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TAMPA AT 1948

Dr. Gary R. Mormino

It was a year to remember, a period when the highs were higher and the lows were lower then anyone could recall. In Washington, a feisty Democratic president cursed the Republican-dominated Congress and negotiated a delicate foreign policy in the troubled Middle East. Articulating a vision of an activist state with the dream of national healthcare, the President openly clashed with conservatives’ demands for tax cuts and a return to limited government. In the White House, the First Lady fiercely attempted to protect her daughter’s privacy from an annoying press. The GOP, confident of a landslide victory, suffered instead a humiliating defeat.

Florida in January served as a welcome refuge from the world’s problems. Not even record rains dampened tourists’ spirits, especially elated University of Michigan fans. The Wolverines won the national championship in football, while the University of Florida, alas, fell short again of an SEC championship.

A surging economy and a cornucopia of consumer goods promised new comforts, but Americans expressed old anxieties. Amidst the new cars, homes, and electronic gadgets, old demons haunted Tampa: race, poverty, and government. Problems aplenty confronted Tampans: the municipal hospital teetered on bankruptcy, while leaders demanded a new stadium to enhance the city’s image. African Americans, organized and frustrated over dreams deferred, demanded change. It was 1948.

Like Banquo’s ghost, the spirits of WWII lingered well past their appointed hour. Floridians, once optimistic that V-J Day would usher in a Pax Americana, witnessed a world spinning out of control. Large parts of Europe and Asia, devastated and disoriented by the war, confronted the spectre of revolution, famine, and homelessness. Displaced persons entered the lexicon, along with the "Iron Curtain" and "Free World."

The United States, by virtue of the atomic bomb, prosperity, and attrition, seemed the only "Free World" power capable of halting the Communist juggernaut. In Czechoslovakia, the Reds toppled the democratic Benes government; Communist forces battled for power in China, Greece, Italy, and Berlin.

The region’s Greek, Italian, and Czech communities nervously followed events in their homeland. A bloody civil war enveloped Greece as Communist guerrillas battled monarchists and republicans. In Italy, the Communists seemed poised for victory at the ballot box. Alarmed, the State Department asked local Italian Americans to write Sicilian relatives, urging them to renounce the Communists. The Christian Democrats triumphed after a bitter contest. In Masaryktown, Czech chicken farmers openly wept at the news of a Communist seizure of power. In 1948, foreign crises in the Middle East, Europe, and the Caribbean drew intense interest from Tampa Bay area residents. On May 14, Israel proclaimed itself a state. Local Jews, exhilarated by U.S. recognition of Israel, recoiled in horror at the violence and war which followed the partition of Palestine. Jewish groups gave generously to Hadassah, the national Jewish relief organization.
In May 1948 the Tampa Tribune printed a headline eerily familiar to present-day Floridians: "Cuban Politicians In Exile Campaign From Miami Beach." Since he lost the presidency in 1944, Cuban strongman Fulgencio Batista had lived in splendid exile at Daytona Beach, plotting a counter revolution. TIME nicknamed Batista, the "Senator from Daytona."1

In December 1948, Tampans gathered at MacDill Army Air Field to dedicate "Miss Tampa," a new B-29 bomber. The only question seemed where "Miss Tampa" would drop her bombs--Berlin, Peking, or Moscow. While cargo-carrying C-54's and C-47's relieved Berlin during the decisive airlift, new weapons, such as P-80 and F-86 fighter jets, and B-36 heavy bombers criss-crossed the skies of Tampa Bay, headed toward the Avon Park bombing range. In September, a crowd of 200,000 gathered at MacDill Field to gasp at American airpower.2 Air power fascinated Americans, who incorporated such terms as jet lag and jet set into their language and culture. The 1948 Cadillac drew its inspiration from the P-38 Lightning, a WWII twintailed fighter. By the summer of '48, the DC-6 Buccaneer whisked Tampans to New York in four hours. Tampa International Airport, only recently Drew Army Air Field, adjusted to civilian flight patterns.

