Like Father, Like Son

An interview with polling veteran Burns W. "Bud" Roper

By Tom Krazit

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The Roper polling organization was already in operation for 13 years when Bud Roper joined his father, Elmo (right), in 1946.

For nearly 50 years, Burns W. "Bud" Roper gathered and analyzed data on public opinion. So it's not surprising that the 77-year-old retired head of the international commercial polling company now called RoperASW has a few thoughts of his own about people and the past and the present state of the industry.

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For starters, Roper says most surveys are too long, questions are too complicated, more interviews need to be conducted in person rather than over the telephone, and the polling industry has lost touch with its roots.

He drew an analogy with aviation. "The first people who ran the airline companies were barnstormers; they knew how to fly. Then you got the second generation, they knew even better how to fly. Now you have the specialists. They have a tremendous knowledge of a very tiny area."

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Roper described the pioneers of modern public opinion research, such as his father, Elmo, as entrepreneurs with a keen understanding both of people and of business. Many of the current industry leaders lack that insight, he said. They don't understand that polling is as much art as science. "Many of the people in charge have never talked to the public. They write them off as stupid oafs. They are not stupid oafs."

Ailing recently but still mentally sharp, Roper reflected on his career and philosophy during an interview on Cape Cod, where he lives. "I'm a strong defender of the average American. He may not be terribly articulate or literate, but he's a pretty smart guy."

His comparison of polling and aviation is appropriate. As a teenager, he flew B-17s over Germany during World War II. After the war, he returned to Yale University as he pondered three career paths—labor leader, architect, or public opinion researcher.

"The first one I ruled out was as a labor leader, because I thought they had reached the point where they had accomplished most of their worthwhile objectives, and I would do more harm than good."

(That social consciousness remains, however. In ordering a beer with lunch, Roper asked for a Miller Lite on draft. He was told the restaurant only had Coors Light on draft. He chose instead a bottle of Miller. The reason for his mini-boycott of Coors? "I like their beer, but not their politics").

He also said he became disillusioned with Yale and the idea of spending another five or six years pursuing an architecture degree.

"So, by process of elimination, I went into public opinion. But it really wasn't just a process of elimination. Public opinion is a fantastic force. and I wish I knew how to predict it. I know how to measure it, but I don't know how to predict it."

And what about the public's opinion of public opinion research? "It's amazing to me how supportive people are," he said. "You ask them, do you think it's possible to tell what a nation of 250 million people thinks by talking to 5,000 people, they will tell you no, flatly no; but then you ask them if they think public opinion surveys are accurate, and they say yes."

In the early years of his polling career, Roper put in his time in the survey research trenches by doing personal interviews. When asked about his toughest one, he mentioned a survey conducted at gunpoint in Huntington, West Virginia. "I knocked on the door and it opened that wide," he said, holding his hands a few inches apart. "I heard a voice saying 'Who is it?' I told them, and the voice said, 'Let him in.'"

"The door was opened by a guy who had a shoulder holster. I was totally surrounded by several people, all armed. I was led to a guy at a table who also had a gun," a person Roper took to be the head of this unorthodox household. "I started asking him my questions. Once, one of the other guys started to answer, and I said 'No, I need his answer.'"

Roper said he went through his entire list of questions, except one. "I decided not to ask, 'What is your occupation?'" When the interview was over, Roper said he thanked the gentleman for his time and left—quickly.

In 1994, Roper retired from the organization his father founded. There is no third generation of Roper pollsters—none of his four children went into the field. He remains chairman emeritus of the Roper Center Board of Directors, which oversees the world's largest archives of public opinion data. Elmo Roper established the center just after World War II.

Roper said his father didn't push him toward a career in public opinion, but he was happy with his decision. "My father was a fabulous person. He was a true democrat, small D, also with a big D. But his life changed. He became—at one point, and I thought my mother was going to disown him—a defender of Richard Nixon."

"My father often said I was a better researcher than he was. I agree."

Elmo Roper was a jewelry salesman who transferred his business savvy into the fledgling field of public opinion research during the 1930s. "My father had a great brain," Roper said. "He knew how to sell anything to anybody. Fortunately, he had the ethics not to sell just anything to anybody."

That commitment to ethical behavior left a lasting impression on the son and helped him deal with crises near the start and end of his own career. The first was the 1948 "Dewey Defeats Truman" presidential election; the second a controversy in the 1990s over a poll question on the Holocaust.

"The '48 election was the classic definition of a dilemma," Roper said. "Your mother-in-law drives off the cliff in your new Cadillac.

