

1997

Claude Pepper, Strom Thurmond, and the 1948 Presidential Election in Florida

Julian M. Pleasants



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Pleasants, Julian M. (1997) "Claude Pepper, Strom Thurmond, and the 1948 Presidential Election in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 76 : No. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol76/iss4/5>

Claude Pepper, Strom Thurmond, and the 1948 Presidential Election in Florida

by JULIAN M. PLEASANTS

IN his book, *The Loneliest Campaign*, Irwin Ross called Harry S. Truman's victory in the presidential election of 1948 "the most astonishing political upset in modern times."¹ Truman achieved this victory despite a three-way split in the Democratic Party. Strom Thurmond, governor of South Carolina and presidential candidate for the States' Rights Democratic Party, and Henry Wallace, former secretary of agriculture and vice president, and nominee of the Progressive Party, both denounced Truman and opposed his election,

Truman counted on the votes of the traditionally Democratic South, but with Thurmond in the race, the South became a key battleground. The States' Rights candidate seemed certain to take the Deep South states of Mississippi, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Alabama, so Florida was pivotal in the plans of both men. Some observers thought that with the Democratic Party in disarray, the Republicans might carry the state. Ultimately, despite the importuning of Republican nominee Thomas E. Dewey and Dixiecrat leader Thurmond, Floridians voted convincingly for Harry Truman.

The presidential election of 1948 dramatically changed state politics. It marked the beginning of the end of one-party rule in Florida and facilitated the ultimate development of a strong conservative Republican Party in the state. In his book on southern politics, political scientist V. O. Key described Florida as a diverse society divided into amorphous factions. State politics, according to Key, was "every man for himself."² In 1948 these factions coalesced into liberal and conservative camps over the controversial leadership of President Truman and, most significantly, over the issue of race. Prior to 1948, politics in Florida had been generally nonideological and issue free, based primarily on the candidate's

Julian M. Pleasants is associate professor of history at the University of Florida.

1. Irwin Ross, *The Loneliest Campaign: The Truman Victory of 1948* (New York, 1968), 6.
2. V. O. Key Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York, 1949), 82.

personality and geographical affiliation. However, as Governor Millard Caldwell, a reluctant supporter of Truman, noted after the 1948 election, "we saw our own party divided by the political appeal to the minorities."³ Many Floridians, primarily those in the Panhandle and northern counties, expressed their disapproval of Truman's liberal agenda and civil rights pronouncements by giving 89,530 votes to Strom Thurmond. In a state that had only 51,000 registered Republicans, Dewey garnered 194,780 votes. Thurmond's and Dewey's combined strength (284,227 votes) exceeded Truman's total by 1,899 votes.⁴

Mid-century Florida was unique among southern states. Most Deep South electorates consisted of whites, born and raised in the South, rural and poorly educated, who usually responded to spell-binding oratory and a not very subtle racism. Florida, however, with a climate that attracted northern retirees and military bases, did not fit the traditional southern profile.⁵ As of 1940, nearly half of all Floridians had been born elsewhere. The largest number of newcomers came from neighboring states, but many came from Republican areas in the Midwest and East, bringing their politics with them. Thus, Florida's less fixed political traditions and its more diverse, dynamic economic life made it easier for outsiders to hold onto their politics than in other southern states.⁶ David Colburn and Richard Scher have argued that the state's large size and geographic, economic, and ethnic diversity nurtured a political localism which led to a statewide factionalism.⁷ By 1950, with the exception of north Florida and the Panhandle, 65.5 per cent of Floridians lived in urban areas, which fostered a rural-urban political cleavage and offered Republicans an opportunity for political success.⁸

Florida had voted Republican in the presidential elections of 1876 and 1928, and Thomas Dewey had received 29.7 per cent of

-
3. Millard Caldwell, speech to the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association, St. Petersburg, Florida, November 8, 1948, box 10, Millard Caldwell Papers, P. K. Yonge Library, University of Florida, Gainesville.
 4. R. A. Gray, compiler, *Official Votes-State of Florida, General Election, 1948* (Tallahassee, 1948), 3.
 5. Earl Black and Merle Black, *Politics and Society in the South* (Cambridge, 1987), 15-16.
 6. Alexander Heard, *A Two-party South?* (Chapel Hill, 1952), 53. Heard found that 48.1 percent of all Floridians had been born outside its borders, more than twice those of any other southern state.
 7. David R. Colburn and Richard Scher, *Florida Gubernatorial Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Tallahassee, 1980), 23.
 8. Lewis M. Killian, *White Southerners* (New York, 1970), 161.

the popular vote in 1944. Nonetheless, the Republicans were scattered about the state and were referred to as “presidential Republicans.” This group included those who voted in the Democratic primaries but voted Republican for president and those Democrats who were disgusted with the national Democratic leadership. In Florida the turn-out for Republican primaries was very low since Florida remained a one-party state, and only the Democratic primaries counted. Republicans seldom ran candidates for statewide office. In 1948 the Republicans campaigned hard for Dewey, and he increased his percentage of the vote to 33.6 per cent.⁹

While conservative businessmen and lawyers dominated the state leadership in the 1940s, Florida was represented in the United States Senate by Claude Pepper, the South’s most liberal senator. Pepper recognized that the conservatives in Florida tried to defeat him in every election, yet he eagerly clashed with the conservative wing of the Democratic Party during the election of 1948.¹⁰ Pepper initially opposed Truman for the Democratic Party nomination and tried to persuade General Dwight D. Eisenhower to run. When Eisenhower refused, Pepper launched his own quixotic quest for the presidency. After Pepper’s abortive attempt failed, he reversed his field and enthusiastically backed Truman.

The South had long been the most cohesive, the largest, and to some degree, the most important region in the country in terms of presidential politics. By 1948, however, that had begun to change. The leaders of the national Democratic Party constructed a platform which favored the interests of important northern constituencies— labor unions, city dwellers, and blacks— over the traditional interests of southern whites. The party assumed it could liberalize its views on civil rights and remain strong in the North without risking its base in the South.¹¹

9. In 1948 there were only 22 Republican candidates for 133 seats in the state legislature. Heard, *Two-Party South*, 56, 63, 100, 103, 106, 112, 114, 142-43; *Florida Times-Union*, May 28, 1948.

10. Claude Denson Pepper and Hays Gorey, *Pepper: Eyewitness to History* (New York, 1987), xii-xv.

11. Merle Black and Earl Black, *The Vital South* (Cambridge, 1993), 39, 344. The party’s strategy for the 1948 election was shaped largely by Clark Clifford, special counsel to the president, who noted in a famous memorandum that “[t]he South, as always, can be considered safely Democratic.” See David McCullough, *Truman* (New York, 1992), 586-87; Cabell Phillips, *The Truman Presidency: The History of a Triumphant Succession* (Baltimore, 1966), 197-99; and Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York, 1991), 197-204.

In late 1946, in response to a rash of racial violence in the South and Republican gains in the 1946 elections (due largely to increased support from northern blacks), President Truman made a bold move to promote civil rights. Truman needed black votes in the key industrial states of the North and West to offset the challenge of Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party. To that end, the president appointed a Committee on Civil Rights and condemned discrimination in a speech to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.¹²

In October 1947, the Committee on Civil Rights completed its report, *"To Secure These Rights."* The committee recommended voting rights for minorities, abolition of the poll tax, and, in general, the passage of civil rights laws and an end to segregation. This document unleashed a firestorm of protest, and white southerners inundated the White House with angry letters. A Florida minister warned Truman: "If that report is carried out you won't be elected dogcatcher in 1948."¹³

On February 2, 1948, in an historic civil rights address to Congress, the president called for the creation of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) and a permanent Commission on Civil Rights, anti-lynching and anti-poll tax legislation, and desegregation of interstate transportation facilities. Special Counsel Clark Clifford admitted that the White House badly underestimated the reaction of the South to Truman's civil rights speech. "[I]t almost cost Truman the 1948 election," Clifford recalled. "The message produced an immediate explosion of anger in the South and set in motion the Dixiecrat revolt."¹⁴

Southern newspapers and prominent politicians such as Senator Richard Russell of Georgia denounced Truman's message. Russell accused Truman of planning a "gestapo" approach to break down segregation in the South. The potential for revolt in the South at that time, opined Russell, was more serious than any he had seen in his lifetime.¹⁵ A very agitated J. W. Cantrell of Kissim-

12. William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Columbus, Ohio, 1970), 41-78.

13. Black and Black, *The Vital South*, 95; U.S. President's Committee on Civil Rights, *"To Secure These Rights": The Report of the U.S. President's Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington, 1947).

14. Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 197-206.

