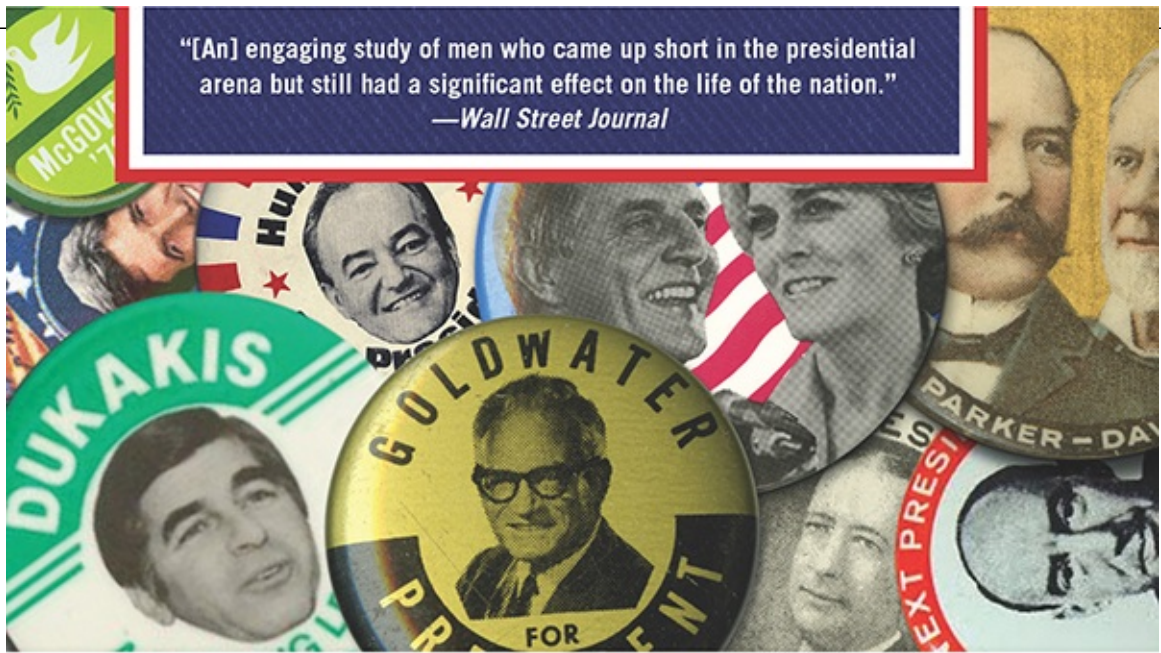


"[An] engaging study of men who came up short in the presidential arena but still had a significant effect on the life of the nation."  
—Wall Street Journal



# ALMOST PRESIDENT

THE MEN WHO LOST THE RACE  
BUT CHANGED THE NATION

Updated  
to include  
2012!



SCOTT FARRIS

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# **ALMOST PRESIDENT**

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**SCOTT FARRIS**



LYONS PRESS  
GUILFORD, CONNECTICUT  
An imprint of Globe Pequot Press

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# INTRODUCTION

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In very rural northwest Kansas, midway between Kansas City and Denver, there is a shrine of sorts dedicated to losing presidential candidates. On a wall of the First State Bank in the wind-swept prairie town of Norton hang the portraits of fifty-nine men who have run for president as the nominee of a major political party and lost. The line of photos and short biographies begins with Thomas Jefferson, who became our nation's first losing presidential candidate in 1796, and ends—as of this writing—with John McCain, the 2008 “also-ran” with his loss to Barack Obama. The display began in the 1960s after the then-president of the bank learned that Horace Greeley, the losing presidential candidate of 1872, had once stopped in Norton on his way by stagecoach to Denver and was likely the most prominent person ever to visit the small farming and ranching community.

How appropriate that the only place in America dedicated to honoring losing presidential candidates was established in such an out-of-the-way location and for such an obscure reason, for historical obscurity is generally the lot of those who run for president and lose. Names like Lewis Cass, Horatio Seymour, Winfield Scott Hancock, James G. Blaine, Alton B. Parker, or John W. Davis are unknown to all but the most obsessed political junkies. Even the better-known unsuccessful aspirants to the White House, such as Henry Clay, William Jennings Bryan, Thomas Dewey, or Adlai Stevenson, are not fully appreciated for how they changed American politics and how their candidacies continue to shape our political discourse.

These men actually have had a far greater impact on American history than many of those who became president. They created, transformed, and realigned our political parties. They broke barriers and taboos around religion and gender, ushered in new political movements, introduced sweeping policy changes that would, in time, become the law of the land, and changed our expectations of political candidates. Journalist Theodore White, chronicler of five presidential campaigns, agreed: “Again and again in American history it has happened that the losers of the presidency contributed almost as much to the permanent tone and dialogue of politics as did the winners.”

They were able to accomplish these things, in part, because they lost. How can losing have more impact than winning? As American political scientist William Riker noted in 1983, “Winners have won and do not immediately need to change things. But losers have nothing and gain nothing unless they continue to try to bring about new political situations.”

In the immediate aftermath of an election, it may appear there is nothing left of the losing campaign but scattered debris. Reshaping our political structure can be like remodeling a house—salvaged from the demolition is the framework on which to hang new construction. Those who lose, especially those who lose by a wide margin, are often accused of discrediting conservatism or liberalism, as was the case with Barry Goldwater and George McGovern, when years or decades later it is clear that their campaigns were not the end of something old and stale, but the beginning of something fresh and different.

Still, despite the enormous contributions made by some losing presidential candidates, it is the winning candidates who are lavished with attention by historians. Abraham Lincoln, our most revered

president, has had more than sixteen thousand books and scholarly articles written about him. Even nonconsequential presidents such as William Henry Harrison, James Garfield, and Chester Arthur are the subjects of multiple biographies, while a historical giant like Henry Clay has, in times past, gone fifty years without a scholarly reappraisal. And poor Judge Parker, who lost to Theodore Roosevelt in a landslide in 1904, has never been the subject of a single biography.

History is written by and for the victors, true, but to ignore the contributions made by losing presidential candidates is to not merely ignore half the result of every presidential election, but also to warp our understanding of American history. No election is a referendum on a single person or party. In each election, voters make a *choice* between competing personalities, programs, and ideologies. In understanding our history, and in using history as a guide to understanding the present and forecasting the future, it is as illuminating to know who and what voters did *not* choose as to know who and what they *did* choose.

It seems understandable not to dwell on perceived failure. Even though losing is a universally shared experience (most of us lose far more often than we win), we are a nation and a culture that simply worships winning and recent success. We are guided by maxims, such as that (falsely) ascribed to Green Bay Packers football coach Vince Lombardi, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." But winning is a narrow definition of success. A presidential campaign is a single battle in a much longer "war" over the policies and direction of the nation.

