

TRUMAN

FDR'S EXIT PLAN

Franklin D. Roosevelt knew he was dying.
So he picked vigorous Harry Truman to help win the 1944 election—
and see the war through to victory.

by John E. Stanchak

U S SENATOR HARRY S. TRUMAN OF MISSOURI SAT on a bed in a seventh-floor suite in Chicago's Blackstone Hotel. Opposite him, Democratic party operative Bob Hannegan was speaking to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the telephone. It was July 19, 1944, in the middle of a sticky urban heat wave, and the Democrats were holding their national convention in Chicago Stadium. Before setting out for the arena, Hannegan was trying to get an answer to the great political question of the day: who would be Roosevelt's running mate? Roosevelt's voice, loud and clear on all occasions, rang out from Hannegan's telephone receiver as if from a theater speaker, letting Truman hear both sides of the conversation.

"Bob, have you got that fellow lined up yet?" Roosevelt asked.

"No," Hannegan replied. "He is the contrariest goddam mule from Missouri I ever dealt with."

"Well, you tell the Senator that if he wants to break up the Democratic party in the middle of the war, that's his responsibility," FDR snapped and slammed down the phone.

Truman was stunned. He looked at Hannegan and muttered, "Oh, shit!" Roosevelt had just more or less demanded that Truman get himself on the Democratic ticket as his running mate. "Well, if that's the situation, I'll have to say yes," a shell-shocked Truman told Hannegan. "But why the hell didn't he tell me in the first place?"

Truman would soon understand FDR's anxious desire to find the right running mate. Most other Americans would have to wait decades to understand, and in the meantime, many newsmen and commentators would write off the presidential election of 1944 as a mere footnote in the history of World War II. But much was at stake—perhaps the very direction of the US war effort—and for Republican and Democratic insiders, this would be the most dramatic election of their lives. Almost all the drama would play out behind the cur-

tains, and at the center of it all would be a president with a secret.

Sixty-two-year-old Franklin Roosevelt was virtually a dead man. Since the spring he had moved around shadowed by medical people. In March 1944 navy surgeon Ross McIntire, the White House physician, began to panic and called in navy cardiologist Howard G. Bruenn for consultation.

Roosevelt had difficulty breathing, his blood pressure couldn't be controlled, anemia had set in, and he couldn't lie flat without going into physical distress. Together, the doctors arranged for a clandestine hospital visit so they could run tests. As they readied Roosevelt for the ride across town, McIntire casually asked him how he felt. "I feel like hell," Roosevelt answered.

Roosevelt had come a long way, for better and for worse, since his birth into the American aristocracy in New York's Hudson Valley. A distant cousin of President Theodore Roosevelt, he was schooled at Harvard and Columbia, served in the New York State legislature, was assistant secretary of the navy under President Woodrow Wilson, and was the unsuccessful Democratic candidate for vice president of the United States in 1920. Then, in the summer of 1921, while vacationing on Campobello Island, off New Brunswick, he suffered what doctors believed at the time was an attack of polio, but which researchers at the University of Texas Medical Branch in



Above: Wearing a campaign button for Franklin Roosevelt in 1944 meant you wanted to give him a fourth term as president. Even three terms had been unprecedented until his 1940 reelection. But most Americans seemed reluctant to change presidents in wartime. Opposite: At the July 1944 Democratic convention in Chicago, party chairman Senator Samuel Jackson proclaims Senator Harry Truman FDR's official running mate.

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Galveston, Texas, determined in 2003 was probably the rare immune-system disorder Guillain-Barré syndrome. He was paralyzed from the waist down.

In what would become an almost iconic tale of perseverance and optimism, Roosevelt tried to banish the appearance of disability, learning to walk with heavy leg braces and canes, driving a Packard with hand controls, and making certain not to be seen in public using a wheelchair. He asserted himself as a kingmaker inside the national Democratic party, won the governorship of New York in 1928, the US presidency in 1932 and 1936, and an unprecedented third term in 1940.

The heroic epic began to draw to a close in the spring of 1944, when McIntire and Bruenn determined Roosevelt had reached the limit of his endurance. They concluded he was suffering from congestive heart failure, chronic bronchitis, and what they termed “invalidism,” the breaking down of his body’s systems and organs after more than two decades of struggle with paralysis. The man was crumbling and there was nothing that 1940s medical technology could do for him.

