LETTER FROM A CAMPAIGN TRAIN

CANDIDATES notoriously promise better than they ever perform, but if Governor Dewey manages the Presidency half as well as he is managing his campaign for it, we are about to have four, eight, twelve, sixteen years of cool, sleek efficiency in government. I venture upon this prophecy after quite a spell of riding aboard the Dewey Victory Special, the train that has been hauling the Republican candidate, his wife, and his entourage of advisers, well-wishers, favor-couriers, and newspapermen up and down the country since mid-September. Before I looked in on the Dewey campaign, I had acquired some seasoning and a basis for comparison by serving as a correspondent's henchman on the train that took President Truman and his similar, but far smaller, group of fellow-passengers over much the same route. As far as the arts and techniques, as distinct from the political content, of the campaigns are concerned, the difference between the Democratic and Republican operations, I calculate, thirty or forty years. It is the difference between horseshoe and foam rubber, between the coal-steam griddle and the pop-up toaster. Dewey is the pop-up toaster.

Everything I've seen of the Dewey campaign is slick and snappy. This is in strong contrast to the general dowdiness and good-natured slovenliness of the Truman campaign, at least when and where I observed it. Truman's main meetings were all old-style political rallies, brightened up, on occasion, by some droopy hunting and by Department of Sanitation brass bands. In San Francisco, the Democrats contracted a most unfortunate alliance with a musical branch of the local parent-teacher association, which called itself the Mother Singers of America. The Mother Singers were authentic mothers—and grandmothers—who wrapped themselves in yards of brown monk's cloth and sang the kind of songs you would expect them to. The Dewey group favors professional musicians, professional decorators, and professionals in everything else. All the way down the line, his effects are more dramatic and more electrifying. At a Truman meeting, the President, as a rule, takes his seat on the platform and sits quietly, a slender and almost pathetic figure surrounded by bead police commissioners and senators of heroic bulk, through all the preliminaries. When his turn finally comes to speak, his advance on the microphone hardly takes the multitude by storm. Dewey's entrances are delayed. He remains in the wings until all the invocations and endorsements are over. Sometimes he stays away from the meeting hall until the last moment. Then, with a great whining of motorcycle-escort sirens to hush the crowd and build up suspense, he arrives. The instant his name is spoken, he comes onstage, seemingly from nowhere, arms outstretched to embrace the crowd and gather in the applause that breaks the hush. It is an uncannily effective piece of business.

Dewey doesn't seem to walk; he coasts out like a man who has been mounted on casters and given a tremendous shove from behind. However it is done, he rouses the crowd to a peak of excitement and enthusiasm, and he has to wait an agreeably long while for the racket to die down.

Dewey likes drama, but he has an obvious distaste for the horseplay side of politics. He accepts honorary memberships in sheriffs' posses and fraternal organizations, but he is uncomfortable during the installation ceremonies. On his first transcontinental tour after his nomination, he collected some fifteen cowpuncher hats, but he refused to try on any of them in public. The only time he got into the spirit of things was at his rally in the Hollywood Bowl. For this gathering, his local managers, mainly movie people, arranged a first-class variety show. In addition to assembling a lot of stars who endorsed the candidate in short, pithy, gag-laden speeches, they hired a marimba band and a chorus line for the preliminary entertainment. For the invocations, they recruited a minister, a priest, and a rabbi. When all of whom could have played romantic leads themselves. At the end of Dewey's speech, the marimba band struck up "God Bless America," as a recessional. Dewey was still standing at the microphone, and Mrs. Dewey, as she always does after he finishes, came forward to join him. Perhaps the pageantry finally overcame him, for suddenly he breathed deep and took aboard a full load of the fine night air of Hollywood. Then he gave vent to the rich baritone he spent so many years developing. "... and that I love," he sang, and, slipping an arm around Mrs. Dewey's waist, looked encouragingly at her. Mrs. Dewey came in on the next line, and together they went all the way through the rest of the Irving Berlin anthem.