Like the scientific process, political struggles test hypotheses. Policies rejected by the public today often become the laws and regulations of tomorrow. New voter coalitions that seem to doom a political party to minority status evolve, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, into new governing majorities. It is often the losing candidate who is prophetic, while time proves it was the winning candidate who was stuck in the policies of the past.

Yet, in America a single lost election can seemingly wipe out a lifetime of achievement overnight and transform the image of an otherwise successful politician from gallant champion to pathetic goat. As we do with great athletes whose otherwise exemplary careers are overshadowed by a single, crucial error on a championship game, we often define losing presidential candidates not by their substantive accomplishments before, during, and after their campaigns, but by their failure on this one great stage of a presidential election.

Television exacerbates this tendency because, in politics as in sports, one recorded moment can become an enduring representation of failure. Michael Dukakis, who lost to George H. W. Bush in 1988, will always be pictured in the public mind looking terribly out of place while riding in an Army tank, even though Dukakis was an Army veteran. John Kerry's voice will always summon memories of the tape played endlessly during his 2004 campaign in which he articulates senatorial procedural gibberish about how "I voted for the bill before I voted against it." When all eyes are watching and all ears are listening, an error can become a moment that encapsulates a career.

There was a time when America was more forgiving of failure and when a single loss did not define a person's legacy. In a study of changing American attitudes toward failure in business, Scott A. Sandage notes that before the nineteenth century, the whole concept of failure applied only to the world of commerce and even then "failure was an incident, not an identity." In the early days of our republic



industriousness was admired, but ambition was not. Ambition would lead to corruption, extravagance, debt, and dependency. As Ben Franklin's Poor Richard admonished, in advice that would be scorned today, "In success be moderate."

This republican ideal of industriousness without ambition was applied to politics as well. While we know that in truth Jefferson and John Adams jockeyed behind the scenes to succeed George Washington as president in 1796, the ruse was that no gentleman actively sought public office; rather, the public sought out the gentleman. If an individual did not strive for office, then not receiving the office meant no personal failure.

Our attitude toward ambition and failure evolved with the market revolution. Subsistence farming provided little opportunity for advancement, while crop failures, due to drought or war, were clearly understood to be beyond an individual's control. Commerce, however, rewarded ambition and provided opportunity for advancement, but if initiative bred success, then failure could be ascribed to a personal defect. By 1842, Ralph Waldo Emerson noted a proverb popular among men of business that said "Nobody fails who ought not to fail," and then added his own thought, "There is always a reason, in the man, for his good or bad fortune."

Unsurprisingly, these changing attitudes were applied to politics. Political ambition was no longer a disqualifier for office, but political failure was now ascribed to a defect of the candidate. Contemporaries who sought to explain why Henry Clay, one of the greatest Americans never to become president, failed in his three bids for the White House usually cited his character, noting that Clay was loved, but not trusted.

In the twentieth- and twenty-first-century world of mass communication and advertising, and with Dale Carnegie replacing Horatio Alger as provider of the roadmap for success, the fault of the individual was expanded to include personality as well as character. Style and assertiveness were valued, and those who failed were assumed to lack both. Losing candidates internalize the idea that failure is the result of an active defect within the person. They eschew the likely fact that most election results are foreordained by factors such as peace, prosperity, or demographics, and instead take to heart Cassius's admonition in *Julius Caesar*, "The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars but in ourselves." Or as Dukakis put it more bluntly, "[I] ran a crappy campaign."

Perhaps, but it is also true that America in 1988 was in a period of conservative ascendancy and Dukakis's best efforts might not have changed the final result. Because the fault is always ascribed to the candidate's shortcomings, losing candidates can come to resent the honor of being a nominee for president. What should bring status instead becomes a stigma. As John W. Davis, the brilliant Wall Street attorney who lost the 1924 presidential election to Calvin Coolidge, noted defensively, "I believe I have been a fair success in life except as a candidate for president." They also resent the voters who made such a disappointing choice. Losing candidates everywhere no doubt smiled at Arizona congressman Mo Udall's wry comment upon ending his 1976 presidential primary bid: "The people have spoken—the bastards."

Arthur Miller, whose 1949 play, *Death of a Salesman*, eloquently captured the American fear of failure, said we like to keep our distance from losers because they remind us of our fear of death. That may be extreme, but losers certainly remind us of defeat.



There was a time when a losing candidate might aspire to lead his party once more. Clay and Bryan were each rewarded with presidential nominations three times, and even in the mid-twentieth century partisans saw fit to nominate Dewey and Stevenson twice each. But not since 1968 has a losing candidate been successful in securing another presidential nomination. Today, if you lose, it is one and done.

Losing candidates also once maintained the role of titular head of their party, their party's leading spokesperson. No losing candidate has remained his party's acknowledged leader or spokesperson since Stevenson, though, as will be discussed in a later chapter, John McCain tried to re-establish the role. Losing candidates are now often given some of the worst time slots to speak at subsequent political conventions, if they are allowed to speak at all, as parties fear their very appearance on television will attach the stench of past failure to the present campaign.

Nor are losing candidates anymore rewarded for their service with important appointments in other administrations. Charles Evans Hughes, loser to Woodrow Wilson in 1916, was later reappointed to the U.S. Supreme Court as chief justice, and Hughes was one of five losing presidential candidates along with Clay, Cass, Blaine, and Bryan, who later served as secretary of state. But since the 1960s the only losing presidential nominees to have been given any posts in a future administration were Stevenson, McGovern, and Walter Mondale, and they each received relatively minor ambassadorial posts.

Capturing the sense of abandonment losing candidates feel, Al Smith, the first Catholic nominee for president, who lost to Herbert Hoover in 1928, suggested that those who have lost the presidential general election be named a U.S. senator at-large. Those who lost the presidency served the nation well, and it is the nation's loss that we do not fully utilize their experience to the nation's advantage.

Small wonder, then, that Arthur Miller identified one other consequence of failure; losers worry that they have lost the capacity to be loved. And yet, many losing candidates retain their admirers generations after their defeat. Conservatives involved in Goldwater's uncompromising 1964 campaign against Lyndon Johnson still fondly recall Goldwater's candor, masculinity, and the self-deprecating humor that led him to conclude after his defeat: "[America's] a great country where anybody can grow up to become president—except me. ”

Liberals of a certain age have similar reminiscences of Adlai Stevenson. His two campaigns against Dwight Eisenhower ignited a passion that drew segments of the population into politics and public service for the first time. Stevenson's enduring image as the rare public figure who raised politics to a new and higher level of discourse was reflected in a panel of the Garry Trudeau comic strip "Doonesbury," published in 1984, nearly twenty years after Stevenson's death. In the strip, a character bemoans the current state of politics and pleads with his wife that if anything should happen to him "You must tell our son about Adlai Stevenson!"

