

# Philadelphia, 1948: City of Crucial Conventions

James A. Kehl, Emeritus  
*University of Pittsburgh*

In 1948 the road to the American presidency passed through Philadelphia. Both major parties and the Wallace Progressives held their national conventions in the city, and rebellious delegates, known as Dixiecrats, took their first dramatic step there by bolting out the convention door onto 34th Street. Party decisions reached in Philadelphia that year left such deep imprints on the political system that they continue to affect political life today.

That summer, several blocks away from Convention Hall, at the University of Pennsylvania, Professor Roy F. Nichols opted to capitalize on this political presence by devoting his political history seminar to these convention festivities. I was privileged to be among the students sharing his insights as he directed our interpretations of history in the making.

Unfortunately, the Republican National Convention had adjourned several days before the seminar began. Thus it had to be studied as a contemporary event, the ramifications of which we could analyze as they were beginning to unfold. To capture early reactions to the Republican presidential nomination of Thomas E. Dewey, the first seminar assignment was to interview someone who had attended the convention in an official capacity and ascertain why, in that person's opinion, Dewey had been victorious.

Unfamiliar with Philadelphia, I hastily concluded that I was at the mercy of the city's news media to find an answer to the question. I visited the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and was shuttled to several desks before locating a man willing to discuss the subject with a graduate student. But, there was a price to be paid; I had to listen to him reminisce before he would focus on my query.

The catalyst for his tale was provided when I identified myself as being from Pittsburgh. "Ah, Pittsburgh!" he exclaimed. "I was fired from my first job in Pittsburgh." With great flourish he pointed out that, as a young reporter for the *New York Times*, he had been assigned in 1923 to accompany the body of President Warren G. Harding from Washington back to Ohio. Sensing that this was not going to be an exciting assignment, he fortified himself with a fifth of whiskey, a forethought that Harding would surely have approved.

Bored almost before the train left the station, he began to imbibe. Quickly inebriated, he unceremoniously sat on the president's coffin. When the train stopped to add water and a second engine for the trek over the mountains, a fellow reporter slipped into the local railway station, dispatched a telegram to the *Times*, and described the coffin-sitting. When the entourage stopped next in Pittsburgh, a telegram from the *Times* awaited my interviewee, notifying him that he had been fired.

Having explained the role of Pittsburgh in his life, he turned to my question and noted that he had been assigned to the headquarters of Ohio senator, Robert A. Taft, Dewey's primary competitor on the right. Harold Stassen, former governor of Minnesota, was the major rival slightly to Dewey's left.

The Taft and Stassen forces had maneuvered a recess after the second presidential ballot on which Dewey posted a commanding lead, although not the required majority. This was a critical juncture for these two rivals: identify a compromise candidate or concede the nomination to Dewey. No middle ground was reached; Taft sponsors could compromise on Taft, and Stassen advocates on Stassen, but my interviewee took a different slant, maintaining that the two had been simply outmaneuvered by Dewey shenanigans. He insisted that these Dewey rivals never exchanged thoughts because the Dewey managers clogged the telephone lines by placing numerous simultaneous, and otherwise pointless, calls to both headquarters, thus preventing them from talking to each other about any possible compromise. Before this scheme was diagnosed, the recess had expired, and Dewey was swept to victory without further contest.

Not ecstatic with my informant's analysis of the Republicans, I had to be content with unearthing his theory of Dewey's victory, modest as its merits seemed. Taft's record suggests that he was too politically savvy not to attempt to salvage something from the convention. With that in mind, was he determined to rise or fall on his conservatism or was the explanation as simple as the theory of jammed communication lines that my informant espoused?