It is one of the paradoxes of 1948 that the man in office is a much less experienced campaigner than the man who is seeking to win the office. Truman was on the public payroll when Dewey was a college boy in Michigan, but his serious campaigning has been limited to two tries for the United States Senate and one for the Vice-Presidency. It wasn't bush-league stuff, but it wasn't big-league, either. Dewey, on the other hand, is entitled to wear service stripes for three major campaigns. In 1940, he sought the Republican nomination as vigorously as he sought the main prize in 1944 and is seeking it now. The effects are apparent in the organization and planning of every phase of his campaign travels. There is far more foresight and far better timing and scheduling than in the President's tour. Dewey's staff work is superior,
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too. For example, correspondents with Truman were forced, while I was aboard his train, to miss deadline after deadline because they had to wait too long for advance copies of the President’s speeches. Presumably his ghostwriters, some of whom were on the train and some of whom were back in Washington, were agonizing up to the zero hour, trying to make their sentences come out right. And then the sentences didn’t come out right anyway. The rhetoric that Truman was given to deliver was coarse, gritty, old-fashioned political stuff, with about as much flow as oatmeal.

Dewey’s speeches, which reporters can put on the telegraph wires twelve to twenty-four hours before delivery time, are as smooth and glossy as chromium. It may be that, on analysis, their cliché content would turn out to be neither much lower nor much higher than that of Truman’s speeches, but, as one man on the challenger’s train put it, they are written and spoken in such a manner that they give one the feeling Dewey has not borrowed his clichés from the masters but has minted them all by himself.

A conscientious search for the literary antecedents of Dewey’s speeches might show that the strongest influence is the Reader’s Digest. They are full of the good cheer, the defiant optimism, the inspirational tone, and the breath-taking simplification that have made that magazine so popular. If Dewey’s speeches are not consciously modelled on the Digest, there are few of them that would not seem at home in its pages. “Your future lies ahead of you,” a catchy line that turned up in several of the speeches, would make a splendid Digest title. Moreover, in sound Digest fashion, Dewey is promising to start, when he gets to Washington, “the greatest pruning and weeding operation in American history.” When the thought first occurred to me that Dewey or his advisers might have picked up a few tricks from the Digest, I asked James C. Hagerty, the candidate’s press secretary, if he had any idea whether or not this was the case. “I hardly think so,” Hagerty said. “The Governor has a style all his own that he’s been working on for years.” Even so, it is worth noting that one of the important personalities aboard the Dewey train is Stanley High, a Roving Editor of the Digest and the author of some of the most celebrated articles it has published in recent years. The dope on Mr. High, as I got it from Hagerty, is that he is travelling with Dewey not as an author but as a former clergyman. His function, I was told, is to advise Dewey on the religious implications of political issues and on the political implications of religious issues. Still, it might be that, unknown to Hagerty, Mr. High finds time, in between issues, to make a phrase here and condense a line of argument there.

Dewey’s effect on his audience is unquestionably greater than Truman’s. He does not, so far as I am able to judge, draw larger crowds. The business of estimating the size of crowds is, by the way, probably one of the most nonsensical and misleading aspects of political reporting. Some correspondents make a hobby of it, and conceivably their technique improves with practice, but most of them rely on police officials for their figures. Suspecting that a policeman can be as wrong as the next man, I made a simple test at one Dewey meeting. I asked the ranking police official for his estimate, and then asked the manager of the auditorium for his. The policeman’s count, which turned up in a number of newspapers, was fifty per cent higher. Since the manager’s standard of living is directly related to the size of the audiences in his auditorium, I imagine it would be safer to string along with him. Then, there is always an element of fortuitousness in the size of the street crowds that watch the candidates ride through the big cities. There is no way of telling how many people have come out of their way to see the distinguished visitor and how many just happen to be around. It is customary for campaign managers to take advantage of the fortuitous element. Campaign trains have an oddly predictable way of arriving for afternoon meetings just before the lunch hour and for evening meetings just before the stores and offices close. A candidate’s procession never goes directly from the depot to its destination in town. The Civic Center may be only three or four blocks up State Street from the Union Station, but the motorcade is certain to follow a route that covers at least thirty blocks, and thereby catches a lot more innocent bystanders. Possibly the best way to calculate the turnout of admirers would be to estimate the number of onlookers carrying bundles and then subtract them from the total.