For all our love of winning, we still admire the underdog who competes nobly, and shared failure can create a powerful bond among those who experience it. Sportswriter Roger Kahn wrote in his marvelous book, *The Boys of Summer*, "My years with the Dodgers were 1952 and 1953, two seasons in which they lost the World Series to the Yankees. You may glory in a team triumphant but you fall in love with a team in defeat. Losing after great striving is the story of man, who was born to sorrow

whose sweetest songs tell of saddest thought.”

Those who supported Goldwater, or Stevenson, or any of the partisan champions who never reached the White House cannot help but wonder what might have been, and the few previous books that have focused on presidential losers as a group are preoccupied with the question of whether those who lost would have made good presidents—or at least better presidents than the men who defeated them. Those are questions that cannot be answered. It is better to focus on what we do know and on what losing candidates did accomplish—and they have accomplished a great deal.

This book covers those men (and so far, they have all been men) who won the presidential nomination of a major political party but lost the general election. It does not cover those men who lost and later won the presidency or those who served as president but lost their re-election bid. They do not receive enough attention from other writers. Also included is the most successful third-party candidate of modern times, Ross Perot, whose candidacy has had a great impact on modern politics. Many third-party candidates have run, and some did well, but Perot and former president Theodore Roosevelt in 1912 are the only third-party candidates who were “almost president.”

Chapters two through ten feature nine men whose candidacies have had the greatest impact on our political system, and where that impact can still be felt today. Those nine are Henry Clay, who resurrected the two-party system; Stephen Douglas, who ensured the Democratic Party survived the Civil War; William Jennings Bryan, who transformed the Democratic Party from a conservative to a progressive party in a single election; Al Smith, whose campaign changed how Americans thought about Catholics and how Catholics thought about America; Thomas E. Dewey, who brought the Republican Party into accommodation with the welfare state; Adlai Stevenson, who raised the question of whether someone can be too intellectual to be president; Barry Goldwater, whose campaign changed the allegiance of the Deep South to the Republican Party; George McGovern, who built a new Democratic coalition that paved the way for our first African-American president; and Ross Perot, who changed the way candidates use television and who inspired other wealthy businessmen and women to enter politics. There is also a special chapter on three recent “also rans”—Al Gore, John Kerry, and John McCain—the only three presidential nominees to have served in the Vietnam War. Their legacies cannot yet be fully assessed, but, as of this writing, they seem to be redefining the role of the presidential loser. This book also offers a series of short essays on the other men who won a presidential nomination and lost, but whose lasting impacts on our political system were, in this author’s judgment, less consequential than those featured in the chapter-length treatments.

And there is also the first chapter, which discusses the great and vital service every losing candidate has provided to the nation, which is the simple act of accepting his defeat. In many nations, losing candidates reject the electoral result and lead their nations into chaos, rioting, and even civil war. That our losing presidential candidates, often graciously, accept their defeat and make way for the winner has been essential to the success of American democracy. As William Riker noted, “The dynamics of politics is in the hands of the losers. It is they who decide when and how and whether to fight on.”

The importance of a gracious concession deserves special attention in today’s unusually polarized political environment when so many Americans seem reluctant to accept the verdict of majority rule. During the past two decades, Americans have been put on edge by the trauma of the terrorist attacks

September 11, 2001, the two wars the United States fought in response to those attacks, and the 2008 collapse of the financial markets. Politically, these tensions were exacerbated by the prior attempted impeachment of President Clinton and a series of extraordinarily close presidential elections. The closest was in 2000 when, for only the fourth time in our history, the candidate who received the largest number of popular votes did not become president. To win the most votes and still lose is an especially bitter pill; to accept this result for the good of the nation is an especially heroic act.

In each of these recent elections, and in several elections past, there were attempts by some to delegitimize the results *and* the presidency of the winning candidate. But every time, we have been fortunate that the losing candidate took his defeat graciously, and in so doing reinforced the legitimacy of our electoral system and of the administration elected to govern us. To do otherwise could lead to a level of rancor and chaos that could debilitate the country. It is not overstatement to say that without this essential contribution of concession from the losing candidate, the stable, resilient democracy which is so often taken for granted in the United States, would be impossible.

# THE CONCESSION

An election does not end when the winner declares victory; it ends only when the loser concedes defeat. This may seem a minor distinction, but it is what makes American democracy work.

Election night, November 4, 2008, Republican presidential nominee John McCain had one final opportunity to be the focus of the nation's undivided attention before his presidential campaign concluded. And even though the election returns indicated he would be the loser, McCain wielded power whose potency even he may not have fully appreciated.

Before Barack Obama could give his televised victory address before 125,000 ecstatic supporters at Chicago's Grant Park, McCain first had to admit defeat. Until he did, the election wasn't over. By tradition, McCain would get to speak first, while Obama remained out of view, his supporters stewing with anticipation, for he was not yet the president-elect.

There was a sense of real drama when McCain finally appeared at 11:18 p.m. EST, before the television cameras and seven thousand dejected supporters who had gathered at a Phoenix, Arizona resort. Tensions had been high during the campaign, and the nation watched to see if McCain would say anything that might lead his supporters to question the results of the day.

Obama was the first African American ever nominated for president by a major political party. As the son of a Muslim father from Kenya, his background was exotic to many. His opponents had repeatedly labeled him a radical. The world economy was in a tailspin. American troops were fighting two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan. The two previous presidential elections had been remarkably close, and America seemed evenly divided by party loyalty and widely separated by ideology.

At campaign rallies for McCain and his polarizing running mate, then Alaska governor Sarah Palin, there had been shouts of "traitor!", "terrorist!", and even "kill him!" at the very mention of Obama's name. Throughout the campaign and through Election Day, there were allegations of voter fraud and voter intimidation from both sides.

But that Election Day evening, McCain, after first hushing the boos that erupted at every mention of Obama's name, graciously conceded his defeat and pointedly referred to Obama as "my president." Moved by McCain's words, the crowd stopped jeering the man now conceded to be the president-elect and instead cheered the historic nature of Obama's election as our first African-American president.

McCain, at least for the moment, had set a tone of reconciliation that helped legitimize Obama's election in the eyes of millions who had voted against him. This period of civility gave Obama time to reach out to those who had not supported him. Within a week of the election, nearly three-quarters of Americans professed to view Obama favorably. Certainly, Obama's own inspirational words, which followed McCain's that evening, had helped persuade Americans to rally to his side at that moment, but the power and importance of McCain's address, by conveying to his supporters that it was his and their patriotic duty to be good losers, were an essential tonic to soothe the nation.

Had McCain expressed anger or bitterness at his loss, had he alleged that fraud had swayed the election, had he questioned Obama's fitness to lead, or continued his campaign assertions that Obama's policies would bring the nation to ruin, McCain would have widened the division caused by the passion of a presidential election. Such a response would have created political chaos and even invited violence.

