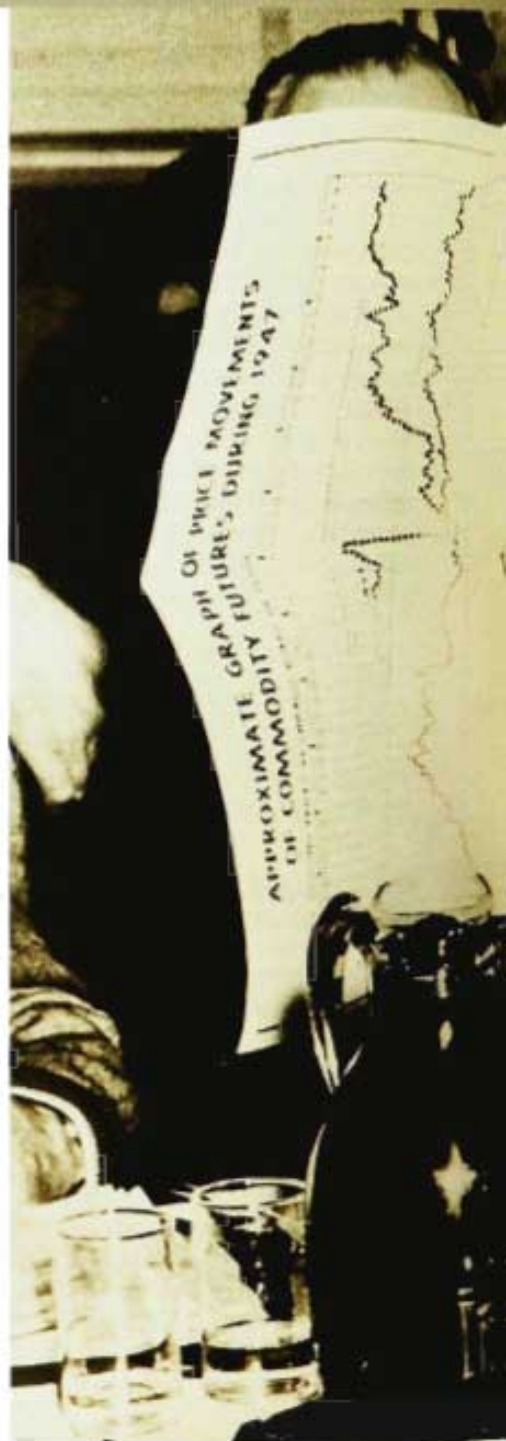


“A Major Con

Harold Stassen and the Politics of American Presidential Nominations

ALEC KIRBY

As the chairman's gavel formally opened the 1996 Republican National Convention, a curiously unremarked finality settled over the GOP. For the first time in a generation, Harold E. Stassen was not even a remote participant in the nominating campaign. Ironically, Nebraska—the final primary of the 1996 season—was the site of Stassen's last electoral triumph: On April 13, 1948 (his forty-first birthday), the former Minnesota governor buried Thomas E. Dewey, Robert A. Taft, Earl Warren, Douglas MacArthur, and others in that state's presidential primary. The *Omaha World Herald*, attributing Stassen's victory to the efficiency of his organization and his “hard hand-shaking and



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tender”



Harold Stassen, candidate for the 1948 Republican presidential nomination, speaking about commodities

STASSEN FOR PRESIDENT *Volunteers*

MINNESOTA DIVISION ★ 1215 PIONEER BUILDING, SAINT PAUL 1, MINN.



campaigning over a long period of time," titled its editorial "A Major Contender."¹

The inevitability of Senator Robert Dole being the last World War II veteran on a presidential ticket has set the pundits to ruminating about generational shifts in American politics. But the disappearance of Stassen from the political scene is particularly poignant. It is a curious fact that although his name appeared regularly in the events of American politics and foreign affairs at midcentury, it is now mainly associated with his many quixotic political campaigns. Yet the Minnesotan's pioneering career resulted in enduring, systemic changes to American political institutions. Perhaps most important, after Stassen no successful aspirant would ever slight primary voters in favor of smoke-filled rooms and party officials.

Stassen was the first to exploit the power—then latent—of presidential primaries. In an eclipse taken for a permanent demise, presidential primaries seemed in early 1948 to be little more than quaint artifacts of the progressive movement of the early twentieth century. According to progressive cosmology, the American political universe featured big business as the metaphysical "first mover," yanking on strings that directed the party bosses, who in turn produced suitably obedient candidates. Politics was a sordid affair, progressives believed, with the stench of smoke-filled rooms lacing candidates from both parties at all levels and branches of government. Progressives were convinced that the key to a healthy change of political air was to transfer the power to nominate from party

leaders to voters, thus establishing the people, rather than big business, as the center of gravity in the political universe. By the close of the Wilsonian era, the number of primaries had exploded to 26.²

Yet the reform impulse was abandoned in the post-World War I era, and the number of primaries declined, never having noticeably achieved their purifying promise. By the 1940s smart presidential hopefuls were careful to enter only those primaries they were confident of winning. They concentrated on meeting with party leaders who controlled state delegates, and primaries languished. Bosses, who had never entirely lost their grip on power, once again ruled virtually unchallenged. In 1940 Wendell Willkie, an ostensible newcomer to politics, won the Republican nomination without competing in a single primary contest, instead winning over state-delegation chairmen. By 1948 there were only five primaries in which voters could directly select delegates pledged to support a specific candidate: New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Ohio, and Oregon. Procedures for garnering delegates varied considerably from state to state, with Oregon the only winner-take-all primary.³

In common wisdom, George McGovern and Jimmy Carter were the first outsiders to do an end-run around party chieftains. They moved to the forefront of the Democratic Party in 1972 and 1976 by vigorously campaigning and doing well in primaries, thereby demonstrating strength and building enough

¹ *Omaha World Herald*, Apr. 15, 1948, p. 10.

² Michael D. Wormer, *Election '84* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1984), 27.

³ Wormer, *Election '84*, 29; Alec Kirby, "Child Harold's Pilgrimage: A Political Biography of Harold Stassen" (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1992), 223.

momentum to make their candidacies unstoppable. This is the strategy that Stassen pioneered in 1948.

