

Chicago Tribune

Dewey defeats Truman *Well, everyone makes mistakes*



November 3, 1948 - President Harry S. Truman holds up a copy of the Tribune after his presidential election, arguably one of the most famous headline mistakes. (UPI/Corbis-Bettmann)

By Tim Jones Tribune staff reporter

As a presidential candidate, Gov. Thomas Dewey of New York was not a glad-hander, not a flesh-presser. He was stiff and tended toward pomposity. "The only man who could strut sitting down" was the crack that made the rounds. But on Nov. 2, 1948, Election Day, an overwhelming sense of inevitability hung about the Republican nominee. The polls and the pundits left no room for doubt: Dewey was going to defeat President Harry S. Truman. And the Tribune would be the first to report it.

Arguably the most famous headline in the newspaper's 150-year history, DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN is every publisher's nightmare on every election night. Like most newspapers, the Tribune, which had dismissed him on its editorial page as a "nincompoop," was lulled into a false sense of security by polls that repeatedly predicted a Dewey victory. Critically important, though, was a printers' strike, which forced the paper to go to press hours before it normally would. As the first-edition deadline approached, managing editor J. Loy "Pat" Maloney had to make the headline call, although many East Coast tallies were not yet in. Maloney banked on the track record of Arthur Sears Henning, the paper's longtime Washington

correspondent. Henning said Dewey. Henning was rarely wrong. Besides, Life magazine had just carried a big photo of Dewey with the caption "The next President of the United States."

The ink was hardly dry on 150,000 copies of the paper when radio bulletins reported that the race was surprisingly close. The headline was changed to DEMOCRATS MAKE SWEEP OF STATE OFFICES for the second edition. Truman went on to take Illinois and much of the Midwest in this whopping election surprise. Radio comedian Fred Allen noted Truman was the "first president to lose in a Gallup and win in a walk." The Tribune blamed the pollsters for its mistake.

The headline might well have been quickly forgotten but for a chance encounter two days later in St. Louis.

Truman, traveling by rail to Washington, stepped to the rear platform of the train and was handed a copy of the Tribune early edition. He had as low an opinion of the Tribune as it did of him. Truman held the paper up, and photographers preserved the moment for history.

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