Yet, McCain had done nothing extraordinary beyond performing his role exceptionally well, for our losing presidential candidates have repeatedly chosen to be good losers, and, as counter-intuitive as it may sound, they have played a crucial part in making politics in America a source of unity, not division.

We may think election-related violence is inconceivable in the United States, even in today's highly polarized political environment. But there is always a thin line between a peaceful election and armed conflict. We acknowledge this close relationship in the way we use martial jargon to discuss our politics. Candidates *battle* for states, *campaigns* are run from *war* rooms, commercials are part of a media *blitz*, and campaign volunteers are *foot soldiers*. "Politics," the Prussian military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz said, "is the womb in which war develops."

Violent conflict is born out in other nations where the martial language of politics is not metaphorical. In the same year that McCain and Obama held their heated but ultimately peaceful contest, post-election violence in Kenya left some fifteen hundred people dead and a quarter-million homeless. Also in 2008, post-election rioting killed eighteen in India, the world's largest democracy, and five in Mongolia. Historic elections in Bangladesh led to rioting that injured one hundred. In 2011, there was post-election violence in Guinea, Belarus, Iran, and the Ivory Coast, and additional examples can be found in virtually any year to remind us, in the words of political scientist Paul Corcoran, "the transition of power is often a matter of life and death on a grand scale." And lest we think post-election violence is confined only to supposedly immature "Third World" democracies, riots in France protesting the election of President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 injured seventy-eight policemen, caused more than seven hundred cases of arson, and led to the arrests of nearly six hundred people.

With the hubris that is part of being an American, we may assume our lack of protest is because, unlike other nations, *our* elections are fair and honest. Yet, American elections are rife with fraud, abuse, and incompetence, which are forgotten and ignored until a close election requires a recount and we realize how imprecise our balloting is.

We devote remarkably few resources to that cornerstone of American democracy: a free, fair, and accurate election process. Election standards vary widely by location, top election officials are elected partisans, and poll workers receive minimal training and compensation. There are multiple examples in every election cycle of outright corruption and concerted efforts to disenfranchise one set of voters or another (particularly minority voters), but violations of election law are seldom prosecuted, and the penalties are minimal for those that are. The result of virtually any close election could be in dispute because running efficient, professional elections is not a national priority. We have minimal interest in probing the question of the fairness of our elections. Few states even have a mechanism for challenging an election result.

Nor is the tradition of relatively peaceful elections in the United States due to any special American aversion to violence. Rioting is a time-honored tradition in America. We have had riots associated with race and religion. We have had riots related to political disputes, dating back to the Whiskey Rebellion.

We have had riots against war and the military draft. We have had riots against police brutality, and riots that involved police brutality, such as occurred during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. We have had labor riots, prison riots, riots by anarchists, and even riots after sporting events—an average of ten to fifteen per year, in fact—and by fans of both losing *and* winning teams. And yet, when we riot after football games, we do not have violence related to our greatest electoral prize, the presidency.

The notable exception, the election of 1860, proves the rule. The refusal of the South to accept Lincoln's election led to our Civil War and six hundred thousand war dead. But the behavior of the losing candidates in that election in no way contributed to the dissolution of the Union, as we will see in the subsequent chapter on Stephen Douglas. Further, that catastrophe has perhaps been a lesson for subsequent generations of the dangers in rejecting the democratic process and the rule of law. In his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln said men had fought and died in the war so that the "nation might live." In less dramatic fashion, each presidential election tests Lincoln's concern that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

The losing candidate, then, must set the tone of acceptance, or at least resignation, that tamps down the possibility of violence in the wake of electoral disappointment. A group of five political scientists from five countries, including the United States, who have studied the role electoral losers play in the democratic process concluded in their 2005 book, *Losers' Consent*, that "what makes democracy work . . . is not so much the success of the winners, but the restraint of the losers."

Many losing candidates have certainly had to exercise great restraint. Four times since 1824, when the popular vote was first used to help determine the presidential winner, the man who won the largest number of popular votes did not become president because he did not receive a majority in the Electoral College. This occurred in 1824, 1876, 1888, and 2000, and there have been other elections, such as in 1880 or 1960, where the margin of victory was so close as to be in dispute.

Presidential elections are almost always close, at least in terms of the popular vote. Only four times—1920, 1936, 1964, and 1972—has the winning candidate won more than 60 percent of the vote, a true landslide. In roughly half of all presidential elections, the winning candidate has received 51 percent or less of the popular vote; 40 percent of the time, because of third parties, the person elected president has not even received a majority of the popular vote.

The narrowness of these victories is masked because of our Electoral College system, which often makes the result seem more definitive than it is. In 1980, for example, Ronald Reagan received less than 51 percent of the popular vote in his victory over President Jimmy Carter and independent candidate John Anderson, but he received 90 percent of the Electoral College vote. Because of the Electoral College, we do not have a single, national election for president, but rather fifty-one separate elections conducted by the states plus the District of Columbia.

After 1860, the closest our nation has come to blows over a presidential result was in 1876, when Governor Samuel J. Tilden of New York won the popular vote by a comfortable 51 to 48 percent margin but lost the presidency to Rutherford B. Hayes in the Electoral College by a single elector. To obtain that result, Republicans had engaged in outright voter fraud in three Southern states, including Florida, though Democrats had also engaged in intimidation to prevent African Americans from voting.

in those states.

In the uproar that followed, Democratic mobs cried, “Tilden or blood!” and fear of a renewed civil war was so real that President Ulysses S. Grant fortified Washington, D.C., with troops and gunboats to repel an expected army of Tilden supporters. But Tilden was a successful attorney who believed in the rule of law, and he declined to sanction any such offensive by those on his side. At Tilden’s urging, tempers cooled and, ultimately, the U.S. Supreme Court established a method by which the election was resolved in favor of Hayes; though, in truth, behind the scenes a deal had been made—Hayes was given the presidency in return for a promise to withdraw federal troops from the South and end Reconstruction. When Tilden, an eccentric character, finally spoke publicly in June 1877, he offered comfort to his supporters, urging them to “be of good cheer. The Republic will live. The institutions of our fathers are not to expire in shame. The sovereignty of the people shall be rescued from this peril and re-established.”

In 2000, Vice President Al Gore faced a remarkably similar situation and was criticized as Tilden had been for not making a more forceful claim to the presidency. Having won the popular vote by a margin of 500,000, Gore lost the election to George W. Bush when he failed to win the state of Florida by 53,000 votes. Gore had said that on election night he felt considerable pressure “to be gracious about this” which led him to concede perhaps too quickly when his own interests would have been served by waiting a while longer. Gore had called Bush to concede at about 2:30 a.m. EST the morning following Election Day, and that call was widely reported in the media. It was while Gore was en route to give his formal public concession speech that aides intercepted him and urged him to retract his concession because of tightening vote totals in Florida. Gore again called Bush who, incredulous, asked, “Let me make sure that I understand: You’re calling back to retract that concession?” Gore replied, “You don’t have to be snippy about it.”

