



American Dreamer: A Life of Henry A. Wallace

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The great politician, agriculturalist, economist, author, and businessman—loved and reviled, and finally now revealed. The first full biography of Henry A. Wallace, a visionary intellectual and one of this century's most important and controversial figures. Henry Agard Wallace was a geneticist of international renown, a prolific author, a groundbreaking economist, and a businessman whose company paved the way for a worldwide agricultural revolution. He also held two cabinet posts, served four tumultuous years as America's wartime vice president under FDR, and waged a quixotic campaign for president in 1948. Wallace was a figure of Sphinx-like paradox: a shy man, uncomfortable in the world of politics, who only narrowly missed becoming president of the United States; the scion of prominent Midwestern Republicans and the philosophical voice of New Deal liberalism; loved by millions as the Prophet of the Common Man, and reviled by millions more as a dangerous, misguided radical. John C. Culver and John Hyde have combed through thousands of document pages and family papers, from Wallace's letters and diaries to previously unavailable files sealed within the archives of the Soviet Union. Here is the remarkable story of an authentic American dreamer. A *Washington Post* Best Book of the Year. 32 pages of b/w photographs. "A careful, readable, sympathetic but commendably dispassionate biography."—Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Los Angeles Times Book Review* "In this masterly work, Culver and Hyde have captured one of the more fascinating figures in American history."—Doris Kearns Goodwin, author of *No Ordinary Time* "Wonderfully researched and very well written...an indispensable document on both the man and the time."—John Kenneth Galbraith "A fascinating, thoughtful, incisive, and well-researched life of the mysterious and complicated figure who might have become president..."—Michael Beschloss, author of *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* "This is a great book about a great man. I can't recall when—if ever—I've read a better biography."—George McGovern

"[A] lucid and sympathetic portrait of a fascinating character. Wallace's life reminds us of a time when ideas really mattered."—Evan Thomas, author of *The Very Best Men: The Early Years of the CIA*

"Everyone interested in twentieth-century American history will want to read this book."—Robert Dallek, author of *Flawed Giant* "[T]he most balanced, complete, and readable account..."—Walter LaFeber, author of *Inevitable Revolutions* "At long last a lucid, balanced and judicious narrative of Henry Wallace...a first-rate biography."—Douglas Brinkley, author of *The Unfinished Presidency*

"A fine contribution to twentieth-century American history."—James MacGregor Burns, author of *Dead Center: Clinton-Gore Leadership and the Perils of Moderation* "[E]minently readable...a captivating chronicle of American politics from the Depression through the 1960s."—Senator Edward M. Kennedy "A formidable achievement....[an] engrossing account."—Kai Bird, author of *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy William Bundy, Brothers in Arms* "Many perceptions of Henry Wallace, not always favorable, will forever be changed."—Dale Bumpers, former US Senator, Arkansas

American Dreamer: A Life of Henry A. Wallace Details

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From Reader Review American Dreamer: A Life of Henry A. Wallace for online ebook

Louis says

I loved this book and have posted this to Face Book.

This man is one of the most important men of recent past you may not have ever heard.

Henry A Wallace former VP of the USA. One of the most important Liberals you have most likely never heard.

His definition of a Liberal in 1953 the year I was born is quite informative.

"To me a liberal is one who believes in using in a non-violent, tolerant and democratic way the forces of education, publicity, politics, economics, business, law and religion to direct the ever-changing and increasing power of science into channels which will bring peace and the maximum of well-being both spiritual and economic to the greatest number of human beings. A liberal knows that the only certainty in this life is change but believes that the change can be directed toward a constructive end."

—Henry A. Wallace, "Liberalism Re-appraised," May 1, 1953

I have just finished American Dreamer 2002 by Culver and Hyde. A very good book.

One of the things I have learned and now realize is that time and time again in our history. Conservative business forces bring this country to the brink of disaster time and time again. It is Progressive Capitalism or Social Capitalism that brings it back time and time again. Yet Liberalism is never allowed to really take hold because conservative forces with their great hold on money, information, infrastructure, and influence on government, especially the Senate.

It was conservative forces within the Democratic Party and with the acquiescence of a weakened and chronically ill FDR. That stole VP Wallace's chance at the Presidency. Our post WWII world would have been vastly different if Mr Wallace had been the President. The man believed in a world of living wages, unions, level economic opportunity, equal rights, integration, universal education, universal healthcare, peaceful world economic competition without colonization.

What a missed opportunity.

Time to bring these principles back and make them reality in this world.

First Post:

Just started this book and amazing stuff jumping out right off the bat. H A Wallace as a boy living at Ames IA at Iowa State was befriended by an older student who instilled in him a love of plants that was of a spiritual nature. That man was George Washington Carver. He was from a big time agricultural family who were agricultural publishers.