Forgotten today, Stassen's new approach was quite obvious to contemporary observers. "Whether or not he finally realizes his ambition to be president," the *Arkansas Gazette* editorialized in April 1948, "Harold Stassen has already earned a place in American political history. It is even possible that he has brought into being a new type of political campaign as precedent-setting in its way as William Henry Harrison's portable log cabin and free-flowing cider barrel." Nationally syndicated columnist Thomas Stokes noted that "the test by ballot . . . has unveiled a new and formidable figure in Harold Stassen . . . [who] has forced a change in primary campaign technique." The *Milwaukee Journal* marveled, "The Stassen candidacy is beginning to assume the aspects of a true grass roots movement, the first this nation has seen for a long time." With considerable prescience, *Newsweek* observed, "Political experts interested in long-term trends say Stassen's success at the polls may have revolutionized long-established methods for seeking the presidential nomination. . . . In the future . . . candidates will frankly announce their intentions well in advance of election year and work openly for delegates to the conventions."⁴

Stassen had little choice but to seek alternatives to winning over the state-party bosses who controlled delegates to the nominating convention. Out of office since 1943, he had refused to challenge Minnesota's Republican Senator Henrik Shipstead's reelection bid in 1946, instead supporting his hand-picked successor as governor, Edward J. Thye, for the post. Given Stassen's later silence on the subject of revising election procedures, his vision of a popularly nominated candidate seems to reflect less a fundamental belief in opening up politics than his personal faith in his potential as the choice of the people.⁵

Winning a surprise victory in Minnesota's 1938 gubernatorial election, Stassen at age 31 had become the youngest elected governor in U.S. history. Quickly establishing control of

Minnesota's Republican Party and initiating liberal reforms throughout his state, he emerged as a leading spokesman for a more internationalist perspective in foreign policy. Credited with bringing labor peace to Minnesota after the turbulence of the earlier 1930s, the Stassen-crafted Labor Relations Act of 1939 sought to make the strike a tool of last resort and had the support of both business and labor. The office of business manager that he created to oversee all state purchasing and budgeting had brought state finances under efficient control, which along with a 7,000-person reduction in the state payroll made possible a sizable tax cut. Resigning his governorship in 1943, Stassen, who was in the army reserve, arranged a transfer to the U.S. Navy and served as an assistant to Admiral William F. Halsey. In 1945 President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked him to serve as a member of the U.S. delegation to the San Francisco conference that drafted the United Nations charter.⁶

Proving by his accomplishments to be a boy wonder with substance, "sudden Stassen" from the beginning proved irresistible to the national media. "Every move he made," one journalist recalled, "every speech, was news. He was the youngest state Governor in United States history, he was bold and unpredictable and courageous and marvelous newspaper copy."⁷

After his discharge from the navy in 1945, Stassen began in earnest his quest of the Republican nomination for president, an odyssey of some 180,000 miles that made him, briefly, front-runner in the contest. Like the pilgrimage of Byron's Childe Harold, the journey was an epic of challenge and new experience.

Early in December 1946 Bernhard W. LeVander, chairman of the Minnesota Republican Party, wrote to an associate that Stassen "has asked that we form the 'Stassen for President Volunteers' . . . with Ed [Thye, U.S. senator] and Luther [Youngdahl, governor] as Honorary Chairmen."



⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, Apr. 9, 1948, p. 4; *Oregon Daily Journal*, May 11, 1948, sec. 2, p. 2; *Milwaukee Journal*, quoted in *Lincoln Journal*, Apr. 15, 1948, p. 10; *Newsweek*, May 3, 1948, p. 11.

⁵ Thye later remarked that Stassen's decision to forgo the Senate led to talk about his lack of good judgment. Particularly bitter was Walter Judd, a member of Congress from Minnesota who tried to persuade him to run: "Stassen said, 'Oh, I'm not interested in the Senate. I want to go out and talk about national affairs and debate the issues'"; Walter Judd, interview by author, Washington, D.C., Aug. 3, 1989.

⁶ *Time*, Apr. 26, 1948, p. 22; Stassen, personal communication, Oct. 24, 1996.

⁷ Bernard Weinraub, "The 1968 Nomination?" *Esquire*, Aug. 1967, p. 99.

LeVander and Rose L. Spencer, the state GOP co-chair, would serve as directors. The public "coming out" took place on December 17 at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. Announcing that he was opening an office in the nation's capital, Stassen told reporters, "I do intend to be a candidate for the Republican nomination in 1948. . . . I intend to develop and present a definite, constructive and progressive program to our Republican Party and on that basis I intend to permit my supporters to present my name in Republican primaries and Republican conventions in 1948." Asked if he were truly a candidate, since he put the matter in the future, the Minnesotan laughed, "Yes; well, of course I am if you want to put it that way. I am very frank and direct about it."⁸

A year later in December 1947, Stassen, still the only candidate openly seeking the nomination, began emphasizing a major theme in his campaign: the power to decide the nomination should belong to the voters, not hand-picked delegates. Inveighing against the "presidential pickers," he charged that it was

their view that the correct thing to do is to go through very elaborate operations of looking the other way, that the difficult, hard contro-

versial issues of the day should be avoided and the people should not be told our views upon them. . . . These riders of regal reaction hold that a position of photogenic availability should be maintained until such time as a key group of their men, with delegates in their pockets, make . . . secret deals for a nomination.⁹

While the Stassen campaign's fundamental strength lay in the grass roots, it was directed by a closely knit organization involving prominent figures from business and government. The staffer destined for the greatest prominence was Warren E. Burger, appointed chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1969. The same age as Stassen, Burger was a St. Paul lawyer who had been active in Stassen's gubernatorial campaigns. He joined the presidential effort in January 1948 as chief of staff in charge of the Minnesota campaign office. Later he was also responsible for recruiting delegates at the various state conventions and caucuses before leading the effort to enlist new delegates at the national convention.¹⁰

Although Burger assumed responsibility for a great deal of the campaign, his management skills left something to be desired. Bernhard LeVander found it necessary to send several memos, respectful but chiding in tone, reminding the future chief justice of needed tasks. In February 1948, for example, LeVander complained: "Just a reminder about posters of Stassen. They will do us no good sitting in the store-

Harold Stassen, about 1950, with subsequent Republican governors Edward J. Thye (center) and Luther W. Youngdahl (right), the honorary chairs of his first presidential-nomination campaign



⁸ Bernhard W. LeVander to Ben Heinzen, Dec. 5, 1946, and Neighbor for Stassen, text of Stassen's press conference, box 97, Minnesota Republican State Central Committee Records (MRSCC), Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul. Stassen's approach stood in sharp relief to the more conventional strategy of Senator Robert Taft, who 24 hours earlier sidestepped a question about his intentions: *Washington Post*, Dec. 17, 1946, p. 3; Dec. 18, 1946, p. 1.