### Contrasting Scenes

The atmosphere at the Republican and Democratic conventions stood in sharp contrast. At the Republican convention, the air was electric; hotels were jammed, and taxis were in short supply. Delegates, gallery sitters, the media, and Philadelphia's on-looking public all presumed that a Republican year was at hand. This excitement represented the Republican aspect of what Philadelphia had appropriated more than a million dollars to promote: \$650,000 to refurbish Convention Hall and gifts of \$250,000 each to the GOP and the Democrats (with nothing to the Wallace Progressive Party).<sup>1</sup>

That June, analyst Ernest K. Lindley predicted that this would be the most crucial Republican convention since the Civil War. A party that had assumed an isolationist stand ever since Versailles in 1919 now gave a strong indication that the GOP internationalists would reverse that trend and forge a foreign policy plank that would, in turn, strengthen prospects for a lasting peace.<sup>2</sup>

Gaiety and optimism abounded. Numerous brass bands stirred excitement throughout the city, while Taft advocates paraded a baby elephant, Little Eva, through the streets to announce their leader's presence. Stassen endorses

responded by carrying a dazzling blonde in a rowboat through the crowded streets and into the hotel lobbies where the delegates and candidates were quartered. She waved a placard proclaiming: "Man the oars! Ride the crest! Harold Stassen, he's the best." Dewey's entourage joined the revelry by sponsoring a more sedate fashion show. The public clamored to join in, to be a part, to be eyewitnesses to history, an attitude that created a shortage of tickets to the 15,000-seat Convention Hall.<sup>3</sup>

No such anticipation sparked the arrival of the Democrats in July. Most delegates descended on the city grumbling over President Truman's handling of domestic affairs and over the 1946 loss of Congress to the Republicans after sixteen years of uninterrupted dominance. Gloom was pervasive, perhaps because the party was already perceived as an also-ran. Hotel managers groaned under hundreds of cancellations, and taxi drivers complained about the lack of fares. Downtown Philadelphia was so deserted that a Chicago delegate observed: "We get more excitement in the 43rd ward at 11 o'clock in the morning when the guys is all in church." This was neither the return that Philadelphia expected on its investment nor the image the Democratic National Committee wished to convey to the public.<sup>4</sup>

Delegates were listless and uninspired; in fact, absenteeism at the first sessions was appalling, a contagion that was transferred to the party faithful beyond the convention site. Organizers kept "pitch men" outside the hall, verbally inviting the public to join the festivities. I accepted their invitation for all the sessions. For the final day, when President Truman was expected, the rules were changed. In expectation of an overflow crowd, admission was by ticket only. It seemed that I was going to be shut out of the grand finale. Approaching a ticket-taker, I explained that, as a student, I was deeply interested in the proceedings. He understood my plight but pointed out that his orders were explicit: no ticket, no entry. He expressed a desire to help but didn't know which men wandering about the lobby were Secret Service, FBI, or other security agents checking on his performance.

In an effort to be truly cooperative, he suggested that, the next time ticket holders rushed his gate, I push my way into the group, and he would let me slip through and give the impression that he had received a stub from me. That worked perfectly, but then, at 3 p.m., I was there for the duration. I knew that re-entry would be impossible and that I was consigned to the humid heat of the hall until the conclusion of the president's acceptance speech, not realizing that that was almost twelve hours away. With only a \$1.50 lemonade and a \$5.00 sandwich to sustain me, I stayed riveted to my chair, although about half my weekly food budget was spent on this riotous living.

This gouging represented approximately a one thousand percent increase over local deli prices and seemed to be inconsistent with Democratic speechifying. Paradoxically, Mrs. India Edwards, dressed in a broad-brimmed hat

that overshadowed everything else that she wore, had lashed out in an earlier session at the Republican Congress for permitting prices to rise. In the process of her polemics, she asked her audience if they understood what the GOP had done; at the same time, she pulled the cord on a bag of helium-inflated balloons. As they soared skyward, she proclaimed that that's what the Republicans have done to prices.

Before the convention began, the outlook was so ominous that *Time* depicted this Democratic gathering as "a mournful wake before the funeral in bleak November." *Newsweek* was no less critical in labeling it "the zaniest, worse-managed, and most dispirited convention in American political annals."<sup>5</sup> Sights and sounds within the convention hall also offered proof to all, except the small coterie of Trumanites, that confusion reigned. As the band, playing high above the convention floor, blared "I'm Just Wild About Harry," delegates milled about below, sporting badges proclaiming "I'm Just Mild About Harry."