Technology held out a dazzling future while it was reshaping the lives of Tampa Bay residents. By 1948, penicillin, and blood plasma had saved thousands of lives while...
DDT was being hailed a miracle pesticide. Consumers eagerly accepted the transistor and FM radio. In May 1948, the region's first FM station opened, WFLA-FM. The Tribune-owned company forecast television in the near future. Time predicted television would "zoom like a V-2 rocket." In Ybor City, an aging Latin workforce--the personification of hand-crafted tradition--welcomed the first radio broadcast of a World Series in Spanish.3

Entertainment would never be the same. Soon, transistor-powered radios wafted across Gulf beaches while TV antennae sprouted along rooftops. Entertainment was becoming increasingly personalized. The serenity of Florida beaches projected a vital image in the selling of the Sunshine State. In a state obsessed with image, television would later redefine the selling of sunshine and leisure. But on this dawn of TV, newspapers, magazines, and personalities still dominated the image industry. St. Petersburg and Tampa supported two English-language dailies and two afternoon newspapers, and several Spanish-language papers. Magazines, such as Life, Look, and Saturday Evening Post enjoyed enormous circulations.

Tampa's image took a beating in 1948. A series of print articles lampooned the city, prompting the Tribune to ask: "Is Tampa Progressing or Slipping" In the winter, the influential Holiday magazine suggested that Tampa smelled, that its Gasparilla Festival smacked of a "slapstick comedy," and that its slums "beggared a Mexican peon village." In the spring, the iconoclastic journalist H.L. Mencken vacationed in the area. The aging satirist mocked the region's manners and morals, ridiculing in particular octogenarian softball players in St. Petersburg. The Baltimore native, when asked about Tampa, responded, "As long as there is any section where a Methodist preacher is treated respectfully by the community and its newspapers, it cannot be considered civilized." Mencken conceded he enjoyed arroz con pollo at Las Novedades.4

Insults turned injurious when Fortune magazine profiled Florida. The Sunshine State "is booming and busting, whooping and worrying," observed the respected journal. "It is the U.S. 1948 in a distorted mirror." Tampans were aghast when Fortune's Lawrence Lessing depicted Tampa as "a gently decaying town with a distinctive flavor."5

Tampans dismissed the naysayers, pointing at the crowded parking lots as proof of the city's health. Yet in hindsight, "gently decaying" aptly described Tampa's postwar plight. The seeds of the crises of the 1990s--inadequate municipal facilities, traffic gridlock, a declining downtown, and political distrust--were sown in the 1940s.

In 1946 Tampa had ended its fifty year love affair with the street car. St. Petersburg mothballed its fleet two years later. The region paid dearly for its abandonment of a mass transit system already in place. Hundreds of abandoned yellow street cars rusted in a vacant lot at Columbus Drive and Lincoln Avenue. Others a had been sold, used as converted homes or trolley cars in Colombia. Ironically, Tennessee Williams' brilliant play, "A Streetcar Named Desire," premiered in 1948. The eccentric Williams resided in Key West. Americans adored the individual freedom allowed by the automobile. A resurgent Detroit seduced consumers with power and style. Whether one purchased a Crosley or Studebaker, traffic jams and potholes awaited commuters. Since automobiles required individual parking spaces, increasing amounts of downtown Tampa surrendered to
In 1948, downtown Tampa was a mecca for movie Boers. The State Theater, 1008 Franklin Street, was one of many such motion picture houses.

(Photograph courtesy of Special Collections, USF Library.)
parking lots. Cheap gasoline—in September one could find petrol for 18¢ a gallon—encouraged even more drivers. By the end of 1948, downtown Tampa needed at least 4,500 more parking spaces.\(^5\)

Leaders brushed aside such problems, smug knowing that complaints about congestion reflected health, not decline. Shoppers from Arcadia to Zephyrhills continued to drive to Tampa and patronize upscale stores, such as Maas Brothers, the region’s finest department store. But in January 1948, St. Petersburg opened its own "million dollar" Maas Brothers store. Downtown Tampa would not see a significant new building, the Marine Bank, erected until 1960.

