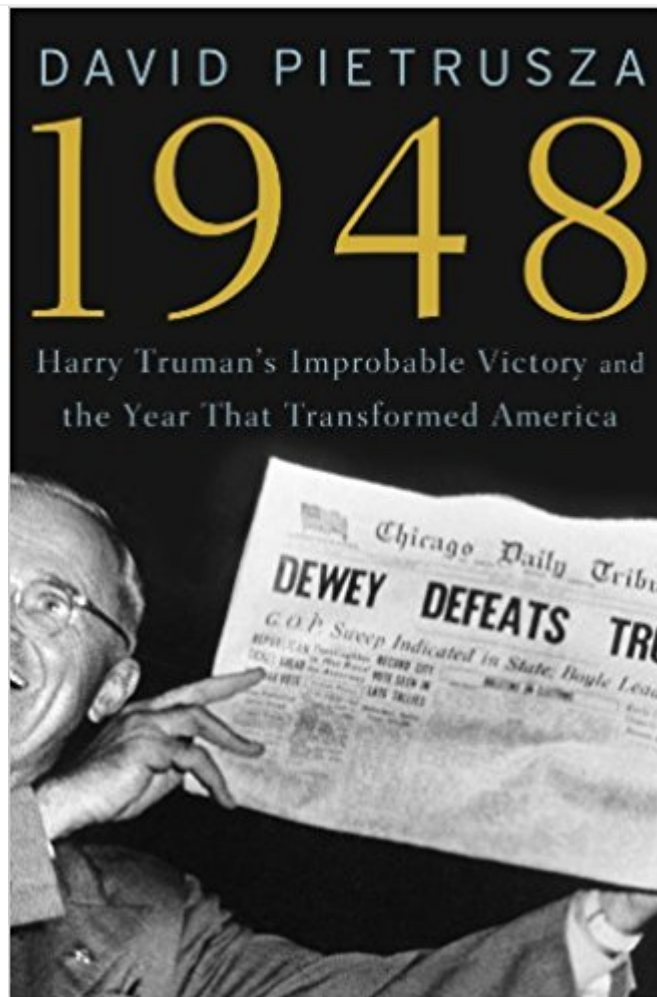


# {essays in history}

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## 1948: Harry Truman's Improbable Victory and the Year that Transformed America



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## Reviewed Work(s)

*1948: Harry Truman's Improbable Victory and the Year that Transformed America.* By David Pietrusza (New York: Union Square Press, 2011). Pp. 520. Cloth, \$24.95.

To most political pundits, journalists, and historians, the 1948 presidential election is summed up in one iconic image: Harry Truman triumphantly holding up the November 3rd edition of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that wrongfully prophesized, “Dewey Defeats Truman.” It was the culminating moment of one of the most unlikely presidential victories of the modern era. Truman’s electoral journey, as it transpired over the course of that year, is the subject of David Pietrusza’s fast-paced, interesting, and well-written account, *1948: Harry Truman’s Improbable Victory and the Year that Transformed America*.

The traditional explanation for that “improbable victory” is that the election was decided by an “underdog who refused to surrender” and a “presumed victor who refused to fight” (405). In this interpretation, Pietrusza aligns himself with Gary Donaldson and Zachary Karabell’s recent works on the same topic.<sup>[1]</sup> The work under review here, demonstrates, however, that the reality of this election was far more complex. The most in-depth account of the first post-war presidential election, *1948* not only covers the fight for the presidency as it played out between Truman and New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey, it also examines the contests for both the Republican and Democratic nominations as they unfolded on the campaign trails, in the media, and at the national conventions. Pietrusza provides powerful portrayals of all the major challengers, Republicans, Democrats, and outsiders alike. On the Republican side, Pietrusza gives plenty of attention not only to Thomas Dewey and his running mate Earl Warren but also to other presidential hopefuls such as Robert Taft, the young star of the party Harold Stassen, and Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg. All vied at one point or another for the nomination. On the Democratic side, Truman faced challenges from Henry Wallace’s leftist progressive campaign and from Strom Thurmond’s states’ rights campaign. Both threatened to steal vital parts of the electorate and in the process

