

## Of Poll-Bashing Journalists and the “Babe Ruth” of Survey Research

Newspapers were vital to the rise and prominence of modern opinion polls. Beginning in the mid-1930s, George H. Gallup syndicated polling reports to daily newspapers, an early step in establishing his assessments of public opinion as a staple of U.S. news coverage.<sup>1</sup> Aligning his polls with journalism helped make Gallup a familiar name. Along with the lucrative market research conducted for commercial clients,<sup>2</sup> polling helped make him rich. At the time of his death in 1984, Gallup had a farm near Princeton, a summer retreat in central Switzerland, and a winter home in the Bahamas.<sup>3</sup>

Frank Newport, a former editor-in-chief of the Gallup Organization and admirer of the company’s founder, once said it was a “combination of journalism and polling that made Dr. Gallup so successful.”<sup>4</sup> At least in his early years, Gallup emphasized polling’s parallels to journalism. He said on the *Meet the Press* interview program shortly after the polling debacle of 1948 that poll-taking was “a new branch of journalism, and I think you gentlemen of the press would agree that it’s just as important to report what people think as it is what they do. This, I think, is a new, legitimate, and important field of journalism.”<sup>5</sup>

And yet, despite shared interests and commonalities, the relationship between election pollsters and prominent journalists has been often stormy, tainted by hostility and mutual suspicion. Poll-bashing among journalists arose from the resentment and distrust of the methods, presumptions, and intrusiveness of election pollsters. Poll-bashing may have eased in American newsrooms in recent years, but its pedigree is extensive. It afflicted such prominent journalists as broadcast legend Edward R. Murrow, former CBS

News anchor Dan Rather,<sup>6</sup> New York City writer Jimmy Breslin, Chicago columnist Mike Royko, and social commentator Christopher Hitchens.<sup>7</sup>

Skeptics in journalism doubted whether opinion polling could accurately divine the opinions or inclinations of millions of people—and doubted whether trying to do so was even a good idea. Such reservations date to 1936 and the dawn of polling’s modern era. The *New York Herald Tribune* said after the election that year it doubted whether “there is any scientifically reliable

### BOX 1. JOURNALISTS ON POLLS AND POLLSTERS

Although their hostility has receded in recent years, journalists prominent and otherwise have delighted in skewering polls and pollsters, as this selection makes clear:

- “I should be very happy if all the polls turned out to be wrong.”—Walter Lippmann, syndicated columnist, *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 1, 1936
- “To a vast number, these polls have been an irritation and annoyance.”—Frank R. Kent, columnist, *Baltimore Sun*, November 24, 1936
- “Defending pollsters these days is a dirty, rotten, thankless job, but somebody has to do it.”—Theo Lippman Jr., columnist, *Baltimore Sun*, November 10, 1980
- “Without these polls, we would never know what cattle feel like.”—Russell Baker, *New York Times* humor columnist, November 9, 1988
- “If you lied to a pollster, then voted the way you intended, elections would still come out the way they would have if you told the truth. The only difference would be that the pollsters would have nervous breakdowns and be institutionalized, and we wouldn’t be assaulted by their silly numbers every election year.”—Mike Royko, columnist, *Chicago Tribune*, October 28, 1992
- “The political polls are everywhere—but do they really mean anything?”—Susan Aschoff, *St. Petersburg Times*, October 10, 2000
- “Being a clever pollster means never having to say you’re sorry.”—William Saletan, *Slate*, October 27, 2000
- “What is going to happen on Election Day? It depends on which pollster you ask.”—Jim Rutenberg, *New York Times*, October 19, 2004
- “Polls are as accurate and precise as human nature, which is to say they are not accurate and they are not precise. This is witchcraft.”—Jim Pinkerton, on *Fox News Watch* program, October 30, 2004
- “If you think about it, talking to a polling company is an odd way to behave. Strangers ask you to give them time and personal information for nothing so that they can profit from it.”—Nick Cohen, columnist, *London Observer*, October 31, 2004

method of telling what 120,000,000 people are thinking.”<sup>8</sup> Edward Murrow expressed similar misgivings. On the day after Dwight Eisenhower won the presidency in 1952, Murrow said on CBS Radio:

