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The Washington Post - Washington, D.C.

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Date: Apr 16, 2000

The presidential election of 1948 was an oddity, no doubt about it. The most obvious and famous reason is that it was won, and decisively, by the candidate who, as Zachary Karabell puts it, "appeared to be on the verge of political death." But there are other important reasons as well: It was the last campaign in which there were four plausible candidates for the White House, it gave the phrase "whistle stop" a permanent place in the American language, it marked the beginning of the end of the "solid" Democratic South, and it brought to the forefront three elements (the polls, the Washington press corps and the broadcast media) that previously had played relatively minor roles.

It was, into the bargain, one hell of a campaign. "For the last time in this century," Karabell writes, "an entire spectrum of ideologies was represented in the presidential election. . . . How different it all was in 1948, how incomprehensible by today's standards -- an election with heated debate and substantial issues, candidates who disagreed passionately about the issues, a citizenry that took interest because elections mattered and were interesting." To the far left were Henry Wallace and his Progressive Party, to the left of center were Harry Truman and his disorderly Democratic coalition, to the right of center were Thomas E. Dewey and his staid, complacent Republicans, and to the far right were Strom Thurmond and his States Rights Party, known familiarly as the Dixiecrats:

"Today, we may not like what the Dixiecrats believed and what they stood for. But at any given time in a healthy multiracial democracy, one group of people hates, dislikes and distrusts what another group says, thinks or advocates. In 1949, the cacophony of voices was part of the process. The debates were visible. In later elections, debate would be pushed from the center of presidential elections to the margins. In 1948, there were alternatives, even though some in retrospect appear far more palatable than others."

The 1948 campaign, Karabell argues, was "dynamic -- perhaps not more dynamic than the major campaigns of 1800, 1832, 1860 or 1912, but more dynamic and ideologically diverse than anyone of political age in 1948 would experience again in their lifetimes." There are, as students of history and politics will be quick to point out, some big holes here: The campaign of 1864, which Karabell omits, was "dynamic" and probably the most important in American history, and the campaigns of 1964, 1968, 1972 and 1980 were far more "diverse" than his analysis admits. But undoubtedly the 1948 campaign was a grand circus, and its repercussions are still felt in American politics.

It came at the end of a long, flukish period in the country's history. Depression and World War II had preoccupied the United States for a decade and a half, and one man -- Franklin Delano Roosevelt -- had so completely dominated the political arena that competition within it had been severely attenuated. As Karabell says, "there hadn't been a fully contested [presidential] election in more than a decade," and "everyone in politics was itching for a fight." The Republicans were desperate to regain the White House, which from 1921 to 1933 they had come to regard as their own, and the ideological divisions that depression and war had papered over were raw and bitter. The far left still looked to Moscow with admiration and hope, the far right was beginning to dig in for the Red Scare of the 1950s, and the white South was preparing to take extreme measures against intensifying pressures for black civil rights.

The country was no longer led by That Man in the White House -- Roosevelt, adored and hated as no other president before or since -- but The Man from Independence, Harry Truman, whom FDR had offhandedly chosen for the vice presidency in 1944 and who had risen to the presidency in April 1945 upon FDR's unexpected death. Few people thought Truman had much of what the cliché calls presidential timber; he was "opposed from within his own party, from the left and from the right and from the center," and "Republicans could sense the victory that had eluded them since Herbert Hoover's win in 1928."

What the politicians sensed about the election was confirmed by George Gallup, Elmo Roper and other practitioners of what they liked to call "scientific polling." They "truly believed that the outcome of an election could be known months before it actually took place," and their "scientific sampling" consistently showed that Dewey would take Truman to the cleaners, not merely because of the GOP's obvious strength but because Wallace and Thurmond would drain away votes on the left and right that customarily went to the Democrats.

It didn't work out that way. Dewey proved to be a weaker candidate than the experts thought, and Truman a stronger one. Dewey couldn't distance himself from the Republican Congress -- the "do-nothing" Congress, as Truman delighted in calling it -- he alienated the hugely influential farm vote, and his stiff, unbending manner was inappropriate for a time when pressing the flesh was still a political essential. Truman, by contrast, turned out to have a brilliant political organization behind him, his "populist, anti- Wall Street rhetoric" struck a deep chord in an electorate that still remembered the Depression vividly and still venerated the New Deal, and he was in his element:

"Truman relished his role as underdog and he embraced the crowds and the journey. He was in many ways the perfect candidate. He loved the process. He loved meeting people and chatting with them. He loved freewheeling speeches, and he loved the feeling of connection to the land, to the people, to the issues that he cared about, to the crops soon to be harvested, and to the towns and cities and counties that he passed through. He loved the fight and he didn't care whether people thought he was fair. If they didn't, they'd let him know it on election day, and if they did, they'd send Thomas Dewey back to Albany."

Today we tend to see Truman in sentimental terms, influenced by David McCullough's admiring (and admirable) biography, but Karabell usefully reminds us that there was nothing pretty about the campaign he ran in 1948; a central ingredient of his strategy was "to sow dissension, stir up fear and slander his opponents." Karabell, who was born long after that campaign had faded into memory, gets rather huffy about all this, complaining that Truman "veered dangerously close to demagoguery," but that is the way politics has always worked, and in any event it is far from clear that this was the decisive factor in his victory.

It is far from clear, for that matter, that the electorate really cared all that much about the election. Though Karabell portrays the 1948 race as a clash among bitterly opposed ideologies and larger-than-life personalities, the facts force him to concede that "most Americans were not passionately interested in the election, nor were they closely following developments." As it turned out come November, "the 1948 presidential election had the lowest participation rate of any national race until the 1990s."

It is not easy to know what to make of this. Karabell is right to argue that 1948 was a turning point in American politics: Radio, "the most important medium in America" at the time, paved the way for television, the effects of which on the style and content of American politics have been amply documented. Though nobody knew it at the time, 1948 marked "the end of a particular type of backroom politics, the end of the hidden convention"; and "the cool, detached Dewey, the packaged candidate who ran so as not to lose," was "the harbinger of the future, while Truman was the last of his kind."

Yet is Karabell also right to mourn, as he so obviously does, the decline -- if not the absolute end -- of starkly ideological political debate? Is it the homogenizing effect of television that has made politics so bland, or has the country settled so many of its most important differences that it can now relax in the comfort and safety of the middle? For that matter, is there anything inherently wrong with a politics in which the real battle is for the center? The center, after all, seeks to include rather than to exclude, to accommodate rather than to alienate.

The most important lessons to be learned from the election of 1948 may have to do not with the style and content of politics but with the diminishing role of politics in our national life. In that election, with its "heated debate and substantive issues," only 50 percent of eligible voters managed to find their way to the polls. This is known as voting with one's feet, and it may well have greater consequence for American life -- for better and for worse -- than any of the essentially mechanical changes that Karabell analyzes so carefully.

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