⁹ *Time*, Dec. 1, 1947, p. 26.

¹⁰ For example, Alfred Lindley, a Minneapolis attorney of the Pillsbury family, oversaw the Minnesota Fund, which financed Stassen's travels. Amos Peaslee of New Jersey, an ambassador in the Eisenhower administration, ran Stassen's eastern headquarters in New York. Other active individuals included Jay Cooke, great-grandson of the Civil War financier, former Undersecretary of the Navy Ralph Bard, and United Airlines president William Patterson; *Time*, Apr. 26, 1946, p. 23-24; Harold Stassen, telephone interviews by author, Jan. 30, 1988, Aug. 9, 1989; James T. Patterson, *Mr. Republican* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972), 511; Bernhard LeVander, interview by author, St. Paul, July 19, 1988.

room and should be allocated for use in the primary states." Another memo that month reported: "In checking up I find that some of our State Managers have not as yet gotten the list of managers in other states. . . . I thought we had it understood two weeks ago that such a list would be sent to all men in the field." A letter from one campaign official, Robert Herberger, to another, Daniel C. Gainey, grumbled, "Several people here in Chicago gave me the same story I have heard frequently in Minnesota—namely, that it was next to impossible to get an answer to any letters sent to Harold's St. Paul office . . . it does make it difficult for enthusiastic Stassen workers to be constantly reminded of the fact that letters to Stassen go unanswered."¹¹

Managerial shortcomings aside, the Stassen organization was an efficient team. In 1948, as from the start of his career, the candidate's true electoral steel was an alloy of young people new to politics, forged to strength in the heat of a frenzied crusade. In 1938 the Young Republican League, which Stassen had organized, served as a font of eager volunteers, augmented by what *Time* billed as a "rowdy, pistol-shooting horse-riding organization from the South St. Paul Stockyards, called the 'Hook-em cows.'"¹² Actually consisting of genteel Republican activists, this group distributed literature and urged voters to the polls. By 1948 Stassen oversaw a massive successor organization with the more dignified name, Paul Revere Riders. The Riders stimulated and channeled activist energy for Stassen and became a force in the primary states.

Like Stassen himself, the enthusiastic youth that galvanized his campaigns were educated and upwardly mobile; the Riders represented less prairie populism than urban professionalism. The Stassenites considered themselves reasonable, sophisticated, and progressive voters. They sought honest, efficient government as well as growing national and international markets, and Stassen's gubernatorial record indicated that

he would be an effective means to that end.¹³

While Stassen took pride in the grass-roots nature of his effort, his opponents held the more traditional perspective that party leaders should choose the nominee. A memo prepared for candidate Robert Taft of Ohio analyzing Stassen's campaign techniques painted his efforts in somewhat sinister colors: "The modus operandi of Harold E. Stassen and his cohorts is by this time pretty well known in political circles: the thorough tactics of infiltration into a contested area, of bringing in outside workers, of the 'Paul Revere Riders' etc."¹⁴

The Paul Revere Riders stood at the apex of the Stassen for President Volunteers. The largest component of this organization, however, was the mighty Neighbors for Stassen, formed in late 1946 and chaired by Daniel Gainey of Owatonna and Isabel Gale of Mound. Its principal task was promotional—reaching the friends, relatives, and acquaintances of Stassen supporters by letter and personal contact. This was a pioneering concept, a campaign structure created not to round up delegates and official party backing but instead to create a blaze of grass-roots support—with the hope that the resulting heat would warm party leaders to Stassen. LeVander, the director of the Stassen for President Volunteers, noted that the Neighbors "has no direct relationship to the political operation of seeking delegates [handled by the Volunteers], but can have a substantial bearing