"All the principals in our firm had voted for [Harry] Truman, but we, along with everyone else, predicted [Thomas] Dewey." Elation over Truman's victory was tempered by dismay over the missed call and how to deal with it.

"We were up all election night. What was my father going to say in his newspaper column the next day?

"An argument raged. I said we've got to say we blew it and not talk about averages over the last 20 years. Other people were saying that one [wrong call] out of 20 isn't bad."

Eventually, said Roper, Eric Hodgins, a Roper consultant and writer whose book, *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, became a celebrated movie with Cary Grant, got up and said, "I think I have the sense of the meeting." Roper was shocked. "I remember thinking, 'What the hell is he talking about? There is no sense of the meeting.'"

An hour later, Hodgins came back with a statement. "I read the first sentence and I was absolutely delighted," Roper recalled. "It said we couldn't have been more wrong, and we intend to find out why. My father said, 'Eric, that's perfect.'

"My father ran that column, and I had people two months later saying, 'You were the only people right in '48, weren't you?' I wanted to do it because it was the only honest thing to say, and it had the byproduct of taking the heat off us."

So what had gone wrong with the predictions? The conventional wisdom has been that public opinion was changing near the end of the campaign and the pollsters, who for the first time were in an election that did not involve Franklin D. Roosevelt, stopped surveying too soon. "I don't think opinion was changing that rapidly, but we did stop too soon," in mid-September, Roper said.

"We did a survey right after the election, and asked people how they had voted, and we had Dewey elected again, after the fact. We found out that 80% said they had voted, but the actual turnout was 60 [percent]. Twenty [percent] said they did and didn't. As best as I could analyze, these were Republicans, who for the first time since Roosevelt had a chance to elect someone other than *that man*, and all the polls said don't worry about it, Dewey's in, and so they played golf."

The Roper Organization then conducted a 10-city analysis of turnout in 1944 and 1948. It revealed that fewer wealthy people voted in '48, the upper-middle class went down some, and

turnout among the lower-middle class, the great bulk of Americans, was no different. However, the percentage of poor people who voted in 1948 was double that of '44, and that group went heavily for Truman, Roper said. "I'm convinced—didn't say this at the time, though I thought of it at the time—that the '48 election polls were more accurate than the election."

Roper's belief in the accuracy of polling is reflected in his oft-repeated view that "When I find myself in disagreement with one of our polls, my starting point has always been: 'Where have I gone wrong?'" That faith was put to the test in the controversy that emerged from a 1992 survey commissioned by the American Jewish Committee.

"I was window dressing at the time," Roper said. "I didn't want to be, but I was. I heard about this survey we had done with one out of five believing that the Holocaust never took place. I was shocked."

It turned out that an associate, in properly trying to make several loaded questions more neutral, unintentionally constructed a double-negative mind-twister: "Does it seem possible or does it seem impossible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened?"

Roper said that after he ordered the question restructured, the results radically changed, from 22% thinking the Holocaust never happened to 8%.

"I said we had to get hold of the client and tell them we screwed up the survey, and boy, did I get a lot of flack. The fact was, the American Jewish Committee was happy with the results because they were good for fundraising.

"We finally did a survey at our expense, a full repeat, with just that one question changed, and you know what we got?—the percentage of people who think the Holocaust never happened?—1%."

The flap over the Holocaust question raged for more than a year, culminating at the May 1994 meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Roper was president of the organization in 1982-83 and had received its top award in 1988. Roper said he tried to get his client to participate in a seminar at AAPOR. Not only did the client decline, but it also pressured him not to discuss the matter at the convention. Roper gave his presentation anyway.

His voice cracked as he recalled the events. "I was shaking like a leaf, but I got a standing ovation." A newspaper account was headlined, "Pollster Admits Blunder." "That kind of a headline was all right with me, 'cause it was a blunder."

At the convention's closing dinner, Roper was warmly toasted and applauded by his colleagues.

"That was a case of ethics paying off," he said. "That isn't why you do it, but it's the only thing that works."

He paused for a few seconds, then added, "But what a way to retire."

Bud Roper was co-pilot of a B-17 that developed engine trouble during a mission over Germany on September 12, 1944. The crew eventually managed to land the plane with only one engine working. After the war, Elmo Roper commissioned famed aviation artist Clayton Knight, who painted this representation based on Bud Roper's description. The painting was a proud father's gift. Bud Roper loaned it to the Wings Club of New York, where it currently hangs.