H A started the world's first cross-bred hybrid corn seed company.

A progressive in the making who abandoned the Republican party because of Herbert Hoover's through the Wilson, Harding, and Coolidge administrations fought Ag reform to give to relief to farmers after WW I. He was prescient on how tariffs and war reparations would lead to disaster.

He explored wide ranging religious and spiritual studies that came to a Theosophy view of the universe. Wonderful so far.

Had no idea that Hoover was a bug in the works for so long. Just doing nothing except for big business.

Rick Elinson says

Why had I never heard of Henry Wallace? He was amazing. Wallace was a scientific farmer from Iowa who was instrumental in greatly increasing agricultural yields through hybrid corn and breeding of chickens, corn, and other crops. As Secretary of Agriculture under FDR, Wallace introduced production controls for price stabilization, food stamps, and school lunch programs. As VP in FDR's third term, he spoke against fascism and the genetic idea of an aryan race. He constantly argued for finding ways to peace, and a key element was ensuring an adequate food supply. He was done in by a strange attraction to mysticism and by not being a Russian basher, when the Red Scare of the early 1950's was on. The book is a very comprehensive treatment of Wallace's life, derived from primary resources. While it is often nice to have direct quotes from Wallace, his supporters and opponents, the authors could have made their points more cogent by judicious trimming. Nonetheless, I am so happy to learn of this scientific, passionate, humble liberal genius.

Ted says

Henry Wallace changed the world. Had FDR died about six months earlier, it might have been a revolution.

Our 33rd Vice President was born into farming royalty. Earnest from his earliest days, young Wallace would spend his days experimenting with plants and crops. He played with few other children, but struck up a friendship with Iowa State graduate George Washington Carver. As the farming prodigy continued his development, Henry's grandfather started an agricultural publication called Wallace's Farmer. Its contents generally consisted of biblical wisdom, farming news, and political commentary.

Henry, in his early 20s, spent his days waking up before dawn to work on his farm and experiment with his plants, then toiling as a writer in the offices of Wallace's Farmer. His hard work paid off; Henry co-founded a hybrid seed company that later produced massive revenues and - more importantly to Henry - optimized corn production.

Meanwhile, Henry's father, who had achieved agricultural fame through the Wallace's Farmer publication, was appointed Secretary of Agriculture under Harding. Alas, intra-cabinet squabbling arose between Wallace and then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, resulting in a lifelong feud between the Wallaces and Hoover.

Once Hoover became President, Henry Wallace himself, now editor of the publication his grandfather originated, penned scathing editorials about Hoover's farm policy. He gained a name as a fervent advocate for government price controls in agriculture. With his mixture of political commentary and agricultural knowledge, Wallace was a natural fit for Secretary of Agriculture when FDR took the presidency.

Wallace's agricultural policies proved a resounding success, garnering him much national attention. In addition, his unusual habits made for good press: Wallace did unusual things for a politician, like experimenting with his diet, or throwing boomerangs in the park barefoot.

Unbeknownst to the public at that time, Wallace had also long been engaged in a spiritual oddysey. Raised in a sober, pious, Protestant household, Wallace had gradually developed some unorthodox views in his young

adulthood. One day, Wallace wanted to discuss William James at Sunday School. Told by church elders that this was not an appropriate topic of Sunday School discussion, Wallace quietly stopped attending. He later exchanged letters with a series of new age teachers, among them the Russian painter Nicholas Roerich. A set of these letters - which included bizarre code language in which Wallace addressed Roerich as "Dear Guru" - would likely have derailed Wallace's bid for the Vice Presidency in 1940 had they been made public. But the release of the letters was averted after the FDR campaign threatened to reveal the infidelities of their GOP opponent Wendell Willkie.

With the Guru letters remaining under wraps, Wallace became Vice President in 1940. He removed the urinal and liquor cabinet from the VP office that Cactus Jack Garner had occupied for the previous eight years. And initially, Wallace found great success in office; indeed, he was thought to be an unusually active and influential VP. Over time, however, Wallace proved a bit too independent in office. His earnest liberal attitude frightened some. His sober and serious attitude gained few friends. As the 1944 convention approached, alternative candidates were sought.

That is where our story climaxes. Had Wallace won renomination in 1944, he would have remained Vice President, and would have ascended to the highest position in the country upon FDR's death. And this is an alternate historian's dream: Would Wallace have used the atomic bombs? What would his postwar policy have looked like? How would this unconventional agronomist have handled one of the most momentous periods in history?

