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The Truman Show

By [Paul Duke](#)

When I arrived in Washington as a young reporter in 1957, Harry Truman was the country's most reviled political figure. Democrats barely acknowledged him as one of their own and Republicans scorned his presidency as a mishmash of bumbling, scandals, and wrong-headed politics.

Indeed, it would be another decade before this dreary cacophony would start to subside and Truman would begin his rise into the pantheon of illustrious presidents. Historians gradually shifted to the positive, as Truman was recognized for his towering role in confronting communism and in preserving the New Deal. Today he is routinely reckoned among the top ten presidents.

Harry Truman never catered to the popular view if he thought it was wrong. This proclivity repeatedly landed him in hot water in the early years after he succeeded FDR. It was the tumultuous postwar period when the country was making the painful adjustment to a peacetime economy. Not only was the White House frequently embroiled in political warfare with the Republican-controlled 80th Congress, but it also had to cope with labor conflicts and shortages of consumer goods. Truman bore the brunt of the blame, and by 1948, his popularity had sagged to 35 percent. Almost everyone echoed the gibe of one prominent Republican, Clare Booth Luce, that Truman was "a gone goose" in the upcoming election.

It was taken for granted that the more polished and debonair GOP nominee, New York Gov. Thomas Dewey, would be an easy winner. In fact, long before the 1948 Democratic convention in Philadelphia, there were rebellious calls for another candidate: The New Republic screamed across its April 5 cover "Truman Should Quit." Although FDR had personally tapped Truman as his vice president in 1944, the entire Roosevelt clan felt he was an unworthy heir and should be dumped. James Roosevelt, one of FDR's sons, energetically promoted a Good-Bye Harry movement aimed at drafting Dwight Eisenhower.

Truman would not be swayed. He persevered and won the nomination for a full term at a chaotic but gloomy convention. For one brief shining moment, the delegates came alive when Truman gave a rousing give-'em-hell acceptance speech ripping into Congress for disregarding the country's social ills. It was a clear signal that he would not go down without a fight, revealing a gritty side to his character that had largely gone unnoticed but would become a decisive factor in the fall race.

[The Last Campaign: How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election](#)

By Zachary Karabell
Knopf

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Still, Democratic unity was shattered. Truman's espousal of civil-rights legislation had angered the once solid South and spawned the third-party conservative Dixiecrat candidacy of South Carolina's youthful Gov. Strom Thurmond (a Democrat in those days). On the left, Truman's tough stand against the dangers of communism had stirred Henry Wallace to desert the ranks and launch the Progressive party.

This splintering left Truman unfazed. He proceeded to carry his campaign directly to the voters, criss-crossing the country by train, whistle-stopping some 31,000 miles, lambasting "the do-nothing" Congress at every stop. He was indefatigable, never seemed dispirited, and his friendly, folksy off-the-cuff style resonated.

It didn't seem to matter. The Roper poll stopped querying voters in September, announcing that the outcome was a foregone conclusion. The press set about preparing the country for the transition, with Newsweek releasing a survey of the country's top political reporters and commentators, including such giants as David Lawrence, Walter Lippmann, and Arthur Krock. All 50 forecast a Dewey landslide (prompting Truman to remark that "I know all 50 of those fellows and there isn't a single one who has enough sense to pour sand in a rat hole"). On election eve Life magazine published a front-page photo of Dewey, referring to him as "the next president." At the Washington Star, veteran political writer Gould Lincoln began his election-day front-page story with the assertion that "Thomas Dewey will be elected president of the United States Tuesday."

All of this is lively fodder for *The Last Campaign*, a well-told chronicle of America's greatest political upset. Historian Zachary Karabell writes with a graphic pungency and verve that sweeps us along right down to the climactic chapter in this legendary drama. Even if he does occasionally overreach in some of his analyses--for example, advancing the dubious argument that Truman's exaggerated rhetoric paved the way for the reckless 1950s McCarthyism attacks on personal loyalties--Karabell has given the story a rich texture in keeping with the times.

Karabell also demolishes a few myths, one being the widely held view that Truman's blunt-spoken speeches were a marvel of spontaneity. Not so. Rather, they were the carefully crafted products of a brilliant campaign staff that discovered and honed the technique of packaging Truman as a simple man of the people. Some of these speeches veered into demagoguery, most notably the references to the "do-nothing" Congress. Far from doing nothing, the legislators actually approved several milestone measures, including the Marshall Plan to stave off the Communist threat to Europe and the Taft-Hartley Labor Act, which Truman called the "slave labor act."

Conventional wisdom has made the pollsters the more culpable, but in reality the press was an equal partner in the crime. True, it was lulled into complacency by the poll findings. But this hardly excused the discounting of impressive evidence suggesting there might be a different ending. As James Reston of *The New York Times* explained: "We did a lousy job of reporting. We talked to each other. We talked to the political bosses. We didn't talk to the people."

In retrospect, there were numerous signs that Truman was a more formidable candidate than believed. For one thing, there were the whistle-stop crowds that began responding to his plain-talking message and grew bigger and bigger. In a late campaign swing across New York state, some 10,000 turned out for a rainy 7 a.m. rally in Dewey's home territory of Albany.

In many ways, as Karabell observes, Truman was the perfect candidate, relishing the role of underdog, loving the campaign trail, chatting with voters, connecting with the land, and discussing the issues he cared deeply about. Above all, he knew how to speak a language that everyone understood, railing against the "special interests," the "rich man's tax bill," and "the gluttons of privilege." In an important

farm-belt speech at Dexter, Iowa, he accused the Republicans of "sticking a pitchfork in the farmer's back."

Finally, Tom Dewey turned out to be a bust. Having run against FDR in 1944, Dewey was widely criticized for his sledgehammer attacks against the ailing but beloved president. This time, vowing to be more civil, he reversed tactics and shaved the sharp edges in favor of cautious, lackluster speeches rife with platitudes. By not answering Truman's relentless assaults, he conveyed an arrogance of being above the fray.

Thus, the Dewey campaign was designed to minimize risks. In his mellifluous baritone voice, the GOP nominee pledged an administration of unity, peace, and prosperity, promising that America would continue to stand as "a beacon of freedom in the world." The actress Tallulah Bankhead, a supporter of Truman, ridiculed Dewey's references to unifying the country, asking: "Will all the candidates who are for disunity please stand? The next thing we know he'll be endorsing matrimony, the metal zipper, and the dial telephone."

Dewey enjoyed an excellent reputation as governor, but his aloof manner carried a smug coldness that he could never overcome. Nor could he ever escape Alice Roosevelt Longworth's piercing characterization of him as the little man atop the wedding cake.

Dewey was gracious in defeat as was Truman in victory. Not only was it a stunning triumph, but the margin wasn't even close and Truman was given a hero's welcome when he returned to Washington from his home in Independence, Missouri. A throng of 750,000 lined the parade route from Union Station, the most enthusiastic Washington salute to any president. When the motorcade passed the old Washington Post building on E St., Truman looked up to spot a large banner cheerily proclaiming: "Welcome Home from The Crow Eaters."

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