15. Gilbert Fite, *Richard B. Russell, Jr., Senator from Georgia* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 231; Nadine Cohodas, *Strom Thurmond and the Politics of Southern Change* (New York, 1993), 131.

mee wrote to Governor Thurmond to urge him to call a Dixie presidential convention embracing the entire Solid South and to nominate a ticket "which will not sell us out to the NAACP."¹⁶

At the Southern Governor's Conference in Wakulla Springs, Florida, in early February 1948, several irate governors took advantage of the gathering to expose the imminent dangers of Truman's civil rights program.¹⁷ Fielding Wright, the fiery governor of Mississippi, was already on the warpath; his January inaugural address had urged Mississippi Democrats to withhold their electoral votes from the Democratic Party unless they got some assurances on civil rights. In Wakulla Springs he urged his fellow governors to "mobilize for an all-out fight" and made a motion to call a meeting for March 1 to consider seceding from the Democratic Party. Governor Millard Caldwell of Florida, a former four-term U.S. congressman and a conservative lawyer-businessman who was elected governor in 1944 by attacking his opponent's liberalism, rejected a separatist movement or any action that would lead to the election of a Republican. Caldwell understood that a split in the Democratic Party might enhance the Republicans' chances for victory in November.¹⁸ Despite a marked decline in blatant acts of racial discrimination during the years 1940-45, Florida still had a largely white Democratic primary system and clung to traditional views on segregation.¹⁹ Although not as extreme nor as vocal as Wright, Caldwell adhered to the states' rights doctrine of segregation.

The Wakulla Springs conference rejected Wright's proposal but gave the Truman administration an ultimatum: cease attacks on "white supremacy" or face a full-scale political revolt. The conference then adopted Governor Strom Thurmond's motion to set up a committee to evaluate the impact of the civil rights proposals and to express their strong reservations to Washington. The governors agreed to reconvene in forty days. Before leaving Wakulla Springs, the governors, including Wright, Thurmond, and Cald-

16. J. W. Cantrell to J. Strom Thurmond, February 4, 1948, folder 3191, campaigns series, gubernatorial papers, J. Strom Thurmond Papers, Special Collections, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, South Carolina.

17. The original purpose of the meeting was to discuss education needs in the South. Ann M. McLaurin, "The Role of the Dixiecrats in the 1948 Election" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1972), 109; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, February 5-6, 1948.

18. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, February 7, 1948; Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 131.

19. Richard Scher, *Politics in the New South: Republicanism, Race and Leadership in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1992), 13-14, 121-22.

well, castigated Truman for his desire to eliminate the poll tax and segregation. Governor Caldwell also demanded the return of the two-thirds rule for nominating the Democratic candidate in the national convention, which historically had given the South a virtual veto of any undesirable candidate.²⁰

According to his biographer, Governor Thurmond's proposal "established Thurmond as a new voice for the white South." The South Carolina governor's rhetoric became more vehement with national recognition, and he accused Truman of attacking the traditions of the South in order to get the votes of "small pressure groups." Thurmond believed at this point that the South's 127 electoral votes could give the region enormous bargaining power.²¹

Thurmond's committee met with Senator J. Howard McGrath, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, in mid-February and bombarded the senator with questions about the unconstitutionality of the FEPC, anti-lynching laws, and federal infringement on states' rights. McGrath defended the constitutionality of the administration's civil rights program and refused to block any of Truman's proposals or to put a states' rights plank into the Democratic platform. The southerners left the acrimonious meeting in a fighting mood. Vowing to use whatever means necessary to block Truman's program, they assured reporters that the South was no longer "in the bag."²²

Many Floridians applauded this tough talk. C. H. Pennell assured Thurmond that the governors' belligerent stand appealed to many solid citizens in north Florida.²³ One of the key players in the states' rights campaign, Frank D. Upchurch of St. Augustine, a well-to-do conservative and longtime political foe of Senator Claude Pepper, called for a meeting of the Florida State Democratic Executive Committee to consider joining in the southern revolt against

20. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, February 12 and 13, 1948; Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 132.

21. Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 132-33. Thurmond and the Dixiecrats got this idea from Alabama lawyer and author Charles W. Collins, who called for the South to align with northern and western conservatives. When that did not happen, Collins urged the South to set up its own political party in order to retain its political influence. Charles W. Collins, *Whither Solid South: A Study in Politics and Race Relations* (New Orleans, 1947), 256-63.

22. *New York Times*, February 23 and 24, 1948; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, February 23 and 24, 1948; Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 134-35; McLaurin, "Role of the Dixiecrats," 116-17.

23. C. H. Pennell to J. Strom Thurmond, February 27, 1948, folder 3191, Thurmond Papers.

Truman. Upchurch, who also was treasurer of the conservative Florida Democratic Club, said that no sensible citizen could support Truman's desire to end racial segregation as this would engender hatred and strife, not cooperation.²⁴

Senator Pepper, a committed liberal, should have been a strong advocate of Truman's candidacy; however, Pepper withheld his support because he opposed Truman's strong anticommunist foreign policy. He also was wary of Truman's unpopularity with labor and southern Democrats.²⁵ On February 12 Pepper led a delegation of Florida officials to see Truman about the upcoming presidential election. Pepper wanted the president's assurance that he would support a liberal party platform and would not kowtow to southern conservatives. Truman told the group that he would wage a fighting campaign and would not back down on his legislative proposals. Convinced of Truman's sincerity, Pepper immediately endorsed him.²⁶

Meanwhile the southern governors, representing six states with seventy-two electoral votes, reconvened on March 13 in Washington, D.C., to receive the Thurmond committee's report. The report, with familiar rhetoric, denounced Truman's civil rights program, repudiated the leadership of the Democratic Party, and recommended that southerners fight to the last ditch to stop the nomination of anyone who advocated the violation of state sovereignty. Outraged at the national party's betrayal of rank and file Democrats and the danger to southern customs and institutions, the committee noted that federal interference with the laws of segregation "would do great injury to the very people intended to be benefitted." The committee's report was not unanimously adopted. Governor Preston Lane of Maryland did not vote and took no active part in the meeting. Governor Caldwell did not attend the meeting because he did not want to support a movement that might lead to a split in the Democratic Party. By this time, it was clear that the revolt was rooted primarily in the Deep South states.²⁷

24. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, February 24, 1948.

25. Claude Pepper, diary, January 1, 1948, Mildred and Claude Pepper Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee; Pepper and Gorey, *Pepper*, 156.

26. Pepper, diary, February 9, 12, 1948.

27. *Washington Post*, March 14, 1948; McLaurin, "Role of the Dixiecrats," 121-23; Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 137-38.

Before adjourning, the states' rights Democrats called for a preliminary meeting in Jackson, Mississippi, in early May to plan future action. They likewise called for a "pre-convention caucus" of southern delegates to be held two days prior to the Democratic convention on July 12. Should Truman be nominated or the party fail to pass a strong states' rights platform, the group would reconvene in Birmingham to select its own presidential slate.²⁸

During April and early May 1948, white Democrats in Mississippi, South Carolina, and Alabama began securing anti-Truman electors and delegates. At the same time, some southerners and national party leaders began to promote the candidacy of General Dwight D. Eisenhower. The anti-Truman sentiment in the South prompted Senator Pepper to second-guess his recent endorsement. T. M. Cook of West Palm Beach wrote the senator that Florida was very much opposed to Truman, and he proposed a ticket of Eisenhower and Pepper.²⁹ George Brown of Clearwater told Pepper that Truman could not carry Florida against a good Republican.³⁰ A Kansas Democrat announced that he favored an Eisenhower-Pepper ticket, and Chester Bowles, a liberal Democrat, said Truman had to be "displaced." Tommy Corcoran, an aide to President Franklin Roosevelt and an astute political observer, reported to Pepper that election possibilities for Truman in Florida did not appear favorable.³¹ When John Temple Graves, an influential journalist, argued that a southern revolt against Truman now existed, Senator Pepper became convinced that Truman had to go.³²

Meanwhile, on May 10, fifteen hundred delegates gathered at the Jackson city auditorium for a meeting of states' rights Democrats. The major roads into Jackson were draped with Confederate flags, and signs at the auditorium read: "Welcome States' Rights Democrats." In a keynote address that was an unapologetic call to arms, Strom Thurmond again denounced Truman's "force bills" and repeated his view that the separation of the races was necessary for peace and order. For Thurmond, the die had been cast and "the Rubicon crossed." He asserted that the South would battle to the end to save democracy. Thurmond's speech elicited raucous

28. *Washington Post*, March 14, 1948; McLaurin, "Role of the Dixiecrats," 121-23.

29. T. M. Cook to Pepper, April 17, 1948, Pepper Papers.

30. George L. Brown to Pepper, April 28, 1948, Pepper Papers.

31. Pepper, diary, April 4 and 5, May 6, 1948.

32. *Florida Times-Union*, March 30, 1948.

cheers and wild applause and marked him as the leader of the states' rights Democrats, who by now were known as the Dixiecrats.³³

After the Jackson meeting, the Dixiecrats, operating under the assumption that Truman would be nominated, began planning a campaign for a candidate of their own choosing. They published an official organ, *The States Righter* but allowed the states to form their own organizations with guidance from a "nerve center" in Little Rock. The Dixiecrat hierarchy encouraged each state to begin the process of selecting delegates and electors pledged to a states' rights candidate.³⁴

Governor Millard Caldwell, in agreement with some of the states' righters' views, urged Florida to send a delegation of Democrats to the national convention charged to support a states' rights candidate and a platform that acknowledged the South's ability and right to solve its own problems harmoniously.³⁵ On April 6, in a radio talk arranged by twenty-one southern senators, Caldwell denounced the "political meddlers" who wanted to establish a Washington gestapo to police the internal affairs of southern states. Caldwell believed that the civil rights legislation was political, not humanitarian, in nature. According to the governor, the Democratic Party selfishly sought the votes of minorities and had unfairly ranted about the supposed discrimination and intolerance in the South. Caldwell indicated that forced federal interference would lead to strife and confusion. The governor concluded by asking Washington "not [to] make our task harder by foisting on us your moralisms and your dogma."³⁶ Caldwell clearly espoused the views of the Dixiecrats but did not want a public break with the Truman administration.

