



# HENRY A. WALLACE INSTITUTE

## FOR ALTERNATIVE AGRICULTURE

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## Second Thoughts on the Agricultural Revolution:

### Henry A. Wallace in His Last Years

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Henry A. Wallace promoted an American revolution. Not a violent political event, it was, instead, bloodless, technological, and demographic. It swept across the American countryside in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, and transformed the ways of farming, the farm population, and the agricultural system. It sharply reduced the number of people on farms, increased the productivity of those who remained, and made them more dependent on the state and the corporation, the twin promoters of the revolution. Wallace contributed chiefly as founder in 1926 of what became a major corporation (Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc.) and the New Deal Secretary of Agriculture from 1933 to 1940.

In the last years of his life, Henry had second thoughts about the revolution to which he had contributed so much. He had not come to doubt most features, including the institutional and the technological, but he did question the demographic component, concluding it had gone too far. He was not, however, a person whose thinking stopped with the definition of problems. He moved on to propose a solution and took advantage of access to the White House to advance his proposal. Unfortunately, he no longer had the strength required to make that proposal a part of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

Henry had begun his intellectual life as a Jeffersonian and a participant in the Country Life Movement. Thomas Jefferson, Wallace recalled later in his life, had "hoped we would always remain a farm people" and, "as I did in my youth," "utterly distrust the life of people in town...." His point of view, and that of his father and grandfather, Henry C. and "Uncle Henry" Wallace, had been expressed, he recalled, by Liberty Hyde Bailey, the Dean of Agriculture at Cornell University and chair of President Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission. According to the Commission's report in 1909:

*Upon the development of this distinctively rural civilization rests ultimately our ability, by methods of farming requiring the highest intelligence, to feed and clothe the hungry nations; to supply the city and metropolis with fresh blood, clean bodies, and clear brains that can endure the strains of modern urban life; and to preserve a race of men in the open country that, in the future as in the past, will be the stay and strength of the nation in time of war, and its guiding and controlling spirit in time of peace.*

This way of thinking placed heavy responsibilities on farm people; they must do much more than farm, although they had to do that very well. It was a conception that implied that the nation must have a large farm population. In 1909, 35 percent of the American people lived on farms, a large minority, but considerably less than the more than 42 percent that had been there when young Henry was born, two decades earlier.

Soon after the Country Life Commission issued its report, H.A., not yet 21, spent the summer of 1909 in the West, a place of large meaning for Jeffersonians. Already a frequent contributor to *Wallaces' Farmer*, the farm journal the family published, he wrote a large number of articles about the trip, seeking to give the readers of the Iowa-based

journal some idea of western agricultural conditions, particularly in the irrigated districts, but also in the dry-farming experiments. He preferred irrigated to dry farming, public to private irrigation projects, and found much to admire in the work of the new Reclamation Service, developed during Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, especially the possibility that it would substantially increase the number of family farms. He predicted that on the irrigation projects would "undoubtedly rise ... an example of as high a type of farm civilization as the world has yet seen." He insisted that irrigation farming was the highest type of farming, requiring more brains and producing more results per acre. Highly intensive farming, it brought farmers closer together than more extensive farming did, encouraged cooperation, and offered opportunities for rich community life. His enthusiasm reflected his democratic agrarian belief that to prosper and succeed, the United States needed many family farmers.

In the 1920s, young Henry, now editor of *Wallaces' Farmer*, battled against people, most notably Herbert Hoover, who, as Wallace saw them, sought to make the United States almost totally urban and industrial. "The great industrial system is running away with us," he wrote. "Soon we shall have four or five people living in the city to every one person living on the land." Hoover and his kind would solve the farm problem of the moment, which appeared to be too much production, by driving most rural people out of agriculture and into cities, leaving in the rural areas only a small number of farmers: those who were highly efficient and could afford to sell at low prices, and those willing to live at a peasant standard of living.