In Tampa, old economies and new realities collided in 1948. "The Cigar City" struggled to redefine itself. Thousands of cigarmakers, many of them pioneers from the hand-rolled heyday of Ybor City as the capital of premium cigars, remained unemployed. The Great Depression and the popularity of cheap cigarettes during the war—a tonic for "war nerves"—had seriously eroded the market for Tampa's finest. Most notably, fashionable men no longer smoked cigars.

Still, the moniker "Cigar City" lingered. While cigars held powerful memories for Tampa, the city's economy was far more dependent upon phosphate and shipping, construction and services, military defense and organized crime. Old firms and first families held power and controlled civic affairs, but a new generation of businessmen and leaders emerged after the war, typified by Jim Walter, Sam Gibbons, Chester Ferguson, Tony Pizzo, John Germany, and Julian Lane.

One resident who had witnessed economic prosperity and great depressions, the Third Seminole War and two world wars, died October 22, 1948. Born in Mississippi in 1855, Isaac Milner Brandon had come to Hillsborough County with his family in 1857. The Brandons first settled in Seffner but later moved to the place which bore their name. Brandon was still a rural hamlet notable for its serenity and unhurried pace.\(^7\)

In 1948, commentators noted increasing traffic and housing starts in Brandon, but Tampa's most serious threat loomed across Tampa Bay. St. Petersburg, and its booming Pinellas neighbors, now posed a daunting challenge to Tampa's hegemony. When statisticians released figures documenting the amount of new construction, Tampans were stunned. In 1947, Tampa's building permits amounted to $9.4 million. St. Petersburg, however, nearly doubled Tampa's total, while Miami experienced a growth five times Tampa's. In the 1960s, to the horror of Hillsborough County officials, Pinellas County overtook Hillsborough in population.\(^8\)

Clearly, much of the unplanned growth in Hillsborough County was occurring outside Tampa's constricted boundaries. But more importantly, Tampa and Hillsborough County were not experiencing the quantity or quality of growth unfolding in Pinellas. Moreover, Hillsborough County was not attracting new industries with high-paying jobs.

If any single Tampan personified 1948, it was Jim Walter. Returning from the navy -- his wife, a WAVE, outranked him -- the young veteran earned $50 a week driving a truck for his father, a fruit packer. He became intrigued with the idea of filling a need in the frantic housing market by building inexpensive "shell houses." An empire was born. By 1948, Walter and partner Lou Davenport sold semi-finished frame homes from their company site at
Sulphur Springs. For less than a thousand dollars, aspiring homeowners could purchase a "shell house," provided one owned a lot and possessed some carpentry skills.  

Jim Walter was to Hillsborough County what the Levitt brothers were to postwar America. By 1962, the Jim Walter Corporation, with branches in 187 cities and 28 states, was the world's largest builder of shell homes. Walter's success, however, came with a price. His early homes left Hillsborough County in dire straits, since many of the inexpensive homes generated little or no tax revenue but still required county services.

Spurred by new freedoms and cheap gasoline, the automobile became a symbol and presence in postwar Tampa. Emblematic of postwar culture, the drive-in flourished. Tampans expressed a love affair with Goody-Goody, Falor's, the Spar, and Colonnade. Anticipating new tastes, Charles Olson finally perfected a machine touted as "revolutionary." The Sulphur Springs machinist had built a stainless steel contraption that allowed short-order cooks to broil rather than fry hamburgers.

The broiled vs. fried burger debate notwithstanding, more serious problems threatened the social welfare of Tampa Bay. Since 1947 had been declared the year of education in Florida, citizens despaired that the state's hopelessly inadequate tax revenues could solve problems of growth. Officials earmarked massive new expenditures for education, but parents discovered the same problems of overcrowding and dilapidation. Defiantly, Hillsborough County voters defeated a 1948 school referendum. Tampa's municipal hospital also languished. "Little is found in the long record of Tampa Hospital, with its climbing costs and outbreaks of discord," concluded the Tribune, "to support belief that cities can manage hospitals on a sound basis."  