Caldwell and other conservative political leaders spent large sums of money to elect sympathetic convention delegates. Their efforts paid off: the conservative wing of the party won a majority of

33. Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 143-47; McLaurin, "Role of the Dixiecrats," 128-32.

34. McLaurin, "Role of Dixiecrats," 134-35.

35. Millard Caldwell to Strom Thurmond, March 18, 1948, civil rights folder, Thurmond Papers; Millard Caldwell, typed statement, March 18, 1948, box 10, Caldwell Papers.

36. Millard Caldwell, radio address, April 6, 1948, Miami, Florida, box 10, Caldwell Papers.

Florida's twenty delegates, while Senator Pepper and his more liberal supporters got only six and one-half delegates.³⁷ Frank Upchurch lead the conservative faction and controlled a clear voting majority originally committed to Governor Fielding Wright.

The state Democratic convention in June revealed a three-way political split. Upchurch and a majority of the Florida delegates, strongly anti-Truman and anti-Pepper, initially pledged to bolt the party should Truman be nominated or a strong civil rights platform adopted. Caldwell opposed Upchurch's desire to leave the party as too drastic. The state convention avoided the issue by eventually agreeing to cooperate with delegates from other states to "rescue the Democratic party from its false leaders."³⁸

The newly elected Democratic delegation met prior to the national convention to organize and set an agenda, the first time a Florida delegation had done so. The delegation elected Frank Upchurch chairman without opposition. Upchurch, under pressure from Caldwell and Senator Spessard Holland, now stated that it was unlikely that Florida Democrats would bolt the party: "If we left the party where would we go?" Upchurch pledged to vote Democratic, not Republican, but also vowed to oppose any civil rights plank.³⁹ Senator Holland later recalled that while sympathizing with the Dixiecrats, he never wanted to bolt the party and tried to keep the Florida Democratic Party intact.⁴⁰

Florida voters also were treated to a crowded and contentious governor's race. The most viable of the nine candidates included Fuller Warren, a handsome, colorful, and dynamic campaigner from rural north Florida; Dan McCarty, a wealthy citrus grower and former Speaker of the House from south Florida; and J. Tom Watson, Florida's attorney general and later an enthusiastic supporter of the Dixiecrats. Warren, with strong financial support and an effective campaign, led the first primary by 22,000 votes over McCarty. Although Warren and Tom Watson were sympathetic to the Dixiecrats, the states' rights issue and race were not significant factors in the election. In the run-off the conservative Warren won the

37. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, May 11, 1948; Pepper, diary, May 14, 1948.

38. *St. Petersburg Times*, June 2 and 3, 1948; *Tampa Tribune*, June 2, 1948.

39. *Tampa Tribune*, June 7 and 8, 1948.

40. Spessard L. Holland, letter to the editor, *Tampa Tribune*, February 15, 1956, box 41-D, Spessard L. Holland Papers, P. K. Yonge Library.

Democratic nomination for governor with 299,641 votes to 276,788 for McCarty.⁴¹

Meanwhile, the movement to nominate Eisenhower was gaining strength. It became deadly serious when Eleanor Roosevelt announced on March 30, 1948, that she would oppose Truman's nomination and was prepared to back Eisenhower.⁴² Ironically the key organization in the dump Truman movement was the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), the leading liberal organization in the country. Just as Truman proposed the most far-reaching civil rights legislation in American history, the ADA, which vigorously opposed his harsh policy against Russia, wanted to replace him with Eisenhower. The Committee to Draft Eisenhower included James and Franklin Roosevelt, sons of the former president, Mayor Hubert H. Humphrey of Minneapolis, and several other politicians including Claude Pepper.⁴³

Several southern conservatives, including Strom Thurmond, joined the Eisenhower pursuit. Governor Thurmond made a private visit to Eisenhower to encourage him to run. Eisenhower politely refused. Liberals and conservatives had joined in this effort because Ike was universally admired and because they thought he could be elected.⁴⁴ Southern conservatives and New Dealers both saw the moderate Eisenhower as the answer to the South's political split.

Pepper emerged as the most active liberal Democrat opposed to Truman's nomination. On June 28 he announced that Eisenhower would be the most popular candidate that the Democrats could nominate. The senator did state that if Truman were nominated, he would support him.⁴⁵ Pepper, however, felt that it would be suicidal to nominate Truman since his popularity ratings had declined to twenty-six percent. Pepper warned that Governor Thomas Dewey would surely win the election and begin dismantling the New Deal.⁴⁶

41. Colburn and Scher, *Florida Gubernatorial Politics*, 74-75; Charlton Tebeau, *Florida: From Indian Trail to Space Age* (Delray Beach, 1965), 90-91; Millard Caldwell, typed statement, June 8, 1948, box 12, Caldwell Papers.

42. *Florida Times-Union*, March 30, 1948.

43. Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 196.

44. *Ibid.*, 161; Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 155.

45. *St. Petersburg Times*, June 28, 1948.

46. Pepper, *Eyewitness*, 160.

President Truman, finally realizing the seriousness of the Eisenhower boom, asked the general for a clear “statement of his unavailability.” Eisenhower initially refused to respond.⁴⁷ His reluctance to withdraw led Mayor Frank Hague of New Jersey to assume Ike would run. Hague then deserted Truman and promised New Jersey’s thirty-six votes to Eisenhower. The Georgia and Virginia delegations, also encouraged by Eisenhower’s indecision, were instructed for the general. The movement continued to snowball and the votes of Arkansas, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, and twelve and one-half votes from Florida would almost certainly go to Ike in the Democratic convention.⁴⁸

Eisenhower tried to dash the hopes of his supporters on July 5 when he stated that he would not identify with any political party and would not “accept nomination for any public office.”⁴⁹ Politicians like Pepper and Jimmy Roosevelt, now out on a limb, would not accept this refusal. They believed that Eisenhower was merely being coy and might not seek partisan political office, but would answer a people’s draft. Pepper suggested that the Democratic Party become a “national party” and urged a “nonpartisan draft” of Eisenhower.⁵⁰ An intermediary from Pepper to Eisenhower reported that the general had given him “great encouragement” about a possible candidacy.⁵¹ Pepper and Roosevelt’s belief that Eisenhower would run if asked was not too far from the truth. According to one of Eisenhower’s biographers, the general, despite his dislike of partisan politics and lack of political experience, would have considered a nomination by acclamation as a call to duty and would not have refused to serve.⁵²

When Senator Pepper announced that he would put Eisenhower’s name before the Democratic convention with or without the general’s permission, Eisenhower acted decisively. He sent a telegram to Pepper requesting that Pepper not nominate him as it would be an “acute embarrassment to all concerned.” Eisenhower

47. Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 214.

48. Jules Abels, *Out of the Jaws of Victory* (New York, 1959), 74; Ross, *Loneliest Campaign*, 112-13.

49. *St. Petersburg Times*, July 6, 1948.

50. Pepper, *Eyewitness*, 164; Pepper, diary, July 8, 1948; *New York Times*, July 7, 1948; *St. Petersburg Times*, July 7, 1948; James Roosevelt to Strom Thurmond, July 5, 1948, folder 3221, Thurmond Papers; Abels, *Out of the Jaws*, 75.

51. Pepper, diary, July 9, 1948.

52. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, Volume I (New York, 1983), 461-62.

would refuse a nomination “no matter under what terms, conditions, or premises a proposal might be couched.” Eisenhower noted that his refusal was “final and complete.” This refusal was so definite that Pepper reluctantly gave up his quest.⁵³

The *St. Petersburg Times* concluded that Pepper’s failure in persuading Eisenhower to run had hurt him politically. If his daring attempt to draft Eisenhower had succeeded, concluded the paper, his prestige would have soared. The conservative element of the Florida delegation to the Democratic convention, led by Frank Upchurch, was as much anti-Pepper as anti-Truman and reveled in Pepper’s failure.⁵⁴

At this juncture Senator Pepper unaccountably announced his own candidacy for the presidency, declaring himself the person best able to represent the principles of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Furthermore, he saw himself as a “practical” southern liberal and denounced Truman’s civil rights program as a “snare and delusion” that could not succeed in the South. This desperate attempt to soften his image as an extreme liberal failed. Pepper asserted that his candidacy was “no gesture” but a fight he thought he could win. Pepper later claimed that he had the approbation of Jimmy Roosevelt, Jack Kroll, Leon Henderson and other liberal leaders, but in the end, neither the ADA, the CIO PAC, nor Jimmy Roosevelt endorsed Pepper.⁵⁵

Although Pepper announced that he had support from twenty-two states and a total of three to four hundred delegates, his only definite pledges, six and one-half votes, came from loyalists in the Florida delegation. Observers like Irwin Ross called Pepper’s three-day campaign for the presidency “a comic turn” while Jules Abels thought Pepper had descended from the sublime to the ridiculous.⁵⁶ The *St. Petersburg Times* accused Pepper of possessing “delusions of grandeur” and maintained that he was committing political suicide.⁵⁷ Governor Millard Caldwell and Senator Spessard Holland also thought Pepper’s candidacy ill-fated since Pepper

53. Dwight D. Eisenhower to Claude Pepper, July 9, 1948, Pepper Papers; Pepper, *Eyewitness*, 162-64; Pepper, diary, July 9, 1948; *New York Times*, July 10, 1948; *St. Petersburg Times*, July 10, 1948.