Most delegates arrived intent on selecting a candidate other than the president to head the ticket. Truman faced the bitterest battle for re-nomination experienced by any incumbent president since William Howard Taft dueled with Theodore Roosevelt's Progressives in 1912. The best organized of the factions determined to unseat him was the fledgling Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). When its members arrived in Philadelphia, they were greeted by a strong contingent of colleagues: John Frederick Lewis, a director of the Philadelphia ADA; William Loren Batt, Jr., the director of the research division of the Democratic National Committee; Johannes Hoeber, a German refugee and administrator of various charitable agencies; and Harry Block, a union executive. Controlling less than ten per cent of the delegates, ADA's cause was led by Leon Henderson, former director of the Office of Price Administration (OPA), who fancied himself the "head of the so-called New Deal government-in-exile." His views were ably seconded by Franklin Roosevelt's sons (Elliott, James, and Franklin, Jr.), all of whom favored dumping Truman for another candidate. The ADA strategy was flawed at the outset when it naively proposed to stop the president on the first ballot and "then unite on someone else — anyone else."<sup>6</sup>

These leaders were following their hearts, not their minds; they were ignoring two political fundamentals: Without a candidate, no faction can defeat anyone, and the anti-Trumanites could agree on no single challenger. This lack of reality was further compromised by the fact that, because of his control over party machinery, no incumbent president has ever been denied a nomination if he wanted it. The only possibility for success open to the Truman antagonists was to convince Truman not to seek the nomination. That was impossible.

### A Closer View

With the Democrats seemingly determined to self-destruct and the Republicans poised to grab the leadership role, the parties' dramatic moments in Philadelphia were being assessed by a new medium. These were the first conventions to parade their attributes and foibles on the television screen — before approximately ten million viewers along the Atlantic seaboard. Television had not yet reached other parts of the nation, but a scattered five million more were able to witness re-broadcasts of convention activity within twenty-four hours after it happened.<sup>7</sup>

Politicians embraced this new dimension of coverage and were anxious to channel it to their advantage. From the outset, they recognized that television gave new meaning to the old adage: "A picture is worth a thousand words." A smile, a frown, or a look of boredom could convey what oratory missed. The politician understood that his image was now enlarged beyond theories, programs, and position papers to include voice, dress, body language, and projected sincerity or lack thereof.

The camera could make a candidate appear stiff, flabby, statesman-like, natural, or homey. In the minds of the television experts, if the presidency in 1948 were to be decided on telegenics alone, Stassen would have been elected because of his youthful vigor and ability to speak directly to his audience. Both Taft and Dewey were classified as too stiff to be attractive to TV viewers. The camera could reveal startling truths. When the Democratic "pitch men" at the doors welcomed us in, they were mindful of the possible vacant gallery sections and did not want an unthinking or Republican-motivated cameraman to pan his "prying eye" on blocs of unfilled seats.

Experience at these first televised conventions taught politicians, particularly aspiring candidates, to be aware of the potential pitfalls that accompanied exposure to the TV camera lens. Unguarded moments had to be minimized; a candidate could not be caught yawning or reading the sports pages during an address. Without trying to project a false image, the camera could give a beautiful woman without makeup a lipless, dowdy look and could convert a clean-shaven man to an unshaven bum.

Experiments with cosmetics were undertaken at once. Thomas Dewey added the final touch to his own makeup, but obviously a general need for professional skills was evident. Between the Republican and Democratic sessions, cosmetic mogul Helena Rubenstein, was the first on the scene to provide expert assistance.<sup>8</sup>

By the time the Democratic convention convened, makeup was considered an essential, so much so that the convention managers would not permit Senator Alben Barkley of Kentucky to deliver his keynote address until the cosmeticians had worked their magic. This decision halted activity; the convention went silent for more than an hour, with no explanation to the public.

During this unscheduled hiatus, I noticed an official-looking man in the corridor, with badges stretching from his shoulder to his belt. Concluding that he must be important enough to provide an accurate answer, I politely asked: "What's the delay?" His reply, "The senator is being made up," brought a quizzical look to my face because I knew nothing about TV props; that caused him to add "for the television cameras."