If 1947 was the year of education, 1948 was the year of political tumult. Everywhere, political institutions crumbled and angry voters searched for new leaders. Two intertwining issues seemed paramount: the question of states' rights and the vexing question of racial equality.

The 1948 presidential race occupies a special place in American political history. A moment of high political melodrama, the 1948 election offered genuine heroes, an improbable script, and compelling issues. For President Harry Truman, the prospects of reelection seemed hopeless. Truman was simply no FDR. In what seemed a harbinger, the Republicans had triumphed respondingly in the 1946 elections. "To error is Truman," quipped a cynic. The issue of civil rights imploded the Democratic Party. Truman had appointed a controversial Committee on Civil Rights, which challenged the sacrosanct doctrine of white supremacy. The published report, To Secure These Rights, condemned segregation, recommended the integration of the armed services, and criticized police brutality. The South reacted predictably. A Baptist minister from Florida wrote Truman, warning, "If that report is carried out, you won't be elected dogcatcher in 1948."

The civil rights plank, written by young Minnesotan Hubert Humphrey, ruptured the Democratic convention. E. D. Lambright, the Tribune editorial director and a newspaperman in Tampa since 1899, expressed his sentiment bluntly: "Lambright Declares South Is Kicked Out of Democratic Party." Florida's 20 delegates voted twenty to zero against the party's civil rights platform. The chairman of Florida's
Democratic Party stated, "No sensible citizen can honestly support the president's plan to abolish racial segregation."¹¹

Truman’s worst nightmare occurred during the summer of ‘48. In rapid succession, two vital wings of the Democratic Party--the Deep South and liberals--bolted. Southern whites rallied under the banner of the States’ Rights Party, popularly called the Dixiecrats. A young South Carolina Governor and war hero, Strom Thurmond, burst on the national scene. Ironically, Thurmond had earned a reputation as a southern moderate.

The enigmatic Henry Wallace led the Progressive Party ticket in 1948. An Iowan who served as secretary of agriculture and vice president, Wallace veered to the left of mainstream Democrats by 1948. In particular, Wallace championed a rapprochement with the Soviet Union, offering an olive branch to Stalin and a thorn to Truman. Wallace’s brother John lived in St. Petersburg.

The Republicans nominated a safe candidate, Governor Thomas Dewey of New York. "Only a political miracle or extraordinary stupidity on the part of the Republicans can save the Democratic party in November," predicted Time. The Tribune asked strollers to comment on Truman’s prospects. Wade Hoffmann, a clerk, said bluntly, "Truman is out of luck."

Sunshine Motors at 200 South Tampa Street, displays a 1949 model Willys Jeep.

(Photograph courtesy of Special Collections, USF Library.)
When Henry Wallace stumped for votes in the Deep South, hecklers frequently hurled rotten eggs at the candidate, but not in Tampa. Wallace tapped into the liberal reservoir that had once challenged cigar manufacturers and embraced radical doctrines. Elderly Latins expressed a genuine fondness for the Progressive Party candidate, shouting "Viva Wallace" at a large rally at Plant Field. A Tribune reporter noted, "perhaps the strangest sight of all was the mingling of white and negro people in the grandstands." In October, the majestical Paul Robeson arrived in Tampa to rally support for Wallace. Robeson, an all-American football player at Rutgers, a celebrated baritone and movie star, was also a lightning rod for controversy. Robeson had actively supported the loyalists during the Spanish Civil War and flirted with Communism. According to the Tampa Times, Robeson spoke and sang to a "non-segregated" audience of 600 at Plant Field. Within a month of one another, Robeson sang "Old Man River" in Tampa and testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee in Washington. Major General Sumter Lowry, Jr. warned Tampans that Henry Wallace and Paul Robeson posed a Communist threat to America.12

Never had so many prominent celebrities campaigned in Tampa as in 1948. Correctly sensing opportunities in Florida, Ohio Senator Robert Taft -- "Mr. Republican"-- campaigned in Pinellas County. A pollster asked elderly Republicans lounging on St. Petersburg's green benches what they
thought of the Republican ticket of Tom Dewey and Earl Warren. To a person, they all wished Dwight Eisenhower had run for president. The long-abused Republican Party of Hillsborough County detected a hint of optimism, organizing a Young Republican Club.13