In contrast with the people he regarded as enemies of the farmer (and the nation), Wallace favored a large farm population and was alarmed by the rate of migration from farm to city, as well as proposals to accelerate it. He did believe that some rural people should move out, hoped that only the least effective, least efficient farmers would do so, but recognized that many intelligent and educated young people were leaving the farms. He suggested in the mid-twenties that while the present mix of 2.5 urban people for each person on the farm might not be "dangerous," if the ratio increased to three to one, the United States would have "a civilization no longer firmly rooted in the soil" and would "almost certainly lose vigor centuries before it would if agriculture and commerce were developed on a more even basis." By the end of the 1920s, the percentage of Americans living on farms had dropped below 25.

A decade later, however, Wallace's experiences as Secretary of Agriculture had persuaded him that the American farm population was too large and that many farm people should move off the land. The experiences that drove him to this conclusion included contact with extreme rural poverty in the South, and observation of the expanding productive capacity and potential of American farmers who were operating good farms and could afford to take on the new technologies, such as tractors and hybrid corn. Although few job opportunities could be found in the cities at the time, they would become available if American industry moved into a new era of rapid expansion. This meant that some of the needed improvements in the lives of farm people, both those who could stay on the land and those who should leave it, waited upon industrial development.

By the time Henry left the Department of Agriculture in the summer of 1940, the revolution was getting off the ground. His contributions — a much enlarged USDA and a now profitable hybrid corn company — were at work, promoting large-scale changes. Two decades later, the new American agriculture system was well developed, and he admired it greatly, convinced that it was the best in the world. "Only in agriculture," he advised the farm editors in 1960, "is it definitely certain that we shall remain superior to the rest of the world for many years to come." "...[I]t is precisely in agriculture," he informed the readers of *The Christian Century* in 1962, "that we have again and again proved our superiority over the Communists."

The system, as Henry saw it, benefitted both the American nation and American consumers. For the latter, it meant low-cost food, "remarkably low compared to other countries or compared to pre-war." Beyond that, the new system enhanced the power of the United States, increasing its ability to serve good purposes. "...[O]ur agricultural surpluses and our ever-expanding agricultural technology, represent national strength, not weakness," he believed. "With food properly used we can help the crowded, hungry lands get into position to help themselves," he proposed. "To do this in a manner which makes friends out of sensitive, highly nationalistic countries cursed with high illiteracy and political corruption, is a supreme challenge...." "...[W]e must go further," he advised an overflow

crowd in the USDA in 1961, "in using our agricultural surplus and our technology as a positive force for the promotion of human welfare and peace."

Enthusiastic about the system, Henry admired the major participants in it, including a frequent target of critics, the larger farmers. "These are the men who utilize the best the USDA, the Experiment Stations, the fertilizer salesmen, the farm machinery salesmen have to offer," he wrote to the Secretary of Agriculture, Orville Freeman, in 1965. "In many ways they are the salt of the earth...."

Wallace's reference here, however, was not to the small group of farmers who presided over the giant corporate farms, but to "the top million" farmers, nearly all of whom operated farms owned and worked by families. Their farms were one-third of the American total. As editor of *Wallaces' Farmer* and Secretary of Agriculture, he had promoted the interests of substantial family farmers, and he continued to champion them, including those who participated in the revolution by enlarging their farms and purchasing and using the new technologies. He distinguished between farmers who depended almost entirely on family labor, admiring them, and the larger operators who hired most of their work force, worrying about them. "I fear we may be headed even in the Corn Belt for BIG Agriculture as well as Big Labor and Big Business and Big Government," he wrote to his long-time associate, Don Murphy. Aware that he had played a "part in bringing this to pass," Henry wondered if the revolution's tendency toward large-scale farming had "a limit."