Yesterday, the people surprised the pollsters, the prophets, and many politicians. They demonstrated, as they did in 1948, that they are mysterious and their motives are not to be measured by mechanical means. The result contributed something to the demechanization of our society. It restored to the individual, I suspect, some sense of his own sovereignty. Those who believe that we are predictable . . . who believe that sampling depth, interviewing, allocating the undecided vote, and then reducing the whole thing to a simple graph or chart, have been undone again. (They were as wrong as they were four years ago.) And we are in a measure released from the petty tyranny of those who assert that they can tell us what we think, what we believe, what we will do, what we hope and what we fear, without consulting us—all of us.<sup>9</sup>

Such thinking resonated in American journalism for years, driven by uneasiness about polling’s presumptions rather than by evaluations of its techniques. “I hope profoundly,” Murrow said after the 1948 election, “that they never succeed in making the measuring of public opinion into an exact science.”<sup>10</sup> Other critics like Eric Sevareid, a commentator for CBS News, were uncomfortable with polling’s audacity in challenging the mystique of the American voter. Sevareid wrote in 1964 of “a secret glee and relief when the polls go wrong” and said the reasons for feeling that way “were obvious: We hate to have the mystery and suspense of human behavior eliminated by clinical dissection.”<sup>11</sup> James Reston of the *New York Times* argued that “the more the pollsters fail, the more the democratic process is likely to succeed.” If pre-election polls “were a sure bet,” he reasoned, “who would vote?”<sup>12</sup>

The ornery Mike Royko, who was perhaps Chicago’s most engaging and entertaining newspaper columnist, delighted in his contempt for polls. The pollster, he wrote, was “a hired brain-picker trying to figure out what your personal fears, hopes or prejudices are, so that he can advise a politician how to more skillfully lie to you.”<sup>13</sup> In the mid-1980s, Royko waged a noisy campaign urging readers to lie to the interviewers conducting exit polls. He said he wanted to confound the projections that television stations relied on. Besides, Royko wrote, exit polling was draining the fun from Election Night. “Do they care,” he wrote, “that their exit polling is completely ruining what used to be the most entertaining and exciting part of an election—the suspense of watching the results trickle in?”<sup>14</sup>

“The election is a few days off,” Royko wrote in early November 1984, “but it’s never too early to begin planning to tell a lie to a TV exit pollster. As some readers might recall, urging people to lie to exit pollsters has long been one of my few constructive civic endeavors. The idea is to mess up their polling results and cause them to go on TV and project the wrong candidate as the winner. And that could cause them to swallow their tongues, which would be fun to see.”<sup>15</sup>

It was a perversely amusing and, of course, an ineffective campaign. Royko’s tongue-in-cheek advocacy troubled the likes of the *Washington Post*. Lying to pollsters, the *Post* declared, was neither wise nor prudent advice, warning that it could even lead to a debacle akin to the “Dewey defeats Truman” miscall of 1948.<sup>16</sup> Royko’s campaign resonated for years after his death in 1997. It was recalled in 2018 at the conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, when the organization’s genial then-president, Tim Johnson, complained about efforts he said were intended to delegitimize opinion polling. He cited Royko’s lie-to-a-pollster advocacy and asked, “How can we expect the public to take our surveys seriously when some of our opinion leaders make a mockery of them?”<sup>17</sup>

Johnson also recalled the snarling, poll-bashing crusade waged by Arianna Huffington, a syndicated columnist who founded the popular online news and commentary site *Huffington Post*. Hers was an aggressive campaign called the “Partnership for a Poll-Free America.” Huffington encouraged people “to take the no-poll pledge and hang up on pollsters” should they call. “If they can’t hang up, if they don’t have the strength yet to do that,” she advised, “at least lie to them—anything to contaminate the sample and demonstrate how unreliable polls are.”<sup>18</sup> She said her crusade was intended “to get the dominance of polling out of our political life.”<sup>19</sup> She lamented that polling results had come to be regarded “with the kind of reverence that ancient Romans gave to chicken entrails”<sup>20</sup> and said they were treated by “media mavens . . . as if Moses just brought them down from the mountaintop.”<sup>21</sup>