Warren E. Burger, who directed Stassen's Minnesota campaign office, about 1944

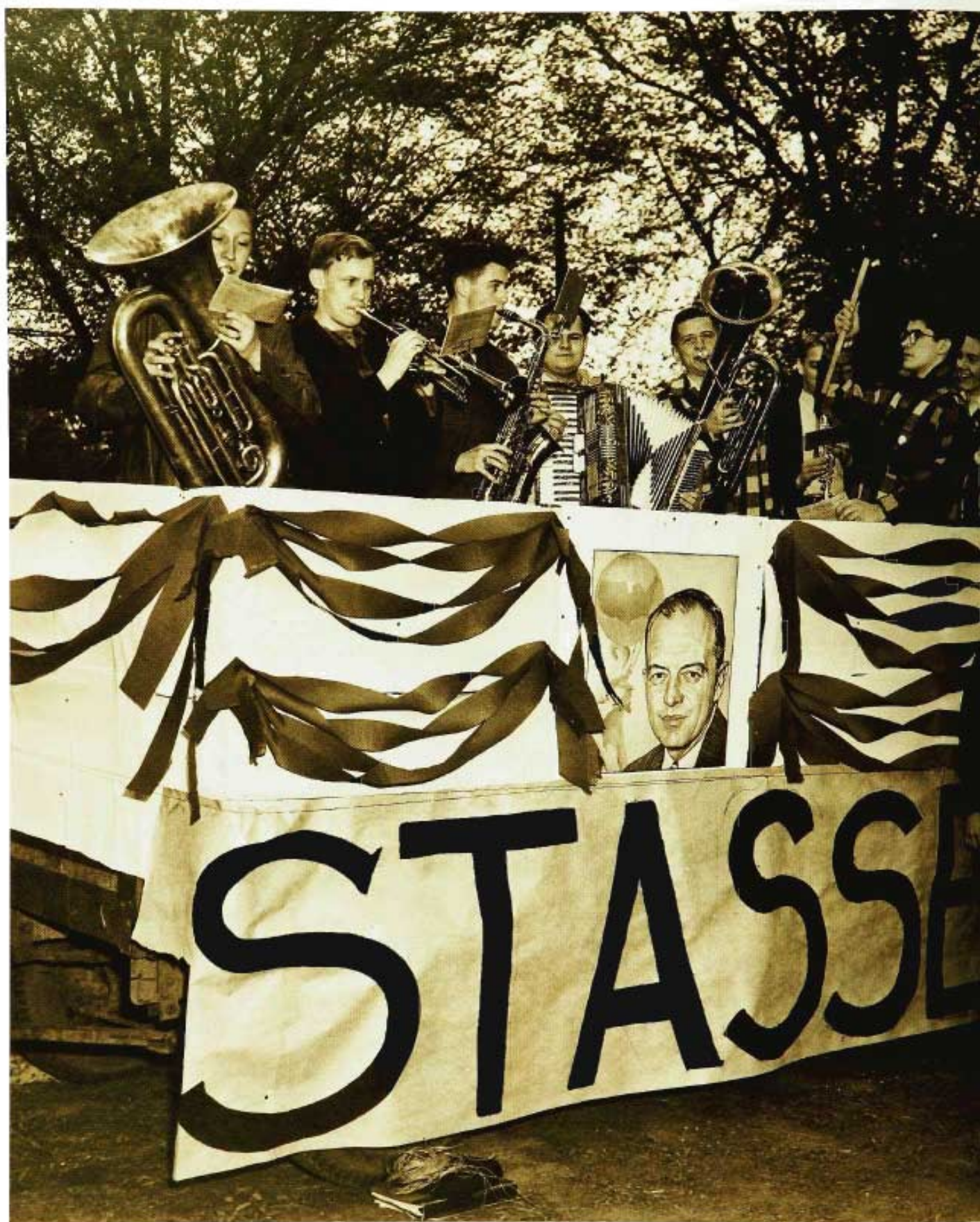


¹¹ LeVander to Burger, Feb. 19, Feb. 20, 1948; G. R. Herberger to Daniel Gainey, Oct. 4, 1947—all box 97, MRSCC Records.

¹² *Time*, Apr. 29, 1940, p. 16.

¹³ Dale Kramer, "Progress of a Prodigy," *New Republic*, Apr. 19, 1948, p. 13.

¹⁴ Unsigned, undated "Memo on Stassen," box 1288, Papers of Robert Taft, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



Young Stassen supporters, who campaigned hard for their candidate in gubernatorial and presidential elections



on that subject by influencing public support throughout the country."¹⁵

Financed by the Volunteers, the Neighbors charged no dues, raised no money, and sought no endorsements. Each Neighbor was to locate people eager to participate, keep them informed of Stassen's activities, and convince them to make their own contacts. The names of all individuals reached were sent to the group's Minneapolis office where a central file was compiled. The office supplied kits containing information about Stassen and a model letter to use when writing to acquaintances.¹⁶

By June 1947, according to an internal memo, there were 4,100 Minnesota and 9,000 out-of-state Neighbors, representing every state in the union. The memo noted, moreover, that these were recorded, minimum figures. By January 1948 the enrollment list had mushroomed to nearly 30,000—twice the number of GOP workers on the national Republican mailing list—before peaking at 49,000 in April 1948.¹⁷

During the summer of 1947, Mark A. Forgette, executive director of the Neighbors, began organizing voter-specific subsidiaries of the organization, such as Secretaries for Stassen and Students for Stassen. For almost a year he dashed around the country, leaving in his wake teachers, insurance salesmen, veterans, and others in pro-Stassen groups. The specialization sometimes reached unusual extremes. For example, a man from Pipestone, Minnesota, organized a Former F.B.I. Agents for Stassen club that eventually sent literature to more than 100 members.¹⁸

Its very success rendered the Neighbors obsolete, as the Minneapolis office could no longer effectively coordinate the local contacts burgeoning across the country. In March 1948 the group was replaced with a new organization, Citizens for Stassen, which still served as a branch of the Stassen for President Volunteers.

¹⁵ LeVander, Stassen for President Volunteers, Minnesota Division, newsletter, Feb. 11, 1947, and Mark Forgette to Daniel C. Gainey, Jan. 3, 1948, both box 97, MRSCC Records.

¹⁶ Mark Forgette to Dear Sir, May 9, 1947, box 97, MRSCC Records.

¹⁷ Mark Forgette, "Report to Liaison Men on Neighbors for Stassen," June 25, 1947; Forgette to Gainey, Jan. 3, 1948, both box 97, MRSCC Records.

¹⁸ See, for example, Morris B. Mitchell, Minnesota Lawyers for Stassen Committee newsletter, Aug. 19, 1947; LeVander to Forgette, May 23, June 18, 1947; Marshall W. Houts to LeVander, Mar. 20, 1947—all box 97, MRSCC Records.

10 reasons why I am for HAROLD STASSEN FOR PRESIDENT



1. He is forthright, courageous and constructive . . . qualities of leadership which we need.
2. He is an exceptional administrator . . . has proved he can make government work.
3. He is a recognized authority on foreign affairs . . . knows how to deal with Russia and other world problems.
4. He is humanitarian . . . with deep understanding of problems of average citizens.
5. He is independent . . . blends constructively conservative and liberal views.
6. He has vision and foresight . . . with imagination to think ahead.
7. He understands American problems . . . His book "Where I Stand" has a positive program for America.
8. He is an able speaker . . . knows campaigning, knows how to reach the people.
9. He is a veteran . . . understands the problems of veterans and youth.
10. He can win . . . attracts support of all groups; has tremendous personal and political appeal.

"He is a potent contender increasingly likely to win WITH OUR HELP!" proclaims the inside of this Neighbors for Stassen brochure, 1947-48.

Now, however, coordination was decentralized through a nationwide network of volunteer groups chartered by the Minneapolis headquarters. Seeking to preserve local flavor and main-

tain prominent roles for individuals, each group was to enroll no more than 25 members. Chapters were advised to undertake activities they could most effectively carry out, for example, sponsoring the formation of at least four other chapters, promoting special groups such as Students or Veterans for Stassen, concentrating on fund raising for the national campaign, or forming a contact committee to visit local Republican leaders and urge them to support Harold Stassen.¹⁹

Citizens for Stassen represented an evolution in the campaign, yet the outside-party-channels philosophy remained the core feature. "By showing great popular support for Harold Stassen, delegates will be influenced to support him at the convention," a Citizens flyer noted. The crux of demonstrating popular support, however, was defeating his rivals in the primaries, especially those in which a rival was favored to win. It was this strategy that turned Stassen from a dark horse to a temporary front-runner.

On Wednesday morning, April 14, 1948, Robert Taft stood in the Senate cloakroom glumly watching the returns from the Nebraska primary come through a news ticker. A colleague asked, "Is Stassen still winning?" "Yes," Taft replied, adding hopefully, "But Dewey and I together have more votes than he has." The senator was correct, but just barely; in the final returns Stassen received 43 percent of the vote, while Dewey followed with 35 percent and Taft placed third with 11 percent. Six days earlier, a Stassen supporter, excited by the candidate's stunning Wisconsin triumph, exclaimed, "The prairies are on fire and getting hotter for Stassen all the time."²⁰ They would never be hotter than in the aftermath of these two back-to-back wins, following an impressive showing in New Hampshire.