The trend toward big agriculture might continue, Wallace feared, if modern family farmers did not obtain more benefits from the revolution. "What does it profit farmers to gain in efficiency if they lose their shirts?" he asked an audience at the University of Wisconsin. Since 1949, he maintained, farmers had increased their efficiency by 85 percent while city labor's efficiency had only risen only 37 percent, and farmers now received "about 70 cents an hour for their labor as compared with \$2.20 for labor in factories." The source of the problem was the distribution of power in the economic system: corporation and labor unions had too much; family farmers had too little. He saw the more efficient family farmers as "the last strongholds of free enterprise in the U.S.," and he hoped they would obtain a government program that would "enable them to get their fair share of the national income...."

In addition to his concern about the benefits substantial family farmers obtained from the revolution, Wallace worried, perhaps even more, about its impact on the size of the farm population. By the 1960s, the revolution had renewed his interest in holding people on farms. Early in the decade, the census taker reported that the American farm population, once nearly the whole of America, had fallen to 8.7 percent of the total population of the United States, down from 23.2 percent only two decades earlier. Even before the report came in, he had begun to define the sharp decline as a problem, doing so because he continued to believe in "the importance of country living and the necessity of acquaintance with the soil." In 1959, he issued a public plea to farmers to "[f]ight those who urge that more farmers be driven off the land," insisting that such advice undermined "our security and balance," and he informed an Iowa friend that he "shudder[ed] for my country when such a small percentage of our people have had childhood experience with growing things."

Henry remained a Jeffersonian in his conviction that farm life produced great psychological benefits, and for the remainder of his life, he continued to think along a path he had traveled much earlier. "We are all part of a big trend that does not portend well for the pioneer virtues which both you and I esteem," he wrote late in 1959 to Don Murphy, his successor at *Wallaces' Farmer*. "The big trend means America is simultaneously going efficient and going soft.... The last vestiges of the Jefferson ideals are being slaughtered." "Here in the USA, where there is no restriction on the size of land holding, the farms steadily get larger and the farm workers more and more efficient," he observed. The consequences were bad as well as good. "Fifteen or twenty years hence only 4 or 5 children out of 100 in the USA will have had close contact with the soil and the plants and animals which grown on it." "Bigness is not everything and neither is efficiency," he advised in 1963. "We need to think of the long time stability of our people and our nation." Some writers seemed to him to be "over-enthusiastic about some aspects of the very great technological revolution," leading him to endorse a suggestion for a book on its "social, ethical, ecological, and true political implications...." "There were 210,000 Iowa farmers when I was Sec[retary] of Ag[riculture] in 1933," he

recalled in 1965. "When the tractors came in in a big way, the small farmers more and more went out, sometimes a thousand a year and sometimes more than 5,000."

Although supportive of the family farmers who had adopted the new ways of farming, Henry worried that the demographic component of the revolution would seriously damage the national character. Two million farms, he noted, had "disappeared during the past 20 years as a result of vertical integration;" the same amount of land was being operated with "half the labor." If the millions who had "lost out" began to feel that they were "entitled to their feather bed," the result would be "the downfall of the U.S." How could this be so? Because "farm habits," even more than "the quality of the agriculture soil and the plants and animals living on that soil," had been "the strength of the U.S." "Farm boys," he maintained, "are trained to take on an overload caused by weather, disease and many other factors."

As his words revealed, the Jeffersonian idea of the benefits of farming for personality development remained a major part of Wallace's point of view. "The fundamental farm habit," he insisted, was "the willingness to stay by a job until it is done no matter what the weather or the breakdowns in machinery." His frequently repeated example was the farmer's attitude toward haying: "The hay must be got in before it rains." He continued to "shudder at the fact that only about 8 percent of our children have the kind of background where you have to get the hay in if it's going to rain — to meet a problem, no matter what." "How long," he asked, "can a civilization exist with less than 8 percent of the next generation acquainted with the virtues inculcated by farm living?"