Of course, we cannot know, as another unlikely figure, Harry Truman, was nominated for the vice presidency instead. And boy, was it close. At the 1944 Chicago convention, a huge popular demonstration broke out in the hall, and had the vote been held at that time, most present feel that Wallace would have won renomination. Seeing their chances slipping away, Truman supporters managed to hastily adjourn the convention moments before a vote was to be called. By that time passions had cooled, and the excitement of the Wallace demonstration had melted away. Truman won the VP nomination the following day.

Despite this somewhat embarrassing ouster, Wallace continued on as Secretary of Commerce until now-President Truman unceremoniously hung him out to dry. Wallace had made some mildly controversial remarks in a public speech. Truman had actually reviewed and approved of them beforehand. After they were made, he reaffirmed his approval, but then tried to distance himself from them, and finally expressed his total disagreement with the comments, at which time he axed Wallace. The affair reflected very poorly on Truman's abilities. Wallace appeared to handle it with magnanimity. However, as he became estranged from the political establishment, he drifted further into impractical idealism.

In 1948, Wallace ran an embarrassing presidential campaign as candidate for the New Party aka the Progressive Party. Some aspects of his campaign rhetoric, in which he advocated for "One World," seem a bit nutty today. Whether this campaign hurt or helped Truman is difficult to say. Yes, most of the folks who voted for Wallace would have voted for Truman instead had Wallace not been on the ballot. However, Wallace's stridently liberal approach also made Truman look centrist by comparison. While Truman could thus disclaim support of the far left, he may have drawn some of the moderate away from Dewey, who did not have a similar far right candidate to soften his image.

The foregoing review just hits the highlights of Henry Wallace's life. For the full story, read this book, which turns the life of this unique political figure into great reading.

Christopher Saunders says

Robust, immensely sympathetic look at Henry Wallace, the one-time progressive icon who history has damned as a flake, a kook and, at worst, a Soviet apologist. Culver (a former Senator from Wallace's home state of Iowa) and Hyde examine Wallace on his own terms, a well-connected farm boy from a deeply religious, conservative Iowa background who made good, and used his intelligence and skill for the betterment of the country. Culver and Hyde's biography proves most convincing examining Culver's service for Franklin Roosevelt: his innovative farm reforms while Secretary of Agriculture proved one of the New Deal's biggest and most lasting successes, and he made a forceful Vice President during the Second World War. Unfortunately, his falling out with the Democratic establishment after being ousted from FDR's ticket in 1944 drove him farther left, becoming an opponent of Truman's Cold War policies and calling for rapprochement with the Soviets, then running on a Progressive Party ticket in 1948 largely backed by Communists and radical leftists. These and Wallace's other eccentricities (his weaknesses for Theosophy and Eastern Philosophy) don't paint him in the most flattering light; by that point, he became almost a caricature of the woolly-headed liberal so open-minded his brain falls out. The authors acknowledge these shortcomings while still allowing Wallace his due as a giant of 20th Century progressivism, an idealistic force for good unfairly remembered for his shortcomings.

Stephen Shank says

Incredible book about an unsung hero of American history. A fascinating account of a precocious farmer from Iowa who would go on to revolutionize agriculture and play a pivotal role in the Second World War. How different the world would be, had we heeded his warnings about the impending Cold War. That so-called civilized people do not follow leaders like Henry Wallace is much to our eternal detriment, and something I hope to see reversed in my lifetime.

Bob Wake says

[Reviewed in 2001]

An unjustly neglected figure in American political history, Henry A. Wallace (1888-1965) is usually remembered—if at all—in vague terms as a hapless footnote to the 1948 national election between President Harry S. Truman and Thomas E. Dewey. As the presidential candidate of the Progressive Party, Wallace was vilified as a third-party spoiler and a Communist dupe, charges that hung in the air for decades and contributed to his marginalized legacy. Two events during the 2000 election year conspired to restore Iowa native Henry Wallace to a degree of prominence. When Ralph Nader's Green Party candidacy briefly flickered to life with press coverage and polling momentum, statistically-minded journalists were quick to inform us that Nader had mounted the first significant left-wing third-party presidential bid since Wallace's 1948 campaign. (Nader would ironically come to be maligned in a manner sadly similar to the treatment afforded Wallace, and both men ended up capturing near-identical electoral percentages; 2.4 percent for Wallace; and 2.7 percent for Nader.) But the milestone that truly marked 2000 as the “Year of Henry Wallace” was the triumphant publication of John C. Culver and John Hyde's majestic biography, *American Dreamer: A Life of Henry A. Wallace*.

