The Boston Globe

UNEARTHING A PRESIDENTIAL - YEAR DRAMA

Boston Globe
Author: Michael Kenney
Date: April 25, 2000

As the 2000 presidential campaign staggers along, with a full six months before it can be laid to rest, just about any past campaign would probably seem a thrilling contest, in which the great issues of the time were thrashed out.

Still, none shows a better contrast with the desultory present than the campaign of 1948. For one thing, it produced perhaps the most memorable of political photographs: A jubilant Harry S. Truman holding aloft the morning-after Chicago Daily Tribune with its "Dewey Defeats Truman" banner headline. That was the final surprise in a year full of political drama, as Zachary Karabell details in a book that is the perfect antidote to this year's pale imitation of a political campaign. And while there can be little suspense in a story whose ending we all know, Karabell, a New York-based historian, effectively argues that Truman's victory was as carefully plotted as any consultant- and pollster-driven effort of more recent years.

That might seem to make it the "first campaign," rather than the "last" - an honorific that Karabell awards because 1948's was the last campaign before television turned presidential races into entertainment ("and not very good entertainment at that"). Even if Karabell lapses a bit too often into analysis and commentary, the story remains a great one.

There was the time itself, a watershed year in American political life as the New Deal was winding down and the Cold War was beginning. Between Franklin Roosevelt's unbeatable popularity and World War II's dampening of political activity, "there hadn't been a fully contested election in more than a decade," Karabell writes. "Everyone in politics was itching for a fight."

There was a clear contest for the Republican nomination between New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey and former Minnesota "boy governor" Harold Stassen (who then was a far more impressive figure than he developed into as quadrennial also-ran). Theirs was a contest in which the primaries played a major role for the first time. And waiting for them to falter was the Old Guard, in the person of Robert A. Taft.

The national conventions were decisive - and divisive - events for both major parties. As Karabell notes, the 1948 conventions marked "the end of a particular type of back-room politics, the end of the hidden convention." The gatherings of the parties were still "mercurial" events when a front-runner could be undone by a back-room deal - or by a well-orchestrated bandwagon.

Also running in November were Henry A. Wallace and Strom Thurmond, not mere spoilers (though in the end they polled barely 1/2 percent of the popular vote), but ideological symbols. Until marginalized by his failure to separate his Progressive Party from the communist far left, Wallace stood as a symbol of the bold experiments of the early New Deal years. By contrast, Thurmond and the Dixiecrats foreshadowed the civil rights battles yet to come.

And finally there was Truman, perhaps the most combative man ever to run a presidential race. All but repudiated by his party, he had been written off as a certain loser - so certain a loser, in fact, that many Republican leaders figured that they did not have to nominate Dewey, who was their strongest candidate.

Around Truman, though, had been assembled what Karabell describes as "the first modern campaign team that systematically obtained, analyzed and collated information on a total spectrum of issues and personalities." As the campaign gathered momentum, this "team of fact-finders and writers" enabled Truman "to speak extemporaneously." Most important, this well-hidden staff work "enabled him to be himself, to take chances, to go off on tangents. As a result, he was seen as the plain talker that he was."

This kind of staff work is pretty much taken as a given in modern campaigns, but "in retrospect," Karabell writes, "what stands out is how unique the process was."

No one had figured out, in 1948, that presidential campaigns were defining events in American political life - events through which the social, economic, and cultural life of the country could be viewed. Thus there was no Theodore H. White to write a "Making of the President 1948."

In the absence of a Teddy White, Zachary Karabell has provided an account that recaptures the mood of the time, and the drama of a campaign the likes of which we are unlikely to see again - and which was, as Karabell rightly puts it, "incomprehensible by today's standards.