Roosevelt spent April resting at the South Carolina estate of his advisor Bernard Baruch. On his return to Washington, he curtailed his public appearances. His daughter Anna left a position with a newspaper and moved into the White House to assist with his care. Wartime secrecy laws helped shield visits by specialists, and McIntire fronted for Roosevelt before the press corps, saying his health was fine and matters were unremarkable.

CABINET MEMBERS AND AIDES WERE APPALLED at Roosevelt’s condition. The president would mentally drift away in the middle of briefings. On one occasion Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins was moved to tears at the sight of him suffering in his chair. In private, Democratic party power-brokers gently raised questions about the upcoming elections. Political boss Ed Flynn from the Bronx met with FDR shortly after his return from South Carolina and was stunned at his appearance. “I

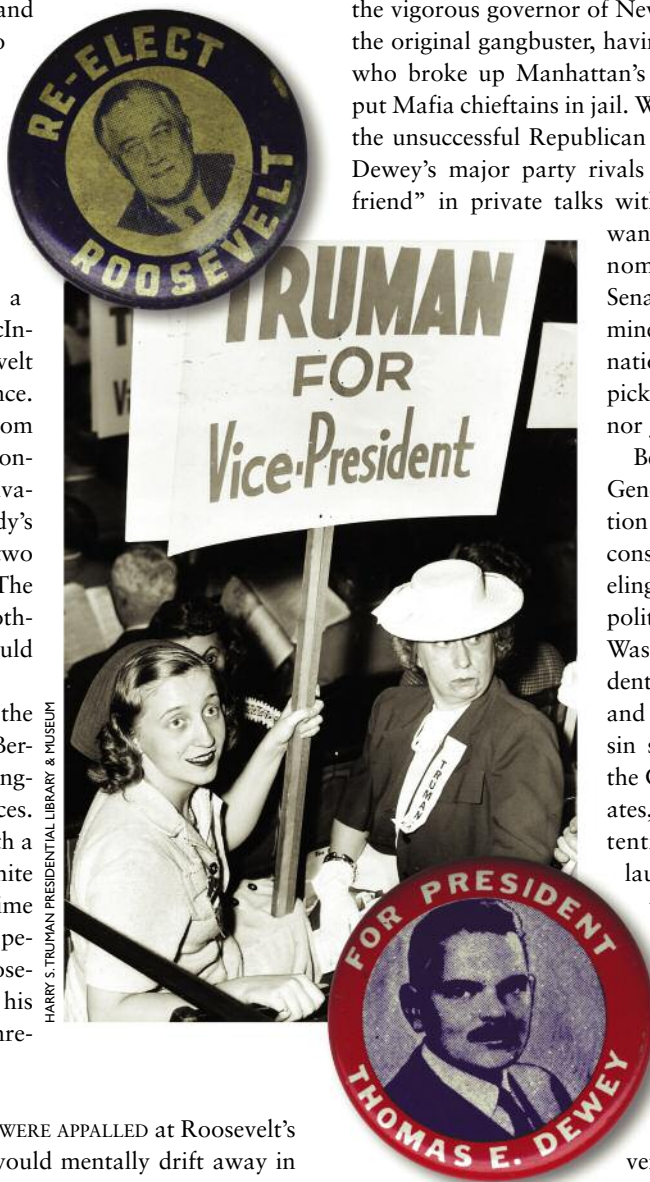
felt that he would never survive his term,” he later wrote. Flynn personally appealed to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to ask her husband not to seek reelection.

Elsewhere in America, Republican leaders saw a decent shot at unseating Roosevelt and were angling for their own party’s nomination. Chief among them was 42-year-old Thomas E. Dewey, the vigorous governor of New York. He was nationally known as the original gangbuster, having won acclaim as a district attorney who broke up Manhattan’s loan-sharking and vice rackets and put Mafia chieftains in jail. Wealthy businessman Wendell Willkie, the unsuccessful Republican standard-bearer in 1940 and one of Dewey’s major party rivals (Dewey dismissed him as “our fat friend” in private talks with Republican movers and shakers),

wanted another crack at winning the nomination. Hidebound conservative Senator Robert Taft of Ohio was determined to deny these upstart moderates a national candidacy. He hoped to hand-pick a contender—perhaps Ohio’s Governor John Bricker.