Ten years in the writing, *American Dreamer* recounts in vivid detail the full breadth of Wallace's

accomplishments, particularly his key role as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's crusading Secretary of Agriculture (1933-40) during the depths of the Depression. He later also served one term as Roosevelt's vice president, and briefly as secretary of commerce. The phrase "reinventing government" has become an empty slogan in recent times, but FDR's New Deal was a breathtaking experiment in social democratic reform. Although it's generally accepted today that the New Deal's achievements were modest (the Second World War, not the New Deal, was the spark that rekindled the economy), the first two years of FDR's initial term in office were unprecedented in the scope of legislative remedies sought and enacted.

Henry Wallace's activist leadership of the Department of Agriculture, according to authors Culver and Hyde, "broke new ground on every front—economic, social, scientific—and permanently changed the relationship between government and agriculture..." Wallace brought soil conservation and erosion control to the forefront, as well as initiating crop insurance programs, land-use planning, and credit assistance to sharecroppers. His concept of the "ever-normal granary" was instrumental in building the nation's stockpile of grain reserves. *American Dreamer* is rich with fascinating facts:

Under Wallace the department's research center... became the largest and most varied scientific agricultural station in the world... The department's scientists combated plant and animal diseases and pests, from grasshoppers and chinch bugs to brucellosis and Dutch elm disease... Over fifty varieties of wheat were developed at the department during the 1930s. Thatcher wheat, which didn't exist when Wallace came into office, was growing on 14.5 million acres in the United States and Canada when he left.

An endlessly curious part-time scientist himself, Wallace was one of the inventors of hybrid seed corn. In 1926 he founded the Hi-Bred Corn Company, which later became Pioneer Hi-Bred and made Wallace's wife and heirs enormously wealthy after his death (the company was purchased by Du Pont in the 1990s for nearly ten billion dollars).

American Dreamer wouldn't qualify as a state-of-the-art political biography without a scandal or character flaw to exploit, and the authors have happily complied. Wallace's "dark side," however, was endearingly kooky. A lifelong fascination with mysticism and the occult appears to have made him an easy mark for charlatans, among them a faux-Indian medicine man and opera composer named Charles Roos, who was given to addressing Wallace as "Poo-Yaw" and "Chief Cornplanter." Wallace considered Roos a soul-mate. In the 1930s the two men purchased a tract of land together near Taylor Falls, Minnesota intended for spiritual retreats where they could, in Wallace's words, "find the religious key note of the new age."

More politically damaging was his friendship and correspondence with an expatriate Russian artist and "guru"—complete with bald head and Fu Manchu mustache—named Nicholas Roerich. Wallace eventually gave Roerich a Department of Agriculture expense account and sent him on a \$75,000 expedition to Central Asia in search of drought resistant grasses. The raucous story of Roerich's fleecing of Wallace and the U.S. Government is straight out of a Preston Sturges comedy and is one of the many highlights of *American Dreamer*. Regrettably for Wallace, a cache of the nutty letters he penned to Roerich was made public and unquestionably tarnished his reputation. Critic Dwight Macdonald famously dismissed Wallace as a "corn-fed mystic" during the 1948 presidential campaign.

Wallace's Progressive Party run for the presidency was plagued by mishaps and blunders (not to mention the familiar criticism that Progressives were destroying the Democratic Party and helping to elect a reactionary Republican). But there were heroics, too. On his campaign tour of the American South, Wallace became the

first presidential candidate to refuse speaking engagements before segregated crowds; nor would he stay in segregated hotels or eat in segregated restaurants. Threats of violence forced some of his speeches to be canceled. One of Wallace's supporters was stabbed. Only once did his public composure give way to anger: after being pelted yet again with eggs during a heated demonstration in Burlington, North Carolina, Wallace grabbed a bystander and shouted at him, "Are you an American? Am I in America?" Thanks to this impressive and indispensable biography, Henry Wallace's remarkable life is at last securely woven into the fabric of our history.

Matthew says

Henry Wallace was an incredible person. He introduced hybrid corn to the American farmer and founded Pioneer Hi-Bred. He passionately worked in agronomy, developing new genetic lines of plants and chickens. At one point, one out of every three eggs eaten was from a chicken descended from one of Henry Wallace's. He is also credited with being the father of the green revolution.

On top of all that, he was Secretary of Agriculture, Vice President, and even Commerce Secretary. He was an avid New Dealer and was in line to be the successor to FDR but was ousted by powerful corporate Democrats and party insiders that saw him as a dreamer and a threat.

The world we live in today would be very different and better if Henry Wallace had become President.

Marvin says

One of the most enjoyable and satisfying ways to read history is through biographies. In biographies we get to know a person intimately: we read their mail, learn their likes and dislikes, discover their strengths and weaknesses, share their ideas, revel in their accomplishments, and empathize with their failures. Biographies are one historical genre where straightforward storytelling is still the norm. And stories that biographies tell, unlike many historical tales, have a clearly defined beginnings and endings. Furthermore, the best biographies reveal as much about the subject's "times" as they do about his or her life.