While publicly inveighing against the system, Stassen was practical enough to work assiduously to court party leaders. This was particularly true in Wisconsin, where he won over Thomas E. Coleman, the former state GOP chairman who still served on the party committee and reputedly controlled a vast political machine. Through Coleman, Stassen secured the support of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, whom Victor Johnston, Stassen's publicity direc-

¹⁹ Here and below, Citizens for Stassen, "How to Organize a Chapter of Citizens for Stassen," n. d., box 97, MRSCC Records.

²⁰ *Time*, Apr. 19, 1948, p. 20; Apr. 26, 1948, p. 23.

tor, had served as a campaign aide and administrative assistant. Johnston was convinced that Willkie's 1944 drubbing in the Wisconsin presidential primary could be ascribed to his effrontery to party leaders, a mistake Stassen should not repeat. "Care should be taken," he advised, "not to . . . antagonize the regular Republican organization" by endorsing delegate candidates not acceptable to the party leadership. "This does not mean," he continued, "that hide-bound reactionaries should be selected but it must be remembered at all times that these delegates are running as Republicans."²¹

Indeed, the Stassen campaign had launched a frenzied effort to court party leaders at the Wisconsin Republican state convention in the summer of 1947. Success was limited, and prominent officials planted themselves in his opponents' corners, particularly that of Douglas MacArthur, who enjoyed the support of former Progressive Governor Philip F. La Follette and Secretary of State Fred R. Zimmerman. While it was unclear to what extent Republican regulars would be able to reconcile themselves to working with La Follette, Zimmerman's activism seemed a dangerous threat to Stassen. The secretary of state employed his office as a veritable campaign headquarters, sending out MacArthur literature—apparently at state expense. McCarthy promptly one-upped him, mailing a pro-Stassen letter on official-looking stationery with U.S. Senate letterhead.²²

Official support was lukewarm in Wisconsin, but Stassen faced a down-right hostile GOP structure in Nebraska. Two years earlier he had supported then-Governor Dwight Griswold's bid to wrest the Republican senatorial nomination from the isolationist incumbent Hugh Butler and received a stinging rebuke in Butler's two-to-one victory. With some glee the *Chicago Tribune* asserted its belief that the defeat rendered Stassen "as dead politically as Willkie after the Wisconsin primary in 1944." Stassen now faced a senator in control of a powerful statewide machine and hankering for revenge,

taken in the form of active support for Taft.²³ In each primary state, then, Stassen clearly had to look for support in some other place than the party hierarchy.

Stassen's strategy, beginning with New Hampshire, was to run a highly personal campaign at the grass-roots level. As a midwesterner, he never developed in the Granite State the large, devoted following that would appear for him elsewhere. Indeed, as supporters of Dwight D. Eisenhower began organizing a campaign before the general's disavowal in late January, Stassen sought to duck a contest in the state entirely. He urged the Dewey-for-President forces to join him in convincing New Hampshire Senator Styles Bridges to become a favorite-son candidate, hoping that a Bridges slate of delegates would defer any show of strength by Eisenhower until the campaign moved to Wisconsin, where Stassen faced better odds. Preferring for the same reason to make his stand in the East, Dewey, governor of New York, refused the gambit.²⁴

So Stassen plowed ahead, running as if for sheriff, shaking hands and kissing babies. The *Concord Daily Monitor* called it the "most unusual Presidential primary campaign in New Hampshire history," noting the candidates' different methods: the Dewey campaign "prepared an avalanche of 10,000 pieces of mailed literature," while Stassen embarked on a "whirlwind" tour, including speeches and receptions. Similarly, the *Portsmouth Herald* observed, "Mr. Stassen approaches the presidency with no sign of old-line party affiliation. . . . He was frank in his opinions, engaging in his manner, and he made no abject bows to the powerful state Republican machine. . . . Dewey, on the other hand, rode into our state on a well-oiled machine created to grind out votes and pass out political appointments."²⁵



²¹ Stassen, telephone interview by author, Aug. 7, 1988; Vic Johnston, "Plan for Wisconsin," box 97, MRSCC Records.

²² Forgette to Gainey, June 19, 1947, box 97, MRSCC Records; *New York Times*, Apr. 4, 1948, sec. 6, p. 12; *Wisconsin State Journal*, Mar. 10, 1948, p. 6, Mar. 26, 1948, p. 6. A straw poll taken at the convention showed Dewey with 321 votes to Stassen's 286; Joseph McCarthy to "Dear Folks," Mar. 31, 1948, box 1288, Taft papers.

²³ *Chicago Tribune*, quoted in *Time*, Mar. 25, 1946, p. 22-23; J.A.W. to Robert Taft, June 3, 1948, box 1288, Taft papers.

²⁴ *Concord Daily Monitor*, Jan. 19, 1948, p. 1, 8.

²⁵ *Concord Daily Monitor*, Feb. 28, 1948, p. 1; *Portsmouth Herald*, quoted in *Concord Daily Monitor*, Feb. 28, 1948, p. 4.



"The Republicans could win with Stassen."

A dynamic, forward-looking Republican party can win in 1948, and the country will benefit.

In candidate must be a man who can furnish winning leadership, and do a good job when elected.

Page from a campaign booklet circulated in Oregon, 1948

In the March 9 primary, six Dewey delegate candidates were elected, against two for Stassen. Reaction to the vote was mixed, ranging from the *Wisconsin State Journal's* view that it was a setback for Stassen to the Associated Press report that the Minnesotan had "kept himself in the thick of the race." Joseph McCarthy went so far as to predict that Dewey would withdraw from the rest of the primaries after the "squeaker in his own backyard."²⁶

Hurrying to Wisconsin, Stassen began what would be his standard mode of travel while campaigning in the primaries—a chartered bus that took the candidate and attending reporters wherever a crowd might be gathered. The bus was somewhat of an innovative idea. In 1944 in Wisconsin, Willkie, hoping for a second nomi-

nation, had used a caravan of cars, which proved awkward. Trains and airplanes had obvious drawbacks in a rural state. With the rear seats of the bus removed, reporters (usually four or five, although in the final week this number jumped to more than a dozen) were provided with a work table for their typewriters and a mimeograph machine. Between towns Stassen typically held impromptu press conferences; when the bus arrived at its destination, a messenger from Western Union collected and filed the news stories recorded on the road.²⁷