In that primitive time for television, only a pastel blue shirt would appear white on TV screens; a white one would cast shadows — not a good image for a politician to project. Barkley not only had to be properly shirted, but he also had to be prepared by the makeup artists with lipstick, rouge, and powder so that he would appear more alive than dead. (Perhaps this was the first phase of party hype in creating synthetic statesmen whose ideas, issues, and party loyalty are assigned second place behind TV charm.)

### Crucial Business

As the first of the two major parties to assemble in Philadelphia that summer, the Republicans, outwardly at least, appeared to move logically through the convention routine. With no platform problems, they readily reached the candidate-selection stage. Having failed at the head of the party's ticket in 1944, Dewey nevertheless appeared to be the frontrunner; his opponents argued that the GOP should not overlook its record of never re-nominating a defeated presidential candidate and agreed with Alice Roosevelt Longworth that "You can't make a soufflé rise twice." Senator Taft, leader of the 80th Congress (1947-1949) and conservative faction guru, was Dewey's leading ideological and isolationist rival, but competitors Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, Governor Earl Warren of California, and Stassen endorsed the New York governor's internationalist bent.

Except for New York, Pennsylvania controlled the largest number of convention votes, but its delegates were seriously divided. Governor James Duff was anti-Dewey and for years had been at odds with elderly Joe Grundy and G. Mason Owlett, the state's industrial leaders. They were inclined toward Taft at the outset, whereas the governor preferred Vandenberg. In addition, Senator Edward Martin, with a strong endorsement from national committeewoman Mrs. Worthington Scranton (mother of later governor William W. Scranton), was the state's favorite son candidate. His rich background in both the military and politics supplied viability to his candidacy. Trained in the political school of Boies Penrose and Joe Grundy and financed by the Pennsylvania Manufacturers Association and the Mellon interests, he achieved widespread respect in Republican circles.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, from 1922 to 1939, Martin served as a brigadier general in the Pennsylvania National Guard; then he was assigned to command the 28th Division which, in turn, was mustered into federal service in 1941. The fol-

lowing year he reached military retirement age, just in time to contend successfully for the governorship. This long association with the Pennsylvania military had made him a prominent figure in the VFW and the American Legion. Along with his political prestige, these organizations catapulted him to the governorship in 1942, followed four years later by an overwhelming Senate victory by a 600,000-vote margin over incumbent Joseph Guffy. Martin pledged to remain in the favorite son role "indefinitely" but realized that Governor Duff controlled more delegates than he did. Not wanting to be embarrassed by the governor's strength, and anxious to salvage as much prestige as possible from the convention, Martin, Grundy, and Owlett, without informing Duff, made a deal with Dewey whereby Martin would withdraw as a favorite son and accept the honor of placing Dewey's name in nomination. In exchange for this support, Hugh Scott, a three-term Pennsylvania congressman and Navy veteran, was named chairman of the Republican National Committee. Although committee members had never met him, Scott was elected unanimously; obviously his sponsors, the Grundy faction, were well respected within the Republican inner circle, and that was adequate endorsement.<sup>11</sup>

With this Pennsylvania push, Dewey's cause gathered enough momentum to carry him to the nomination. Duff, who had favored Vandenberg, switched to Taft, and when Dewey seemed headed for the nomination on the second ballot, he desperately called for a recess to plot a compromise, anti-Dewey strategy. He tried to arrange a meeting with the Vandenberg, Stassen, and Taft managers but had trouble reaching them. That may be the phone tie-up that my *Inquirer* "source" had mentioned, but at any rate during the inter-ballot recess, no arrangement could be worked out; thus Dewey's third ballot nomination was a mere formality.

Although Taft registered no outward pique before the convention was gaveled to a close, he and his followers could not shake off the enormity of their defeat. Dewey selected Earl Warren, a fellow moderate, as his running mate to shut out the conservatives completely. For the first time since the Republican Party was formed in the 1850s, a midwesterner was not on the ticket.