Beating them all in dash and rank was General Douglas MacArthur. For election purposes, MacArthur claimed Wisconsin as his home state, and while traveling around the Pacific theater, he sent political feelers back to associates in Washington and the Midwest. His presidential hopes were dashed when both he and Willkie were drubbed in the Wisconsin state primary election. This pleased the GOP’s increasingly influential moderates, who dismissed the general as a pretentious right-wing ideologue. They laughed along with much of the country at a comment MacArthur’s ex-wife, Louise, made in a magazine interview. Asked whether MacArthur could be considered a dark horse, she quipped, “It depends on which end of him you’re looking at.”

The Republicans held their convention in Chicago June 26–28 in the same hall the Democrats had booked for July and in the same hot and humid conditions. In this era before state primary elections and caucuses were popular, convention delegates followed the lead of state power brokers or political machine bosses when casting their votes. Republican leaders had arm-wrestled over the nomination for months, and by the time the



Above, top button: In 1944, FDR wanted to seem vigorous—the way he looked on this 1940 campaign button. Opposite: Democratic insiders knew that Roosevelt—here looking worn at the Jefferson Memorial dedication in April 1943—was dying. But FDR felt duty-bound to seek reelection in 1944 and see the war through to victory. Above, bottom button: To do that, he had to beat Republican Thomas Dewey. That would require a running mate who could campaign the way a dying man could not—and be a capable successor. FDR chose Truman. Above, photo: Truman resisted at first, then dove into the vice presidential race to the scowls of his taciturn wife, Bess (in hat), and the enthusiasm of his daughter Margaret.



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convention's opening gavel sounded, they had reduced the field down to Dewey and Bricker. After some routine recognition of also-rans and a few floor votes, Dewey was selected as the Republican nominee. On the advice of party insiders, he selected defeated conservative contender Bricker—a man he believed less than competent and whom he had characterized as “an honest Harding”—as his vice-presidential nominee.

The Republican team split up and went campaigning almost immediately. On the national stage Bricker was a complete cipher and remained so throughout the campaign. Dewey fared worse. His strongest gut-level appeal to voters was to lambaste Roosevelt for flaunting the two-term tradition established by George Washington. When Roosevelt broke that tradition in 1940, supporters claimed it was because he was indispensable. Willkie, his

was a pity,” Scott commented years later. “He just didn't get it.”

Dewey didn't look like much, either. He stood stiffly and wore a small, pencil-thin moustache. A remark variously credited to socialite Alice Longworth or literary wit Dorothy Parker derided him as “the little man on the wedding cake.” He possessed a marvelous, professional-grade tenor singing voice and in youth flirted with the thought of an opera career, but in politics he never once tried to warm up a crowd with a song.

Stereotypically, the Republicans were the party of the privileged and the elite, and even though Dewey was no snob, he had trouble eluding that characterization. For example, fuel was rationed at the time and a decent car was hard to come by, but Dewey rode in a marvelous motorcade through Philadelphia. The crowds at the curb were mostly made up of old men and housewives. As he



opponent that year, had lashed back, “If one man is indispensable, then none of us is free.” This phrase resonated in the media at the time because it reflected the world's then-distinct fear of dictators and political strongmen. But when Dewey repeated Willkie's sentiment in 1944—with the world in shambles and Americans looking for leadership—it sounded warmed over.

DEWY'S PUBLIC PERSONA WAS AWKWARD. At a Los Angeles-area rally where thousands of Republican faithful gathered to be entertained by musicians and were worked up into a happily shouting horde by movie stars Cary Grant and Ginger Rogers, Dewey came onstage to thunderous cheers. He then gave a stiff, serious speech about economic and tax policy. It laid an egg. He had a hard time understanding that on the stump it was sometimes better to sound breezy and bright.

A sense of humor might have helped Dewey. At a gathering of Republicans in Pennsylvania, Congressman Hugh Scott shouted from the podium that after Dewey's election “we'll all be invited to lunch at the White House.” Dewey looked concerned. “I'm afraid you'll have to call for an appointment first,” he replied. “It

cruised by smiling and waving, they taunted him with shouts of “Where did you get the gas?”

That year, political pollsters stumbled upon the obvious. In surveys, young members of the American military admitted Roosevelt was the only US president they could remember in their lifetimes. By then he was in his 12th year in office; he'd been president for at least half their lives. He had led the country out of the Great Depression, prepared it for war, and was at that moment heading up the nation's life-or-death struggle against fascism and militarism. Roosevelt was the reliable brand and could expect huge blocks of votes from service personnel. GIs didn't talk much about Dewey.

