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The Truman Show

Crisscrossing the country by train in 1948, Truman studded his speeches with bits of local color compiled back in Washington.

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By Edward Kosner
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One of my first political memories is of Nov. 2, 1948—election night in Harry Truman's underdog race against the prim Republican nominee, Thomas E. Dewey, Strom Thurmond of the racist Dixiecrats, and Henry Wallace, whose Progressive Party campaign was masterminded by American Communists. Truman was predictably behind when I dozed off, but I heard the Philco radio on all night in my parents' bedroom. And when I woke up for school the next morning, my father beamed, "Truman won, boy!"

Truman's stunning victory of scrappy conviction over smug overconfidence is an epic chapter in American political history—etched forever in popular memory by the next-day photo of the jubilant president holding up a copy of the early edition of the Chicago Tribune with its infamous headline, DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN.

WHISTLE STOP

By Philip White
ForeEdge, 314 pages, $29.95

The Truman story is particularly illuminating today, when Barack Obama is routinely portrayed as the most besieged president in modern times—thwarted by obstructionist Republicans, whipped in the midterm elections, reviled by crypto-racists, challenged by fanatic Muslim terrorists and Czar Vladimir I. Compared with Truman's plight as he sought to survive in the White House, Mr. Obama's second term is a stroll in the Rose Garden (or, if you prefer, the first lady's organic vegetable patch).

The 1948 election has been chronicled many times, especially resonantly in David McCullough's unsurpassed 1992 biography, "Truman." Now, Philip White, the author of a book about Winston Churchill's 1946 "Iron Curtain" speech, has compiled an almost day-by-day account of the heart of the campaign: Truman's whistle-stop tours aboard his Last Chance Special, during which he covered more than 31,000 miles, visited all but a handful of states, and made 352 separate speeches that were seen and heard by millions of Americans.

What emerges is a far more compelling account of just how Harry gave 'em hell—the campaign's war cry—than the gauzy version that has hardened into legend. Truman's crusade was no Capra-esque fantasy. As Mr. White documents, the campaign's strategic themes were framed by savvy pros, including James Rowe and Clark Clifford. His seemingly impromptu rear-platform speeches were actually custom-tailored to research compiled by an eight-man team back in Washington. And the candidate himself, at 64, demonstrated stamina that stupefied his aides. Between a hearty breakfast and midnight on a characteristic day in September, the president, one reporter calculated, "traveled 500 miles by train, 141 by automobile and bus, made 11 speeches in 15 different towns, changed his clothes eight times and met 250 politicians, labor leaders and civic dignitaries."

There was no time to waste. Truman had never really been accepted as Franklin Roosevelt's successor by Democratic grandees, especially FDR's son Franklin, who tried to entice war hero Dwight Eisenhower to accept the 1948 nomination. In April of election year, the president's approval rating had fallen to 36%, six points lower than Mr. Obama's latest reading. Only 17% of America's newspapers supported Truman's re-election, and his nemesis, the arch-conservative Chicago Tribune, derided him as "a nincompoop." The Dixiecrats had splintered the Democrats' solid South, and Wallace's left-wing party was flirting with labor and minority voters essential to a Truman victory. Stalin's Berlin blockade confronted the West with its greatest challenge since the end of World War II.

What's more, Truman and his running mate, Alben Barkley, an aging, bottled-in-bond senator from Kentucky, were facing a Republican "dream ticket," of Dewey, the popular governor of New York, and Earl Warren, the equally moderate governor of California (and later chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court). The GOP candidates' home states alone accounted for more than a quarter of the 266 electoral votes needed to win the White House. The result seemed so settled that Elmo Roper quit polling in September, just as Truman's armor-plated railroad car, the Ferdinand Magellan, pulled out of Washington's Union Station on his doomed quest. "Dewey," Roper proclaimed, "is almost as good as elected."