A high moment in Huffington’s campaign came in 2003, when AAPOR invited her to address the organization’s annual conference. She opened her remarks by saying that friends had asked her who was crazier—she, for accepting the invitation, or AAPOR, for offering it. Huffington demonstrated on that occasion that she was more inclined to offer insouciant and humorous asides than a serious or sophisticated critique of polling, its methodologies, and its failures. The speech was less a confrontation than a theater for witty

exchanges and sly repartee. Richard Morin, the polling director at the *Washington Post*, was one of the designated respondents to Huffington's speech. Morin said drolly that the talk revealed there "are actually two Arianna Huffingtons. There's the one who just spoke to us: What a charming woman—intelligent, witty. She's critical but insightful about polls." Morin turned to Huffington and added, "But then there's the shrieking pundit from hell who writes about polls in a syndicated newspaper column under your name. Have you ever met this dreadful woman?" Laughter swept the room. The evening closed with Huffington's being asked to place her hand on the convention program and vow never again to try to kill off survey research.

A hint of naïveté characterized Huffington's campaign. And Royko's. Not many people ever are called or interviewed by a pollster, and a few deceptive responses would not significantly distort a poll's results. In time, Huffington's poll-bashing campaign faded away. Its end effectively came in 2010 when the *Huffington Post* acquired Pollster.com, an aggregator and interpreter of polling data that was renamed HuffPost Pollster. "Polling, whether we like it or not, is a big part of how we communicate about politics," Huffington said then. "And with this [acquisition], we'll be able to do it in a deeper way. We'll be able to both aggregate polls, point out the limitations of them and demand more transparency."<sup>22</sup> Huffington left *Huffington Post* in 2016, after Verizon acquired AOL, which owned the site.

Poll-bashing also arose from a tension between anecdote-based reporting and data-based methods of information-gathering, a tension between qualitative and quantitative methods of assessing public opinion. While election polls were valuable in addressing the inevitable questions about elections—who's ahead, who's likely to win—they posed a challenge to the celebrated news-gathering technique of "shoe-leather" reporting, which obliged journalists to leave the newsroom and rely on direct observation and in-person interviews. "Some newspaper folk are antagonistic to opinion polls, chiefly because they are skeptical of the methods employed," the director of the Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin* poll wrote in 1949. "They doubt that the cross-section is an accurate portrayal of the community at large, and feel that for their purposes they can obtain results as conclusive by a much more limited number of spot interviews."<sup>23</sup>

Generations of American journalists have assigned outsized value to "shoe-leather" reporting, a practice steeped in presumptive virtue and sometimes identified as an antidote to the failures of election polling. Jay Rosen, a jour-

nalism educator, has observed—with, perhaps, only faint exaggeration—that “in the U.S. press there is thought to be a single source of virtue. The mythical term for it is ‘shoe leather reporting.’ There can never be enough of it. Only good derives from it. Anything that eclipses it is bad. Anything that eludes it is suspect. Anything that permits more of it is holy.” It is, Rosen added, “the one god an American journalist can officially pray to. Fine writing, great storytelling, aggressive questioning, toughness in the face of attacks: these are universally admired. Amusing and inventive word play, quick and biting sarcasm, superior crap detection: these will win you points in any newsroom or press bus. But godliness is reserved for shoe leather reporting.”<sup>24</sup>

Such sentiment can be traced to the presumed high moments of “shoe-leather” journalism, such as the dogged reporting of the early Watergate scandal by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein for the *Washington Post*. Their work—which often and wrongly has been credited with bringing down Richard M. Nixon’s corrupt presidency<sup>25</sup>—was memorialized in *All the President’s Men*, a best-selling book and an eponymous, much-acclaimed motion picture. “The scenes in *All the President’s Men* that show Woodward and Bernstein crisscrossing Washington on foot or ringing doorbells at night” represent “shoe leather mythology in its most concentrated form,” Rosen wrote. This determined quest for vital truths makes poll-taking seem like an unglamorous slog.