For FDR's advantages to matter, however, he had to run for reelection, and as he faced up to his waning strength he faced a dilemma. Presidential aide Clark Kerr recalled that at the November 1943 summit at Tehran, Iran, with Soviet leader Josef Stalin, Roosevelt mentioned that there would be a presidential election in 1944. “He said he did not want to run, but might have to if the war was still on,” Kerr remembered. Later, Roosevelt wrote to Hannegan that despite his health, he would run again. “All that is within me cries out to go back to my home on the

Hudson River, to avoid public responsibilities....," he wrote. But he would campaign one more time because "to win this war wholeheartedly, unequivocally and quickly as we can is our task of first importance. To win this war in such a way that there would be no further world wars in the foreseeable future is our second objective. To provide occupations, and to provide a decent standard of living for our men in the Armed Services after the war, and for all Americans, are the final objectives."

Run he would, and the Democrats set out to spread the word by newspaper and radio that he would seek a fourth term. But Roosevelt needed a running mate who could supply the campaigning vigor he lacked—and carry on his presidential legacy after his fast-approaching death. Vice President Henry Wallace was not that man.

In 1944, no party official felt like defending Wallace a second time, and he was unpopular among Senate Democrats. So, in May, Roosevelt sent him on a long diplomatic mission to China, and sat up with his party's chiefs in late-night meetings discussing alternatives. High on the list were Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn and former US senator from South Carolina and former Supreme Court Justice James Byrnes, who then held an administrative post in the East Wing of the White House as director of war mobilization.

THEN, DURING A SHIRT-SLEEVE evening meeting over smokes and cocktails at the White House, someone brought up the name of Harry Truman. "I hardly know Truman," Roosevelt said, and sent someone to fetch a copy of the Senate



Wallace, who had started as Roosevelt's agriculture secretary, had become a problem. When John Garner of Texas, vice president during Roosevelt's first two terms, left the New Deal fold because it had become too liberal for his taste, FDR selected Wallace as his 1940 running mate. Roosevelt respected his intellect. But not long into that campaign, Wallace's religious beliefs became a liability; he was an adherent of Eastern mysticism, and Republicans discovered letters he had written to his spiritual advisor with the salutation "Dear Guru." By 1940s standards, Wallace was by no means a regular guy, and this revelation could have scuttled Roosevelt's chances for a third term. Democratic party bosses countered by threatening to reveal that then-candidate Willkie, a married man, was enjoying an affair with the ex-wife of literary critic and prize-winning writer Carl Van Doren. The standoff ended up squelching the rumors on both sides.

directory so he could check out his background.

To FDR, Truman's record seemed mixed. Truman had entered the Senate in 1934 backed by Kansas City's Democratic boss Tom Pendergast, who was later jailed on tax evasion charges. But Truman struggled to wash the machine politics image off his 1940 reelection campaign. Without anyone's urging, he gave a speech to an almost all-white Missouri audience in which he advocated full civil rights for blacks. The speech, if not overwhelmingly convincing to the racially segregated state's citizens, got Truman noticed without dooming his campaign. He appeared politically brave and persuasive. Reelected, Truman headed up a wartime Senate committee that exposed profiteering and shoddy manufacturing of military goods by American corporations. He appeared tough but personally honest.

In the weeks preceding the Democratic convention, Roosevelt

Opposite, left: Dewey campaigns with his wife in Charleston, West Virginia, in October 1944. The New York governor lacked charisma, but his crime-fighting and criticism of FDR appealed to many voters. Opposite, right: Dewey had won his party's nod over GOP hopefuls including General Douglas MacArthur. Here, at the June 1944 convention in Chicago, pro-Dewey delegates march for their man. Above, left: The Democrats' convention the next month focused on the vice presidency. FDR, staying away to hide his broken health, hoped a radio speech and Truman's moxie would secure the ticket he wanted. Here, Truman accepts handshakes as he emerges the winner on the second ballot. Above, right: Democratic National Committee Chairman Robert Hannegan and Truman meet in Washington, DC, in August to discuss campaign plans.

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was almost maddeningly coy about his choice of a running mate. He told certain factions he might consider Douglas. He hinted to others it might be Byrnes. He coldly told Wallace he would let the convention decide the matter and wished him luck.