A partial recount was halted by a 5-4 U.S. Supreme Court decision that the court itself said set no precedent. The month-long dispute had resulted in some minor scuffles—a few Gore partisans protesting in Washington, D.C., even tried to rouse a cheer of “Gore or blood” to evoke the Tilden crisis—but the tradition of a good loser is now deeply rooted in American politics. Tensions rapidly dissipated when Gore gave a remarkably cheerful concession speech and there was no violence, even though surveys later showed that 97 percent of those who voted for Gore believed he was the “rightful” president. But once Gore had conceded, even in a private phone call, the perception was that he had lost and then was trying to overturn the results; had he never conceded, the public perception might have been that both candidates had an equal claim to the election.

Gore is not the only cautionary tale of a loser willing to concede too soon. President Jimmy Carter conceded to Ronald Reagan on Election Day in 1980 with a telephone call at 9:01 p.m. Eastern time, followed by a speech an hour later at the Sheraton Washington Hotel ballroom. Carter had been urged to delay his concession until 11 p.m. Eastern time, after the polls were closed on the West Coast. But Carter was worried the public, knowing that Reagan was projected to win by a wide margin, would think he was sulking in the White House and he did not want to appear to be a “bad loser.”

“It’s ridiculous,” Carter said. “Let’s go and get it over with.” That decision infuriated Democrats, who thought Carter’s early concession led some voters in the West to skip casting their ballots. House



Speaker Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill raged that Carter had cost a half-dozen Democrats seats in Congress and perhaps two Senate seats. He yelled at a Carter aide, “You guys came in like a bunch of jerks, and see you’re going out the same way!”

Despite what appeared to be a mistake in retrospect, Gore was not unwise in trying to avoid being labeled a sore loser, for complaints about the fairness of a result seldom receive much sympathy beyond the losing candidate’s most rabid followers. Americans simply do not want to consider that an election has been unjust or worse.

Gore and Carter were not alone in fearing what the label of “sore loser” might do to their reputation. Ohio governor James M. Cox said of his 1920 defeat to Warren Harding, “A wrong reaction the could have ruined my life.” James G. Blaine demonstrated the danger of complaining about a perceived injustice when he attributed his 1884 loss to disenfranchisement of African-American voters in the South. He had fallen to Grover Cleveland by barely fifty thousand votes. The *New York Times* accused Blaine of sour grapes because he was “smarting from defeat.”

Richard Nixon weighed both the danger to the nation and to his own political future in deciding against challenging the results of his narrow loss to John Kennedy in 1960—even when there were credible allegations of Democrats stealing votes in Illinois and Texas (though Democrats also alleged Republican vote stealing in Ohio). Nixon discovered that few states even had a mechanism to challenge election results, and worried about the damage to the nation that a months-long process might cause, especially its “devastating” impact on national foreign policy. On a personal level, he also knew that “charges of ‘sore loser’ would follow me through history and remove any possibility of a further political career.”

Two years later, Nixon forgot his own advice when he lost the governorship of California and famously announced he was through with politics, telling newsmen, “Just think how much you’re going to be missing. You won’t have Nixon to kick around anymore.” It was the testiest concession since the frontiersman Davy Crockett, defeated in his 1834 bid for re-election to Congress, told his Tennessee constituents they could “go to hell; I’m going to Texas.” Crockett did, only to die at the Alamo in 1836, but Nixon came back to win the presidency in 1968.

The man Nixon beat that year, Hubert Humphrey, lost a race nearly as close as the 1960 Nixon loss to Kennedy, and he also considered the personal stake in making a graceful concession. “I told myself,” Humphrey said, “This has to be done right because it is the opening speech of your next campaign!” He was already looking ahead.”

There was historical precedent for Humphrey’s hope that losing graciously would place him in good stead for a future election. After the 1824 election of John Quincy Adams, which had been decided in the U.S. House of Representatives, Andrew Jackson was privately seething at the supposed “corrupt bargain” whereby Adams named Henry Clay secretary of state in return for Clay’s support in the House. Yet, when Jackson bumped into Adams at a social event on the very day the U.S. House decided for Adams, Jackson was expansive and gracious while Adams, the nation’s most experienced diplomat, seemed rigid and ill at ease. Jackson’s grace during the encounter was the talk of the capital, with one friend writing him: “You have, by your dignity and forbearance under all these outrages, won the people to your love.” His demeanor in defeat enhanced his reputation and helped Jackson claim the

presidency when he ran again in 1828.

Disappointed supporters of losing candidates, too, seem to immediately begin looking ahead to the next election and hoped-for retribution—with ballots, not bullets. The authors of the aforementioned *Losers' Consent* found that voters who supported the losing candidate in an election certainly do have a higher distrust of our electoral system than those who supported the winner. But that level of distrust is lessened if the person is an active partisan member of one of our two major parties. Given that the two major parties in America routinely win some and lose some, those who strongly identify with one of the major parties know that while their candidate may have lost this time, their time will come again. Our oft-maligned two-party system may limit voter choices, in the opinion of some, but having two, large, relatively evenly matched parties is a key reason America does not suffer from election-related violence. It is not surprising, then, that the highest level of mistrust in our political system is felt by those who consider themselves independent or who are prone to supporting third parties. Based on the past history of third parties, these folks will likely never be on the winning side.

Interestingly, studies have also found that distrust of the electoral system is higher after a landslide loss rather than after a close election. According to data from U.S. presidential elections from 1964 to 2000, the highest level of distrust among voters who supported a losing candidate came in the lopsided 1964 and 1972 elections, which were landslide defeats suffered by Barry Goldwater and George McGovern. The lowest levels of distrust occurred after the very close 1968 and 1976 elections, the 1980 election, when Ronald Reagan won with less than 51 percent of the popular vote, and the 2000 election, despite all the controversy surrounding it.

There are three possible explanations for this. First, when the ideological gap is wide, as was the case in the Goldwater and McGovern losses, those who support the losing candidates are likely discouraged and disbelieving that more of their fellow citizens did not see what was so obvious to them. Second, in the close elections cited, there may have been some ambivalence among the supporters of the loser. In close elections occurred when the losing candidate was associated with a previous administration marked by controversy. In other words, even an intense partisan may grudgingly have to agree that it was time for a change, after all.

