



Truman Defeats Dewey

Gary Donaldson

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Fifty years ago Harry S. Truman pulled off the greatest upset in U.S. political history. With his party split on both the left and the right, and facing a formidable Republican opponent in New York governor Thomas E. Dewey, the Missourian was thought to have little chance of remaining in the White House. But politics in the postwar years were changing dramatically. Truman and his advisers successfully read those changes: their strategy focused on building a coalition of organized labor, African Americans in large northern cities, and traditional liberals—and ignoring protests from the conservative South. Donaldson argues that Dewey did nearly as much to lose the election as Truman did to win it. Dewey entered the campaign so overconfident that he refused to confront Truman on the issues. The Republicans, certain of a mandate from the public after the midterm elections of 1946, prepared to disassemble the New Deal. Yet they suffered from even more severe internal division than the Democrats. The 1948 presidential campaign was a watershed event in the history of American politics. It encompassed Truman's rousing "Give 'em Hell Harry" speeches and intriguing behind-the-scenes political maneuvering. It was the first election after Roosevelt's death and the last before the advent of television. It marked the new political prominence of African American voters and organized labor, as well as the South's declining influence over the Democratic Party.

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