All of these strengths characterize the best biography of an Iowan to come out in recent years, John C. Culver and John Hyde's *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace*. It helps that Culver and Hyde chose as their subject one of the most fascinating and significant figures in Iowa history. And unlike many "famous Iowans," Wallace's ties to Iowa were deep and lasting, so his biography tells readers a lot about Iowa history as well as the history of the nation.

The authors are thorough in dealing with the various aspects of Wallace's remarkably wide-ranging career. They account for his years as a farm editor, when he and his family had an immense impact on Iowa farmers. They also make a fascinating story out of his role in the development and marketing of hybrid seed corn, which transformed Iowa agriculture in the twentieth century. In both roles, Wallace was, the authors argue, "the prophet and evangelist, the teacher and preacher of agricultural scientific advancement." The authors also uncover Wallace's vast intellectual curiosity, which led to religious experimentation that many Americans found bizarre. Other than that, however, there is little in this biography about his private, family life, the one significant gap in the authors' coverage.

Although the authors offer a comprehensive account of Wallace's life, it's clearly his political life that they find most interesting. There, the narrative really comes to life. This should not be surprising given the authors' backgrounds—Culver as a former U.S. representative and senator from Iowa; Hyde as a reporter in the Des Moines Register's Washington bureau. And there are great stories to tell here: Wallace's leading role—as Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of Commerce, and Vice-President—in the development of President Roosevelt's New Deal policies; his replacement on the ticket in 1944 by Harry Truman; his tragic run for the presidency in 1948 on the Progressive Party ticket.

Wallace, most readers will know before they begin this book, was no typical politician. Culver and Hyde confirm that perception. In their account Wallace was first and foremost a man of ideas, an "American dreamer." Wallace's opponents did not hesitate to use that characterization against him. For Culver and Hyde, however, it is a compliment. They insist that he was a dreamer in the best of a long tradition of American dreamers stretching back to Thomas Jefferson. They repeatedly defend Wallace against charges of political naiveté. Over and over they show instances when he was an effective bureaucratic infighter when necessary, but he was unwilling to obfuscate or be duplicitous. At times when he appeared naïve, such as during the 1944 Democratic Convention that denied him the vice-presidency, he knew the potential consequences of his actions and chose to pursue them anyway. The authors' repeated efforts to make this point give their biography an ironic twist: in a book dedicated to the proposition that their subject was a man of ideas, an American dreamer in the best sense of the word, one dedicated to bringing his dreams to life, their account of his political life devotes more time to bureaucratic infighting than to ideology.

Whatever his dream, whatever the battle he engages in to pursue that dream, Wallace always appears in this book as a heroic figure, at times nearly alone in his heroism, and all his enemies are backroom wheelers and dealers with impure motives. Some readers may wish for a more subtle treatment, but many others will finish this book convinced that this heroic Iowan whose remarkable life was unfairly tarnished at the end of his career deserves the resuscitation that John Culver and John Hyde's impressive biography performs so admirably.

Miles says

If you've ever sat around wondering about the dismal state of progressive politics in the U.S., the biography of Henry Agard Wallace provides an enlightening walk through 20th century American political history and the New Deal. It does much to explain the patterns of political life in which we seem locked.

It would be tempting to think of a book that tells the American story from the perspective of the Vice President during the third Roosevelt Administration as akin to "the story of the Presidency from the perspective of the White House dog." But it turns out that Henry Agard Wallace, midwestern scientist and Christian mystic, business man, Secretary of Agriculture, Vice President and Presidential candidate, was no joke. He was probably the most progressive, left-wing individual ever to occupy the Vice Presidency. In a certain sense he tells us what has been possible and where the dangers lie when a public figure pushes the boundaries of the possible.

I first noticed Wallace while reading the story of Roald Dahl (*The Irregulars: Roald Dahl and the British Spy Ring in Wartime Washington* by Jennet Conant), who was tasked with tracking for Churchill the "dangerous" Henry Wallace. "Why on earth were the British conservatives so concerned about the American Vice President?" I wondered. Well for one thing they probably had a sense of Roosevelt's health, and so

anything that Wallace said or thought had the potential to become reality, and indeed would have, had Roosevelt not dumped Wallace in 1944 in favor of Truman. And the things that Wallace was saying were highly anti-colonialist, and anti-imperialist and oriented toward reaching an understanding with the Soviet Union. We can well imagine Churchill's alarm.