Another enormously influential example of “shoe-leather” journalism was *The Making of the President, 1960*, Theodore White’s deeply reported, behind-the-scenes narrative of John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign and election victory over Nixon. *Making of the President* spawned great interest and imitation in political journalism, and confirmed the appeal if not the soundness of detail-driven “shoe-leather” journalism. White’s approach inspired numerous book-length imitations, many of which borrowed his formula of describing politics in novelistic fashion, as a struggle of great personalities, as Timothy Crouse noted in his equally famous campaign book, *The Boys on the Bus*.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, the appeal of White’s “dramatic, inside style swept over into daily journalism,” James David Barber wrote in *The Pulse of Politics*. He noted that scores of reporters “muscled their way into the campaigns of 1972, frantically jotting down what the candidates had for breakfast, how he did his hair, what his children thought of him.”<sup>27</sup>

Crouse’s *Boys on the Bus* turned the lens from the candidates to the journalists who covered the 1972 presidential campaign. It was “shoe-leather” reporting about the reporters, and Crouse presented a humorous but unsettling

account of the frenetic yet collaborative packlike behavior of supposed rivals in the traveling campaign press corps. "Campaign journalism," Crouse wrote, "is, by definition, pack journalism: to follow a candidate, you must join a pack of other reporters; even the most independent journalist cannot completely escape the pressures of the pack."<sup>28</sup> "Pack journalism" was both a reality and a failing. Crouse pressed the term into the argot of American journalism as a defect or distortion of "shoe-leather" reporting.

The pedigree of "shoe-leather" reporting of political campaigns is rich. Years before White's book, or Crouse's, or *All the President's Men*, syndicated columnist David Lawrence crisscrossed the country in quadrennial efforts to detect and assess voters' moods in the weeks before presidential elections. His analyses sought to combine direct observation with judgment born of extensive experience. Lawrence's analyses were not always on target, but they were invariably detailed. They were sometimes celebrated as responses or alternatives to pre-election polling.

Extensive travel likewise characterized the "shoe-leather" reporting of Haynes Johnson, who wrote long, long, interview-based reports about the moods of Americans for the *Washington Post* in the runup to presidential elections in the 1970s and '80s. Johnson derided opinion polls, saying they could never match the texture and detail produced by rigorous shoe-leather reporting. "I wish we would disband all polls," he once said in an interview on the C-SPAN cable network. "I hate the polls. We rely on them, I use them, I've cited them, and I've even gone out, God help me, and done polling myself and knocked on doors and so forth. But I think we make too much of polls. . . . They give you a little fragmentary snapshot of a moment in time."<sup>29</sup>

Johnson also inveighed against the perceived intrusiveness of polls, long an indictment by critics in the news media. "People resent them," Johnson said of polls in 1980. "They are tired of being told how they think, according to the polls; how they will vote, according to the polls; and why they didn't think the way they were supposed to think or vote the way they were supposed to vote, according to the polls." He added that when people "say that they resent the polls, they invariably go on to criticize the press for relying on them so heavily." Never, he wrote, have polls been so numerous. Never, he said, "have they been so widely cited as ultimate wisdom."<sup>30</sup>

Years ago, the journalism magazine *Nieman Reports* published a collection of tips and suggestions for covering political campaigns, a lengthy compilation that had been prepared by the now-defunct Committee of Concerned

Journalists. The suggestions touted “shoe-leather” reporting while advising reporters not to rely too much on polling: “Cover voters, not polls. It is voters—what they think, how they live, what they are worried about—that are important (and also more interesting). Polls turn the public into an abstraction, reacting to questions and constructs of the pollster/journalist. . . . Polls are only a tool to get at voters and only one tool. Relying on that one tool too much will bias your coverage. Other tools include focus groups, or panels (a recurring group of voters you visit), knocking on doors, talking to people in malls, talking to people at rallies.”<sup>31</sup>

“Shoe-leather” reporting was identified as a response and prospective remedy following the polling embarrassment of the 2016 election—embarrassment in which the news media shared deeply. “If I have a mea culpa for journalists and journalism,” Dean Baquet, executive editor of the *New York Times*, said soon after the election, “it’s that we’ve got to do a much better job of being on the road, out in the country, talking to different kinds of people than the people we talk to—especially if you happen to be a New York-based news organization—and remind ourselves that New York is not the real world.”<sup>32</sup> In an essay in the *Columbia Journalism Review* that addressed how the news media botched their coverage in the 2016 election, Neal Gabler, a journalist and historian, suggested doing away with “media-financed, pre-election polling altogether. This would leave a lot of reporters twiddling their thumbs, thinking of something to write about—which would, frankly, not be a bad thing—forcing them out from behind their desks or their seats on the campaign planes to tour the country and listen to citizens and interpret their grievances.”<sup>33</sup>

