

Henry Wallace, America's Forgotten Visionary

Sunday, 03 February 2013 06:55

By [Peter Dreier](#), [Truthout](#) | [Historical Analysis](#)

One of the great "What if?" questions of the 20th century is how America would have been different if Henry Wallace rather than Harry Truman had succeeded Franklin Roosevelt in the White House. Filmmaker Oliver Stone has revived this debate in his current ten-part Showtime series, "The Untold History of the United States," and his new book (written with historian Peter Kuznick) of the same name.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, only FDR eclipsed Wallace - Roosevelt's secretary of agriculture (1933-1940) and then his vice president (1941-1944) - in popularity with the American people. Stone's documentary series and book portray Wallace as a true American hero, a "visionary" on both domestic and foreign policy. Today, however, Wallace is a mostly forgotten figure. If Stone's work helps restore Wallace's rightful place in our history and piques the curiosity of younger Americans to learn more about this fascinating person, it will have served an important purpose.



Henry Agard Wallace. (Photo: [Department of Commerce](#))

Wallace almost became the nation's president. In 1940, he was FDR's running mate and served as his vice president for four years. But in 1944, against the advice of the Democratic Party's progressives and liberals - including his wife Eleanor - FDR reluctantly allowed the party's conservative, pro-business and segregationist wing to replace Wallace with Sen. Harry Truman as the vice presidential candidate, a move that Stone calls the "greatest blunder" of Roosevelt's career. Had Wallace remained as vice president, he would have become president when FDR died in April 1945.

Wallace opposed the cold war, the arms race with the Soviet Union and racial segregation. He was a strong advocate of labor unions, national health insurance, public works jobs and women's equality. He would have been, without question, the most radical president in American history. He would have served out the remaining three years of FDR's fourth term and certainly would have sought to be elected on his own in 1948.

Stone raises several titillating but unknowable questions: Had Wallace become president, would the United States have dropped the atom bomb on Japan? Would the country have spent several decades engaged in a costly cold war and arms race with the Soviet Union? Would we have created a permanent war economy (one that President Eisenhower later warned had become a "military-industrial complex") and replaced England as the world's most assertive imperialist and colonial power, leading the country into numerous military adventures, including Vietnam? Would our society have postponed for at least a decade the civil rights and women's rights revolutions?

Today, if Wallace is remembered at all, it is as a fringe candidate who ran on the Progressive Party ticket against Truman in 1948 and garnered less than 3 percent of the popular vote. That is unfortunate, because Wallace was a

remarkable public servant. He was, according to John Kenneth Galbraith, "second only to Roosevelt as the most important figure of the New Deal."

Wallace was born on an Iowa farm in 1888. After graduating from Iowa State College in 1910, he went to work for his family's newspaper, *Wallaces' Farmer*, which was widely read by farmers and was influential in educating farmers about new scientific techniques and political issues shaping agricultural life. In 1921, Wallace took over as editor when his father became secretary of agriculture in the administrations of Warren G. Harding and then of Calvin Coolidge.

Wallace had a great passion for what was then called "scientific agriculture" and a talent for agricultural research. In 1926, he started the Hi-Bred Corn Company - later renamed Pioneer Hi-Bred - to market a new high-yield corn seed he had developed during his years conducting scientific experiments on a part-time basis. The company was hugely successful, making Wallace rich and his heirs secure. The new company revolutionized American agriculture. (DuPont bought the business for \$9.4 billion in 1999.)

Wallace recognized that farming followed an unpredictable boom-and-bust cycle due to the weather, overproduction and consumers' ability to pay for food. In the 1920s, almost half of all Americans made their living directly or indirectly from agriculture. Wallace saw that farmers had not shared in the decade's prosperity and that their plight worsened when the economy crashed in 1929. Between 1929 and 1932, farm income fell by two-thirds. Farm foreclosures were occurring at a record pace. Farming communities were emptying as family farmers and sharecroppers abandoned the land looking for jobs elsewhere, a situation portrayed in John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and in the film based on it.

As Adam Cohen recounts in *Nothing to Fear* (2009), his book on the first 100 days of FDR's administration, these experiences radicalized many farmers throughout the farm belt. In May 1932, for example, 2,000 farmers attended a rally at the Iowa state fairgrounds and urged fellow farmers to declare a "holiday" from farming, under the slogan "Stay at Home - Buy Nothing Sell Nothing." In effect, they were urging farmers to go on strike - to withhold their corn, beef, pork and milk until the government addressed their problems. They threatened to call a national farmers strike if Congress did not provide farmers with "legislative justice." In Sioux City, Iowa, farmers put wooden planks with nails on the highways to block agricultural deliveries. In Nebraska, one group of farmers showed up at a foreclosure sale and saw to it that every item that had been seized from a farmer's widow sold for five cents, leaving the bank with a total settlement of just \$5.35. In Le Mars, Iowa, a group of farmers kidnapped Judge Charles Bradley off the bench while he was hearing foreclosure cases and threatened to lynch him if he did not agree to stop foreclosures.