In the minds of many critics, this exclusion cost the Republicans a victory in November. The region felt insulted; both Taft and the isolation issue had been rejected, but still the Midwest's allegiance was being taken for granted. One party functionary's confidence in the region's Republicanism was so strong, yet so wrong, that he boasted: "Iowa will go Democratic the year hell goes Methodist." Because such nuances took time to spread, the convention closed as it had begun—amid cheers of optimism.

On the other hand, the Democratic convention neither began nor ended on such a positive note. Senator Barkley's keynote address buoyed spirits tem-

porarily, but then the party turned to the adoption of its platform and encountered what all parties dread: a floor fight on issues, in this case civil rights. With Senator Francis J. Myers of Pennsylvania as chairman of the platform committee, all was expected to move smoothly. President Truman had counseled the senator to work for a plank similar to the 1944 statement that had served the party well. Declaring that racial and religious minorities have a right to live, develop, and vote equally with all citizens, it was intentionally vague.

Myers quickly learned that his committee consisted of members who held two additional points of view. The ADA contingent wanted no equivocation: abolition of the poll tax, anti-lynching legislation, and a fair employment practices commission, as had been advanced by the GOP's 1944 and 1948 platforms. The southern delegates did not object to a vague plank, provided it recognized that the Constitution left these powers to the individual states.

By vote of the committee, Myers presented the majority version, the one preferred by southern members, to the convention floor; that was immediately rebutted by the ADA members of the Platform Committee through their irrepressible spokesman Hubert Humphrey, the 37-year-old mayor of Minneapolis who was also running for the United States Senate. At this point, he threw down the gauntlet to his southern comrades: "The time has come to walk out of the shadow of states rights and into the sunlight of human rights."<sup>12</sup>

When the civil rights plank came to a roll call vote, Pennsylvania's 74-member delegation was the deciding factor in approving the ADA version. With this action, the Democratic Party, for the first time since the Civil War, adopted a platform that did not waffle on the matter of Negro rights. This defeat was as devastating to the South politically as the battle of Gettysburg had been militarily to the Confederacy in 1863.<sup>13</sup>

When this final tally was announced, 35 delegates from Mississippi and Alabama charged out of the convention brandishing Confederate flags, not into the "sunlight" as Humphrey had recommended, but into a Philadelphia rainstorm. As they left, the band played a little traveling music, and gallery observers waved a fond farewell with white handkerchiefs that were already in hand to mop their brows because of the sweltering heat.

A second convention jolt was delivered during the President's 2 a.m. acceptance speech. Preliminary to his remarks, Emma Guffey Miller, Pennsylvania committeewoman and sister of Senator Joseph Guffey, rushed to the podium unannounced and interrupted Convention Chairman Sam Rayburn to present President Truman with a large floral arrangement in the shape of the Liberty Bell. As she lifted the bell, she uncrated a flock of doves (really pigeons), heretofore covered by the bell, to salute the president as the leader of "peace in our time and peace for all time." (V-E Day, V-J Day, and the founding of the United Nations had all occurred "on his watch.")



Only a few individuals on the dais knew about the planned pigeon release in advance. When one of the managers was so informed just before it occurred, he was panicky — fearing that the flock may have perished from the lack of air in their crowded, covered space. He demanded to know: ‘What damn fool could have thought of a thing like that? In that heat they could all be dead,’ but he was pleased when only two of the four dozen (one for each state) failed to make the scheduled flight, although the alternative may have been less embarrassing.<sup>14</sup>

Symbolic as the gesture seemed, its execution was another Democratic gaffe that produced gasps throughout the hall. As the frightened pigeons fluttered skyward, they did what comes naturally — with Bess Truman and Senator Barkley’s daughter being the most notable dignitaries to serve as unwitting targets. Some birds were zapped by the electric lights in the vaulted ceiling, and others flew against closed windows before they spiraled, injured or dead, to the convention floor. The president spotted one bird using Sam Rayburn’s bald pate for a landing strip and said he would vote for that as the convention’s most amusing moment.<sup>15</sup>