After Roosevelt dumped Wallace from the '44 ticket in favor of Truman, Wallace went on to run as the Progressive candidate in 1948, and garnered very few votes, as his party was caught up in the beginning of Hoover inspired Red baiting and vicious smears. The Progressives were easy to smear because Wallace was extremely un-involved in the nitty gritty of party building, and as a result there were in fact communists and former fellow travellers involved in the party. Wallace himself was a self identified "progressive capitalist" (and wealthy from his hybrid corn seed company), but he and his party were smeared from every direction - from the South for his opposition to Jim Crow - from the Republicans for alleged communist influences - from the Truman Democrats for alleged willingness to appease Stalin and other disagreements, all related ultimately to the fact that they were attempting to occupy the space to the left of Truman. Truman's defeat of Dewey was close, and a surprise, and it was almost undone by the Progressives, but in the end the Progressives received only a few percent of the total vote, and Truman did win in 1948. With that, Wallace was done, and he retired to his farming and research.

This is a great biography to read to understand the agrarian origins of American progressive politics, and the divisions within the Roosevelt administration over the New Deal and foreign policy. Wallace was right in the center of it all, representing rural America in an era when progressive, populist reality had a distinctly rural tinge to it. It is somewhat ironic that Wallace's hybrid corn and later developments in farm productivity reduced the numbers of farmers needed on the land, and led to the industrialization of agriculture, which hollowed out the very source of Wallace's original progressivism - rural America. By 1948 it was Blacks and Jews who supported Wallace most strongly. What happened to his rural base, the base that he had served as Secretary of Agriculture in the 1930s, is unclear to me. But his aloof attitude toward building a progressive political operation, his preference to leave the dirty work of organizing and vetting to others, and the party's (admirable? foolish?) commitment to internal democracy and amateurism, all made it difficult for the Progressive Citizens of America to survive the vicious attacks that were leveled against the organization. Contemporary progressives have at least internalized the understanding that progressive politics requires much more than a famous champion - it requires organizational strength, maintained over time and across election cycles.

CJ Hebert says

Wallace seems like someone the US and the world desperately needs right now; a good, thoughtful, intellectually vigorous person who is dedicated to the common good. This book is a frustrating account of someone of those virtues coming tantalizingly close to leading our nation in the critical WWII and post-war period to being attacked, torn down and discredited by profit and power-seeking, anti-intellectual demagogues. It is encouraging to know that people like Henry Wallace have lived. Hopefully a new leader like him will emerge soon.

Andrew says

I'm glad I waited until the current moment to read this masterful biography, because Henry Wallace represents all that could be great about American politics - as Hubert Humphrey eulogized him he was a learned man, a passionate man, and a forward thinker, but most importantly he was simply a good person.

I delighted in parts of this biography; there were so many moments where Wallace just burst free from the text fully formed. This is due both to the skill of John Culver and John Hyde, but also to the boundless qualities of their subject. His combination of earthy wit comes alive especially when he's challenged - the story of his response to criticism over the Depression-era slaughter of pigs to control prices ("They contend that every little pig has the right to attain before slaughter the full pigginess of his pigness", p124) made me drop the book laughing. The thought of an American vice president wandering the country chatting about corn with whoever he met is so at odds with modern politics as to push at absurdity. Yet the seriousness of the man, and the ability to grapple with massive questions of science and society while balancing them with a sincere desire to better the individual, is stunning.

So too is his transformation from personable agrarian to powerhouse national figure. This book rescues Wallace from the historical sidelines and restores him to his place as one of the twentieth century's most indispensable figures. He reinvigorated American agriculture at its lowest moment, saw and acted upon the need for war planning while isolationism still reigned in the late 1930s, helped spur revolutions in agricultural production and plant genetics that saved millions of lives, and offered a visionary approach to postwar peace which - with just a slight readjustment to the stream of history - could have steered the oncoming train of the Cold War onto peaceful and cooperative tracks. Culver and Hyde detail all of this painstakingly, and in the tradition of the best biographies, Wallace is as much the author of their book as they are. Much like "The Seer," the bust of Wallace that the authors describe, Wallace's fire leaps from the page.

Wallace was by no means perfect. I love issues-based politics and abhor the politics of personality and dealing, but Wallace's naivete in these areas was sometimes maddening, and makes the reader wonder to what extent he could have avoided that Faustian bargain of power vs persuasion with just a bit more effort and forethought. In this, it's interesting to contrast him to the book's other main character, Franklin Roosevelt, who - much like in Greg Mitchell's magisterial "Campaign of the Century" emerges as a brilliant manipulator, though he largely manipulates toward good ends. Wallace has no manipulation in him, which I love him for, but which denied the country the full potential of his leadership.