The November election served as Harry Truman’s defining moment. Giving Republicans hell, he adroitly concentrated his criticism at a "do nothing" Republican Congress. Truman managed to rally in the waning moments of the campaign to defeat Dewey in the greatest upset in American political history. Hortense K. Wells, a Tampa Democrat who once ran for governor, seemed to summarize local sentiment. "I held my nose and voted for Truman," she acknowledged. Ultimately, Florida’s leading politicians refused to sacrifice the Democratic Party for the Dixiecrat windmill. U.S. Senator Spessard Holland told members of Florida’s United Daughters for the Confederacy that "we, in the South, will solve this in a decent, Christian way in the best interests of both races involved."14

Truman carried Florida and Hillsborough County, but the biggest surprise was Henry Wallace’s showing. The Progressive candidate won seven precincts--all in Ybor City and West Tampa--representing Wallace’s most effective support anywhere outside Manhattan. The Dixiecrat Thurmond fizzled in Florida, as most Democrats reckoned that a protest vote was a wasted vote. Thurmond’s greatest support came in Duval County. Wallace’s "triumph" represented a last gasp of Latin radicalism in Tampa. Quickly, Communist-baiting and McCarthyism created a hostile climate for progressives.15

In Pinellas County, the election electrified Florida’s moribund Republican Party. Dewey took the county and Republicans seized City Hall, a signal moment in St. Petersburg history. William Cramer urged the leaders of the Republican Party to take note. In 1954 Cramer became Florida’s first Republican Congressman in the twentieth century.16

In Tampa, 1948 marked a political watershed, a moment when one can observe a changing of the guard. R.E.L. Chancey, three-time mayor of Tampa in the 1930s and ‘40s, died. J. Tom Watson, Florida’s enigmatic and briary attorney general, abandoned the Democratic party and never held office again. Watson had arrived in Tampa in 1906 serving as judge, legislator, and gadfly.

The year 1948 also undermined Hugh Culbreath. Elected Hillsborough County Sheriff in 1940, Culbreath had established a powerful political base. Critics, including the Tribune’s "Jock" Murray, accused Culbreath of blatant corruption. In 1948, W.B. "Bill" Myers challenged Gulbreath, charging him with malfeasance of duty, forcing the incumbent into a runoff. Culbreath adamantly denied that organized crime and gambling existed, let alone flourished. In a "last hurrah" performance, Culbreath rallied to win the election, but he never ran for sheriff again. The Tribune, which once tolerated such corruption, attacked Culbreath and others with a new ferocity. In 1950 he was implicated by the Kefauver investigation into organized crime.

A new era dawned. Randolph McLaughlin, the School Superintendent was vulnerable; voters seethed over the condition of local schools. The challenger came from the gridiron. J. Crockett Farnell—he of the square jaw—had compiled a legendary career
as a football star at the University of Tampa and as coach with a 61-8 record at Hillsborough High. The resolute Farnell destroyed the hapless McLaughlin at the polls and remained a powerbroker until scandal forced him out of office in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{17}

The 1948 elections also brought new faces to Tallahassee. Floridians elected Fuller Warren to the governorship. A flamboyant character, Warren seemed to be running for governor since he enrolled at the University of Florida. While participating on the boxing team and cheerleading, he also represented Calhoun County in the State Legislature. Days after Pearl Harbor, Warren wrote the Secretary of War a letter which the political-minded volunteer sent to scores of state newspapers. "I want to take an active part in slaughtering the Japs and Germans," the thirty-six year old Blountstown native wrote, adding, "I have no inclination to kill Italians--whom I consider craven cowards."

Fuller Warren defeated challenger Dan McCarty, a war hero, Ft. Pierce farmer, and former speaker of the Florida House of Representatives. The candidates fiercely debated Florida's antiquated tax structure. Warren vowed to veto any sales tax, which of course he signed in 1949. Angry voters never forgave Warren, whose administration became mired in scandal. Merchants placed jars on the counter with labels reading "Pennies for Fuller."