Henry's agrarianism had an anti-urban component, focused partly on corporations, even more on labor. In increasing their efficiency, American corporations had, he pointed out, done "only half as good a job as the farmer and were beginning to fall behind the Germans and the Japanese in many export lines." Although the average American farmer was the most efficient in the world, Wallace doubted that this could be said for the urban worker. "The growing city labor habits will end by destroying this nation," he feared. "The most promising agricultural occupation may yet be growing geese to produce feather beds for city labor." His concern about work habits persuaded him to support the bracero program, which until 1965, brought in Mexican workers to work on farms in the United States. These workers had not only earned much more money than they could at home, but appeared to him to have "greater capacity for stoop labor than Americans on relief who would rather be on relief than do this kind of work." When the Secretary of Labor developed a program in 1965 to substitute American for Mexican workers, Wallace hoped that the program would "create a new race of young Americans" who were "willing to bend their backs and turn out as much work in a day as the braceros," but he feared that the Americans would "be paid much more and work much less...."

It was this idea about the importance of "farm habits" for the national character that persuaded Henry to press once again for a substantial farm population. As he saw things now, this national need for people on farms meant that small farmers should be held on the land. Otherwise, "the agricultural base of our population" would "be cut down to 4 percent — one farm family to 25 city and town families."

Henry did not expect as much from farm people as his grandfather and Dean Bailey had. History had not moved as they had anticipated, and thus the nation could not call upon farm people to play as many roles as the Country Life Commission had. "Scarcely anyone except perhaps Henry Adams," H.A. wrote in 1962, "had more than a glimmer of the extraordinary changes which after 1908 would so speedily reduce the importance of the farmer as the spiritual and genetic fountain of our national being." No one a century ago, he felt confident, "anticipated how greatly the efficiency of the average farmer would increase." And Henry A. expected that the "big farmers" would "constantly produce a higher and higher percentage of our food and fiber," for modern science had taken "hold in a big way." Yet, he continued to believe, as had the participants in the County Life Movement, that the nation needed more than food and fiber from people on farms.

The challenge was to find practical ways of maintaining and expanding the farm population. One obvious criterion, given Henry's high regard for modern farming, was that the solution must not damage that system. That, however,

did not worry him, for he regarded small farmers as incapable of adding so much to national output that they would drive down farm prices.

What could hold small farmers on the land when so many forces pushed and pulled at them to leave? Wallace believed in the existence of natural advantages that held people in rural places. "Many small farmers are," he maintained, "willing to accept an income per hour less than one-fourth that which they could earn in town simply because they want fresh air and a wholesome outdoor life for their children." But migration patterns suggested that these forces no longer had much strength. He believed that even if they lived a life of poverty on their farms, small farmers would be "better off" than they would be "drawing unemployment relief checks in town." Perhaps this is so, but farmers who contemplated migration did not, it appears, anticipate life on relief, and Wallace was not willing to rely on his calculation to accomplish his objective.

The solution that attracted Henry's attention was part-time farming. In 1959, he enjoyed a visit with a professor from the City College of New York and was "surprised and impressed" to learn that the academic lived in a hamlet some distance from the city and commuted to his job, and by 1961, he had learned that most small farmers and members of small farm families who lived within 30 miles of a town or city had jobs in them much of the year. This led him to conclude that "a rising percentage of our small farmers" could "get by because some member of the family is commuting to a job in town."

Would it be possible to make this type of farming a solution to the problem that so worried Henry? That is, could part-time farming develop so rapidly that it reversed the movement of the farm population? To make that happen, Henry recognized, it would be necessary to work against those "business outfits" that insisted that "the one solution to the farm population is fewer and fewer farmers until we get less than two million in the USA." They might be right "technologically," but they might not be able to supply "jobs for the displaced," and it would be better for "the long welfare and character of our people" if the nation moved "in the direction of widespread dispersal of a job." The "smaller, widely dispersed plants," he suggested, could "fit their work schedules into the seasonal schedule of the farm" or "at least one member of a family living on a ...rather inefficient farm" could work in town. Roads could be arranged with this in mind. "...[A]s much effort ought to be put on bringing the job within driving distance of the farmer as on preparing farm boys for jobs which may not exist in town if we cut the farms down to less than 2 million," he argued. More small farmers would, he maintained, be able to keep their farms if some member of the family could hold an industrial job while living on the farm.