54. *St. Petersburg Times*, July 10, 1948.

55. *New York Times*, July 10, 11, 1948; Pepper, diary, July 10, 1948; Pepper, *Eyewitness*, 165-66; Ross, *Loneliest Campaign*, 114-15.

56. Ross, *Loneliest Campaign*, 115; Abels, *Out of the Jaws*, 80.

57. *St. Petersburg Times*, July 12, 1948.

could not even get the majority support of his own delegation. Caldwell and Holland, who desired unity in the delegation, knew Pepper's announcement would increase the gap between the conservative bloc led by Frank Upchurch, who despised Pepper, and Pepper's pro-Eisenhower group of six and one-half delegates. The Florida Democratic Club, led by Upchurch and Charles E. Sheperd, a member of the Florida House of Representatives, trashed Pepper as "a promoter of the radical left-wing of the party" and pointed out that he had been remarkably silent on the southern states' rights protests.⁵⁸

Pepper kept up a brave front and combed other delegations for uncommitted votes. His hope that the South might turn to him because he was a southerner was naive and misguided. Finally, a red-faced Pepper quit a race in which he never had any real support. Pepper admitted in the end that he had failed to unite the party, and it was better to quit than make a bad matter worse.⁵⁹ Arthur Krock, writing in the *New York Times*, noted that the Pepper faction was limited to a few henchmen from Florida. The so-called "liberal revolution," concluded Krock, not only failed to defeat Truman, but won the president some measure of respect.⁶⁰ In his memoirs, Pepper remembered his candidacy as exciting and important even though "it was destined to come to naught." Pepper believed he had more delegates than anyone except Truman, but did not win because Truman had the power of incumbency. Perhaps responding to his critics, Pepper admitted that his brief flirtation with the presidency was "impractical, but not entirely fanciful."⁶¹ Surely Pepper was the only person who saw his ill-fated attempt at the nomination as anything other than fanciful.

Although the Florida delegation had agreed not to bolt, they made it clear that they would not waver in their commitment to states' rights.⁶² In fact, Upchurch attended a southern states caucus of anti-civil rights, anti-Truman delegates while Caldwell reiterated

58. Florida Democratic Club, press release, July 1, 1948, folder 3350, Thurmond Papers; George A. Smathers, interviews by Donald A. Ritchie, August 1 to October 24, 1989, Washington, D.C., transcript, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville.

59. *St. Petersburg Times*, July 11-14; *New York Times*, July 11 and 12, 1948; Spessard L. Holland to the editor, *Tampa Tribune*, February 15, 1956, box 41-D, Holland Papers.

60. *New York Times*, July 12 and 14, 1948.

61. Pepper, *Eyewitness*, 166-68.

62. *St. Petersburg Times*, July 14, 1948; *New York Times*, July 14, 1948.

his stand for states' rights and joined the floor fight against the civil rights plank.⁶³ The governor reminded listeners that despite his strong feelings: "I cannot walk out of the convention and I cannot bolt from the party in December."⁶⁴ Charles Shepperd, a member of the platform committee, also vigorously opposed the civil rights plan and announced that he would support Fielding Wright for president.⁶⁵

The race issue came to a head when the Democratic convention adopted a civil rights platform that was far stronger than that desired by the Truman administration. A majority of the convention delegates approved the platform after acrimonious debate despite the fact that some southerners had announced that "failure to reaffirm the constitutional rights of the states was essential to Southern confidence in and support of the party." Florida cast all of its twenty votes against the plank.⁶⁶

When the conference reconvened that evening, Handy Ellis, chairman of the Alabama delegation, rose to address the convention. He stated that Alabama's presidential electors had been instructed never to vote for a Republican, Harry Truman, or for any candidate with a civil rights program. Ellis shouted: "We bid you good-bye," and one-half of the Alabama delegation and the entire Mississippi delegation walked out of the convention. The remaining southern delegates did not leave, but were glum and dispirited.⁶⁷ Senator Pepper looked on the exodus with sadness. "We are witnessing the complete break-up of the Democratic party, just as I predicted. This might be Charleston, South Carolina in 1860."⁶⁸ The remaining southerners caucused and then rallied behind the nomination of Senator Richard Russell of Georgia. Someone raised the rebel flag, a few delegates let loose with rebel yells, and the band struck up a noisy rendition of "Dixie." Governor Thurmond seconded Russell's nomination.⁶⁹

63. *St. Petersburg Times*, July 10, 1948.

64. *Ibid.*, July 14, 1948.

65. *Ibid.*, July 10, 1948.

66. *New York Times*, July 15, 1948; Black and Black, *The Vital South*, 97; Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 217-20.

67. Black and Black, *The Vital South*, 98.

68. *St. Petersburg Times*, July 15, 1948.

69. *New York Times*, July 15, 1948; *St. Petersburg Times*, July 15, 1948; Ross, *Loneliest Campaign*, 127-28; Fite, *Russell*, 238-40.

When the convention completed the roll call for president, Truman had collected 947½ votes and Russell had garnered 263 votes, all of which came from southern delegates. Florida cast nineteen and one-half votes for Russell and one-half vote for Paul V. McNutt (nominated by Byrd Sims of Florida), former federal security administrator. Governor Caldwell voted for Russell, but announced that he was still a Democrat. Spessard Holland, who had cheered the rebels when they left the convention, did not comment on Truman's nomination, but pledged to work for the election of Democratic senators in November. The nineteen and one-half Florida votes were obviously a protest against Truman's renomination, but the vote finally united the delegation as the Pepper group likewise voted for Russell. By backing Russell, Senator Pepper was clearly trying his best to reconcile with the Upchurch group after his abortive fling at the presidential nomination.⁷⁰

The southern rebels, faced with a loss of control over racial issues, now called for a states' rights convention in Birmingham, Alabama, on July 17. Frank Upchurch and six other Florida delegates planned to attend, while Governor Caldwell and Senator Pepper announced they would support President Truman and the Democratic ticket. The *St. Petersburg Times* thought Truman a long shot but endorsed him anyway. Eventually seven members of the conservative group in the Florida delegation, including Upchurch and Mr. and Mrs. E. H. Ramsey of Jacksonville, attended the Birmingham convention.⁷¹

On July 16 unofficial, self-appointed delegates and interested spectators poured into Birmingham to discuss their plans for protecting southern values and institutions. Florida had a delegation of between fifteen and twenty-five among the 6,000 guests. Senators James O. Eastland and John Stennis of Mississippi were the only national politicians who attended. Conspicuously absent was Senator Richard Russell, who refused to attend or to allow his name to be placed in nomination for president. Russell did not want to weaken the Democratic Party as he thought a split would only help the Republicans and would reduce southern influence in the Senate. Russell preferred to remain in Washington, retain his

70. *St. Petersburg Times*, July 14 and 15, 1948.

71. *Ibid.*, July 15 and 16, 1948; *Miami Herald*, July 15, 1948.

party credentials, and work to change Democratic policies on civil rights.⁷²

Governor Thurmond did not plan to attend the conference and returned home to South Carolina after the national convention. On the eve of the conference he received a call from the states' righters asking him to consider running for president. Thurmond expressed reluctance about accepting the nomination because if the Republicans won due to the Democratic split, it might be the end of Thurmond's political career. On the other hand, nomination by a states' rights party would give him a chance to stand up for the principles he believed in and would also give him national exposure. Thurmond thought there was an outside possibility that the Dixiecrats could get enough electoral votes to deny the nomination to the major candidates and force the election into the House of Representatives, where the South could dictate the terms.⁷³

On July 17 the boisterous conference adopted a "declaration of principles" and "recommended" Governor Strom Thurmond for president and Governor Fielding Wright of Mississippi for vice president. Declaring themselves the true Democratic Party, the States' Rights Democrats pledged their support for segregation and racial integrity. Several speakers attacked Truman and his civil rights program as a "threat to make Southerners into a mongrel, inferior race by forced intermingling with Negroes."⁷⁴

Thurmond's acceptance speech was a rabble-rousing diatribe against Truman, who had "stabbed" the South in the back. Thurmond promised to wage a fighting campaign on the issue of states' rights and told the cheering crowd that "there's not enough federal troops in the army to force the southern people to break down segregation and admit the Negro race into our theaters, into our swimming pools, into our homes and into our churches."⁷⁵

The reaction to the States' Rights convention was instantaneous and harsh. The *New York Times* concluded that the "revolt" did not possess much political or moral logic, but that it might elect Dewey.⁷⁶ Jonathan Daniels, editor of the *News and Observer* in

72. *New York Times*, July 16-18, 1948; Fite, *Russell*, 241; Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 174-75.

73. Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 175-76.

74. *New York Times*, July 18, 1948; McLaurin, "Role of the Dixiecrats," 172-85; Heard, *Two Party South*, 20-21.

75. *New York Times*, July 18 and 19, 1948; Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 177.

76. *New York Times*, July 19, 1948.

Raleigh, North Carolina, wrote that the movement would lead to the destruction of the Democratic Party.⁷⁷ Senator Holland, along with many other southern politicians, announced that he was “completely out of accord” with the Democratic platform, but considered the Birmingham conference “unwise” and would not support the Dixiecrats.⁷⁸

A fairly significant core of Florida Democrats, however, favored Thurmond. Attorney General J. Tom Watson called on Florida states’ rights Democrats to organize support for Thurmond and asked for a statewide convention. Watson, a Tampa lawyer and judge, had been elected attorney general in 1940. He had earlier denounced Truman’s civil rights program by declaring that the president “was stirring up political animosity in hopes he might survive the next election.” Watson formally withdrew from the Democratic Party on September 12, announced he was an independent, and stated that he planned to work hard for a two-party system in Florida. Watson told the press that he left the Democratic Party because the national convention “abused and insulted southern democracy.” When the States’ Rights Party died out, Watson switched to the Republican Party and ran for governor as the Republican nominee in 1954.⁷⁹

The *St. Petersburg Times* denounced Watson for beating the bushes for the Dixiecrats. Florida voters were not very enthusiastic about Truman, explained the paper, but responsible leaders had no intention of following “a hare-brained movement out of Birmingham” that appealed to racial bigots and the lunatic far right fringe and that would result in Dewey’s election.⁸⁰ Thurmond tried to explain to the national press that he was fighting for the principle of states’ rights, not white supremacy, but this argument was specious.⁸¹ Thurmond and his followers were fighting to preserve segregation and white supremacy by appealing to the fears of the voters. The constitutional issue of states’ rights, while a significant factor, took second place to racism.

77. *Raleigh News and Observer*, July 18, 1948.

78. *St. Petersburg Times*, July 18, 1948.

79. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, September 12, 1948. Colburn and Scher, *Florida’s Gubernatorial Politics*, 303; Allen Morris, compiler, *The Florida Handbook, 1959-60* (Tallahassee, 1959), 207.

80. *St. Petersburg Times*, July 20 and 21, 1948.

81. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, July 20, 1948.

The Dixiecrat strategy was to persuade the Democratic Parties in the South to accept their candidates as the official party nominees. Where this was not possible, they would appear on the ballot under the designation of the States' Rights Democratic Party. By late August Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina had chosen presidential electors pledged to Thurmond. In these four states, Thurmond and Wright were listed as the nominees of the Democratic Party. In all states save Alabama, Truman's name eventually was added to the ballot, although not as the nominee of the Democratic Party.⁸²

Thurmond and Fielding journeyed to Houston on August 11 to formally accept the nomination of the four states.⁸³ The Dixiecrats then launched an effort to get on the ballot in all forty-eight states. This attempt was hampered by the late start, complex election rules, and a lack of funds.⁸⁴ The frequently disorganized Dixiecrats did manage to set up an executive committee to coordinate the campaign. Governor Ben Laney of Arkansas served as chair while both Frank Upchurch and Charles Shepperd of Florida were influential committee members.⁸⁵

Thurmond began his campaign for president in late July and concentrated his activity in the South. He preferred the personal style of campaigning and tended to speak to small groups on the courthouse steps in small towns. Lacking the support of a strong organization, Thurmond had to rely on the efforts of local citizens. He stood almost alone in his quest; only Senator James Eastland and a few former governors actually came out and worked for Thurmond publicly.⁸⁶

The governor's speeches rarely changed. He provided a little local color, denounced Truman and civil rights, and reaffirmed his faith in states' rights. In his first speech, Thurmond, with harsh rhetoric, warned of the dangers of segregation and predicted civil strife, chaos, and lawlessness. He called the intermingling of the races "impractical and impossible." He did not discuss taxes or foreign policy or what he would do for agriculture or business. His one-note campaign, described by one paper as a "field filibuster,"

82. Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 181-82.

83. Abels, *Out of the Jaws*, 217; Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 181-82.

84. McLaurin, "Role of the Dixiecrats," 215.

85. *Ibid.*, 213-14.

86. Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 183-87; Abels, *Out of the Jaws*, 219.

never varied. Thurmond, appealing to southerners' emotions and fears, soon realized that he did not have to use inflammatory language or the word "nigger" to convey his message. Everyone knew that Thurmond was the symbol of the white South, so he began to talk about the sympathy that white southerners of good will had toward the Negro. He concluded that the Negro had progressed farther than any race in history.⁸⁷

While Thurmond organized his national campaign, the presidential race in Florida began to heat up. On August 2, Alex D. Littlefield, Volusia County Sheriff and chairman of the State Democratic Executive Committee, stressed that absolute loyalty to the Democratic Party was essential for victory. Littlefield said that there was only one candidate for president, Harry Truman, and all Democrats "will support Truman and his program."⁸⁸ Littlefield's statement incensed conservative Democrats who immediately replied to his call for unity. Frank Upchurch declared that Truman could not carry Florida. If Florida citizens cast their votes for Truman, continued Upchurch, they would surrender their principles to "Northern Communists, radicals, and left-wingers" and would end up submitting to the FEPC and anti-segregation laws. Upchurch warned Floridians that Truman had repudiated the principles of states' rights and had set up a police state in Washington to get the Negro and radical vote.⁸⁹

Littlefield, Senator Pepper, and others tried to ignore Upchurch and journeyed to Washington, D.C., to elicit Senator McGrath's help in planning Truman's campaign in Florida.⁹⁰ Upchurch continued his tirade unabated. He announced that the Truman administration was under the control of "sinister men" who planned to seize control of the government and had raised the race issue to "create confusion and hatred." On the other hand, he declared Thurmond and Wright men of character and ability who could save the South's traditions.⁹¹

As the national campaign got underway the battle lines were clearly drawn in Florida. Upchurch, Shepperd, and other conservative Democrats, outraged that Thurmond was not on the state bal-

87. Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 183-87; Abels, *Out of the Jaws*, 219.

88. Alex D. Littlefield, news release, August 2 and 3, 1948, Pepper Papers; *Florida Times-Union*, August 3, 1948.

89. *Florida Times-Union*, August 6, 1948.

90. *Ibid.*, August 10, 1948.

91. *Ibid.*, August 12, 1948.

lot, protested Florida's election laws. The issue heated up after four Democratic presidential electors announced that they would vote for Strom Thurmond regardless of the outcome of the election.⁹²

On September 3, *Miami Herald* newspaper publisher Reuben Clein filed a civil suit to disqualify the four Democratic electors who planned to violate their oath to the Democratic Party and cast their ballots for Thurmond. Clein argued that the four votes for Thurmond would, in effect, cancel Florida's electoral vote. Circuit Court Judge Miles W. Lewis heard the case and ruled that the oath did not bind the electors. In accordance with the constitutional principles establishing presidential electors, Lewis judged that they were free to vote for whomever they pleased.⁹³

Recognizing a serious problem, the state named a joint legislative committee to consider changes in the Florida election laws. The special twenty-one member committee met on September 8 in Tallahassee to consider the legal and political ramifications of possible changes. Under 1948 Florida law, the election ballots carried only the names of the electors of the Democratic and Republican Parties and did not carry the names of the presidential candidates themselves. The law required new political parties to persuade five percent of the voters to change affiliation before the new parties would be put on the ballot. Henry Wallace's Progressive Party, which also wanted to get on the ballot, had fewer than three thousand members and did not qualify.⁹⁴

The legislative committee, under severe pressure from the states' righters, gave general approval to a proposal that would list Truman, Dewey, and Thurmond on the ballot, but the committee defeated a motion to include Wallace. Opponents argued that to put Wallace on the ballot would publicize a party which had communistic leanings. Some of those favoring the motion said that it would be discriminatory to accept one third party and not the other. The approved proposal mandated that the presidential candidates be listed without party designation. The committee also agreed that the eight current electors would be divided by preference (four for Truman and four for Thurmond) and four addi-

92. *Gainesville Sun*, September 5, 1948; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, September 8, 1948.

93. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, September 3 and 7, 1948.