These “doves of peace” were still teetering on balconies or in the folds of draperies in search of safe havens when the President began to read haltingly from a black loose-leaf notebook. This document contained no written text; each of the eighteen pages dealt with a specific topic and included provocative statements prepared by Clark Clifford, Truman’s youthful White House advisor, or by Samuel Rosenman, an old FDR confidant. Without transition, the President moved from one topic to another with the simple phrase, “now a few words about . . .” and he would then launch into his views on such topics as organized labor, agriculture, and the USSR. Each statement that his preparers gave him was phrased to evoke applause from a segment of the delegates and keep the excitement mounting to a crescendo.<sup>16</sup>

Truman’s message was typical political pap until, in concluding, he dropped his political bombshell, a call for a special session of Congress to begin July 26. The best evidence indicates that this idea originated with Philadelphia’s William Batt, was passed on to Clifford, and was accepted by the President, whose directive called on Congress to enact civil rights, housing, price control, and agricultural legislation, all of which had been advocated in the Republican platform adopted the previous month. Members of both parties groaned, believing that this action would hamper the fall campaign.<sup>17</sup>

At first interpreted as a punitive action aimed at the Republican Congress, the President’s call was instead a win-win political maneuver. If Congress produced meaningful legislation, Truman would be credited with taking its members by the scruff of the neck and forcing them to legislate. On the other hand, if the Republicans fumbled away the opportunity to demonstrate

this was a "Do-Nothing 80th Congress," as Truman had contended for almost two years. In either event, the President could claim victory. This marked the only time in history that a President evoked his power to convene Congress for partisan political purposes.

### Beyond the Convention

President Truman's call for a special session exposed a rift in Republican ranks; some party members were unaware of it, and the conservatives were determined to ignore it. The party had gained control of both the House and Senate in the 1946 elections, not because of a nationally appealing program or a vigorous campaign, but because the public had voted negatively — against the Democratic Party's wartime regulations, restrictions, and controls. Although this brought a group of serious, moderate Republicans to Congress, they did not assume leadership roles in committees. As was the custom, seniority decreed that such positions be entrusted to the old "mossbacks," who represented sinecure-type districts or states.

The rank-and-file delegates to the 1948 GOP convention represented the same breed of moderates as those who had gone to the 80th Congress and, as expected, responded with a moderate platform. When President Truman called this Republican-controlled Congress back into session, the conservative Taftites were in charge and exhibited no interest in redeeming the platform pledges of the Dewey wing. As a result they palavered through a "Do-Nothing" session, to the irritation of the American public. "And of course," gloated Truman, "they didn't do a damn thing."<sup>18</sup> The Old Guard preferred to see the GOP go down to defeat rather than give up control of the party organization. They were simply applying a fundamental political rule: power over party machinery, rather than victory at the polls, is the basic goal of a committed partisan. He would like to enjoy both, but if one had to be surrendered, it would be success on election day.

In addition to conservative Republicans saluting this rule of "power over victory" in 1948, the southerners who walked out of the Democratic Convention did likewise. They believed that they were keeping their state organizations intact in order to assume leadership of the national party in subsequent years. Accepting the popular hype that Truman was doomed in November, their strategy was to remain firm behind the southern rejection of federal civil rights regulation, permit the party to lose nationally, and then force concessions for the future. Thus when the southern secessionists headed for the exits in Philadelphia, their action was not an impulse of the moment, but a planned response.

The major parties emerged from their Philadelphia conventions without an accurate assessment of their strengths but with decisions destined to influ-

paign, the GOP position was not as solid as the party faithful believed, and the Democratic cause was not as hopeless as painted by the media. These distorted images came about largely because the analysts — political advisers, pollsters, and journalists — failed to do their homework. They lost track of the decision-makers, notably Clark Clifford, and did not recognize that everything a president does in an election year, when he is a candidate for re-nomination, is political.

