leader, like FDR. All too often, he suffered anew from self-inflicted wounds. Surveying Truman's prospects in March 1948, *Time* concluded that "Mr. Truman had often faced his responsibilities with a cheerful, dogged courage. But his performance was almost invariably awkward, uninspired and above all, mediocre." The man on the street, *Time* said, had decided that Truman "means well, but he don't do well."

Especially damaging now were the administration's zigs and zags on the festering problem of Palestine. Truman was committed to the UN's 1947 plan to divide the British protectorate into independent Jewish and Arab states. But, by early 1948, the State Department under George Marshall was fighting Truman's pro-Zionist approach at every opportunity. At one point, a U.S. delegate to the UN even announced that Washington no longer favored partition. Walter Lippmann, the leading columnist of the day, pronounced the disarray "a grave problem for the nation. The problem is [how] the affairs of the country are to be conducted by a president who has not only lost the support of his party but is not in control of his own administration."

### The Campaign Begins

Surprisingly, it did not help Truman when the U.S. government became the first in the world to tender de facto recognition to Israel after the Jewish state proclaimed its existence on May 14, 1948. Diplomatic recognition without U.S. emergency aid, at a time when Israel was hard beset by Arab armies, drew scorn from most dedicated Zionists. Jewish votes in New York, Illinois, and California might swing an election, and Wallace, as well as Republicans Dewey and Taft, had solid pro-Zionist records. Meanwhile, to many Americans less emotionally tied to Israel's fate, Truman looked once again like an opportunistic small-time politician who was playing to special interests.

For all of these reasons—his lackluster performance, the gathering Southern revolt, the Wallace candidacy—the conviction that Truman would be a sure loser in November was sweeping through the disheartened cadres of the Democratic Party by the spring of 1948.

The various elements of the party—Southern conservatives, mainstream liberals, organized labor, Catholic big-city bosses—were now united in only one endeavor: a desperate search for an alternative to Truman. Even FDR's sons, notably Representative James Roosevelt of California, joined in. They begged the new president of Columbia University, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, to announce his availability. Never mind that Ike had staked out no public positions on the issues of the day. He was the hero of D-Day, with an aura of command. And the polls showed that he could beat anybody the Republicans might nominate. Eisenhower's admirers, like Governor Mario Cuomo's in recent times, would not take "no" for an answer. They persisted right up until the

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Democratic convention in Philadelphia.

We do not know exactly what Truman thought of his prospects during that difficult spring of 1948. Historians do know that he was determined to run and seek vindication. He would stand or fall on his strategy of rebuilding the Democratic coalition, hoping that defections on the Left and Right would not prove fatal. By now, he and his advisers had also decided on a campaign tactic—to present to the public not the Harry Truman who stumbled over prepared speeches on grand occasions, but the natural Harry Truman who was at his best speaking off-the-cuff to relatively small crowds.

On June 4, the president set off on a “nonpolitical” cross-country train trip, ostensibly to accept an honorary degree and deliver the commencement address at the University of California at Berkeley. On the train, he was accompanied by some 60 print reporters and photographers and 66 aides and support personnel—a far cry from the massive airborne White House entourages, burdened by TV equipment, of later presidents on tour.

The trip was not always smooth; in Omaha, local arrangements were so badly botched that Truman wound up making a speech to a nearly empty auditorium. In Eugene, Oregon, he blundered into an expression of sympathy for Josef Stalin: “I like old Joe! He is a decent fellow. But Joe is a prisoner of the Politburo.”

His missteps, however, turned out to be less important than his message. In one talk after another, he focused on domestic bread-and-butter issues. In the West, he contrasted his own support of water and power projects with alleged neglect by the Republican 80th Congress. In the cities, he attacked the Taft-Hartley Act and excoriated the Congress for failing to pass a strong housing bill. A remark at Albuquerque, New Mexico, summed up all the New Deal echoes: “The issue in this country is between special privilege and the people.”

His new style was on the whole a decided asset in the West. As only a few Washington reporters noted, Truman’s folksiness and informality struck a responsive chord with the surprisingly large and friendly “whistlestop” crowds. He showed off his wife Bess and daughter Margaret. He got out of bed and, in bathrobe and pajamas, spoke to a late night crowd at Barstow, California.

A spectator in Bremerton, Washington, caught the tone of the trip. “Pour it on, Harry!” he shouted. The president’s response was quick: “I’m going to—I’m going to!” When Truman returned to the nation’s capital on June 18, he was elated. His blood was up. The Democratic convention lay ahead, but the campaign of 1948 had already begun.