condemn Truman to defeat. Perhaps most ominously for the sitting president—and one of the most interesting aspects highlighted in Pietrusza's work—the Democratic establishment abandoned Truman as well in 1948. They ignored his whistle-stop tour on the *Ferdinand Magellan*, and all the way up to the Democratic convention in July of 1948, the party searched high and low for someone to replace Truman on the Democratic ticket. As Pietrusza makes clear, the establishment never believed that Truman had earned the right to be president nor did they think he could win in 1948. In an unprecedented manner, the sitting president was disregarded, even by his own party. Truman only ended up on the ballot because the two candidates favored by the party establishment, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, ignored pleas to run.

In a style familiar to readers of Pietrusza's other accounts of twentieth century presidents, this is a lively told tale of Truman's inspiring effort to win the White House. But Pietrusza's Truman is not always likeable. At times racist, at times ignorant, and often fumbling, Pietrusza portrays his campaign as "unpresidential" and "undignified" (132). The campaign is also presented as smart, however. No great orator and too near-sighted to powerfully engage with his audience when delivering a speech, Truman understood that "Americans love a fighter—and they love a show." When nobody believed he could win, when no poll implied that he could win, Harry Truman put up a fight and he put on a show. This involved attacking the Republicans at every turn. Truman's "prairie-populist demagoguery" linked the GOP to the "blood suckers on Wall Street" and compared Dewey with his little mustache to Hitler (pp. 345). With nothing to lose, Truman dragged the election into the gutter. Perhaps convinced that he had already won or perhaps because he was too proud to replicate these tactics (no clear explanation ever emerges from Pietrusza), Dewey chose not to follow. As a result the Republican campaign was tame while Truman's was spirited. Still, even on election night, most Republicans and Democrats believed that Dewey's victory was safe. All Gallup polls implied as much. All reporters said as much. Within the Truman administration some even began to prepare for the transition of power. In dramatic fashion, Pietrusza narrates just how wrong they all were. Symbolically at least, nothing is more illustrative of the surprising turn of events than the position taken by Nina Warren, wife of the Republican candidate for vice president. "Wanting no part of

Tom Dewey or of being a vice president's wife, she [had] privately marked her ballot – for Harry Truman” (384). Like so many others, including those expected to vote in droves for Wallace and Thurmond, Nina Warren may not have been in awe of President Truman but nor did she want the uninspiring Dewey in the White House. It was a common feeling across the nation.

Pietrusza's originality lies mainly in placing the 1948 election within a larger story of the nation's political culture. He shows his talent for penetrating politicians' armor and reaching the humans behind it. The cameos made by Eleanor Roosevelt, William R. Hearst, Henry Luce, Joe Martin, Drew Pearson, the Alsop brothers, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., Joe McCarthy, Dwight Eisenhower, and the always piercing political commentary by H. L. Mencken demonstratively supports this. They bring Pietrusza's story to life. *1948* reminds us that politics is fundamentally about people and about ideas.

Perhaps the greatest shortcoming of *1948* is Pietrusza's determination to tell the full tale of the election. In what at times seems like an overreach for details and an exaggerated number of anecdotes, the author at times loses sight of the bigger picture. Pietrusza's coverage of foreign affairs, for example, is particularly weak and often appears labored. A more evenhanded observation might acknowledge that the crises in Europe and Asia were of vast importance to Truman and to many members of the GOP during this fateful year. This criticism aside, *1948* is a powerful classic American story about “the man from Independence” who defied the odds to finally become president in his own right. Pietrusza's work is a highly enjoyable read. It will prove useful to scholars and the larger public as well.

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[1] Gary A. Donaldson, *Truman Defeats Dewey* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999); Zachary Karabell, *The Last Campaign: How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election* (New York: Knopf, 2000).



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