

# The song remains the same

Analysis by Jim McElgunn

*Haven't we seen this all before?*

This is a common complaint about elections. But in the 1980 American presidential election, *deja vu* has reached absurd lengths.

A modern-day Rumpelstiltskin awakening from a 32 year slumber might conclude he is seeing the 1948 election: only the names are different.

In place of Harry Truman and Thomas Dewey are Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, but what else has changed?

Just consider...

Harry Truman was a hard-working middle of the road Southern Democrat. A firm believer in clean living and old-fashioned morality, he had little sympathy for countries which did not share America's values, especially its strident anti-Communism.

Although he was never particularly fond of blacks and his grandmother was an avowed racist, he was one of the first politicians to recognize and vie for the electoral strength of blacks.

Jimmy Carter is a hard-working middle of the road Southern Democrat. A born-again fundamentalist, he is loathe to help countries which do not share America's concern for human rights.

Although he belongs to a church which still bars black members, he was one of the first Deep South politicians to bring a large number of blacks into state government. As Georgia governor, he was the epitome of the moderate leaders of the "New South."

Harry Truman was always an unlikely politician. A mediocre public speaker, his main political assets were his easy smile, folksy manner, and incredible political luck.

He surrounded himself with some very shady characters called the "Missouri Mafia," and spent most of his political life in public disfavour. Yet he always regained his popularity at election time.

Carter is a ho-hum speaker, but his famous smile is still a big asset. He has worked hard to cultivate a "just folks" image: inviting ordinary citizens to dinner at the White House, informal chats with the public, and the ever-present cardigan sweater. And he is lucky.

Other similarities exist; the most important are in the political roles of the two men.

In 1945, the United States had been through a long period of liberal reform beginning in the early 1930s, but public



opinion was swinging to the right. Truman was a compromise candidate, a middle of the roader who could sway with the political breezes.

In 1976, the United States had been through a long period of liberal reform beginning in the early 1960s. But again the public mood was beginning to swing to the right. Carter was seen as a compromise, a politician who could drift with the winds without too much anguish.

Truman assumed office in 1945, and amazed observers by alienating so many voters, so thoroughly, so quickly. Liberal reforms almost ceased as he tried to find a middle ground between the demands of his party and shifting public opinion. Indecivness was rampant, and editorialists criticized the government's fickleness. Meanwhile, record peacetime inflation ravaged the nation.

When Jimmy Carter assumed office in 1977, he wasted no time breaking Truman's record for the sharpest decline in popularity for a new president. Liberal reforms slowed to a trickle as Carter fought to retain the loyalty of both his party and the voters. He was lambasted for his fickle public stands. Meanwhile, record peacetime inflation ravaged the nation.

In foreign affairs, Truman presided over the collapse of the fragile postwar American-Soviet accord. The Soviets occupied Eastern Europe and were seen as

a threat to Western Europe. Truman was said to be "soft on Communism." In 1948, Czechoslovakia was "lost," proof to many of America's growing powerlessness.

The military budget had been declining steadily since the Second World War, but pressure grew to increase it. In 1947, Truman announced the Truman Doctrine, committing the United States to resist any Communist advances of any type anywhere in the world.

During Carter's first term, the Soviet-American detente established in the previous decade began to crumble; the fear and hostility of the Cold War era was reborn. The Soviets have occupied Afghanistan and are seen as a threat to Africa and the Middle East. Carter, it is charged, is too meek towards the Soviet Union. In 1979, Iran was "lost," proof to many of America's growing powerlessness.

The military budget had been slightly declining in real dollars since the Vietnam War, but strong demands have been made and met to increase it sharply. In 1980, Carter announced the Carter Doctrine, committing the United States to resist any Soviet advances of any type anywhere in the Persian Gulf.

As for election chances a year before election day neither was thought to have much hope of winning.

By late 1947, Truman was so intensely unpopular few Democrats even

wanted to think about renominating him. The traditional Democratic coalition of blue collar workers, Catholics, Jews, blacks, and other ethnic minorities clearly wanted a liberal but knew they would lose independent voters. So they unenthusiastically endorsed Truman for the party leadership, hoping their traditional supports would not protest by voting Republican or staying home.

By late 1979, Carter was considered such a longshot even most Democrats wrote him off as a contender. But his main opponent Ted Kennedy was considered too liberal to win over independent voters. Kennedy won the cheers at the convention, but the Democrats halfheartedly endorsed Carter.

The 1948 election was one of the biggest upsets in electoral history. Thomas Dewey, the very conservative governor of the largest state (New York), started with a very large lead. Truman increased his support steadily, but Dewey seemed such a sure winner the Gallup organization stopped polling six weeks before the election.

In the campaign, Truman adopted a more liberal line, including a promise for a national health insurance scheme. The Democratic coalition turned out in sufficient numbers in the end to give Truman a victory with 49.5 percent of the vote to Dewey's 45.1 percent.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan, the very conservative governor of the largest state (California), started with a very large lead. Carter has increased his support steadily, but Reagan is still the odds-on favorite to win.

Can Carter pull the same magic act as Truman? Come on, don't be ridiculous; that would mean history repeats itself!

*Postscript: After Truman's victory, his government virtually abandoned all liberal reforms and swung ever more to the right to meet the challenge of the still-ascendant Republicans.*

*Inflation again ravaged the nation, the "loss" of China prompted another wave of anti-Communist hysteria, Senator Joe McCarthy rose to wield exceptional power, the US became embroiled in a long and costly war fighting "the international Communist conspiracy" (Korean version)—and Harry Truman left office the least popular president since the invention of the opinion poll.*

*Give 'em hell, Jimmy ...*

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