There are also moments where the book doesn't live up to the rest of its monumental achievement. The portrait of Wallace as a third party insurgent doesn't bring him to life as much as earlier chapters (or the final one). The issue of race bubbles up rarely, and one gets the feeling that Wallace's commitment to human liberation falters at times on this issue (something he is criticized for by the left during his life). The authors also seem to struggle to rein in the spiritual detours of Wallace's life, which so often got him into trouble. But these are small points in the face of a really incredible work about a really incredible man.

Henry Wallace was a visionary; we weren't quite good enough to deserve him. This book, at least, gave me joy at a dark political moment. I wonder what visionaries we might find working in our fields or behind our counters or in our cubicles today who might match him. I fear we can't find them, because there are none like him.

Randall Wallace says

“Even a quarter century after Wallace’s death, descendants of his chickens are laying one of every three eggs eaten by Americans. Worldwide the figure approached 50%.” Henry A. Wallace was a scientist who saw that corn need constant care to survive, and that without human intervention “corn as we know it would survive only a few years.” HAW changed corn growing because previously corn was grown for looks and Henry thought “What’s looks to a hog?” and began growing for yield. His development of the double cross enabled hybridization commercially feasible. By 1924, Henry’s corn had taken the Gold medal. His new Hybrid seed use in Iowa “grew from less than 1% in 1933 to 99.5 percent ten years later.” HAW had a pantheistic streak that came two sources, George Washington Carver (who had taught him) and Theosophy. Henry wrote in his book, ‘Whose Constitution?’: “During the past 150 years, we white men have destroyed more soil, timber and wildlife than the Indians, left to themselves, would have destroyed in many thousands of years.” As Secretary of Agriculture, HAW had many “high spirited” luncheons with Clarence Darrow, Robert Frost and Sherwood Anderson. HAW said, “when things are bad, I like to do something about it.” HAW sees Japan is bent occupying rubber producing areas and sends Standard Oil’s secret synthetic rubber project info to FDR. Wallace does a deal with JFK’s dad Joseph trading cotton for natural rubber with England; the deal gives us “almost all of the U.S. rubber stockpiles at the end of 1939.” Under Wallace’s directive, the U.S. produced 800,000 tons of synthetic rubber in 1940. 15% of Costa Rica turns out to meet Henry Wallace when he visits there. HAW puts wheels in motion to increase Mexico’s food output dramatically, Norman Borlaug credits Wallace as the inspiration for the Green Revolution (HAW was not part of the GR’s large chemical input). Wallace was privy to Atomic Bomb info from 1941 on. Groves briefed Wallace personally on one occasion. This was years before Truman had a clue about the bomb.

At HAW’s apex of power, James Reston of the New York Times wrote, “Henry Wallace is now the administration’s head man on Capitol Hill, its defense chief, economic boss, and No.1 post-war planner. He is not only Vice-President, but ‘Assistant President.’” HAW says, “We cannot fight to crush Nazi brutality abroad and condone race riots at home.” One of the reasons, HAW was not kept as VP in ‘44, was because he had written strongly against British colonialism and Churchill, Lord Halifax and the head of the British secret service turned on Wallace culminating in a rebuke to Cordell Hull demanding Wallace be fired. This is the book that tells you Claude Pepper was just one step from the podium when it was shut down, keeping Wallace at the ‘44 convention from becoming VP again, and then soon President. Roosevelt once said that in order to win his first election, he had to adopt the South’s candidate, John Nance Gardner. (translation: If you want the votes of racists, you’ve got to give them something). When FDR died, Hubert Humphrey wrote HAW, “How I wish you were at the helm.” Reason for Hiroshima? Says HAW, Jimmy Byrnes was “deeply concerned that all this vast amount of money that had been invested in the Manhattan Project (2 billion dollars) would be wasted.” According to this book, few believed Wallace in ‘48 to be a communist, but millions believed he was a communist dupe. However, HAW said, “the Communist party does not believe in God. I believe in God. The Communist Party does not believe in progressive capitalism. I believe in progressive capitalism.” Truman for political reasons adopts much of Wallace’s domestic program leaving voters only their disagreement on foreign policy. For example, in ‘48, the Dixiecrats finally leave the Democrats and form their own party when HAW pressure makes Truman’s platform oppose the poll tax. To HAW, NATO was a ‘most flagrant’ violation of the UN Charter. Wallace’s caving on the Korean War splits the progressive party in two. “Henry A. Wallace once observed that he could barely remember a time during his youth when his father was not working.” Yet Henry always himself worked hard and slept but four to five hours a night.