Left unsaid was that “knocking on doors,” “talking to people in malls,” and interpreting “their grievances” are techniques that are prone to producing hazy and misleading impressions, which undercut the value of “shoe-leather” reporting. Impressions gathered that way can easily be misinterpreted. That is a serious shortcoming, and perhaps an explanation as to why “shoe-leather” reporting has never fully been embraced as an adequate substitute for election polling. It can be an impressionistic, nonsystematic method of information-gathering. As Nate Silver has noted, it can be “easy to misread the vibrations on the ground” during a campaign<sup>34</sup>—easy to misinterpret the size and enthusiasm of crowds or the prevalence of such totems as campaign yard signs. The *New York Times* cited impressionistic indicators in 2012, for example, suggesting the presidential race in Pennsylvania was tilting toward Mitt

Romney, the Republican nominee.<sup>35</sup> Romney lost Pennsylvania by five percentage points.

This is not to scoff at “shoe-leather” journalism: it can be an important prod to journalists, a supplement to office-bound “screenwork” reporting, which has become common in the digital age. “Shoe-leather” reporting is probably best understood as a supplemental technique that can be oversold as a useful and effective response to flawed polling. Without reliable polling, as the *Columbia Journalism Review* once observed, campaign coverage would be “governed by instinct, hunch, and whispered plane conversations.”<sup>36</sup>

Election polling has grown enormously since the mid-1930s, when it was mostly a profile-raising pursuit of marketing researchers like Archibald Crossley, Elmo Roper, and George Gallup. Pollsters these days number in the hundreds and include news organizations, colleges and universities, and private research firms. Even then, they represent a modest portion of the much larger market and research services industry, which is estimated to generate annual revenues in the United States of \$18 billion.<sup>37</sup>

The vernacular of survey research is imposing and seemingly intent on excluding. A frequent complaint among pollsters is that journalists just don’t grasp, or convey very well, the intricacies of polling, that they lack an essential command of probabilities and rudimentary aspects of survey research. Amy Walter, national editor of the *Cook Political Report*, has said that journalists talking about polls are akin to pre-teens discussing sex. “They know all the words,” Walter said. “They talk about it a lot. But they have no idea what they’re talking about.”<sup>38</sup> Charles Franklin of the Marquette Poll said at an AAPOR conference a few years ago that pollsters should expect frustration in trying to explain concepts such as the margin of sampling error to reporters “and people who talk about these things on TV.”<sup>39</sup>

Such complaints are of long standing. One of the lessons of the 1952 election, according to Elmo Roper, was “that the press is not ready to handle the survey tool properly.” Newspaper editors, he complained, were too eager to turn to polls for predictive purposes while failing to recognize their analytical value. Roper argued that “it is not the function of public opinion polls to predict elections . . . . I think what we lose in the plaudits of newspaper editors we more than make up in the approval of the many social scientists who find something really constructive to work with in the information we produce.”<sup>40</sup>

Gallup, too, sometimes spoke resentfully of pre-election polls, especially after their frailty became clear in the 1948 election. He referred to pre-election polls as “this Frankenstein” that he, Roper, and Crossley had created.<sup>41</sup> For pollsters, Gallup said on another occasion, pre-election surveys were akin to “having another baby. One hopes that it will not be two-headed and that it will have the proper number of fingers and toes. You will recall we gave birth to a monster in 1948, the year when all of us pollsters elected Tom Dewey President of the United States.”<sup>42</sup>

Gallup also became inclined to describe election forecasts as “the least socially useful function that polls perform.”<sup>43</sup> Even so, it was Gallup, more than anyone else, who went to lengths to proclaim the accuracy of pre-election polls. After the presidential election in 1940, for example, Gallup bought advertising space in *Editor and Publisher*, a journalism trade journal, to proclaim: “The Gallup Poll Sets a New Record for Election ACCURACY!” The advertisement declared that Gallup’s poll, which had been launched just five years earlier, had set “a new all-time record in polling history with its forty-eight-state pre-election survey” that estimated results with an average error of 2.5 percentage points.