Claude Pepper faced a very gloomy future in 1948. For the forty-eight year-old U. S. Senator, once featured on the cover of \textit{Time} as "Roosevelt's weather cock," 1948 was a disaster. When Pepper came to Tampa's Plant Field for an October campaign rally, State Senator Sheldon apologized to the senator for the sparse crowd. He encouraged Henry Wallace and opposed Harry Truman, a snub which the President never forgot or forgave. Senator Pepper's shifting stands on issues irritated voters. In 1944, candidate Pepper opposed an anti-lynching bill, announcing, "The South will allow nothing to impair White supremacy." By December 1948, he promised to support Truman's civil rights program, "even if it beats me in the next election." It would.\textsuperscript{18}

Pepper's actions baffled Floridians. In a visit to the Soviet Union, the Senator praised Stalin's willingness to work with the West. Pepper attended a Madison Square Garden rally and shared the stage with Paul Robeson. The \textit{Tribune} asked Tampans, "What do you think of Claude Pepper now" William Segars, an advertising agent, opined, "I believe he is too pink." Ellsworth Rue, a clerk, remarked, "I don't believe Senator Pepper has used his education for the progress of Florida."\textsuperscript{19}

As Claude Pepper, Strom Thurmond, and Harry Truman realized, the battle for civil rights ignited a firestorm of controversy. In Hillsborough County, 1948 marked the first time in a half century that African Americans registered and voted as Democrats. For three years, local leaders such as John Dekle, Supervisor of Registration, and J. Tom Watson, Attorney General, had resisted the implementation of the Supreme Court's 1944 Smith ruling, which banned the White Primary. By 1948, the legal challenges had been exhausted. Black preachers and leaders led a crusade to register thousands of African-Americans as Democrats.

Voting was only a small part of a larger civil rights revolution. Led by C. Blythe Andrews, Perry Harvey, Sr., and James Hargrett, Sr., Tampa's African-American community agitated for decent schools, better municipal services, and humane
treatment from the police. In 1948, black leaders sought respect and equality within a segregated Tampa. What is remarkable is that Tampa's white leaders regarded such change as radical.

In 1948, Tampa was a city of sunshine and shadows, a city brightened by its ethnic vitality and sense of pride, but darkened by the lengthening shadows of poverty and inequality. An unyielding Jim Crow line divided the city into separate neighborhoods, schools, and public and private accommodations. A casual reader of 1948 newspapers might draw the conclusion that Tampa was a city populated chiefly by whites, aside from an occasional race crime. The all-county football and basketball teams were all white, as they had been for decades.

An examination of Tampa's surviving African-American newspaper, the Florida Sentinel Bulletin, reveals a hidden world, a society which cherished its segregated schools, patronized black-owned shopkeepers on Central Avenue, and nurtured powerful dreams for its children. It would be the children of Perry Harvey, James Hargrett, and others who would advance the civil rights revolution.

Change was on the land.

ENDNOTES

Gary R. Mormino holds the Frank E. Duckwell Professorship in Florida History at the University of South Florida.

1 *Tampa Morning Tribune* (hereafter cited as *Tribune*), April 12, May 2, October 10, 1948; "Senator from Daytona," *Time* (April 12, 1948), 44.

2 *Tribune*, July 17, August 1, September 12, 19, December 7, 8, 1948; 5 January 1950.


4 *Tribune*, November 7, 1947; *Holiday* (January 1948).


7 *Tampa Daily Times*, October 23, 1948.

8 *Tribune*, January 10, 1948.


10 *Tribune*, April 14, July 15, September 12, 1948.

11 *Tribune*, May 2, June 6, July 15, September 7, 30, 1948.


13 *Tribune*, September 12, October 14, 1948; *St. Petersburg Times*, October 12, 13, 14, 1948.


16 *Tribune*, October 14, December 16, 1948; *St. Petersburg Times*, November 3, 4, 1948; William Cramer papers, University of Tampa.