The governor, who in 1944 had come closer than any Republican to defeating FDR, certainly thought so. He was so cocksure that he didn't even start his campaign until two weeks after Truman hit the rails. And when he did, Dewey's Victory Special maintained a dilatory pace. He rarely made more than one sonorous speech a day—identical, bromide-laced appeals for "unity."

Virtually alone in his camp, Truman was sure he was going to win—or, at least, he showed spunky optimism from day one. "I'll take Dewey like that," he bragged with a snap of his fingers when the Republican ticket was named. Early on, his team had concluded that the election would be won in the heartland and the West and plotted the itinerary of the Last Chance Special accordingly. He was convinced that the salient issues for voters were "peace, prices and places to live." And he knew that he could spearhead his campaign against Dewey by targeting the GOP-dominated "Do-nothing" 80th Congress, which had blocked his every effort to control inflation and build low-cost housing to ease the postwar shortage.

But, as "Whistle Stop" demonstrates, the most remarkable aspect of Truman's relentless campaign was the vigor and plain-spoken eloquence of his partisan language. With daily infusions of fresh material from the research unit back in Washington, he studded every talk, even in the humblest prairie hamlets, with references to local history, personalities and concerns, as well as chapter-and-verse on how his and FDR's Democratic administrations had worked for the people. He told one crowd: "The Republicans stand for special interests and always have. The Democratic Party, which I now head, stands for the people—and always has stood for the people." "You know where I stand," he'd say over and over.

He unapologetically waged class warfare. The Republicans, he told Midwest audiences, "had stuck a pitchfork in the farmer's back." In the mountain states, he intoned: "The Republican leaders have been . . . eager agents of the big business lobbies and the most reactionary elements in American economic life." And he could go over the top. One day, he likened Dewey and his fat-cat backers to Hitler as a stooge for evil German industrial interests.

As the campaign moved into its final weeks, Truman's crowds began to build. San Antonio turned out 300,000, Tulsa 100,000. By one estimate, a million New Yorkers saw and heard him on Oct. 29. The next day, a vast throng in Harlem cheered the most fervent civil-rights speech any Democratic nominee had ever delivered. That talk, coupled with his executive orders mandating job and pay equality in the federal government and the desegregation of the armed forces, solidified the black vote for Truman. He also wooed immigrant voters, industrial workers, farmers and ranchers—a new coalition to replace Southern states lost to the Dixiecrats.

Mr. White's sympathetic narrative of Truman's comeback is marred by clunky writing ("sickness cruelly claimed FDR") and clichés ("cut his teeth," "honed his craft"). And embarrassing bloopers (storied House Speaker Sam Rayburn is called 'Senator Rayburn," Edward R. Murrow and other CBS News icons cover the 1948 conventions in this book for NBC!) cast doubt on the author's mastery of the era.

Still, nothing can derail the drama of Truman's run for glory. He campaigned until the last possible moment, cast his vote late on Election Day in Independence, Mo., drank a glass of buttermilk and was asleep by 9 p.m. He woke with a start at midnight, Mr. White relates, and switched on his bedside radio only to hear H.V. Kaltenborn of NBC report that while Truman was ahead in the popular vote by 1.2 million, his lead was sure to evaporate and he was "undoubtedly beaten." Serene, the president went back to sleep. Four hours later, Truman was roused by Secret Service agent Jim Rowley with the news he knew was coming all along: "We've won."

For all its partisan rancor, there was an innocence about the campaign of 1948 that will never be recaptured in America. It was fought mostly on the issues by two men who exemplified the classic stances of their parties. Millions of voters saw the candidates in the flesh, heard their voices over loudspeakers or unfiltered on the radio, and read their words primarily in newspapers, as they had since the birth of the republic. Truman and Dewey took their cues from a few old pros in backrooms without the benefit of focus groups and raised money the old-fashioned way. With few pollsters in the field, the candidates had only gut readings of how they were really doing. So the stunning outcome seemed all the more pristine for being so unheralded.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me," of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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