Four years later, Gallup placed a similar self-congratulatory ad in *Editor and Publisher*, this one carrying the headline: “Gallup Poll Sets Another Record for Election ACCURACY.” The ad copy described a “virtual bullseye’s prediction”<sup>44</sup> of the 1944 presidential election, in which Franklin D. Roosevelt defeated Thomas Dewey by 53 percent to 46 percent. Gallup’s final poll in 1944 showed a closer race, with Roosevelt leading by 51 percent to 48 percent. During much of the campaign, in fact, Gallup’s figures “indicated a very close race and played up factors favorable to Dewey,” a post-election analysis noted.<sup>45</sup> And in 1948, as we will see, Gallup brushed aside late-in-the-campaign doubts about his poll showing Dewey with a comfortable lead and declared that on Election Day “the whole world will be able to see down to the last percentage point how good we are.”<sup>46</sup>

Gallup apparently was interested in devising some sort of polling “championship,” an idea he raised in a letter to Roper after the 1940 election. “Frankly,” Gallup wrote, “I think it would be a good idea sometime during the next year for the [journal] Public Opinion Quarterly, or those of us who are interested in this job of measuring public opinion, to set up the rules by which we could stake our claims for the championship” of, presumably, the most accurate pre-election poll.<sup>47</sup> Roper wasn’t much interested and said so in a letter that he drafted but apparently never sent.<sup>48</sup>

Gallup's interest in asserting the accuracy of election polling was clear enough: by insisting on and demonstrating the accuracy of pre-election polling, he could stake a claim to the trustworthiness of *all* opinion polling,<sup>49</sup> including the far more numerous surveys on public policy issues and consumer-product preferences. Accuracy in forecasting elections, in other words, would translate to confidence in polling techniques generally.<sup>50</sup>

Gallup sometimes characterized election polling as “an acid test”<sup>51</sup> of polling techniques—even though pre-election polls, especially those taken near the end of campaigns, tend to be quite atypical. Sample sizes are usually larger in the final polls of presidential campaigns, as pollsters seek results with smaller margins of sampling error. As such, they “bear very little resemblance to the vast majority of polls,” as J. Michael Hogan noted in a detailed and critical assessment of Gallup and his techniques. Hogan wrote that “final election forecasts are not so much a ‘test’ of their general procedures, but instead unique, special events,” methodologically “different from all other polls.”<sup>52</sup> They are in a sense uncharacteristic beauty contests of opinion polling.

From the beginning, Gallup's polling on policy issues was prodigious. His frequent reports were syndicated to a few dozen client newspapers including major dailies such as the *Washington Post* and *Boston Globe*. The *Post*'s publisher, Eugene Meyer, was an early and unabashed cheerleader for Gallup and his work.<sup>53</sup> Meyer wrote in 1940 that the *Post* “was one of the first to publish the results of Dr. Gallup's work . . . and deems itself fortunate in having this interesting information to present to its readers.” Meyer declared that the “accuracy and quality” of Gallup's reports “have met my highest expectations.”<sup>54</sup> Gallup's output, his ties to newspapers, his frequent speeches to clubs and organizations, and his willingness to appear on radio and television interview programs heightened his profile and eventually made his the most recognizable name in opinion polling.<sup>55</sup>

Gallup was outwardly cordial to his rivals, Elmo Roper and Arch Crossley. They were a fascinating trio, collectively credited with having “transformed polling from alchemy to home-brewed chemistry.”<sup>56</sup> They were men of ego, varied backgrounds, and differing political views. Gallup was the best educated of the three, having earned a doctorate in psychology at the University of Iowa in 1928. He taught journalism at Northwestern and Drake universities before accepting a research position at Young & Rubicam in New York City. He ran his Princeton-based polling company, the American Institute of Public Opinion, while holding an executive position at Young & Rubicam until 1947.

Privately, Gallup and Roper entertained suspicions about each other. According to interview notes of Phyllis L. Gillis, his would-be biographer, Gallup disliked Roper because Roper had been a failed retailer jeweler in Iowa and possessed no scientific credentials.<sup>57</sup> That could be a sore subject for Roper who, according to Jean Converse's history of survey research, "bristled at negative comments beamed from the ivory tower."<sup>58</sup> Gallup also complained to Gillis that Roper had not presented the polling business very favorably in television interviews.<sup>59</sup>

Roper's papers at the University of Connecticut include an unflattering letter he apparently solicited in 1947 from William J. Gaskill, a former associate of Gallup who discussed what he said were Gallup's insecurities and his private "lack of faith" in opinion polling. Gaskill, who had worked with Gallup for six years and knew him by his nickname "Ted," told Roper in a brief but remarkable letter:

We shouldn't be human, no matter how great, without some weaknesses. Ted's has always been a lack of faith in the great instrument which you fellows developed. He has always had the notion for some reason or other he has to deny man's intellectual and developmental shortcomings, instead of recognizing them as a challenge for tomorrow. He can't help but feel personal assault every time the public doesn't say what he wants it to say and every time someone mentions the shortcomings of research in the public opinion field. Ted's great curse is too great a love—and too great a fear—for a thing, which God knows, is one of the most beautiful devices of the 20th Century, a device which will only grow as the people leading the field can recognize its shortcomings as challenges for further development.<sup>60</sup>

In reply Roper thanked Gaskill for his insights and said: "I think your explanation of George's sensitivity about what seemed to be attacks on him is a sound one, and I shall remember it the next time he gets unusually annoyed at me over something which was not intended to reflect on him personally."<sup>61</sup> Roper showed Gaskill's correspondence to Frank Stanton, the president of CBS, who wrote in a brief reply, "This is quite a letter. Thanks for letting me see it."<sup>62</sup>

It is not known what Gallup may have said or done to disturb Roper. Gallup cultivated an engaging, aw-shucks demeanor, but he could be prickly and intemperate, and acutely sensitive to criticism.<sup>63</sup> He was known to be openly contemptuous of his detractors. In a speech in Cleveland at the end of 1948, for example, Gallup publicly thrashed Rensis Likert, the director of the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, who had written a critical article for *Scientific American* about the Dewey-Truman polling debacle. Lik-

ert pointedly questioned whether the election outcome meant that polls weren't to be trusted on other topics. "If the polls could be so inaccurate in predicting an election, what of their activities in sampling public opinion on complex social, economic and international issues? In that field there has been skepticism for some time," he wrote.<sup>64</sup>

Likert impugned the quota-control sampling methods then used by Gallup and other election pollsters, in which interviewers were instructed to seek out respondents who appeared to correspond to specific attributes of age, gender, race, and income levels. "A major source of bias in quota samples is the fact that interviewers, in perfectly human fashion, endeavor to fill their quotas in the easiest manner possible," Likert noted. "They go to places where people are readily available and seek any who will fill the age, sex and socio-economic specifications of their quotas." The result, he wrote, were polling samples that included "more people who are easily contacted than a truly representative sample should include." Likert advocated random-sampling techniques, saying they would produce more reliable results—and less discretion "in selection of the persons to be interviewed."<sup>65</sup>

Likert's criticism about flaws and shortcomings in opinion research were piercing but they were not new.<sup>66</sup> But coming soon after the election debacle, they aggravated Gallup, who replied angrily—much in the fashion that Gaskill had observed in his letter to Roper. Gallup treated Likert's observations as a personal assault and prepared a mocking response. "I regard him as an honest researcher who is such a good salesman that he has oversold himself on his own remedies" for opinion polling, Gallup said, sneeringly, of Likert.<sup>67</sup>

Gallup turned to what was then, and is now, an unresolved conundrum of election surveys—that of discerning which poll respondents are most likely to vote. He said that "if Mr. Likert can tell us just how to identify in advance those who will vote and those who will stay at home, he can be sure of a niche in the Researchers' Hall of Fame." He suggested that Likert subscribe to *Public Opinion Quarterly*, where Gallup had published articles about polling's intricacies, and urged him to "catch up with his reading before he undertakes to write his next article on the matter."

He also challenged Likert to try his hand at election polling, at the local level. "If Mr. Likert, or anyone else, wants to prove to the world that he can do a better job than the rest of us, then he has his chance . . . and the cost, at least in a local election, should be a minor consideration." Gallup said he would "be the first to cheer if Mr. Likert does have all the right answers. It will save

me many a headache in years to come and many an hour explaining away my own shortcomings.”<sup>68</sup>

It was a harsh and petty attack. But it was hardly the only occasion when Gallup publicly assailed an outspoken critic. In 1949, Lindsay Rogers of Columbia University published *The Pollsters*, a thin book that criticized polling as a practice that did little to promote representative democracy. The argument was a thrust at the heart of one of Gallup’s central tenets—that polling was a continual sampling referendum, an effective and expansive town meeting through which the public regularly informs elected representatives of its collective will, judgments, and preferences. Rogers scoffed at such sentiments. “Dr. Gallup does not make the public more articulate,” he argued, not without justification. “He only estimates how in replying to certain questions, it would say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or ‘don’t know.’ Instead of feeling the pulse of democracy, Dr. Gallup listens to its baby talk.” He also wrote that “Dr. Gallup is on the side of angels and relegates critics to the camp of devils who distrust democracy.”<sup>69</sup>