94. *Ibid.*, September 8, 1948.

tional electors, chosen by States' Rights and Democratic Party leaders, would fill out each slate of eight.⁹⁵

The *Daily Democrat*, in an editorial, judged that the loud dissatisfaction with the nomination of Truman was the only reason for amending the state's election laws. The anti-Truman forces, argued the paper, wanted to change the laws for the sole purpose of getting Thurmond's electors on the ballot. To be fair, said the *Democrat*, Wallace's name should also be included so as to avoid any charges of discrimination. The paper decried the fact that Democratic electors could vote for Thurmond when Truman was the choice of the Democratic Party and the electors were the choice of the Democratic voters. If too many loyal voters violated their pledge to the party, determined the *Democrat*, then the party would be split in two. Finally, the newspaper concluded that Thurmond could not win the presidency, and if Florida voters cast their ballots for Thurmond as a protest vote against Truman, Dewey would win.⁹⁶

On September 9 Governor Caldwell called for the tenth special session of the Florida legislature in sixty-three years for the sole purpose of "considering the enactment of laws relating to the general election." In effect, the legislature would vote on the recommendations of the special legislative committee.⁹⁷ The state legislature approved (with only minor changes) the bill recommended by the special legislative committee by a vote of 33-1 in the Senate and 72-14 in the House. Under great pressure to be fair, the legislature then put Wallace's name on the ballot. The Democratic Party and the State' Rights Party provided the legislature with the names of eight electors for each slate. Frank Upchurch was listed as one of the newly chosen electors for the States' Rights Party.⁹⁸ The following day Governor Caldwell signed the bill into law.

Under pressure from Dixiecrat supporters, the legislature had amended the statutes, allowing nominees from any party to file without formality. Several Florida legislators were friendly to Strom Thurmond, and the changes in the election laws were a major concession to a group of insistent conservatives. With all four candidates now listed on the ballot, the vote could not be split, and all

95. *Ibid.*, September 9, 1948.

96. *Ibid.*, September 12, 1948.

97. *Ibid.*, September 10, 1948.

98. *Ibid.*, September 16, 1948.

eight electoral votes would go to whichever candidate carried the state.⁹⁹

Claude Pepper thought that Truman would have a “tough fight” to carry Florida, but he planned to spend August and September in Florida campaigning for the national ticket.¹⁰⁰ Pepper, however, got very little support from state Democratic Party leaders. Initially, Governor Caldwell neither opposed Truman nor worked for Thurmond. He supported the state ticket and on September 21 announced that he would vote for all the Democratic nominees, but would not actively campaign for Truman.¹⁰¹ Caldwell, however, soon realized that Truman might carry the state, and he did not want to break with the administration. Shortly thereafter, in Louisville, Kentucky, the Florida governor made a radio speech for the national party denouncing the “do-nothing” 1946 Republican Congress. He advocated the election of the Democratic ticket and touted Truman as “a leader whose calm, courageous judgment may be depended on.” Caldwell did not mention civil rights or states’ rights.¹⁰² Ultimately, although Caldwell favored the states’ righters, political considerations led him reluctantly to vote for Truman.

Fuller Warren, Democratic gubernatorial nominee, thought there was no hope for Truman either in Florida or the country. Warren did not want to take any political heat from the Dixiecrat faction and refused to mention Truman’s name in his campaign. Warren tried to separate the national and state tickets, surely the wisest political strategy in 1948.¹⁰³

Pepper did not become discouraged by Floridians’ lack of enthusiasm for the national ticket. He went to DeFuniak Springs, Apalachicola, and other small communities to round up support for Truman. Encouraged by the support he found, Pepper predicted in August that the president would carry the state.¹⁰⁴ Other Democrats agreed. J. Lindsay Almond, the colorful attorney general of

99. *Gainesville Sun*, September 12-14, 1948; McLaurin, “Role of the Dixiecrats,” 245; Daniel A. Mazmanian, *Third Parties in Presidential Elections* (Washington, D.C., 1974), 95; Heard, *Two-Party South*, 140.

100. Pepper, diary, August 11, 15, 1948.

101. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, September 21, 1948.

102. Democratic Party Broadcast, October 2, 1948, Louisville, Kentucky, box 10, Caldwell Papers.

103. Pepper, diary, August 19, 1948.

104. *Ibid.*, August 19, 20, 22, 23, 1948.

Virginia, advised Democrats to “stay in the house of their fathers even though there are bats in the belfry, rats in the pantry, a cockroach waltz in the kitchen, and skunks in the parlor.”¹⁰⁵

Thurmond continued to pound away on the issue of race. He appealed to many parents by telling them that they had the right to send their children to schools with “proper” [white] teachers and “proper” classmates. No government authority, declaimed Thurmond, had the right to tell parents to which schools to send their kids or with whom they should play.¹⁰⁶

On July 27, 1948, President Truman further angered Thurmond by issuing Executive Order 9981, which integrated the armed forces of the United States. His advisors had urged Truman to wait until after the election as it would hurt his chances for victory. Truman, in a courageous move, refused to do so because he believed segregation in the armed forces undermined American values. Nineteen of the twenty-two southern senators condemned the executive order.¹⁰⁷ Thurmond opposed the integration of the armed forces because the decision would undermine morale and threaten the safety of the country.¹⁰⁸

The Dixiecrats’ denunciations of the Democratic Party appealed to some Floridians. Former member of the State Democratic Executive Committee J. L. Lee rejected blind allegiance to the Democratic Party since it had gone against the South’s best interests. Lee expressed delight that, after years of complaining about what they did not like, the South had finally done something.¹⁰⁹ C. D. Smith also pledged his support to Thurmond. “We are fixing to have a rally for you in Madison (Florida) and we are going to do all we can to keep Truman from getting a single vote.”¹¹⁰ The *Gainesville Sun* charged the Democrats with rejecting states’ rights for causes such as the FEPC, which invaded the domain of individual states. The South should stick by the States’ Righters, counseled the paper, so that it would become the balance

105. Abels, *Out of the Jaws*, 220.

106. J. Strom Thurmond, speech, August 26, 1948, States’ Rights file, Thurmond Papers.

107. Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 208-11.

108. J. Strom Thurmond, speech, September 23, 1948, civil rights file, Thurmond Papers.

109. J. L. Lee to James Peters, September 23, 1948, civil rights file, Thurmond Papers.

110. C. D. Smith to J. Strom Thurmond, September 30, 1948, civil rights file, Thurmond Papers.



States' Rights Democratic Party presidential candidate J. Strom Thurmond, governor of South Carolina, addresses the citizens of Gainesville in October 1948. *Photograph courtesy of J. Strom Thurmond Papers, Special Collections, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina.*

of power in the nation. At the very least, the *Sun* believed, Thurmond would “shatter the smugness of the Democratic party leaders” that caused them to ignore and trample on the South.¹¹¹ Encouraged by the support from Florida, Thurmond attended a Labor Day rally in Wildwood where, in a speech broadcast over fifteen radio stations, he referred to “that asinine Civil Rights Program” as the wedge which would open the door to tyranny.¹¹²

Many Florida Democrats rallied to President Truman's banner. T. A. Price wrote Senator Pepper that he thought the progressive Democrats in the state had resigned themselves to defeat and had allowed a handful of dissidents like Frank Upchurch and Tom Watson to speak for the party. Price worried that if the progressives remained silent, Dewey would be elected president.¹¹³ Pepper spoke out for Truman in Gainesville and reiterated the point that a vote

111. *Gainesville Sun*, September 26, 1948.

112. C. L. Starnes to J. Strom Thurmond, August 26, 1948, civil rights file, Thurmond Papers; *Gainesville Sun*, September 6, 1948.

113. T. A. Price to Claude Pepper, 1948?, Pepper Papers.

for Thurmond would mean the election of Dewey and would put big business back in power in Washington. He added that Truman's civil rights platform had been distorted. The president's goals were merely to preserve constitutional rights, not integrate society.¹¹⁴

Except for a speech in Boston on October 30, Thurmond mined the South for votes. He had high hopes for Florida and returned for a four-day swing in October. A *St. Petersburg Times* poll of 150 Democratic leaders in the state dashed Thurmond's hopes when it showed Truman with seventy-nine percent approval from the party hierarchy while Thurmond had only twenty-one percent.¹¹⁵ Thurmond ignored the poll and began his tour of the state with a visit to Gainesville where he addressed an enthusiastic crowd of supporters. Thurmond blasted Truman, Dewey, and Wallace for "bartering away peoples' rights to get a few racial bloc votes." The *Gainesville Sun*, in an editorial, praised Thurmond for speaking his convictions and not pulling his punches. The *Sun* liked Thurmond and his platform and concluded that the Dixiecrat candidate was not the self-seeking politician depicted by his enemies.¹¹⁶

The next day in Jacksonville, Thurmond greeted an enthusiastic and large crowd in Hemming Park and asked them to choose between tyranny and constitutional freedom.¹¹⁷ He next stopped at Palm Beach. Speaking before an audience of three thousand, Thurmond called Henry Wallace the "stooge" and Truman the "mouthpiece" of radical groups, while Dewey was the "puppet prince." The governor predicted he would win one hundred electoral votes in the South and would throw the election into the House of Representatives.¹¹⁸ One listener thought Thurmond made a "splendid impression" in Palm Beach with "his logic and hard-hitting sincerity."¹¹⁹

Thurmond moved on to Miami to be feted at a reception attended by five hundred people. He stated that he favored racial

114. *Gainesville Sun*, September 29, 1948.