Wallace, a scientist and economist as well as a farmer, believed that the solution to the farm crisis was a combination of better farm management and government relief. Both Wallace and his father had been loyal Republicans, but in 1928, the younger Wallace changed his allegiance, supporting Democrat Al Smith for president. Four years later, Wallace endorsed FDR in the pages of his newspaper. Iowa, a traditionally Republican state, gave FDR almost 60 percent of its votes. Soon after winning the presidency, FDR recruited Wallace to become his secretary of agriculture - at 44, Wallace was the youngest member of the cabinet.

The Farm Belt protests continued after FDR took office in March 1933. Wallace used the growing farm rebellion to persuade the president to support a number of innovative and controversial programs, including crop subsidies, to keep farmers afloat. Wallace was the key advocate for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Rural Electrification Administration, the Soil Conservation Service, the Farm Credit Administration, and the food stamp and school lunch programs. Wallace added a program for erosion control. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) sponsored research to combat plant and animal diseases, to locate drought-resistant crops, and to develop hybrid seeds to increase farm productivity.

As a result, the USDA changed from a marginal department into one of the largest agencies, in size and influence, in Washington. Wallace's agency was also widely considered the best-run department in the federal government.

Business groups and Republicans in Congress opposed Wallace's plans, as they did most of the New Deal initiatives. Radical farm groups, like the National Farmers Union, thought the plans did not go far enough. But it is clear that the New Deal farm programs saved the farm economy and helped stabilize rural areas.

Wallace, Frances Perkins, Harry Hopkins, and Rex Tugwell formed the progressive wing of FDR's inner circle. Wallace had FDR's ear on a wide variety of issues, and he used that influence to push for policies to help industrial workers and the urban poor as well as farmers. Wallace became the New Deal's evangelist. In 1934 alone, he traveled more than 40,000 miles to all 48 states, delivered 88 speeches, signed 20 articles, published two books, and met regularly with reporters to promote the president and his program.

Because the fate of American farming is closely linked to global issues - particularly the export and import of food, but also hunger and famine around the world - Wallace was well versed in foreign affairs. In the late 1930s, he became alarmed by the rise of fascist dictatorships in Germany, Italy and Japan. Many Midwesterners, including progressives, were still isolationists, but Wallace had become a vigorous internationalist and a strong advocate for "collective security" among the United States and its allies.

During FDR's first two terms, Wallace developed a broad following among farmers, union activists and progressives. FDR was impressed by Wallace's popularity, his intelligence, and his integrity and believed that they shared a common view of government's role in society. In the summer of 1940, having decided to run for an unprecedented third term, FDR picked Wallace to be his vice presidential running mate.

During World War II, FDR involved Wallace in many military and international matters. Wallace also traveled throughout the war-torn world. FDR encouraged him to speak out about the possible shape of the postwar world. "Henry Wallace," wrote columnist James Reston in *The New York Times* in October 1941, "is now the administration's head man on Capitol Hill, its defense chief, economic boss and No. 1 post war planner."

Wallace faced significant opposition from the Democratic Party's conservative, business and segregationist wings. He feuded openly with Jesse H. Jones, a one-time Texas banker and businessman who was FDR's secretary of commerce and head of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), which controlled the purse strings for purchasing wartime supplies. For example, Wallace and Jones disagreed over the importing of essential materials for the war effort, such as rubber from South America. Wallace knew that about 40,000 workers were needed to extract the 20,000 tons of rubber that the United States needed each year. But each year, one-third of the rubber workers died and another third were too sick to work, afflicted with malaria, malnutrition, venereal disease, contaminated water, and other conditions. To guarantee a steady supply of rubber, Wallace (with the support of Perkins, the labor secretary) wanted the United States to provide the workers with healthy food and to require labor clauses in contracts with South American suppliers that mandated health and safety standards. Jones was adamantly opposed to Wallace's proposal and rounded up allies within the Roosevelt administration (including the State Department) and in Congress, including Republican Sen. Robert Taft of Ohio, who accused Wallace of "setting up an international WPA."

On May 8, 1942, Wallace delivered a talk in New York City that became famous for his phrase "the century of the common man." It was, noted John Culver and John Hyde in their biography, *American Dreamer: A Life of Henry A. Wallace*, "as pure an expression of progressive idealism as Wallace could muster." Wallace defined America's wartime mission as laying the groundwork for a peaceful world of global cooperation, "a fight between a slave world and a free world." Modern science has made it possible for everyone to have enough to eat, Wallace said, but it will require cooperation among the major nations to raise the standard of living for the common man in every corner of

the world.

The speech was Wallace's response to a 1941 article by Henry Luce, the publisher of Time and Life magazines, which called for an "American century" after the war - meaning a century dominated by the United States, "to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit."

Wallace's rebuttal was very explicit. He envisioned an end to colonialism, a world in which "no nation will have the God-given right to exploit other nations. Older nations will have the privilege to help younger nations get started on the path to industrialization, but there must be neither military nor economic imperialism." Wallace was aiming for a kind of global New Deal.