Truman did not want the vice presidency. He told everyone around him, honestly and earnestly, "in words of one syllable" as he put it, that he would not run. He knew the state of Roosevelt's health and did not want to be the man to follow him or to be compared to him.

By the night of July 19, 1944, Truman had already told anyone who would listen that he would not seek the nomination. But Roosevelt's snarling call to Hannegan in the hotel room changed that. Party elders urged Truman to have his fellow senator from Missouri, Bennett Clark, make his nominating speech at the convention, then sent Truman out into the Chicago night to find him. Clark, recently widowed, had taken to drink. Truman had to troll bars and hotels across the city before he found him, in someone else's hotel room, drunk to the point of incoherence.

Roosevelt, meanwhile, was on a train to San Diego, where he was to board a ship for a round of meetings in Hawaii with Pacific theater commanders. He would not be present at the Democratic convention and would give his nomination acceptance speech from the train via radio. But on July 20, alone in his railcar in San Diego with his son James, a US Marine Corps officer, Roosevelt suffered a severe angina attack. "Jimmy, I don't know if I can make it—I have horrible pains," he gasped. James helped him out of his chair and laid him on the floor, where he remained for 10 minutes until the attack subsided. James then helped him compose himself, and together they left to watch troops practice amphibious landings.

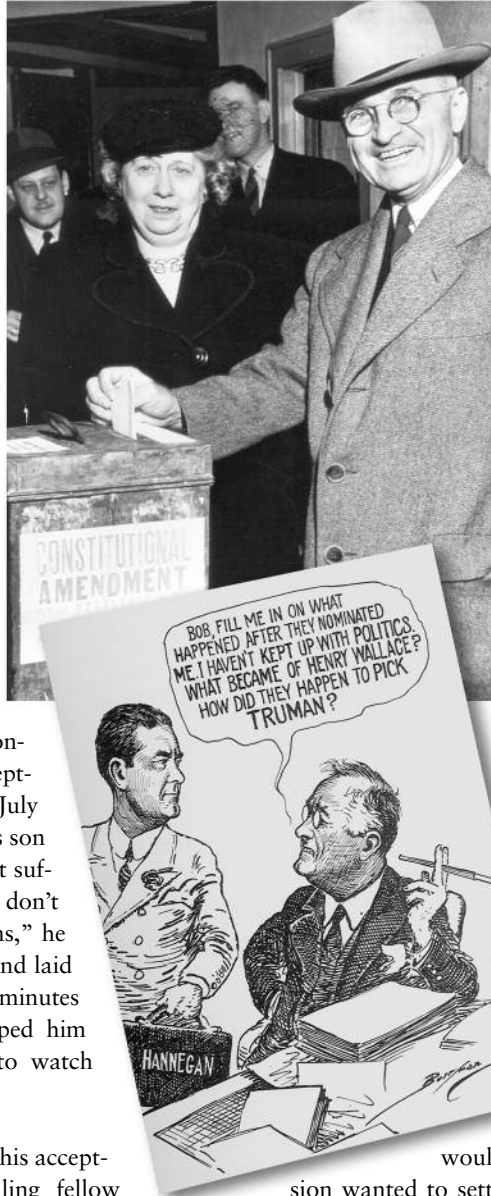
THAT NIGHT, ROOSEVELT BROADCAST his acceptance speech from the train, telling fellow Democrats "I shall not campaign, in the usual sense, for the office. In these days of tragic sorrow, I do not consider it fitting. And besides, in these days of global warfare, I shall not be able to find the time. I shall, however, feel free to report to the people the facts about matters of concern to them and especially to correct any misrepresentations."

As Roosevelt spoke, delegates in the Chicago convention hall either looked up at poster portraits of him that had been manipulated to make him appear younger and healthier, or gazed at an empty podium illuminated by a single spotlight. The familiar presidential tones coming out of the speakers sounded as plucky and strong as ever. But the sight of loyal thousands listening intently to the disembodied voice and then cheering for it struck some observers as eerie.

The following day, the conventioners moved to the next order of business: selecting a vice president. Wallace, angry at Roosevelt's abandonment, had shown up in Chicago with a large and loyal delegation. On the morning of July 21, there were demonstrations with conventioners chanting "We Want Wallace!" Several long-shot would-be nominees, such as Senator John Bankhead of Alabama, were also working the delegates.

