

THE GOOD OLD CAMPAIGNS AN ENGAGING LOOK AT THE 1948 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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In our age of focus groups and instant polls, it is refreshing to be reminded that presidential campaigns can sometimes be unpredictable and electrifying. Historian Zachary Karabell does just that in this entertaining and thoughtful account of the most exciting presidential campaign in modern times, the 1948 contest that pitted underdog incumbent Harry Truman, the Democrat, against the overconfident Thomas Dewey, the Republican, and two minor-party candidates. What makes the 1948 election unique, Karabell tells us, is not just its surprising outcome but the range of opinions articulated by the contenders.

On the left, running on the Progressive Party ticket, was former Vice President Henry Wallace, who combined a populist appeal and deeply religious beliefs in his lonely crusade for internationalism and pacifism. "He believed he was called to lead a noble crusade in the path of righteousness," Karabell writes. Unfortunately for Wallace, the hardening Cold War consensus and growing fears of communist subversion left him vulnerable to charges of being soft on communism. Ironically, the most strident voices came not from the right but from fellow liberals in an operation organized by the White House and spearheaded by the Americans for Democratic Action. Karabell is evenhanded in his treatment of the often-elusive Wallace. While defending Wallace against the vicious Redbaiting of his opponents, Karabell acknowledges that his refusal to disavow the Communist Party overshadowed his farsighted and often courageous support for civil and economic rights.

Far to the right were the Southern Dixiecrats, who bolted the Democratic Party and selected South Carolina Gov. Strom Thurmond as their spokesman after the Democrats included a strong civil rights plank in their platform. Thurmond, who won in his first run for governor in 1946 campaigning as a liberal who promised "a progressive outlook, a progressive program and a progressive leadership," tried to steer clear of race-baiting, talking instead about liberty and states' rights, but racism fueled his campaign. Karabell reminds us that while Thurmond's views may be objectionable to us today, they were a natural byproduct of a healthy and vibrant debate over a contentious issue.

Dewey, the colorless governor of New York, won the Republican nomination after a tough primary contest against Minnesota's "boy governor," Harold Stassen. Though dull and uninspiring, Dewey emerges from this account as a man of real principle and

integrity who "rarely impugned" the integrity of his opponents "and almost never resorted to ad hominem assaults." When Stassen publicly supported the popular Nixon-Mundt bill, which called for outlawing the Communist Party, Dewey forcefully dissented, saying the measure represented a dangerous assault on civil liberties. "Dewey had taken a bold position based on conviction," Karabell concludes. "Dewey refused to pander." Having secured the nomination, he assumed he would coast to victory in November. Dubbed "the nominee nobody loves," he crisscrossed the nation on his 15-car train known appropriately as the Victory Special, offering voters bland speeches that inspired respect but produced little passion.

Nearly every schoolchild is familiar with Truman's famous come-from-behind, "Give-'em-hell-Harry" campaign, with its whistle-stop assaults on the "do-nothing 80th Congress." His stunning election-night victory is forever memorialized by the photograph of a beaming Truman holding a copy of the Chicago Tribune headlined "Dewey Defeats Truman."

While most accounts celebrate Truman's straight-talking style and his tough but honest rhetoric, Karabell chastises the president, saying he "unleashed a torrent of vitriolic rhetoric that was often unrestrained by factual validity." He says Truman's speeches "veered dangerously close to demagoguery." In the end, the unpopular Truman managed to tie himself to Roosevelt's legacy and tarnish his more-appealing opponent with the burden of Herbert Hoover and a conservative Congress.

While Karabell captures much of the excitement of the campaign, painting vivid and memorable portraits of the leading figures, he falls short of proving his central point that 1948 was, as his title suggests, "the last campaign." Karabell tries to convince us that the election represented a critical turning point in the nation's political life. Not only did it signify "the end of a particular type of backroom politics, the end of the hidden convention," he says, but it also marked the last time "an entire spectrum of ideologies was represented in the presidential election." In later years, he argues, "debate would be pushed from the center of presidential elections to the margins." In an ironic twist, he suggests that the Tribune's headline got it right after all, because over time TV would reward candidates who adopted Dewey's cautious, bland style and punish those who adopted Truman's barbed, ideological approach.

But Karabell overstates his case in his effort to tease meaning out of the election. It is true that conventions have lost much of their purpose, but the 1948 election is not especially significant in that evolution. Conventions played a vital role in the nomination process until the series of reforms initiated after the disastrous 1968 Democratic convention expanded the number of primaries and changed the procedure for electing delegates. It is also hard to claim that the election was unique for the range of ideological options it presented voters. By Karabell's own admission, there were few real differences between the two leading candidates. "Dewey," he writes, "had engineered a platform that in key respects mimicked the Democrats' and accepted the core of the New Deal." Wallace and Thurmond presented striking alternatives, but by November they had been pushed to the fringes of the campaign. And modern campaigns have not been as devoid of substance as

Karabell suggests. Certainly voters choosing between Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson in 1964, or Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale in 1984, were presented with very different visions of the nation's future.

His analysis may be frayed at the edges, but Karabell is a talented historian and a gifted storyteller who brings to life this moment in the nation's political history. It is impossible to read this engaging book and not share his nostalgia for the good old days when presidential candidates seemed more authentic, and political debate more meaningful.