Clifford, a presidential consultant, was hardly mentioned before and during the convention and rated little more than a footnote during the campaign. Although he preferred to remain in the background, the media had a responsibility to seek him out; he wasn't an unknown entity. Having been appointed the President's chief adviser in 1946, Clifford was the connecting link between Truman and his principal advisers, the conduit for election strategy. As a pragmatic liberal, he realized that the postwar years required a change in focus, a new liberalism that discarded the New Deal emphasis on poverty and unequal opportunity and concentrated on an equitable distribution of the new abundance. In post-mortems of the Truman victory, however, the analysts touted him as a key figure in the upset. Why was he relatively ignored before that? In a like manner, the critics also failed to analyze the changing political tendencies of three large voting blocs: organized labor, American Jews, and African Americans.<sup>19</sup>

Organized labor clearly identified Truman as the lesser of two evils. While the President had spoken and acted vehemently against the wave of postwar strikes, the Republicans had committed the unpardonable sin in the minds of union leaders by sponsoring the Taft-Hartley Law of 1947, which threatened to reverse important labor gains achieved under the New Deal. In an attempt to modify the Wagner Act of 1935, this complex legislation was designed to redress the balance between labor and management by making unions and their leaders subject to the anti-trust laws. In part, this was accomplished by outlawing the closed shop, prohibiting secondary boycotts, and by inserting "cooling off" periods as weapons against strikes involving the national health or safety. When Truman vetoed Taft-Hartley and the Republican Congress gleefully overrode his decision, the signal was clear; the GOP stood atop labor's political hit list.

A second bloc of voters, American Jews, lined up behind the President when Israel declared independence in May 1948. Within eleven minutes of that declaration, Truman recognized the new state and just as quickly alienated the Arab world. When the President further directed the IRS to construe the billions of dollars donated by American Jews to the Israeli cause as a gift to charity (thus exempt from federal taxation), he established a bond that was remembered in November.

By the time of the conventions, African Americans also viewed Truman positively, as their only champion in the federal government. The Republican-dominated Congress, with full support of southern Democrats, had declined to act on the President's request for legislation to abolish discrimination. Guided by the report of his civil rights commission, the President recommended that Congress take ten steps to advance the cause of civil rights. Among them were the establishment of permanent commissions on both fair employment practices and civil rights, federal action to end lynching and to protect the right to vote, and prohibition of discrimination in interstate transportation. When Congress dallied, Truman announced his plan to act in areas of presidential authority and moved to desegregate both federal offices and the armed services; no previous administration had done so much. Blacks appreciated his action, and not to endorse him after that would have injected confusion into their civil rights mission.<sup>20</sup> Blacks had hesitated to commit to Truman before the convention because they saw no future in a party heavily populated with southerners who opposed granting them their civil rights. But, when southern delegates walked out of the convention and proceeded to organize the Dixiecrat movement, the Blacks looked more favorably on Truman and the Democrats.

Before that Dixiecrat split, Blacks were intrigued by the proposals of Henry Wallace and his liberal Progressive Citizens of America (PCA). They fully concurred in Truman's civil rights platform, but, like so many others, looked askance at Wallace's seemingly pro-Communist foreign policy declarations. The President clarified his stand on that subject in his 1948 St. Patrick's Day speech by literally reading the former vice-president out of the party. In unmistakable language, he declared: "I do not want and will not accept the political support of Henry Wallace and his Communists."<sup>21</sup>

A week after the Democrats concluded their convention in Philadelphia, the Wallaceites took over Convention Hall. Having converted the PCA to the Progressive Party, they demonstrated that Truman was correct in his analysis of the group's Communist sympathies. Temporarily, Wallace lost control of his own party; that permitted the pro-Communist faction to dictate a platform that espoused the Soviet line in foreign policy, thus clinching the Black decision to support Truman. With both conservative and liberal extremes (Dixiecrats and Progressives, respectively) removed, Truman stood as the sole Democrat in quest of the "vital center" votes.

By the end of the 1948 convention season in Philadelphia, most of the substance on which the fall campaigns would be waged was known but not fully comprehended. The convention analysts failed to assign the proper significance to the many election variables. Organized labor's fear that New Deal legislation might be overturned, the farm belt's Democratic allegiance

ish voters' gratitude for Truman's support for Israel, African Americans' new-found voting balance in northern states, and the relatively limited impact of the Dixiecrat movement on the ultimate outcome (Illinois, Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania alone had more electoral power than eleven southern states) were all factors that went unconsidered. Thus the pollsters' myth of Republican strength stood unchallenged.