115. *Ibid.*, October 11, 1948.

116. *Ibid.*, October 17, 1948.

117. E. H. Ramsey to Merritt H. Gibson, October 18, 1948, civil rights file, Thurmond Papers; *Gainesville Sun*, October 17, 1948.

118. *Palm Beach Post*, October 18 and 19, 1948.

119. Margaret C. Wilson to J. Strom Thurmond, October 21, 1948, civil rights file, Thurmond Papers.



Florida governor Millard Caldwell accompanies President Harry S. Truman to the American Legion National Convention held in Miami in October 1948. *Photograph courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.*

separation, but did not hate Negroes and did not want to force his views on anyone else.¹²⁰ At this point Thurmond withdrew from public view as President Truman arrived in Miami to give a “non-political” address to the national American Legion Convention. The city declared a holiday, and a crowd estimated at 250,000 lined the streets to welcome the president. Governor Caldwell greeted Truman, his wife, and daughter, Margaret, and escorted them to the convention attended by seven thousand Legionnaires.¹²¹

Governor Earl Warren of California, the Republican vice-presidential nominee, also spoke to the convention. Governor Dewey, however, refused to campaign in the South in order to avoid the race issue. In early September Dewey had stated that he intended to make a determined bid for southern support and hoped to establish a true two-party system in the South; Dewey’s “determined

120. *Miami Herald*, October 18, 1948.

121. *Ibid.*, October 19, 1948.

bid" for southern support turned out to be mostly rhetorical and did not include a visit to Florida.¹²² *Miami Herald* columnist Jay Hayden wrote that Dewey's decision not to campaign in the South upset southern Republicans. Hayden thought that if Dewey came to Florida and gave a speech favoring states' rights, he might carry the state.¹²³

Other secondary candidates appeared in Florida. Thurmond's running mate, Governor Fielding Wright, spoke at a rally in Marianna on October 13. Wright warned that the FEPC was "hatched in the brains of Communists" and that the anti-lynching laws, directed solely against the South, ignored race riots in New York in which Negroes had been killed.¹²⁴ Glen Taylor of Idaho, vice-presidential nominee of the Progressive Party, had a difficult time while speaking in Jacksonville. Boos and jeers from the crowd interrupted his speech on several occasions, and his listeners bombarded him with eggs. The crowd urged him to go home, and when the loudspeaker company took away its equipment, Taylor finally got the message and retired from the field of battle.¹²⁵

In late October most observers judged Dewey and Truman neck and neck in a race to capture Florida's eight electoral votes. The *New York Times* thought that Thurmond had considerable appeal among the "crackers" in western Florida, who resented Truman's views on civil rights.¹²⁶ The *Jacksonville Journal* reported that Dewey had the edge in the campaign, and because of his strong support on the east coast and St. Petersburg, predicted that he would carry the state.¹²⁷ The *Gainesville Sun* published a survey which concluded that Thurmond's split of the Democratic Party would throw the election in Florida to the Republicans.¹²⁸

As late as October 24, Thurmond continued to wax eloquent about his party's chances, bragging that he would carry the entire South and would be elected president by the House of Representatives.¹²⁹ Despite his confidence, the trend was running against

122. *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, September 4, 1948.

123. *Miami Herald*, October 14, 19, 21, 1948; Richard Norton Smith, *Thomas E. Dewey and His Times* (New York, 1982), 524.

124. *New York Times*, October 14, 1948.

125. *Ibid.*, October 21, 1948; *Gainesville Sun*, October 21, 1948.

126. *New York Times*, October 14, 1948.

127. *Jacksonville Journal*, October 14, 1948.

128. *Gainesville Sun*, October 31, 1948.

129. *New York Times*, October 24, 1948.

Thurmond, especially after Senator Richard Russell of Georgia and Ben Laney of Arkansas pledged their support for the national Democratic Party. With these key defections and with other states such as North Carolina and Florida refusing support, Thurmond recognized that he could not carry the South. The last poll of October showed Truman winning Florida and Thurmond lagging behind in most southern states. At this juncture, Thurmond understood his situation and changed the goals for his party. Thurmond now explained that even if the Dixiecrats did not carry the election to the House of Representatives, they had accomplished their purpose by rebuilding the Democratic Party, preventing the passage of civil rights legislation, and by restoring states' rights.¹³⁰

Senator Claude Pepper poured a tremendous amount of energy into Truman's election. He campaigned extensively in Florida and even went on a two-week cross-country speaking tour.¹³¹ In Daytona Beach on October 27, Pepper claimed that Truman had gained strength all over the country and would win in November.¹³² Pepper, assisted by Congressman George Smathers, also led two rallies for Truman in Miami and made two radio broadcasts for the president.¹³³ Pepper had certainly kept his pledge, made after his abortive campaign for president, that he would campaign diligently for Truman.

Some Democratic newspapers shifted their support to Truman. The *Key West Citizen* endorsed Truman partly because he was an honorary citizen of Key West.¹³⁴ The *Sebring American* supported the straight Democratic ticket and predicted a Truman victory.¹³⁵ Other papers such as John S. Knight's *Miami Herald*, accused Truman of demagoguery and recommended Dewey, who "would win easily."¹³⁶ A few papers, including the *Gainesville Sun*, came out for Thurmond and states' rights.¹³⁷

The heated nature of the race issue in the campaign was perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the dormant Ku Klux Klan,

130. *New York Times*, October 29, 31, 1948.

131. *Ibid.*, October 12, 1948; Mary D. van Demark to Terrell H. Yon, October 13, 1948, Pepper Papers.

132. *Palm Beach Post*, October 27, 1948.

133. *Miami Herald*, October 30 and 31, 1948; Ralph Crum to Claude Pepper, November 4, 1948, Pepper Papers.

134. *Key West Citizen*, October 30, 1948.

135. *Sebring American*, October 28, 1948.

136. *Miami Herald*, October 31, November 1, 1948.

137. *Gainesville Sun*, October 28, 1948.

fearing a victory by the liberal Truman, announced an election eve ride through Leesburg, Mt. Dora, Eustis, Tavares, and Plymouth. A Klan member warned that "only trusted newsmen with credentials authorized by the proper authorities (the Klan) would be permitted inside the enclave." The Klan did not allow close-up photographs. Leigh Tucker, a reporter for the *Orlando Morning Sentinel*, said Klan members threatened to beat her if she covered the parade. When she ignored their warnings and drove to the site of the parade, hooded figures forced her car from the road, smashed her camera, and threatened to beat her and burn her car if she did not leave.

The Klan parade on November 1 started in Plymouth and featured a jeep bearing a huge cross emblazoned with red bulbs. Most of the fifty or so cars had their license plates covered and each car contained two to four hooded Klansmen. Spectators lined the roads by the hundreds to watch the parade. The Klan burned their first cross in front of a black school in Eustis and left a trail of fiery crosses warning against Communism and integration in Florida.¹³⁸

As voters across the country came to the polls on November 2, most experts predicted a Dewey victory. President Truman won a huge upset in the closest election since 1916, capturing 303 electoral votes and over 24 million popular votes to Dewey's 189 electoral votes and almost 22 million popular votes. Strom Thurmond, on the ballot in only thirteen states, won 39 electoral votes and over a million popular votes. Thurmond carried Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and South Carolina and got one additional electoral vote when a Tennessee elector rejected the Democratic Party and cast his vote for Thurmond. Henry A. Wallace and his Progressive Party garnered over one million popular votes but no electoral votes.¹³⁹ Thurmond fell far below his prediction of 100 electoral votes.¹³⁹ Truman captured seven states in the South (and four border states) with a total of 70 electoral votes. Truman's capture of Florida and other southern states outside of the Deep South was crucial to his election victory and to the continued dominance of the Democratic Party in Washington.¹⁴⁰

138. *New York Times*, October 28, 1948; *Palm Beach Post*, November 1, 1948; *Miami Herald*, November 2 and 3, 1948.

139. *New York Times*, November 3, 1948; Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 189; Phillips, *Truman Presidency*, 247.

140. McCullough, *Truman*, 711; Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 189.

In Florida Truman led the voting with 281,988 votes; Dewey had 194,780, Thurmond received 89,750 votes, while Wallace got 11,620. Thurmond carried only three counties: Alachua, Flagler and St. Johns.¹⁴¹ Florida Democrats who supported Truman were jubilant. Claude Pepper called Truman's win the greatest upset, the most gallant fight, and the most deserved victory ever in American politics.¹⁴² Although Pepper had done as much as anyone to keep Truman from getting the nomination, the senator's vigorous campaigning had improved his relationship with the national party, if not with Truman. Among state Democratic leaders, only Pepper, George Smathers, and Alex Littlefield, the state party chairman, had worked energetically for Truman's election.