Stassen's initial prospects did not look good. A straw poll conducted by a Green Bay radio station in mid-March showed MacArthur the clear favorite, with Stassen placing a distant third behind Dewey. Moreover, Stassen was being heavily outspent. According to reports filed with the Wisconsin secretary of state on March 30, Dewey had used \$23,854 up to that point—a considerable sum, though less than the \$29,671 spent by MacArthur. Stassen's energetic grassroots campaign had expended a mere \$14,861. Undaunted, the Minnesotan stepped up his campaign, attracting respect and attention. "Here is Mr. Stassen," observed one editorial echoing an increasingly typical sentiment, "touring the hamlets of the state, volunteering his views on the most explosive issues. . . . Contrast that formula with those of Gov. Dewey out in Albany. He hasn't said six words on a national or international problem. And he gives no one a chance to ask him."²⁸

On a Saturday afternoon in early April, 150 University of Wisconsin students, calling themselves the Stassen Minutemen, went door to door in Madison, dispensing campaign literature and urging voters to the polls. Already at work were the Paul Revere Riders, who drove around leafleting doorways and parking lots. In the week before the election, 340 carloads of Riders had blanketed 1,000 towns and villages. Meanwhile, Stassen supporters were celebrating mud. Recent rains had soaked farmland, which Wilbur Renk, a farmer and Stassen-delegate hopeful, saw as a good sign: "Farmers won't be in their fields by election day. . . . And that's good for Stassen, who is strong on the farms." The weather forecast for election day called for partly cloudy skies with scattered showers.²⁹

²⁶ *Wisconsin State Journal*, Mar. 10, 1948, p. 1, p. 10 (Associated Press quote).

²⁷ *Wisconsin State Journal*, Mar. 7, 1948, p. 10.

²⁸ *Wisconsin State Journal*, Mar. 17, 1948, p. 21, Mar. 26, 1948, p. 6; *Milwaukee Journal*, Mar. 30, 1948, p. 6.

²⁹ *Wisconsin State Journal*, Apr. 4, 1948, p. 1; Richard Norton Smith, *Thomas E. Dewey and His Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 485; *Milwaukee Journal*, Apr. 1, 1948, p. 28.

The hoped-for rain did not materialize, but it hardly mattered for Stassen. The results were not even close. Nineteen of Stassen's delegate candidates were elected. MacArthur finished second with eight. Dewey received none.³⁰

The impact of the election was best put by the *Wisconsin State Journal*. "Wisconsin has given the nation—and the world—something startling—and refreshing—to think about. By lifting Harold E. Stassen to a tremendous, phenomenal victory, it has given notice that the people demand the voice in making their president this time. It tells the anxious kingmakers that the Republican nominee is not to be picked from a smoke-filled room." Another editorial noted that "Harold Stassen traveled the highways and byways, he talked to the people, he stated his views frankly." This did not impress everyone. Taft dismissed Stassen's victory as due merely to personal campaigning. Also down-playing the victory was Dewey, who managed to say that April 6 had been a "pretty good day" for him. He noted that the delegation from New York would provide him with 90 convention seats, which alone gave him a hefty lead in the delegate count.³¹

Dewey missed the point. Unlike any GOP candidate in the history of the party, Stassen had bypassed the leadership and propelled himself to the front of the pack in what syndicated columnist Marquis Childs called a "minor revolution."³² The upcoming Nebraska contest presented the opportunity to strengthen his position, yet there seemed insuperable obstacles. In addition to the Butler machine, the liberal internationalist vote was split by the most unwilling placement on the ballot of Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg, whose views were similar to Stassen's and who was not planning to run for the presidency.

Vandenberg's dilemma stemmed from the machinations of the Nebraska Bi-Partisan Committee, the brainchild of 32-year-old

Raymond McConnell Jr. As editor of the *Journal* newspapers in Lincoln, McConnell had no interest in a boring primary and formed his committee to pull every possible contender into the race. He reasoned—correctly—that no politician could afford a humiliating loss. Once on the ballot, a candidate would be compelled to campaign in the state to defend his honor. Vandenberg, however, had no desire to get in Stassen's way in Nebraska and bitterly resented being placed on the ballot. Stassen could only praise the senator and deny that he saw Vandenberg as a threat.³³

The Minnesotan could have pointed out that his commitment to internationalism predated that of the Michigan senator. While Minnesota and its GOP, led by Senators Ernest Lundeen and Henrik Shipstead, had in the late 1930s been a sturdy bulwark of isolationism, by the late 1940s Stassen had thoroughly refashioned the party, giving it a more active, eager posture toward foreign affairs. By his own account, his internationalism was less a product of philosophical reflection than political calculation: "I

looked at the enlistment rates in the navy," Stassen recalled many years later. "I found that Minnesota had the highest enlistment rate per 100 in the country . . . I looked at that and said, 'Isolationism, hell!'" By the time he served as Willkie's floor manager at the 1940 Republican convention, he was firmly planted in the internationalist wing of the GOP.³⁴

Stassen had initiated his Nebraska campaign long before McConnell set about his schemes. By late 1947 the Minnesotan had won the support of State Senator Fred A. Seaton, who agreed to serve as his Nebraska campaign manager. In January 1948, at Stassen's request, LeVander flew to Omaha to meet with Seaton. In a memo to Warren Burger, LeVander related that Seaton had called attention to the "utter lack of any Stassen organization in Nebraska" where the state GOP "is predominantly Taft at this time."³⁵



³⁰ *Wisconsin State Journal*, Apr. 8, 1948, p. 1, 2.

³¹ *Wisconsin State Journal*, Apr. 7, 1948, p. 6, 9; *Milwaukee Journal*, Apr. 7, 1948, p. 16.

³² *Wisconsin State Journal*, Apr. 9, 1948, p. 7.

³³ *Newsweek*, Apr. 5, 1948, p. 22; *Nebraska State Journal*, Mar. 2 and 4, 1948, both p. 1; Sinclair Lewis to Arthur Vandenberg, May 2, 1948, and Vandenberg to Raymond McConnell Jr., Mar. 1, 1948, both box 3, Papers of Arthur Vandenberg, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

³⁴ Stassen interview, Jan. 30, 1988.

³⁵ LeVander to Burger, Jan. 17, 1948, box 97, MRSCC Records.

