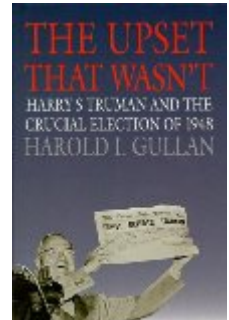


Harold I. Gullan. *The Upset That Wasn't: Harry S Truman and the Crucial Election of 1948.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1998. xii + 256 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56663-206-5.



Reviewed by Howard L. Reiter

Published on H-Pol (January, 1999)

For half a century, Harry Truman has been the patron saint of candidates who are running second. The photograph of a smiling Truman holding up the *Chicago Tribune's* erroneous headline, "Dewey Defeats Truman," has become part of our political lore, and appears on the cover of Harold Gullan's popular history of the 1948 campaign. Not only were Truman's opponents vanquished, but so were the pollsters, the pundits and conventional wisdom.

Gullan, an independent scholar with a doctorate from Temple University, has timed his book to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of Truman's triumph. Like any good popular history, it is written in a sprightly style and highlights most of the colorful events of that year. It's a fine overview.

The story is well known. A product of the Pendergast machine in Missouri, in his ten years in the Senate Truman compiled a generally pro-New Deal voting record. In 1944, he was tapped for the vice presidency when an ailing Franklin D. Roosevelt and the organizational leaders of the Democratic party lost patience with incumbent Henry A. Wallace, a leftist visionary with little talent for

political glad-handing. Eighty-two days after his fourth inauguration, Roosevelt died suddenly, leaving Truman to lead the nation to military victory and deal with postwar adjustments. Soon he began to establish a reputation as a hapless bumbler, mishandling numerous incidents and appointing hacks and cronies to important positions. In November 1946, the Republicans gained control of Congress and a majority of governorships for the first time since the Hoover Administration.

Liberal Democrats were especially disappointed with Truman, and when the president fired Wallace, his Secretary of Commerce, over the latter's criticism of Truman's nascent Cold War policies, the party appeared deeply divided. In the autumn of 1947, Truman's aide Clark Clifford drafted a memorandum plotting strategy for the coming campaign. (As Gullan points out, and Clifford acknowledged in his memoirs [1.], most of the ideas came from veteran New Dealer James Rowe.) Correctly assuming that the Republicans would nominate New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey and that Wallace would mount his own candidacy, Clifford urged Truman to court such

liberal constituencies as labor, blacks, Jews, Catholics, and westerners. The only serious blunder was that Clifford assumed that the south would remain solid for the Democrats.

When his Committee on Civil Rights issued its report, Truman soon learned how difficult it would be to please both African-Americans and southern white segregationists. The latter, led by South Carolina Governor J. Strom Thurmond, became increasingly angry at the national Democrats. When party liberals, including Minneapolis Mayor Hubert H. Humphrey, amended the platform with a stronger civil rights plank than even Truman had favored, Thurmond agreed to run for president as a States' Rights Democrat. With the Republicans reasonably united behind Dewey, the Democrats split three ways, and Truman running far behind in the polls, it was small wonder that political undertakers were taking the president's measurements.

However, Truman would not be counted out. He called Congress into special session, a session that proved his contention that Dewey's moderate liberalism was out of step with his fellow Republicans in Congress, and then mounted an energetic whistle-stop campaign lambasting the Republicans as plutocrats who would return the nation to the Great Depression. In contrast, Dewey spoke in gaseous platitudes, not wishing to divide the country before his inevitable inauguration. Extrapolating from their experience during the Roosevelt years, most pollsters assumed that the voters had made up their minds by the fall, and ceased taking soundings late in the campaign. Nevertheless savvy political observers sensed that the race was tightening up, and when it ended, Truman eked out a narrow victory. Thurmond carried only four deep southern states, and Wallace netted no electoral votes.

Decades ago, two popular histories of the 1948 campaign were published, a breezy and somewhat pro-Dewey account by Jules Abels, and Irwin Ross's more detailed study. [2.] The first

question that Gullan's book raises is what a third such monograph adds. While he has reviewed an immense amount of literature, there are no new revelations here. Gullan does show how Truman's 1948 campaign was foreshadowed by some of his earlier races, in showing how he ran hard, stuck to several simple themes, and was portrayed as the underdog. Moreover, most of his elections were close contests.

In fairness, Gullan does not claim to present new information, but does insist that he has a revisionist interpretation that is stated in his title. "Given all the factors in his favor," writes Gullan, "Truman should have done better (p. viii)." Unfortunately, he does not develop this case. It would seem that the best argument that Truman's victory was not an upset would have to emphasize that the Democrats were the majority party, and that after his earlier mishaps Truman simply rebuilt the New Deal coalition as Clifford had recommended. However, Gullan denies that 1948 was a "maintaining" election, one that simply returns the majority party to power. In addition, he states that "Of all the reasons why Truman won, the extension of the Roosevelt coalition does not rank high (p. 214)." Therefore it is unclear why 1948 was not an upset.

Conventional wisdom has generally had a bad reputation, but in this case it seems justified. Truman was indeed running far behind in the polls throughout most of the year. His party was indeed split, and into not two, but three presidential candidacies. His opponent was indeed the respected governor of the nation's largest state. Two years earlier, the opposition party had indeed recaptured Congress, and not since 1874 had that happened without the presidency following suit two years later. Why therefore shouldn't Truman be credited with an upset victory?

Gullan is on firmer ground when evaluating the long-term implications of the election. The rise of television and the declining partisanship of the electorate were developments that seemed to be

fostered by the events of 1948. This is an argument that Joel Silbey has been making for some time. [3.] In addition, Gullan is right to conclude that "In political terms, Thurmond's unintended contribution in 1948 was the most lasting of any offered by the presidential candidates: he broke the traditionally solid Democratic South (p. 196)." These trends combined to give Dwight D. Eisenhower the electoral votes of four former Confederate states four years later.

Besides the interpretive reservation discussed earlier, there are other shortcomings worth mentioning. The reader who wants to track down any of the many interesting facts and quotations will find only a list of sources, rather than footnotes or other more helpful guides. Even those sources are not presented alphabetically, so that the reader will find it difficult even to locate quotations of historians. Gullan's sympathies seem to be largely with Truman, and the most unfortunate indication of this is the paucity of material on the Republicans until after their convention. There is one paragraph on their primaries, and seven pages on the entire GOP campaign through the convention.

Nevertheless most of the basics are here. Although the promise contained in Gullan's title is never quite kept, he provides for the lay reader a vivid portrait of a year that marked the last hurrah of the New Deal era.

Notes

[1]. Clark Clifford with Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 191.

[2]. Jules Abels, *Out of the Jaws of Victory* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1959); and Irwin Ross, *The Loneliest Campaign: The Truman Victory of 1948* (New York: New American Library, 1968).

[3]. E.g., Joel H. Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Howard L. Reiter. Review of Gullan, Harold I. *The Upset That Wasn't: Harry S Truman and the Crucial Election of 1948*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2626>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.