Third, it is not a coincidence that Goldwater and McGovern themselves did little to hide their disappointment. Each did what is expected of a losing candidate, but no more. In his concession speech, McGovern said that while he congratulated Nixon on his victory, he and his supporters would “not rally to the support of policies we deplore.” Despite his obvious defeat, Goldwater declined to concede on election night because, well, he was Barry Goldwater and Goldwater, his friend, Lee Edwards, said he “ended his campaign as he began it—doing things his way, regardless of what others thought.” Goldwater sent Lyndon Johnson a congratulatory telegram the next morning, but it struck a defiant pose, pointedly telling LBJ that the Republican Party would remain “the party of opposition where opposition is called for.”

If even such a relatively mild negative reaction can influence voter trust in the system, this simply reinforces the key role the actions of a losing candidate play in maintaining a functioning democracy. In a nation where private citizens own 270 million guns, we can only speculate about what type of crisis might erupt if a candidate ever refused to concede, or conceded in a way that created deep antagonism.

toward the incoming president.

If defeated candidates want to avoid looking like sore losers, winning candidates also do not want to appear presumptuous (or worse) by declaring victory too soon. Winning candidates have waited hours—even days—for the loser to concede before declaring victory. Only when the losing candidate clearly intends to delay the concession for an extraordinarily long time, either because he believes he still has a chance to win the election, as Charles Evans Hughes did in 1916, or because of an ornery streak, as Goldwater exhibited in 1964, will the winner issue a victory statement before hearing the loser concede.

Advances in communications technology have shaped the evolution of the concession. Through most of the nineteenth century, losing candidates either said nothing publicly or issued statements reprinted in partisan and general circulation newspapers. The lack of instant communication meant there was no shared peak moment of emotion that might trigger a violent reaction to an election result. But as communications improved, the possibility for a mass reaction increased. The telegraph was invented in 1844 and changes in printing technology and newsprint led to an explosion in the number of newspapers—from three hundred nationwide in 1814 to more than twenty-five hundred by 1850. The boom in timely communications certainly helped stir passions and form opinions in the lead-up to the Civil War. Fortunately, these instant communications could also help contain passions by allowing losing candidates to calm their supporters.

William Jennings Bryan takes credit for issuing the first congratulatory telegram, to William McKinley in 1896. Bryan said he did so to underscore that he had no personal animosity toward McKinley, that their contest had been over different political ideas, not personalities, and that “a courteous observance of the proprieties of such an occasion tends to eliminate the individual and enables opponents to contend sharply over the matters of principle, without disturbance of social relations.”

With one exception (Thomas Dewey in 1944), losing candidates continued to send telegrams to the winners through the 1980 campaign. After that, a congratulatory phone call was deemed sufficient. A. J. Smith gave the first concession speech over the radio in 1928; Adlai Stevenson’s concession was the first made on television in 1952.

Dewey’s failure to send a congratulatory note in 1944 irritated Franklin Roosevelt a great deal. Dewey did make a statement on the radio in the wee hours of the morning after Election Day to state that he would “wholeheartedly accept the will of the people.” Roosevelt, still angry at the snub, sent a terse telegram to Dewey stating, “I thank you for your statement, which I have heard over the air a few minutes ago.” Heading off to bed, Roosevelt said of Dewey, “I still think he’s a son of a bitch.”

While Dewey was the only candidate since 1896 to decline to contact his victorious opponent, others besides Goldwater have procrastinated. Hughes, who had resigned from the U.S. Supreme Court to run for president, needed time to absorb a stunning turn of events. Early returns from the East put Hughes so far ahead that, thirty-two years before the *Chicago Tribune* famously printed the headline “Dewey Defeats Truman,” the *New York Times* declared Hughes the winner over Woodrow Wilson. But Wilson ran stronger than expected in the West and when he carried California by a very narrow margin, he had won re-election. Hughes waited two weeks before sending a congratulatory telegram to Wilson, who joked that Hughes’s note was “a little moth-eaten when it got here but quite legible.”

Even though the winning candidates and the public wait to hear it, the concession speech is commonly dismissed by commentators as a series of meaningless bromides. If concession speeches, for all their importance, seem formulaic, it is because they have assumed the character of a liturgy—even to the point of now ending with an obligatory blessing.

Each concession speech now contains three basic sections: the validation of the result by conceding the outcome, the explanation of what the losing campaign had been about, and a final benediction with the now ubiquitous “God bless America!”

In the first section, we hear kind words for the victor that help unite the country. The key moment is usually a simple statement, accepting the outcome as fact. McCain began his concession speech by saying, “The American people have spoken, and they have spoken clearly.” Similarly direct prose was found in Wendell Willkie’s concession to Roosevelt in 1940: “People of America, I accept the results of the election with complete good will.” Adlai Stevenson seemed to virtually copy Willkie when he conceded to Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 with the words, “The people have rendered their verdict and I gladly accept it.” Bryan in his first concession telegram to McKinley said, “We have submitted the issue to the American people and their will is law.”

The words are carefully chosen, and any alteration in such a set piece offers a small window into how a candidate really feels. Following the controversial 2000 election, for example, Gore congratulated George W. Bush on “becoming” the forty-third president of the United States, rather than on being “elected” president.

By cheerily (or at least with a minimum of complaint) accepting the result, the losing candidate has essentially vouched that the process was fair, or fair enough that the result cannot—or at least should not—be disputed. By conceding, the loser has effectively announced that he will not challenge the result. He also precludes those who might want to challenge the results on his behalf. If the person with the most standing to make the challenge, the losing candidate, declines to formally question the result, then no one else has a prayer of forcing an examination. The concession, then, more effectively concludes the election than any state canvassing board.

Often, the losing candidate goes out of his way to describe the victor as “*my* president” or “*our* president,” with a pledge to support the new president or to at least “work with him.” Often added is a testament to the electoral system that has, after all, served these men well in previous electoral efforts. In conceding to Bill Clinton, President George H. W. Bush spoke of respecting “the majesty of the democratic system.” Walter Mondale, too, spoke of a system that had both “dignity and majesty.”

It may speak to our growing worry that our nation is being pulled apart by its diversity that the word “unity” or a variation thereof now is also always included in a concession speech. Willkie was the first to use the term in 1940, as the nation prepared to enter the struggle against fascism, but it is now virtually obligatory, with John Kerry declaring in 2004 that the United States was in “desperate need for unity.”

The call for unity is not pabulum. America is still a comparatively young nation. The American experiment still seems fragile, which is why our entire political system is designed to marginalize radicalism, forge consensus, and prevent sudden shifts in public policy that might threaten our unity. “That which unites us as American citizens is far greater than that which divides us as political parties,” Stevenson said in his 1952 concession speech. Perhaps campaigns and media coverage seem to focus on

trivial issues or personalities because we subconsciously worry that larger issues featuring sharp ideological division, such as slavery in 1860, may stir passions that could become too strong to absorb the disappointment of defeat.

Having only two major, relatively equal, ideologically centrist political parties also helps maintain national unity, but this may be changing. Where forty years ago, both parties had liberal and conservative wings, there has been a realignment in which the Republican Party is now essentially conservative and the Democratic Party essentially liberal. Whether this increased ideological divide will alter the concession ritual remains to be seen, but polling shows many Americans base whom they vote for as president on who they believe can bring America together.

After validating the result, the second element of the concession speech is the loser's explanation of what his campaign was all about. As Paul Corcoran, a scholar who has studied concession speeches, put it, "The rhetorical challenge is to pronounce one's own defeat as a chapter of honor in the nation's history, to put a brave face on failure, transforming defeat into a semblance of victory."

Sometimes, a losing candidate has been so closely identified with a single issue that he declares that while his campaign did not win, the campaign advanced the cause. In 1972, McGovern, whose campaign was based on promising a speedy end to the Vietnam War, told his supporters that the campaign had "pushed this country in the direction of peace," adding, "If we pushed the day of peace just one day closer, then every minute and every hour and every bone-crushing effort in this campaign was worth the entire effort."

When there is no overriding issue on which a campaign was based, the losing candidates have often offered a laundry list of causes for which they promise to keep fighting. This particular rhetorical device has been especially prevalent in more recent campaigns where modern telecommunications demand instant analysis under circumstances not conducive to introspection. Prior to the age of television and radio, candidates had at least a few days to assess the meaning of their candidacy.

In a slower age, having issued the customary congratulatory telegram, candidates would develop a major post-election address, often around the theme that voters would soon realize the error of their choice and make amends at the next election. In a post-election speech in 1904, Alton Parker said of the Republican victory, "Before long the people will realize that the tariff-fed trusts and illegal combinations are absorbing the wealth of the Nation. . . . When that time comes, and come it will, the people will return to the Democratic Party for relief." Al Smith offered a similar sentiment in 1928 while referring to the Democratic Party as "the democracy." If "the cause of Democracy was right before the election, it is still right, and it is our duty to carry on and vindicate the principles for which we fought." And William Jennings Bryan philosophically noted that the burden of proof after an election is then on the ruling administration. Of McKinley's victory, he said, "If his policies bring real prosperity to the American people, those who opposed him will share in that prosperity. If, on the other hand, his policies prove an injury to the people generally, those of his supporters who do not belong to the office-holding class, or to the privileged classes, will suffer in common with those who opposed him."

Concern about a campaign's legacy is probably why modern losing candidates focus on how the campaigns involved the young. Until the ascendance of the "youth culture" concept in the second half

the twentieth century, losing candidates rarely mentioned their youthful supporters in their concession remarks. Then, in 1972, McGovern, not coincidentally a college professor, said, "If we have brought into the political process those who never before have experienced either the joy or its sorrow, the fact that, too, is an enduring blessing."

Before McGovern, except for a brief mention by Smith in 1928 (during another decade that catered to the young), no losing candidate singled out his youthful supporters for recognition. Since the concession speeches have had a trace of the high school commencement address. In 1984, Walter Mondale offered a "special word to my young supporters this evening . . . in every defeat is to be found the seeds of victory," while Michael Dukakis, who became a college professor after his defeat, advised his young supporters in 1988 to consider a career in the "noble profession" of public service because "there is nothing you can do in this world more fulfilling and more satisfying than giving yourself to others and making a contribution to your community and your state and your nation and your fellow citizens."

In 2004, John Kerry borrowed a rhetorical device first used by Ronald Reagan during the latter's "State of the Union" addresses, singling out individuals for recognition to illustrate a broader point. In Kerry's case, his concession speech cited young supporters—very young supporters—he had met during the campaign. To demonstrate his influence upon those who would govern America in future generations, Kerry singled out a six-year-old boy who had raised \$680, "a quarter and a dollar at a time," selling campaign paraphernalia, and an eleven-year-old girl who formed a group called "Kids for Kerry." This led humorist Jon Stewart to observe, "I know why [Kerry] lost . . . you have to be eighteen to vote! Why are you going after the six-year-olds and the eleven-year-olds?"

Recent losing presidential candidates have also paid homage to Reagan's acknowledged mastery of political communication in the third distinct portion of the concession speech. Virtually all have adopted Reagan's trademark conclusion to most major addresses: "God bless America." Since 1984, from Mondale to McCain, every losing presidential candidate, except Dukakis, has ended his concession speech with "God bless America," and only George H. W. Bush provided even a modest variation on the phrase, ending his address with "May God bless the United States of America." Before Mondale, no losing candidate had ever concluded his concession speech with "God bless America."

Two scholars who analyzed major presidential addresses from 1933 to 1981—a total of 22 presidential speeches—found that the phrase "God bless America" was used only in a speech Nixon gave on the Watergate scandal in 1973. Since Reagan took office in 1981 through 2007, these scholars analyzed another 129 major presidential speeches, 49 of which concluded with "God bless America." So routine is its usage that the scholars who analyzed the phrase concluded it was just a form of "religious branding" with no more depth of meaning than an advertising slogan like Nike's "Just Do It" or Coca-Cola's "The Real Thing." A speechwriter for President Carter, who seldom invoked God despite being one of the most religiously observant of modern presidents, agreed that "God bless America" had become so shorn of meaning that it is just shorthand for "the speech is over now," and is "the political equivalent of 'Have a nice day.'"

Before "God bless America" took hold, the norm was not to mention God in a concession speech, though there were exceptions. Stevenson, in his 1952 concession, said, "We vote as many, but pray as

one . . . we shall move forward with God's guidance toward the time when His children shall grow in freedom and dignity in a world at peace." Compared with Stevenson's eloquence, simply ending a speech with "God bless America" sounds trite and theologically lazy.

While a higher percentage of Americans regularly attend church today than at any time in our history—62 percent today compared to 45 percent one hundred years ago and just 20 percent at the time of the American Revolution—we have lost the ability to have a serious discussion about religion and faith in the public square. The use of "God bless America" now seems to serve the different purpose of reinforcing the concept of American "exceptionalism"—the widely held belief throughout American history and today that America has a divine mission in the world—without making any real effort to explain why we are an exceptional people.

While every nation likely believes that it has a special destiny, as the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Russel Nye noted, "No nation in modern history has been quite so consistently dominated as the United States by the belief that it has a particular mission in the world, and a unique contribution to make to it." The simple expression of "God bless America" becomes a very safe way for the politician to tap into our national yearning for a sense of purpose.

Admittedly superficial, the invocation of "God bless America" or any reference to the divine in a concession speech, when considered alongside the "deeply embedded" national belief in a divine destiny, allows the losing candidate to subtly suggest that the election was an expression of divine will, not just the popular will. The candidate and his supporters are consoled by the belief that victory was denied, not because of any fault of the candidate or error in the cause, but because defeat at that moment serves some inscrutable higher purpose.

Given the stakes involved and the martial language used in our presidential elections, it is not surprising that some, such as the historian John R. Vile, suggest we consider the concession as a form of military surrender or even a funeral oration.

Just as after a war, the public wants peace after a presidential campaign. They hope that politicians will emulate that most famous surrender in American history, when Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia yielded to Ulysses S. Grant and the Army of the Potomac. Despite the bitterness accumulated during four years of civil war, chivalry reigned. Lee acknowledged his defeat, Grant offered generous terms, and Lee told his soldiers to fight no more, but to go home and be "good citizens." Voters expect no less at the conclusion of a political squabble: The loser's dignity is left intact, both sides are praised for their valiant behavior, generous terms and words are offered, and the losers forswear future conflict so that they may work together for the good of the nation.

Generosity and magnanimity is easier for the winner. The loser, after all, has suffered a devastating disappointment. The exhausted losing candidate is aware of what his candidacy has meant to millions of supporters, and that he has let them down. For many losing candidates, defeat means not only the end of what may have been a lifelong quest, but also the end of a career in public service. Hubert H. Humphrey called losing to Nixon "the worst moment of my life," adding that he felt "so empty . . . I could cry." George McGovern said, "There are some things that are worse than losing an election. It's hard to think what they are on Election Day."

Psychologists tell us that it is important for those who experience loss to be able to articulate the



emotions in order to place the loss in perspective. Yet, this is the opposite of what we expect our losing candidates to do. So the emotions are masked, sometimes by nothing more than civility, other times with humor. Adlai Stevenson, after losing to Dwight Eisenhower in 1952, used an anecdote so well received that McGovern repeated it twenty years later. Losing a presidential election, Stevenson explained, reminded him of a story told by his fellow Illinoisan, Abraham Lincoln, about “the little boy who had stubbed his toe in the dark. He said he was too old to cry, but it hurt too much to laugh.”

Humor is for public consumption; privately, candidates are more likely to be hurt and angry. When Henry Clay lost to his archenemy Andrew Jackson in 1832, he confided to a friend, “Whether we shall ever see light, and law and liberty again, is very questionable.” Walter Mondale, who lost to Ronald Reagan in 1984, reportedly asked McGovern, who had lost a dozen years before, when losing stopped hurting. “I’ll tell you when it does,” McGovern replied.

Losing candidates do not brace themselves for the possibility of defeat. “I never conceded to myself or anybody else that that election couldn’t be won,” said McGovern, even though he was crushed in his landslide loss to Richard Nixon. “At two o’clock in the morning on election day, I was still campaigning.” No matter what the polls have said, the candidates maintain the hope that they will surprise the pundits and pull off an upset, as President Harry Truman did in 1948. In 1992, President George H. W. Bush received only 38 percent of the popular vote, but “when you are in the bubble, one of his aides said, “you feel the momentum and the crowds are lively and you know in the outside world you’re behind, but in the inside world you’re thinking, “This is going to be 1948 all over again.”

It is not surprising then that the concession speech can resemble the five-step process psychologists have identified for those coping with grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Some have even feigned relief that they have avoided the burden of the presidency. They are, of course, lying. Bryan insisted to reporters, who marveled at his equanimity, that, despite his loss to William McKinley in 1896, he “went to bed happy” on election night. But a friend who observed him that evening instead saw a man summoning all his strength to conceal his emotions, and later wrote, “It is a terrible thing to look upon a strong man in the pride of youth and see him gather up in his hands the ashes of a great ambition.”

This sense of finality (which Bryan avoided by running for president twice more) can make the end of an unsuccessful campaign seem a type of death. In a traditional funeral, it is usually obligatory to display the body, although in the case of a concession speech it is the corpse who gives the eulogy (and who, like Bryan, prays for a possible political resurrection).

Dewey noted the similarity between the end of a campaign and a funeral, with his own role as that of the corpse, in 1948, shortly after losing to Truman. In a speech to the Gridiron Club a few days after the election, Dewey, who had also lost the presidency in 1944, said he felt like the drunk who had passed out during a wake. “If I am alive,” he said to himself, “what am I doing in this coffin? If I am dead, why do I have to go to the bathroom?”

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## CHAPTER TWO

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# HENRY CLAY

1824, 1832, 1844

*Sir, I had rather be right than be president.*

One irony of contemporary politics is that the annual celebration of the Democratic Party is still known as “Jefferson-Jackson Day” when it is the birthday of Andrew Jackson’s arch-nemesis, Henry Clay, who helped lay the foundation of modern liberalism. If alive today, small government advocate Jackson (and probably Thomas Jefferson, too) would more likely be considered conservative Republican, while Clay and his political disciple, Abraham Lincoln, would be Democrats in their shared belief in the necessity of an assertive national government to act positively for the economic, social, and moral well-being of the nation.

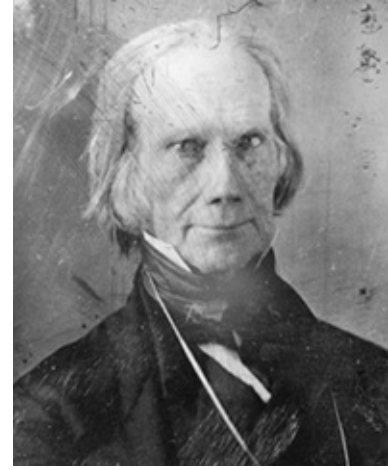
But Clay, the greatest legislator in American history, has no national political dinners named for him, nor is his face chiseled on Mount

Rushmore. His is the greatest example of how failing to become president obscures a candidate’s place in history. At his death, Clay was eulogized by the *New York Times* as “too great to be president,” and given the several mediocrities who have occupied the White House, this may be a fair comment. Clay himself despised our national fixation with the presidency to the exclusion of the other branches of government, though, Lord knows, he sought the office often enough himself.

Three times Clay was nominated for the presidency and came within a whisker of election. On two other occasions he actively sought nomination. This exceptional man known to his admirers as “Prince Hal” and the “Western Star” failed again and again through an extraordinary combination of poor judgment, rotten timing, and bad luck. Yet, these losses did not prevent Clay—Kentucky senator, Speaker of the House, secretary of state—from shaping American history far more profoundly than most presidents.

Clay once said, perhaps a bit disingenuously, “Sir, I had rather be right than be president.” He was never president, but he was often right. To a degree far beyond his contemporaries, Clay had an accurate vision of the nation the United States was to become. Where Jackson was stuck in the Jeffersonian fantasy of a country populated only by yeoman farmers, Clay foresaw the industrial potential of America and understood its destiny as a great world power.

A Southerner by birth, Clay was a Westerner by choice. Part of his genius was in developing a political program and strategy designed to bind the nation together and reduce the concept of sectionalism, by entwining the interests of each section with those of the others. In arguing in favor of his Compromise of 1850, Clay famously proclaimed, “I know no South, no North, no East, no West, t



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