For judging crowds, the ear is probably a more reliable instrument than the eye. Its verdict, I would say, favored Dewey almost everywhere. No Truman crowd that I heard responded
with more than elementary courtesy and occasionally mild and rather weary approval. Partly, no doubt, this was because the President has a lamentable way of swallowing the very lines he ought to bellow or snarl, and partly, I think, it was because he simply didn’t have his audience with him. Dewey’s ovations are never, as the phrase goes, thundering, but his applause is not mere politeness. Dewey is not an orator in the classic sense, but he is a first-class elocutionist, and when he fixes his eyes on the crowd and says that the way to avoid having Communists in the government is to avoid appointing them in the first place, as he plans to do, he gets what he wants from the customers, which means, naturally, that they are getting what they want from him.

The junior-executive briskness in the running of the Dewey campaign extends, quite mysteriously, to many phases of life aboard the train. Campaign trains become, in their few weeks of existence, compact social organizations. They develop their own mores and their own institutions. One of the most remarkable—indeed, almost weird—features of life on them is the way the spirit of the leading passenger, riding in the last car, seems to dominate and mold the spirit of the entourage. It is understandable that this should happen to the staff of the candidate, but it actually affects even the newspapermen. Candidates have nothing to do with the selection of the reporters who accompany them. In some cases, to be sure, the reporters select candidates, and it is conceivable that psychological affinity may have influenced their choices. But the effect of that affinity would be, at best, a small one, and it would govern only a few journalists. Yet I am prepared to testify under oath that the atmosphere even in the press section of the Truman train is pure Harry Truman, and the atmosphere in the press section of the Dewey train is pure Tom Dewey. One is like life in the back rooms at District Headquarters, the other like life in the Greenwich Country Club. The favorite beverage in the club cars on the Truman train, when I was on it, was the Kentucky bourbon highball, before, during, and after meals. I don’t recall seeing a single cocktail served. Highballs are often seen on the Dewey train, but Martinis and Manhattans are more in vogue. The principal diversion on the Truman train was poker, generally seven-card stud. At least two games were

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always in progress. If any poker is played on the Dewey train, it is played behind closed compartment doors. There are, however, several spirited bridge games going on all the time.

It may be that the correspondents with Truman took to the more rugged forms of recreation because their life was more rugged. Life with Truman was not exactly primitive but, compared to life with Dewey, it was hard. If you wanted anything laundered, you did it yourself, in a Pullman basin. When you detrained anywhere for an overnight stay, it was every man for himself. You carried your duffel and scrabbled for your food. If a man was such a slave to duty that he felt obliged to hear what the President said in his back-platform addresses, he had to climb down off the train, run to the rear end, mingle with the crowd, and listen. Often, this was a hazardous undertaking, for the President was given to speaking late at night to crowds precariously assembled on sections of roadbed built up fifteen or twenty feet above the surrounding land. The natives knew the contours of the ground, but the reporters did not, and more than one of them tumbled down a cinder embankment. The Dewey organization sees that none of these inconveniences trouble the life of anyone on the Governor's train. Whenever the Dewey train stops overnight, luggage vanishes from your berth and is waiting for you in the hotel room you have been assigned. Good Republican caterers have hot coffee and thick roast-beef sandwiches waiting in the press rooms at every stopover. Laundries are alerted a thousand miles ahead to be ready to turn out heavy loads in a few hours. There is really no need for anyone to bestir himself and risk his life to hear the whistle-stop speeches, since almost the entire train is wired for sound and the words of the Governor are carried over the public-address system.