Gallup bristled at such observations and, as if to prove Rogers’s point, excoriated *The Pollsters* in a letter to *Public Opinion Quarterly*. “This book,” Gallup wrote, “draws upon all the literature or material derogatory to polls that has ever been published, without regard to whether the statements have been proved erroneous or not.” He likened Rogers to “perhaps the last of the arm-chair philosophers in this field. I, for one, do not begrudge this last—albeit futile—charge by an arm-chair warrior, even if the weapons he chooses are tomahawks and poisoned arrows.”<sup>70</sup> In his feud with Rogers, Gallup showed he could also nurse a grudge. Several years later, Gallup renewed his attack, declaring that Rogers had contradicted himself “in almost every chapter, if not every paragraph,” of *The Pollsters*.<sup>71</sup>

Mean-spirited outbursts are decidedly at odds with what has been the conventional, popular view of Gallup as the kindly patriarch—big, likable, and well-meaning, the “Babe Ruth of the polling profession,” as *Time* magazine described him in a cover story in May 1948.<sup>72</sup> Gallup, the magazine said, “is still the rumped, well-fed Iowa boy who first came east to make his fortune. Tweedy, balding, good-humored, unhurried, he talks earnestly in a deep, Midwestern voice, addresses everyone indiscriminately as ‘my friend.’ . . . Gallup loves children and animals, hates cities and crowds.”<sup>73</sup>

David Ogilvy, the legendary advertising executive, offered a somewhat more nuanced assessment of Gallup, for whom he worked at the Audience Research Institute. Gallup set up the institute in New Jersey in 1939 to survey moviego-

ers about what they liked in motion pictures. He later opened an office in Hollywood, where Ogilvy worked early in his career. “Gallup was a man of remarkable humility,” Ogilvy recalled in his autobiography. “When a magazine published an article attacking his methods on thirty-eight accounts, he summoned his lieutenants and told us that he agreed with thirty-six of them.”<sup>74</sup> Gallup “had one curious quirk: he paid [paltry] wages,” Ogilvy wrote. “I got \$40 a week, which was less than the gardeners of the Hollywood moguls I was advising. Saul Rae, who later became Canadian ambassador to the United Nation, was employed to help Gallup write a book—for \$50 a week.”<sup>75</sup>

Ogilvy’s other recollections were like stealthy insults. He wrote, for example: “I would have been happy to pay Gallup for the education he gave me. Apart from polling he taught me three things of consummate value: 1. ‘Grant graciously what you dare not refuse.’ 2. ‘When you don’t know the answer, confuse the issue.’ 3. ‘When you foul the air in somebody else’s bathroom, burn a match and the smell will vanish.’”<sup>76</sup>

Survey research has had few more dependable, media-wise, and high-profile advocates than Gallup, who once declared that “polls constitute the most useful instrument of democracy every devised.”<sup>77</sup> But Gallup’s vision of polls as a continual referendum assumed a public both attentive and well-informed, which even he, on occasion, conceded it was not.<sup>78</sup> Usually Gallup praised the wisdom of the masses,<sup>79</sup> saying they tended to be savvier and more in front on issues than their leaders.<sup>80</sup> But sometimes he let the mask slip. In an appearance in 1956 on Edward R. Murrow’s televised *Person to Person* interview program, Gallup said:

It is always shocking to me when we interview people who have the advantage of an education . . . to find that these people are very ill-informed about the world. . . . I remember one study in which we found that only a third of all adults of the country knew where the Suez Canal is. A good many people do not know that we have two senators from each state. They know very little about the Electoral College. They know very little about geography generally and particularly the geography of Asia and the sad part is that these are people who have had the advantage of an education.<sup>81</sup>

In time, Gallup came to be regarded as “the elder statesman” of survey research,<sup>82</sup> and his memory was celebrated for years after his death in Switzerland in 1984. A few months before the 2016 election, for example, the *New York Times* recalled Gallup and his legacy, describing him as “an Iowan with a commanding presence and a bone-crushing grip.” Gallup, said the