The Republicans were relaxed. They even passed up opportunities to challenge President Truman's oft-repeated description of the Republican-dominated 80th Congress as "Do-Nothing." The President, of course, was wrong; that Congress had achieved formidable accomplishments, including unification of the armed forces, the Marshall Plan, and the Vandenberg Resolution that served as a springboard to NATO, as well as the Taft-Hartley Law. Dewey understood that touting internationalist achievements would only offend the isolationists within his party.<sup>22</sup>

As a result of the widely circulated Republican lead in the polls, Dewey concluded that his campaign could forego all references to the 80th Congress. At the same time, he also began speaking in glib rather than engaging terms and was pleased to be in a position to invoke the political adage that advises candidates never to promise more than is necessary to win. Such a procedure was doubly attractive at this juncture because the party's conservatives were skeptical about his program, and he did not want to antagonize them further. Thus he welcomed the opportunity to speak in generalities, but his speeches wandered too far, and public interest began to wane. Meanwhile, Democratic leaders, particularly those responsible for state organizations, worked assiduously to save their tickets from being swept away by the avalanche that was predicted to take Truman down to defeat.

In constructing their political mosaics, advisers, analysts, and journalists, especially those concerned with the fortunes of the Republican Party, made the mistake of accepting the pollsters' forecast of a Dewey landslide as a given. In their various interpretations of how the presidential campaign would play out, organized labor, African-American options, the Jewish vote, Dixiecrat secession, Wallace expulsion, conservative Republican pique, and farm belt satisfaction were always treated as variables that could be squeezed, compressed, or omitted, as necessary, to complete a particular mosaic. Never was the pollsters' prediction converted to a variable that would permit these other factors to be fully explored. This failure by contemporary critics to analyze fully the party decisions at Philadelphia caused the coverage of the 1948 conventions to be the most distorted in American political annals.

## Notes

This essay is not a regular research article, but a personal reminiscence of the 1948 Philadelphia Convention.

1. Irwin Ross, *The Loneliest Campaign: The Truman Victory of 1948* (New American Library, 1968), p. 92.
2. *Newsweek*, XXXI (June 21, 1948), 28.
3. *Time*, LII (June 28, 1948), 10; Ross, *Loneliest Campaign*, p. 94.
4. *Time*, LII (July 19, 1948), 23.
5. *Time*, LII (July 12, 1948), 11; *Newsweek*, XXXII (July 26, 1948), 19.
6. *Newsweek*, XXXII (July 12, 1948), 19, 21; Gary A. Donaldson, *Truman Defeats Dewey* (University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 99.
7. *Time*, LII (July 5, 1948), 34.
8. *Ibid.*, 34.
9. Jules Abels, *Out of the Jaws of Victory* (Henry Holt, 1962), 62.
10. *Time*, LI (June 21, 1948).
11. *Newsweek*, XXXII (July 5, 1948), 24, 26.
12. *Time*, LII (July 19, 1948), 23-24; LII (July 26, 1948), 12-13; *New York Times*, July 12, 1948.
13. Abels, *Out of the Jaws of Victory*, 91.
14. Jack Redding, *Inside the Democratic Party* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), p. 196. *New York Times*, July 15, 1948.
15. Redding, *Democratic Party*, p. 196; Paul F. Boller, Jr., *Presidential Campaigns* (Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 275.
16. *Time*, LII (July 26, 1948), 13.
17. Donaldson, *Truman Defeats Dewey*, p. 245.
18. Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (Berkeley Publishing Corp., 1974), p. 257.
19. Donaldson, *Truman Defeats Dewey*, p. 21-22, 24.
20. Robert A. Divine, *Since 1945: Politics and Diplomacy in Recent American History* (John Wiley & Sons, 1975), pp. 18-19.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
22. Abels, *Out of the Jaws of Victory*, pp. 128-29.