Undaunted, Stassen hurled himself at the contest, engaging in virtually nonstop personal campaigning. On April 10 his organization played its final ace, as the Paul Revere Riders took to the streets. Roughly 1,000 Stassen supporters piled into some 250 cars, driving to nearby towns to greet people and distribute Stassen materials. The volunteers reached more than 400 towns and cities in all 93 counties and handed out 125,000 pieces of literature.³⁶

On the morning of April 13, as Nebraskans were going to the polls, Stassen and his wife, Esther, attended a breakfast hosted by the Nebraska campaign staff in honor of his forty-first birthday. Then they departed for St. Paul, where they soon started receiving calls from excited supporters. From the moment returns began to be reported, Stassen never lost the lead. Dewey could muster victories in only 7 of the 93 counties. In the largest turnout for a primary in Nebraska history, Stassen polled 80,522 votes—an amazing 43 percent of the total in a seven-candidate field. Dewey trailed with 35 percent, while Taft garnered a surprisingly dismal 11 percent. Far behind, with less than 5 percent each, finished Vandenberg, MacArthur, Earl Warren, and Joseph Martin in that order.³⁷

Isolationist and internationalists: Republican presidential nominee Wendell Willkie (center), with Stassen and Minnesota's U.S. Senator Henrik Shipstead, 1940.



Presidential aspirants rarely entered primaries in the home state of any opponent. An outlander was not likely to win against a hometown hero, and nobody wanted to be tinged with defeat. Moreover, opposing a candidate on his home ground could turn a potential ally into a bitter enemy at the national convention. Thus, Stassen's decision to run against Taft in Ohio raised eyebrows.

The choice was not made cavalierly. In the summer of 1947 Stassen went to Columbus to deliver an address. Accompanying him was LeVander, who described the trip in a memo to Fred J. Hughes, a St. Cloud attorney. Hughes responded, arguing forcefully against challenging Taft on his home turf. It appeared, Hughes noted, that Stassen's reception in Ohio "lacked the spontaneity and drive which characterizes our affairs." As a result, "we should stay out of Ohio. The small numerical gain, as well as the larger psychological which would come from a few delegates garnered in Ohio, would not justify our risking the loss of a friendly disposition." Persuaded, LeVander urged Stassen to pass.³⁸

Disagreeing was Earl E. Hart, a Buckeye-state native and the manager of Stassen's Washington, D.C., headquarters. In November, at Stassen's request, Hart visited Dayton, Cleveland, Youngstown, Toledo, and Akron and came back enthusiastic. "I have told the governor," Hart wrote LeVander, "there are Stassen delegates in Ohio if he wanted to go in there and get them." A distraught LeVander fired off his own memo to Stassen, in which he objected that Hart's conclusions "do not seem entirely warranted by what he reports the feeling is at the meetings. If these men advise us to stay out of Ohio giving Taft the right of way, it is hard for me to conceive how they would be willing to carry on the campaign on your behalf."³⁹

Hart, however, was determined. In January 1948, before Stassen made a final decision, Hart visited his home state to organize a slate of delegate candidates. In an extraordinary memo to LeVander, he noted that Stassen would not decide until the end of the month but acted as if the matter were settled: "This was a hard decision for the governor to make and of course it is a big gamble. However . . . my judgment is we can win some delegates."⁴⁰

³⁶ *Omaha World Herald*, Apr. 12, 1948, p. 2.

³⁷ *Nebraska State Journal*, Apr. 14, 1948, p. 1.

³⁸ Hughes to LeVander, Aug. 22, 1947, box 99, MRSCC Records; LeVander interview, July 19, 1988.

³⁹ Hart to LeVander, Dec. 8, 1947, and LeVander to Stassen, Dec. 11, 1947, both box 100, MRSCC Records.

⁴⁰ Hart to LeVander, Jan. 14, 1948, box 100, MRSCC Records.

Whatever reasoning Stassen may have employed in taking Hart's advice, a monumental miscalculation lay at its core: Stassen's conviction that unionized workers in industrial areas, angered by the Taft-Hartley Labor-Management Relations Act of 1947 that restricted organized labor, would vent their hostility by voting against its principal sponsor. Yet only days after Stassen committed himself to a Buckeye State contest, a Gallup poll reported that voters were becoming less—not more—sympathetic to organized labor's effort to repeal or revise Taft-Hartley.⁴¹

More important, Stassen was trapped by his own effort to retain his support among the well-heeled while winning over workers. In 1947 his campaign organization had celebrated his influence in shaping the Taft-Hartley act. Now, seeking labor support, Stassen focused on his differences with it. In particular, he criticized the section that required all union officers to sign affidavits that they were not Communists. "It is against the American grain," he charged. The Taft campaign pounced on the inconsistency of objecting to the anti-Communist provisions of Taft-Hartley and Stassen's support for outlawing the Communist Party.⁴²

Pressing his advantage, Taft marshaled all of his resources to focus on Stassen's record on labor. Early in 1948 the Congressional Joint Committee on Labor-Management, chaired by Stassen's Minnesota nemesis, Republican Senator Joseph Ball, and having Taft as second-ranking member, launched an investigation of Stassen's labor record in Minnesota "with a view to making a comparison with the restriction upon unions provided by the Taft-Hartley labor law." Thomas Shroyer, chief counsel for the committee, reported, "Generally speaking, the Minnesota law is considerably more drastic" in dealing with internal regulation, the right to strike, and enforcement of labor laws. Shroyer's points surfaced in Taft's public remarks in the closing days of the campaign.⁴³

The result of the May 4 primary was mixed.



Republican hopeful Robert A. Taft in Northfield, about 1945

Taft captured 14 of the 23 districts where Stassen had competed for delegates, leaving 9 to the Minnesotan. While each side gamely declared victory, the *Oregon Daily Journal* felt that the election had damaged both camps, a significant opinion since Oregon was the site of the next—and final—primary on May 21, which would pit Stassen and Dewey in a one-on-one contest.⁴⁴

Suddenly, it was as though the identities of the two men had been switched. Dewey began

⁴¹ *Nebraska State Journal*, Feb. 18, 1948, p. 3.

⁴² Address of Harold E. Stassen at Macomber High School, Toledo, Ohio, Apr. 22, 1948, p. 10, 11, and unsigned, undated memo to Robert Taft, both box 1288, Taft papers. Upon passage of Taft-Hartley, the Stassen campaign reported, "It is well worth noting how much the final verdict resembles the proposals made by Stassen," who had supported, among other issues, provisions against strikes in essential industries, jurisdictional strikes, and secondary boycotts; *Minnesota Letter*, June 12, 1947, p. 1-2, box 97, MRSCC Records.

⁴³ Thomas E. Shroyer to Robert A. Taft, Apr. 23, 1948, box 1288, Taft papers. Stassen had appointed Ball to the Senate in 1940 and supported him for election in 1942. The two had a serious falling out in 1944, when the senator supported Roosevelt against Thomas Dewey. FDR carried Minnesota, and state Republicans, including Stassen, felt that Ball had "sold out"; Joseph Ball to author, June 18, 1988.