Millions of copies of Wallace's speech were distributed around the world in 20 languages. It drew praise in liberal and progressive circles, but it also stirred controversy. The British prime minister, Winston Churchill - who hoped that Britain would still have an empire to run after the war - was upset by Wallace's stark anticolonial sentiments. American business groups objected to Wallace's views about economic imperialism. The New York Times and, of course, Luce's publications, thought it was too radical.

Wallace's speech framed the debate between progressives and conservatives. Opponents viewed Wallace as naive, a dreamer and a radical. These opponents included influential Democrats who worried that FDR might anoint Wallace as his successor, or at least give Wallace a big enough stage from which to launch a presidential bid once FDR had retired.

Led by Robert Hannegan, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, local and state party bosses quietly lobbied FDR to replace Wallace with Truman. Going into the 1944 Democratic convention in Chicago, Wallace was strongly favored to keep his position as FDR's running mate. Too ill to attend the convention and too busy overseeing the American war effort to get in the middle of an intraparty battle, FDR let it be known that either Wallace or Truman (a little-known senator from Missouri with few accomplishments to his credit) would be an acceptable vice presidential pick. On the first ballot, Wallace beat Truman, but lacked sufficient votes needed to secure the nomination. Then the party's conservative influence-peddlers went to work making deals with leaders from different states to gain votes for Truman. They maneuvered successfully and handed Truman the

nomination.

Wallace was deeply hurt by FDR's failure to back him. After the election, FDR appointed Wallace to be secretary of commerce, but he stripped Wallace of control of the RFC, which he left in Jones' conservative hands. Wallace had a prestigious title, but he was no longer an influential insider. After FDR died in April 1945, Wallace continued to speak out in public, often in terms critical of Truman. Within a year, Truman had purged most of FDR's key appointees. In September 1946, he fired Wallace, too.

On the major issues facing postwar America - the cold war and the arms race (particularly the atomic bomb), strengthening New Deal social policies and boosting organized labor, and addressing segregation and racism - Wallace believed that Truman was too cautious and conservative. These were themes Wallace would pick up on when he campaigned for president against Truman on the Progressive Party ticket. He attacked Truman's support for loyalty oaths to root out communists and radicals from government jobs, unions, and teaching positions in schools and universities. He called for national health insurance, an expanded public works program, and reparations for Japanese Americans who had been interned during the war. He said it was time to elevate women to "first-class citizenship." And when Wallace campaigned in the South, he refused to speak to segregated audiences.

On foreign policy, Wallace opposed the so-called Truman Doctrine, which aimed to contain communism through military intervention if necessary. He refused to support the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe, considering it an

instrument of the cold war. He preferred a multilateral aid program that would be administered through the United Nations.

Some early polls showed that Wallace had the support of more than 20 percent of the voters. Democratic Party officials, as well as some left-leaning union leaders, feared that even if Wallace could not win the election, he might attract enough Democratic voters that the White House would fall into the hands of the Republicans. Although his campaign initially attracted support from a wide political spectrum of liberals and radicals - including high-profile figures like scientist Albert Einstein and singer and actor Paul Robeson - much of that support soon withered as Wallace became closely identified with communists.

There *were* communists in key positions within the Wallace campaign, particularly among the left-wing unions that supported him after most other unions had abandoned his crusade. In some ways, Wallace was naive about the Soviet Union. He visited the port city of Magadan in Siberia in 1944 and described it as "combination TVA and Hudson's Bay Company." In reality, it was a slave-labor camp filled with political prisoners. Only later did he acknowledge that he had been conned by his Soviet guides.

Wallace believed in what would decades later be called "détente" - finding ways to cooperate with the Soviet Union rather than getting trapped in a spiraling arms race. Even as cold war tensions were growing, Wallace simply did not subscribe to the anticommunist hysteria that emerged after the war. "I say those who fear communism lack faith in democracy," he said.

In the 1948 contest, Truman beat New York Gov. Thomas Dewey, the Republican candidate, in a historic upset. Wallace received only 2.38 percent of the national vote. He even trailed third-place Strom Thurmond, the Democratic governor of South Carolina, who was running on the segregationist Dixiecrat Party ticket.

After this humiliating defeat, Wallace bought a farm in New York State, where he enjoyed working with plants and keeping chickens and made only occasional forays into public life. He was soon forgotten or reviled as a misguided radical. It is easy to see, with 20-20 hindsight, that running as the Progressive Party's presidential candidate transformed Wallace into a marginal figure. But an honest examination of his 1948 platform reveals that most of the ideas for which he was condemned as a radical are now viewed as common sense.

For further reading

Adam Cohen. *Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days That Created Modern America*. New York: Penguin Press, 2009.

John C. Culver and John Hyde. *American Dreamer: A Life of Henry A. Wallace*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2000.

Richard J. Walton, *Henry Wallace, Harry Truman and the Cold War*, New York: Viking, 1976.

Copyright, Truthout. May not be reprinted without permission of the author.



[PETER DREIER](#)

Peter Dreier teaches politics and chairs the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His most recent book is [*The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame*](#) (Nation Books, 2012).

Related Stories

25 Best Progressive Victories in 2012

By Peter Dreier, [Truthout](#) | Op-Ed

Show Comments
