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BOOKSHELF

Influence Instead of Victory

Ballot defeat isn't the end of the story. Adlai Stevenson served as an unofficial spokesman for Democrats during the Eisenhower years.

By *Robert K. Landers*

December 6, 2011

Who was the most influential Republican of the 20th century? One name unlikely to leap to mind is that of Thomas Dewey, who now figures in collective memory chiefly in the famous photograph of President Harry Truman, triumphant in his unexpected return to office in 1948, holding up a copy of the Chicago Tribune that proclaims: "Dewey Defeats Truman." Presidential loser though he was, Dewey may indeed have been the century's most influential Republican, Scott Farris contends in "Almost President," his engaging study of men who came up short in the presidential arena but still had a significant effect on the life of the nation.

"Dewey, along with his protégés Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon," Mr. Farris writes, "moved the Republican Party away from an agenda of repealing the New Deal to a grudging acceptance of the permanent welfare state." Dewey—who had been a nationally renowned prosecutor and then a three-term governor of New York—called himself a "New Deal Republican." He favored the pursuit of liberal ends by conservative means. "It was fine for the federal government to initiate social reforms, Dewey believed, but those reforms should be implemented at the state or local level, and they should be funded in a fiscally responsible manner that did not increase the national debt."

Almost President

By *Scott Farris*

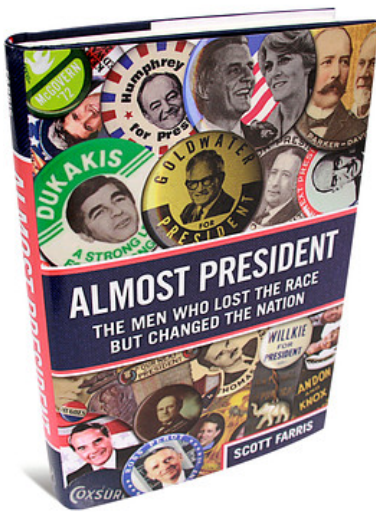
(*Lyons*, 339 pages, \$24.95)

Barry Goldwater dismissed the Eisenhower administration's Dewey-esque "Modern Republicanism" as nothing but a "dime store New Deal." In his own 1964 presidential run, the senator from Arizona suffered the overwhelming defeat that Dewey had predicted for foes of the welfare state. Goldwater carried only Arizona and

five Deep South states, the latter recoiling from President Lyndon Johnson and the Democrats after enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Goldwater's vote against that measure, which (among much else) outlawed racial discrimination in public accommodations, made the Republican line attractive for outraged white Southerners, and Mr. Farris argues that Goldwater's nay vote was "the seminal event in turning the white South from Democratic to Republican."

Dewey and Goldwater are among nine presidential losers whom Mr. Farris profiles at length. The book also includes an appendix with sketches of 22 also-ran also-rans, like James M. Cox, the Ohio governor who was defeated by Warren Harding in 1920—but who ushered a former assistant secretary of the Navy, Franklin Roosevelt, onto the national stage by choosing him as a running mate. Mr. Farris, a former journalist, has been a political loser himself: As the Democratic candidate for Wyoming's at-large congressional seat in 1998, he was defeated by the GOP incumbent. He seems a fair-minded liberal, albeit with some familiar blind spots (e.g., about the Cold War menace of communism, which he seems to think scarcely existed, to judge from his faintly dismissive mention of "Cold War liberalism" and ritualistic references to "Communist witch hunting").

His efforts to show how influential his chosen losers were go beyond the credible at times. He argues, for instance, that Barack Obama's victory in 2008 vindicated 1972 loser George McGovern's remaking of the Democratic Party, which had led to the exodus of many blue-collar



ALMOST PRESIDENT

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and conservative Democrats. After Mr. McGovern's own disastrous showing, Democrats lost five of the next eight presidential elections—partly a result, according to Mr. Farris, of the Democrats' failure to enthusiastically embrace Mr. McGovern's "New Politics" formula for success.

All the losing candidates have contributed in an important way to American democracy, just by accepting the verdict of the ballot box, Mr. Farris rightly notes. Beyond that customary service, many losers have made significant contributions of their own. Yet "we often define losing presidential candidates not by their substantive accomplishments before, during, and after their campaigns," he says, "but by their failure on this one great stage of a presidential election." In recent decades, once a candidate goes down to defeat, even the political parties themselves have taken to fleeing the person who just days before they were touting as the savior of the nation. For instance, Democrats have largely treated Michael Dukakis as a pariah since his 1988 loss to George H.W. Bush.

It hasn't always been that way, Mr. Farris observes. The eloquent Adlai Stevenson, who retained a large and passionate following after his losses in 1952 and 1956 to Eisenhower, memorably served as the unofficial spokesman for the Democrats during the Eisenhower years, as Dewey less memorably had done for the Republicans after his losses to FDR in 1944 and to Truman four years later.

Other notable losing candidates who then led their party include Democrat William Jennings Bryan. In the first of his three presidential losses, the 1896 election won by William McKinley, "the Democratic Party was born again [as] a progressive party after a century of conservatism," Mr. Farris relates. Moreover, Bryan "was instrumental in the passage of a host of progressive reforms" during his more than 30 years in public life. "His influence came not from any [formal] office," Mr. Farris writes, "but from the roughly fifteen years he spent as titular head of the Democratic Party and the large popular following he enjoyed until his death in 1925."

Influential though that unofficial party post might have been, it has disappeared since Stevenson reluctantly gave it up in 1960. The reason, Mr. Farris suggests, is television. TV coverage has indelibly stamped "the image of failure" upon the loser, making it difficult for him to remain "a revered figure, still venerated by many followers and still holding the promise of what might have been." Mr. Farris might have added that the difficulty is compounded by all the "inside" reports that reduce presidential contests to mere games, diminishing the "players" in the process.

Even so, Mr. Farris sees some hopeful signs—since John Kerry's 2004 loss, for instance, he has gone on to become the influential chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—that losing presidential candidates may be treated in the future with more respect.

Mr. Landers, a writer in Baltimore, Md., is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell."