

Shake Not Thy Dewey Locks at Me!

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, Aug. 19—Thomas E. Dewey had a mustache. Afterwards, that was one of the thousand explanations you heard for Dewey's unaccountable failure to be elected President of the United States that year. It was 1948. To be sure, densely haired men were not the commonplace we know today, but the few who went in for it—mustaches, sideburns, long locks—tended to be the kind of men America respected. Clark Gable, after all, had a mustache.

Nobody had attacked Dewey's mustache during the campaign, so it really made no sense, looking back at the election returns, to bring the mustache into the post-mortem analyses. But then, neither did many of the other factors make sense which were offered as possible explanations for the event.

Dewey's defeat was a happening of such monumental inexplicability that men were willing to grasp at any rationalization rather than believe what primitive instinct told them for a certainty; to wit, that somebody playing with pins, chicken feathers, bat's blood and a Thomas E. Dewey doll had tampered with the course of American history.

Dewey was simply unbeatable in

1948, and the politicians and reporters who saw, saw with their own eyes what happened to him—these men will never be quite whole again.

Among them, of course, was Richard M. Nixon who is now, as Dewey was in 1948, simply unbeatable, only more so. Every poll shows him beating Senator McGovern so dreadfully that, if politics were a less brutal sport, like boxing, the match would be stopped immediately.

The memory of Dewey, which has eaten into the soul of the Republican party, prevents the prospect of easy victory from bringing joy, as it did in 1964 to the Democrat, Johnson, who was secure and delighted in the evidence which assured him that his victory would rival Alexander's.

No sensible man spends long at politics without learning to fear the childish passion of the gods for cruel jokes. Johnson, who bestrode the narrow world like a colossus in 1964, couldn't get into the Democratic National Convention in 1968. And Dewey—raised so high—just as his grasp was about to close upon the prize—the most hideous laughter —.

Mr. Nixon, who has spent a long time at politics and has been the butt of a couple of Olympian guffaws, quite naturally declines to strut and bray about the coming barbecuing of

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the Democratic party. Dewey must haunt him. Despite all evidence, he must go ahead clinging to the insistence that he is in a close fight for survival.

It would surely gall any man less fond of playing the underdog. The love of the crowd lapping over him is what the politician lives for, the sure sense that he is the chosen favorite of the masses. That is the politician's catnip.

For a man of Mr. Nixon's political history, it might be doubly sweet. After the heartbreaking rejection of 1960, the awful twist of the knife in 1962, the equivocal nature of the comeback victory in 1968, how sweet it might be to turn the campaign into a Roman triumph spanning the continent! How deadly dangerous! Dewey, though dead, still mocks Republicans raised too high.

Pretending that he is in a desperate fight will probably not be hard for Mr. Nixon. He has a talent for playing the underdog, as has the Vice President. Between them, they have the power to make widows and orphans weep for the suffering, misunderstanding and abuse which are heaped upon

the poor President, his struggling but honest Pentagon, his long-suffering public-relations campaign, his—nay! Let us stay the catalogue 'ere tears begin to damp the page.

The point is that the Messrs. Nixon and Agnew are splendid at persuading most of us, probably, that a President can still be an underdog. They will probably play the role with relish against the unspeakable menace to the Established Order, George McGovern.

Anyone who states the obvious—that it looks like an easy victory for Nixon—will probably, from here on out, be denounced for conspiracy to NOT re-elect the President. Good Republicans will clench jaws in insistence that the party cannot dare look beyond this fall's fearfully dangerous campaign. All the while agreeing behind locked doors, joyfully or mournfully as the case may be, that the inevitable re-election of Agnew as Vice President will inevitably make him the candidate to succeed President Nixon in 1976.

If the Republican convention in Florida seems unreal next week, it may be because the party will be more concerned about 1976 and 1948 than about 1972. It will be looking ahead to the post-Nixon succession to be established in 1976 and hesitating to look back for fear that 1948 may be gaining on it.