The Dixiecrats' poor showing distressed some Floridians. Both J. L. Lee and Mrs. F. E. Hobson believed that Thurmond would have carried the state except for a last-minute whispering campaign which warned that a vote for Thurmond was a vote for Dewey and the Republicans, which would bring about another depression.¹⁴³ James S. Davis of Sarasota praised Thurmond's valiant fight and compared him to Robert E. Lee as a guiding light in the South.¹⁴⁴ In a letter to W. D. Woody of Jacksonville, Thurmond insisted that although he did not win, the Dixiecrats showed the political leaders in the Democratic Party that the South would be independent and would no longer be the party's doormat.¹⁴⁵

The Dixiecrat revolt of 1948 disrupted the Solid South. The New Deal Democrats—the party of blacks, unions, the urban masses, and social reform—now became anathema to many in the rural, conservative South.¹⁴⁶ A similar sectional split occurred in Florida. North Florida differed little from south Alabama and south Georgia. Voters there were mainly Protestant, old-stock southerners, and the region's politics reflected a devotion to social

141. R. A. Gray, Secretary of State, *Tabulation of the Official Vote*, 3-5; Tebeau and Carson, *Florida From Indian Trail to Space Age*, 191; *Gainesville Sun*, November 3, 1948.

142. *Palm Beach Post*, November 4, 1948; *Gainesville Sun*, November 4, 1948.

143. Mrs. F. E. Hobson to Thurmond, November 8, 1948; J. L. Lee to Thurmond, November 12, 1948, folder 3350, Thurmond Papers.

144. James S. Davis to Thurmond, November 13, 1948, folder 3350, Thurmond Papers.

145. Strom Thurmond to W. D. Woody, November 13, 1948, folder 3350, Thurmond Papers.

146. Dewey W. Grantham, *The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds*, (New York, 1994), 202.

and racial conservatism. These rural, small town citizens of north Florida became estranged from the predominantly urban, socially heterogeneous south Florida in the 1948 presidential contest.¹⁴⁷

Political scientist Alexander Heard noted that 98.8 per cent of the Dixiecrat vote came from eleven southern states, thus making it a sectional party. Their vote came entirely from whites, but only about twenty-five percent of southerners voted for Thurmond. Heard concluded that the bulk of the Dixiecrat votes came from whites who lived in close proximity to a large population of blacks. In Florida, twenty-six of the thirty-three counties that gave Thurmond over 20% of the vote were in the northern section of the state. The counties in which Thurmond polled more than thirty percent of the vote contained thirty-five percent or more black population. Despite Thurmond's insistence that the states' rights campaign was not about race, Heard clearly demonstrated that Floridians' concerns about racial upheaval were at the heart of the Dixiecrat vote.¹⁴⁸

The Dixiecrats failed in many ways. They did not reinstate the two-thirds rule in the Democratic convention, failed to prevent Truman's nomination and election, and failed to block the passage of a strong civil rights plank. The Dixiecrats waged a difficult campaign because they did not have time to set up an effective party machine, used inexperienced operatives, lacked sufficient financial support necessary for a national campaign, and faced internal dissension.¹⁴⁹ As E. H. Ramsey of Jacksonville explained to Thurmond: "Our major weakness was the fact that we were trying to do a job in a matter of months that would have required a minimum of four years."¹⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the election was significant. In Florida and other southern states, the Dixiecrats split the Democratic Party into factions and loosened inhibitions against bolting the party in presidential elections. Floridians voted for Eisenhower in 1952 and

147. Numan V. Bartley and Hugh D. Graham, *Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction*, (Baltimore, 1975), 60-62.

148. Mississippi, with the largest percentage of blacks, 45.5%, gave Thurmond 87.2% of its votes. South Carolina, next in black population, gave him 72.0% Heard, *Two-Party South*, 251-53, 273-75; Key, *Southern Politics*, 329-44; Black and Black, *The Vital South*, 146.

149. McLaurin, "Role of the Dixiecrats," 261-66.

150. E. H. Ramsey to Thurmond, November 4, 1948, folder 3349, Thurmond Papers.

1956, for Richard Nixon in 1960, 1968, and 1972, for Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984, and for George Bush in 1988. The 1952 contest can also be viewed as a watershed in state politics since the Republicans established themselves as a respectable party for urban and suburban whites in Florida. Eventually conservative southern Democrats and Republicans would team up against liberal civil rights legislation and demands from organized labor. In this context, Republicans appealed to the north Florida voters who had once favored the Dixiecrats.¹⁵¹

At the state level, the political shift from the solid Democratic South to the Republican South of the 1990s evolved slowly and gradually. From 1948 on, Florida changed dramatically and the successful candidates in Florida were those who advocated conservative issues— fiscal restraint, limited government, opposition to welfare, and patriotism. The newcomers to the state had little awareness of past politics and few local ties. They were more concerned about taxes, big government, education, and public services. The economy changed with the decline of small farms and with the growth of the service, commercial, tourist, and industrial sectors. Rural areas declined while urban communities mushroomed. All of these changes provided fertile ground for the growth of the Republican Party.¹⁵²

Gregory Lee Baker, in a study of the Florida Republican Party, has demonstrated that after 1948 there were well-disciplined Republican Party organizations in Pinellas, Broward, and Orange Counties. The main reason for Republican growth in these areas was the rapid population increase due to white middle-class migration from the North and Midwest. In 1948 C. C. Spades, the state party chairman, led a major effort for Dewey, who carried Pinellas, Broward, Orange, Palm Beach, and Sarasota Counties— the urban heart of the burgeoning Republican Party. By 1954 Republicans had won six house seats in the Florida legislature and had elected a Republican congressman. By 1974, Republican registration figures equalled thirty per cent of the total registration in Florida.¹⁵³

151. George B. Tindall, *The Disruption of the Solid South* (Athens, 1972), 52, 58; Bartley and Graham, *Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction*, 86, 126, 133.

152. Neal R. Peirce, *The Deep South States of America* (New York, 1974) 445-48.

153. Gregory Lee Baker, "Intraparty Factionalism: The Florida Republican Party," (master's thesis, University of Florida, 1976), 3, 5, 8-10; Peirce, *The Deep South States of America*, 445-47.

This conservative movement was clearly demonstrated in Florida by George Smathers' 1950 defeat of the liberal Claude Pepper in a contest dominated by the issues of race and communism. After 1948, Frank Upchurch and other states' rights advocates focused their attention on fighting civil rights legislation and on Pepper's defeat in his re-election bid in 1950. Upchurch, a long-time foe of Pepper, had been incensed with Senator Pepper's active campaigning for Truman in 1948 and by the senator's criticism of Truman's hard-line anticommunist foreign policy. The *St. Petersburg Times* had been correct in July 1948 when it deemed Pepper's ill-fated presidential candidacy political suicide.

James C. Clark, in his article on the seeds of Pepper's 1950 defeat, has explained that Pepper had undermined his popularity with his courting of the political Left and his championing of close and cooperative relations with Russia. By 1950, concluded Clark, Pepper's views and his antics in 1948 led to an extensive and well-organized opposition. In fact, in 1950 President Harry Truman called Congressman George H. Smathers to the White House and urged him "to beat that son of a bitch Claude Pepper."¹⁵⁴ In the end, Pepper simply could not overcome six years of negative publicity. Moreover, the movement in Florida toward a more conservative politics helped undermine Pepper's political base.¹⁵⁵ Pepper, in a failed attempt to salvage his political career, lost a senate race in 1958 against the more conservative Spessard Holland. Pepper ultimately revived his career with election to Congress from a liberal district in south Florida.

By 1966 Florida's economically conservative, affluent whites fused with the rural and lower-class whites to elect Republican Edward J. Gurney to the United States Senate. This coalition also helped elect Claude Kirk in 1966 as the first Republican governor since Reconstruction.¹⁵⁶ And finally, in 1964, Strom Thurmond switched to the Republican Party (soon to be followed by other

154. George A. Smathers, interview by James C. Clark, April 30, 1987, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program.

155. James Clark, "Claude Pepper and the Seeds of his 1950 Defeat, 1944-1948," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 74 (Summer 1995), 1-22.

156. Tindall, *The Disruption of the Solid South*, 52, 58; Abels, *Out of the Jaws*, 222-23; Bartley and Graham, *Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction*, 86, 126, 133; Heard, *Two-Party South*, 21-23.

southern conservatives such as North Carolina's Jesse Helms) and he was elected to the U.S. Senate as a Republican in 1966.¹⁵⁷

The Dixiecrat revolt of 1948 initially seemed to be a boost to Pepper's career and a humiliating loss for Strom Thurmond. The election, however, produced the opposite long-term result. Pepper was defeated in 1950 and Thurmond still serves in the United States Senate. More importantly, the 1948 presidential election broke the Democratic Party's ironclad political control of Florida and began the development of a true two-party system. Florida had always been somewhat conservative, and now those voters began to change their party allegiance. By 1994 Florida Republicans controlled the state senate and had increased their political power to a level not seen since the days of Reconstruction.

157. Cohodas, *Thurmond*, 383-86.