Wallace got his nomination as a candidate for vice president. Then Clark—supported by plenty of black coffee, multiple orders of bacon and eggs, and a metaphorical swift kick in the pants from Truman—made an undistinguished speech touting Truman for the slot. The vote that followed ended with no strong result for any candidate. Long into the afternoon votes were horse-traded, and Truman, defying tradition, showed up personally with his wife, Bess, and daughter Margaret in tow. Bess scowled throughout. Margaret, a college student, cheered at floor demonstrations for her dad as if they were football games. Truman munched hot dogs behind the stage and appeared to be secretly enjoying himself.

Party officials decided to postpone the dinner break and push back the evening session to get one more floor vote in. Truman supporters who feared that more Wallace voters would materialize during the coming evening session wanted to settle the issue right away. They succeeded, and Truman seized the nomination firmly with 1,031 votes to Douglas's 4 and Wallace's 105. Later that night, as Truman tried to escort Bess and Margaret from the hall, crowds outside pressed forward to touch them and shake hands. Bess, who disliked crowds and fuss, turned to Harry and snapped "Are we going to have to go through this for the rest of our lives?"



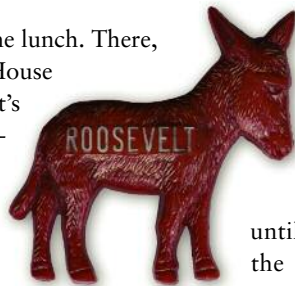
Above, top: Truman and Bess vote on November 7, 1944, in Independence, Missouri. Every vote counted—FDR beat Dewey by less than 3.6 million ballots in the popular vote. Above, bottom: FDR had not left the election to chance while focusing on the war, as he suggests to Hannegan in this period cartoon. Instead, he had sent Truman campaigning while he carefully concealed his broken health. Opposite, top: The tactic worked. Here, on November 10, FDR, Truman, and then-Vice President Henry Wallace greet the press from their car as they return to Washington, DC, victorious. Opposite, bottom: A 1936 campaign pin, a relic of FDR's first presidential run. Roosevelt knew his fourth term belonged to Truman.



On August 18, Truman met Roosevelt for lunch in the gardens outside the White House. Together they smiled for the news cameras. After this brief formality, Truman was to hit the campaign trail while Roosevelt ostensibly carried on the business of managing the war. They discussed nothing of substance, but Roosevelt quipped, perhaps only half-jokingly, that Truman should not travel by air during the campaign because it was important that one of them stay alive.

Truman walked back to his Senate office after the lunch. There, his friend Harry Vaughn asked how the White House meeting had gone. Truman told him Roosevelt's hands trembled so much that he had trouble pouring cream into his coffee. "His hands were shaking," Truman said, "and he talks with considerable difficulty." Roosevelt's mental sharpness was still there, Truman continued, "but physically he's just going to pieces."

The campaign went on, and Truman and Dewey crisscrossed the nation giving stump speeches. Roosevelt made a few campaign addresses when convenient, but his surrogates did the bulk of the electioneering. In October, the nation was stunned when Willkie suddenly died of a heart attack in New York City. Republicans shuddered to think of the disaster they would have faced had Willkie been their nominee. Roosevelt—who had run for president against Herbert Hoover in 1932, Kansas Governor Alf Landon in 1936, and Willkie in 1940 and had never worked up



personal animosity toward any of them—expressed sincere sorrow at the loss. When anyone mentioned Dewey in private, on the other hand, he snapped that he was "a son-of-a-bitch."

The result of the national popular vote that November was 25,612,916 for Roosevelt and 22,017,929 for Dewey. It was Roosevelt's closest presidential contest. He did carry every state in the South, however, and set a record in Mississippi, winning 90 percent of the popular vote.

On election night, Roosevelt listened to the ballot returns on the radio at his family home in Hyde Park, New York. Long into the morning, he had heard himself declared the winner in 36 states but still, no telephone call came from Dewey conceding the race. Despite illness and fatigue, Roosevelt sat up until almost 4 A.M. Finally, the phone rang with Dewey on the line to formally give up the race to the exasperated Roosevelt. As historian David McCullough wrote, Dewey went on to address his supporters and concluded his remarks with the sentiment "in the difficult years ahead Divine Providence will guide and protect the President of the United States." After hearing this, Roosevelt went to bed saying, "I still think he is a son-of-a-bitch." ★

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