⁴⁴ *Oregon Daily Journal*, May 5, 1948, p. 15.



Thomas E. Dewey campaigning in Minneapolis, probably 1944

appearing at local barbecues and state fairs, smiling benignly at small children and hanging ribbons around prize hogs before showing his teeth to shocked reporters. Stassen, meanwhile, was . . . where? In Ohio? West Virginia? Arkansas? With a breathtakingly overcrowded schedule, he was fiddling in relatively unimportant places while his chances in crucial Oregon burned to the ground. "We kept telling him, screaming at him, to come out there," LeVander recalled. "When he finally came, he was in bad shape physically. . . . he was a sick man, running a 102 degree temperature." Suffering from the flu and wearied by a grueling schedule, Stassen could not make up the ground he had lost to Dewey, territory Stassen had commanded only weeks before the primary. Indeed, the New Yorker had considered abandoning the Oregon contest, thinking it hopeless.⁴⁵

Poor scheduling was only part of the problem. More serious was a major tactical error Stassen had made almost one year before: to tar Dewey with the brush of Communist sympathy. In June 1947, in a nationally broadcast radio address, Stassen had recited conventional wisdom that labor disputes could be traced to Communists. He then specifically identified

New York City as a seedbed of communism and called for a bipartisan program to root out the party, developed and implemented "through the cooperation of the President and the Attorney General of the United States, the Governor and the Attorney General of the State of New York, the Mayor and the Prosecutor of the City of New York." If the point was too subtle, Stassen closed by noting that before his election as governor, Minnesota, like New York, had been "one of the centers of Communist activity." He had rid the state of the scourge, and now "for years Minnesota has had less than her share of national Communist difficulties." Finally, he demanded that the Communist Party be banned.⁴⁶

Tom Swafford, a young program director at radio station KPOJ in Portland, seized on the idea of a debate between the two Republican candidates, focusing on the issue. Quickly organized, the debate was scheduled for May 17. Stassen, who had only recently appeared in the state, arrived in Pendleton the day before, already behind schedule. After hastily greeting 600 people at the airport, he launched a furious day of personal campaigning, with no time for rest and study. Larry Howes, a reporter for the *Oregon State Journal*, observed, "Although still energetic, Stassen was beginning to show the strain of . . . campaigning." Weary and ill, Stassen met Dewey for the pivotal debate.⁴⁷

The contest focused on the question "Shall the Communist Party in the United States be outlawed?" and was carried by 900 radio stations nationwide. Millions of listeners tuned in; when the debate began, telephone operators reported that long-distance calls dropped by 25 percent.⁴⁸

Those who listened heard Stassen self-destruct. Swafford recalled that the Minnesotan, responding to Dewey's opening statement, "was wearing the kind of half smile a boxer puts on after taking a damaging blow when he wants the judges to think it didn't hurt. The radio audience couldn't see that, of course, but it could hear the uncertain, diffident delivery that had replaced the earlier booming confidence." The one-hour debate was a disaster.

Outcampaigned, outspent, and outdebated, Stassen was stopped in his tracks. In a heavy

⁴⁵ LeVander interview, July 19, 1988; Smith, *Dewey and His Times*, 26.

⁴⁶ Harold Stassen, "Address of Harold E. Stassen over the National Broadcasting System," June 14, 1947, UPA 6, University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

⁴⁷ *Oregon Daily Journal*, May 16, 1948, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Here and below, Tom Swafford, telephone interview by author, Aug. 28, 1988; Swafford, "The Last Real Presidential Debate," *American Heritage* 37 (Feb.-Mar. 1986): 69, 71; *Oregon Daily Journal*, May 18, 1948, p. 1.

turnout on May 21, Dewey garnered 113,350 votes to Stassen's 104,211 in the winner-take-all race. The next morning Stassen, at his home in St. Paul, conceded the election to Dewey. Staffer Warren Burger blamed the defeat on "the most monumental campaign we have yet been up against."⁴⁹

After the end of the primary season, the candidates and their supporters headed toward Philadelphia for the national convention in late June. The Stassen forces could not dispel the notion that their balloon had been punctured. Still, they gamely tried to revive enthusiasm. According to *Newsweek*, "For sheer noise and circus tactics the Stassen demonstration outdid all others," going so far as to parade a young girl through the hail in a boat while demonstrators screamed, "Man the oars, ride the crest, Harold Stassen, he's the best!" But on the first ballot Stassen could only muster 157 votes to Taft's 224 and Dewey's 434. Thereafter his support melted away.⁵⁰

Regrettably for Stassen, the time had not yet arrived when primary voters would decide which candidate would receive each party's presidential nod, for in the five primaries he entered, the Minnesotan won a total of 806,906 votes—more than any other candidate. Dewey did not run in Ohio, but in the four contests where both competed, Stassen outpolled Dewey 446,419 to 345,440. Stassen's victories had propelled him to the forefront of Republicans nationwide. By May 1948 he had surged to an impressive lead in a Gallup poll measuring support for each candidate, besting second-place Dewey 37 to 24 percent.⁵¹

The Oregon primary, however, removed any aura of invincibility Stassen had generated. In a state uncluttered with favorite sons, with neither candidate enjoying a regional advantage, Dewey won decisively. As a result, delegation chairmen saw little reason to support a candidate who had, after all, tried to wrest their nominating power from them by creating a public demand



Flyer from the Oregon primary campaign, highlighting Communists in New York

for his selection. In the end, Dewey, heavily favored to win in November 1948, lost to Democrat Harry S. Truman in a cliff-hanger election.

While the Republican nomination had escaped Stassen, the Minnesotan and his campaign organization effected a major change in the tactics of seeking party endorsement. Beginning with the Eisenhower nomination effort in 1952, candidates would appreciate the power of building momentum in the primaries. Perhaps this is Stassen's most important legacy.

⁴⁹ R. W. Hitchcock to Fellow Delegates, June 3, 1948, box 1288, Taft papers; *Oregon Daily Journal*, May 23, 1948, p. 1.

⁵⁰ *Newsweek*, July 5, 1948, p. 16.

⁵¹ In contrast to this popular support, only 77 of the 1,094 delegates to the Republican national convention had been chosen by primary voters to support specific candidates: 45 for Stassen, 18 for Dewey, and 14 for Taft; Hitchcock to Fellow Delegates, June 3, 1948.



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