This is a good book, however, not the best on HAW. The best book on Wallace to read is the much older 1976 one by Richard J. Walton. This Culver/Hyde book has a great cover, looks more expensive, and reads

like an interesting well-paced People Magazine article about Henry. But, if you read it, you would never learn Henry was one of America's greatest radicals. If that was the Hyde/Culver thesis, Doris Kearns Goodwin would certainly not have written the front blurb. Walton's is a much more hardcore book – it pointed out, like Oliver Stone's 'Untold History of the United States', and like Studs Terkel's view of Wallace, that Wallace's foreign policy stand against his own party in '48 was such a principled courageous stand that Studs said that Henry was one of the three greatest leaders (along with FDR and MLK) of the 20th century. To understand the true importance of Henry A. Wallace you must read not only the Walton book, and the Oliver Stone book and great TV series, but also Mark L. Kleinman's amazing book, 'A World of Hope, A World of Fear: Henry A Wallace, Reinhold Niebuhr and American Liberalism'. However, if simply you want to relax with Doris Kearns Goodwin and enjoy only the non-political implications of Henry A. Wallace, then relax – Culver/Hyde is your book.

Tara says

Forgotten history. Important/extraordinary person. Amazingly thorough account- "It was Wallace's fate to be often regarded as a dreamer when actually he was only seeing in his pragmatic realistic way some of the shapes of things to come, and more often than not he was right."

Paul Brannan says

It's fascinating to wonder what the world might have been like had Henry Wallace become president of the United States.

No Cold War perhaps, no arms race with the Russians, no domino theories to defend against global Communism, no Korean War nor Bay of Pigs debacles, no need to engage in the disastrous Vietnam War. No segregation. There'd certainly be no need for a wall between the US and Mexico.

Wallace was undone in a shameful night of chicanery at the 1944 Democratic Convention which opened the door for Harry Truman to get the VP ticket and, ultimately, the keys to the White House.

Until then, Wallace's progressive ideas had saved US agriculture from the boom-and-bust of unfettered market forces and his wider philosophies helped shape FDR's New Deal.

Fully two years before WW2 was won, while serving as Roosevelt's vice-president, Wallace was thinking deeply about the peace.

How would the US switch from a military economy while maintaining full employment, how would it raise standards of education and improve health care, what kind of world would be built in the aftermath and what role should America play?

In 1941, Time magazine publisher Henry Luce envisioned a post-war "American century" in which the US could "exert...the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit."

Wallace responded with his “century of the common man” speech in which colonialism would end and there would be neither military nor economic imperialism.

By 1944 he was prophetically warning against the dangers of American Fascism, writing in the New York Times:

“The American fascists are most easily recognized by their deliberate perversion of truth and fact. Their newspapers and propaganda carefully cultivate every fissure of disunity... They claim to be super-patriots, but they would destroy every liberty guaranteed by the Constitution. They demand free enterprise, but are the spokesmen for monopoly and vested interest. Their final objective toward which all their deceit is directed is to capture political power so that, using the power of the state and the power of the market simultaneously, they may keep the common man in eternal subjection.”

Widening an existing rift in the Democratic Party, the pejoratively dubbed ‘Dreamer’ was becoming a problem and the conservative, pro-business wing wanted him out.

They persuaded FDR, unwell and still consumed by the war, to ignore progressive advisers and to allow Truman to go up against Wallace as the VP candidate. And even though Wallace won the first ballot he didn’t have enough votes to secure the nomination.

From there, the party machinery went to work, deals were done, Wallace was crushed and when FDR died in April, 1945, the little-known, little-regarded senator from Missouri took the helm.

Patrick says

Continuing my series of biographies of unsung liberal legends (beginning with Hubert Humphrey), we have Henry Wallace. I knew he had been Secretary of Agriculture and FDR’s second Vice President but did not know of his role in promoting hybrid crops and starting the Green Revolution or his crucial role in alerting FDR to the possibility of an atomic bomb or his role in managing essentially the entire US war economy. Wallace was a contradiction-a rational man of science who loved statistics and plant biology but also a self-professed mystic whose lifelong search for spiritual meaning lead him to be conned by various charlatans, including fake Indian “medicine men” and Russia emigre prophets producing some truly cringeworthy correspondence that later embarrassed him politically. Like most liberals of the 1940’s (Roosevelt included) he failed to appreciate Stalin for the monster he was. What the book doesn’t tell me though is how a man lauded for his cool demeanor and common sense became a wild-eyed progressive firebrand by the late 1940’s, culminating in his Quixotic third party run for president in 1948. There’s no explanation, no real buildup; it’s like he just woke up one day around the time he was dumped from the 1944 Democratic ticket a completely different person than he was before. I’d give the book 4 stars if it could tell me what happened.