Truman and Dewey are contrastive types, but in many fundamental ways they act on roughly the same principles and proceed toward roughly the same ends. Office-seeking is a great leveller. Most men who engage in it are sooner or later forced to abandon themselves to the ancient practices of audience-flattering, enemy-vilifying, name-promising, moon-promising, and the like. In these matters, the 1948 candidates are just about neck and neck. Offhand, I would say that Truman is working a little harder at enemy-vilifying and name-promising than...
Dewey looks a little stronger in audience-flattering and also has a slight edge in the scope and beauty of his promises. This last is a natural consequence of the relative positions of the two men. Truman, being in office, can hardly claim the ability to deliver in a second term what he has manifestedly been unable to deliver in his first. There is no one, however, to gainsay Dewey when he asserts that under his leadership “every American will walk forward side by side with every other American.” Some drillmasters might quibble over the difficulty of achieving such a formation, but no one pays any attention to logic in this season of the quadrennium.

It is probably a good thing for the sanity of the Republic that we do have this suspension of logic during campaigns, for the fact is that reason is outraged not only by the speeches of the candidates but by the very idea of this travelling up and down the country to make them. I have been unable to find, on the Dewey train, the Truman train, or anywhere else, a single impartial and responsible observer of national affairs who is willing to defend the thesis that this tearing around will affect the electoral vote in even one state. There are, no doubt, some people in every community who will vote for the man who says the pleasanter things about the local crop and the local rainfall, but their number is probably balanced by the number of intelligent citizens who will decide, the next morning, to vote against the man who disturbed their children’s rest by roaring through the night, surrounded by a hundred motorcycle cops with a hundred sirens, so that he could deliver an address pointing out that the Republicans invented the depression or that the Democrats invented Communism. Nobody knows exactly why or when people switch political allegiances, but it is known that an insignificant number of them do during a campaign. Jim Farley said, in the early Roosevelt days, that every vote in the country was frozen by October 1st, and the work done by Mr. Roper and Dr. Gallup indicates that the results are settled long before that.

In theory, the institution of the travelling campaign is educational as well as political. It gives the voters a chance to hear the candidates and learn their views first-hand. No doubt the theory had great merit a century ago, but today it is possible for any citizen to hear the candidates’ voices and to learn their views in his own home, where the acous-
ties are a good deal better than in a stadium or auditorium. If an appraisal of views is the important goal, the conscientious citizen must attend to that matter between campaigns, not during them, for what he gets around election time is not a candidate's idea of things but his own, as nearly as the candidate is able to figure it out and reproduce it. One could also argue that it is a healthy thing in a democracy for the people to see their Presidents and Presidents-to-be, to give them the once-over and observe what psychologists call their "expressive movements." This notion has some measure of plausibility, but it will be harder to find it four years from now, when they tell us, television will be installed in every American home that today has radio. There will be no reason then for not checking the observation platform from some obsolete Pullman, setting it up in a television studio, and hiring a few extra to lug aboard the baskets of apples, the Seltzets, and the bouquets.

One feature of the old ritual, however, will be beyond the grasp of science for quite a while yet. That is handshaking. "Hell's bells!" a political adviser on one of the trains said to me. "Everybody knows that we don't go through all this business to win friends and influence people. We go through it to keep the friends we've already got. The only important thing that happens on this train is the handshaking and hellogore-Jacking that go on back in the caboose. We've got a party organization to keep going, and the best way to keep it going is to have the big men in the party get out and say nice things to the little men. I don't care which party it is. It means everything to the stragglers you see in the club cars to go back home and tell how they rode down to the state line with the big wheel and how, when they went into his private car, he remembered them well from his last swing around the country. If you think party organizations are not a good and necessary thing in a democracy, then you can write all this off as a lot of nonsense. If you think they're important, then you can't deny the usefulness of these trips." Stated in those terms, the question is a weighty one.

—RICHARD H. ROVERE

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