Wallace was, as he saw himself, "drifting toward the Brandeis approach." His reference was to Louis Brandeis, who had tried without great success to persuade Woodrow Wilson and then Franklin Roosevelt to decentralize the economic system. After a riot erupted in Los Angeles in the summer of 1965, Henry saw his plan as a solution to the nation's urban problems. The cities, as he saw them, were "becoming cesspools of tension, corruption, crime and violence." The only cure was "systematic and carefully planned decentralization." If "90 percent of our children" continued to have "no experience doing chores," American civilization would continue to head "down the same path a Rome."

During the last years of his life, Wallace promised much needed psychological benefits from a program of industrial decentralization. The editors of the *Des Moines Register*, for one, endorsed his line of thinking in 1963, seeing benefits in it for Iowa. And Secretary Freeman that year wrote a "nice letter" to the former secretary about his "decentralizing of industry suggestion." "I know you are familiar with the survey...of the area around Austin [Minnesota] where the smaller farmers did quite well because of jobs with Hormel," he wrote to Freeman early in 1965. "...I see evidence of it in your planning."

Perhaps President Lyndon Johnson could make Henry's idea a part of his War of Poverty. The two men had known, admired, and liked one another since their days as New Dealers in Washington during the 1930s, and remained friends as the Texan moved from the Senate to the Vice Presidency and then the White House. When Johnson became president, Wallace assured him he would "handle" his "vast powers with confidence and moderation" and "extremists with wisdom," and that the nation needed a man with his "most unusual experience and capacities." The

new President responded that there were "few living Americans who know, as you know, the heavy tasks that face us and the almost intolerable obstacles that lie in front of every decision that must be made" and that he remembered well "the sturdiness of your character and your undiminished love for your country."

Although he was no longer a Democrat and had voted for Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon in the presidential elections of 1956 and 1960, Henry endorsed Johnson in 1964. He regarded his as "neither pro-Liberal nor pro-Conservative but pro-USA" and the Johnson-Humphrey ticket as offering the greatest hope for world peace, an improved domestic economy, and realistic help for farmers. Both Johnson and his running mate, Hubert Humphrey, thanked Wallace for his support.

Wallace did grow troubled about Vietnam in 1965, but he continued to admire the President. The "wrong turning" had been taken long before, he believed. It had been made when, as Henry put it, he was "getting the hell kicked out of me for suggesting that we were taking on more than we could chew" and "trying to run a large segment of the world." "...[T]he wrong turn was taken by Truman and Dulles many years ago and...we are now reaping the harvest," he maintained. He thought "a lot of Johnson and Humphrey" and saw them as "caught by historical, geographic and demographic forces," including rapid population growth, poor diets, weak economies, and unstable politics in the Third World. "Under the circumstances," he did not know "what else Johnson could do." It appeared to be "a pure power struggle" that could not "be settled until both sides" were "worn out."

Confidant that key figures in the administration had the "highest respect" for him, Wallace offered advice about several matters. Latin America, "where the uneven impact of the technological and population explosions hits hard; where hunger stalks the countryside and most of the people cannot read and write," was much on his mind, and he wrote to Johnson about it and received pleasing assurances that his "friendship and counsel" had "always been...a source of much pride and joy."

In mid-August, 1965, Johnson asked Wallace to see him in the White House and offered to send a plane to bring him there. Writing in advance of the trip, Henry assumed that the President wished to discuss agriculture and, after praising Secretary Freeman, he informed Johnson that he wished to discuss the relationship between Freeman's department and the new Department of Housing and Urban Development "and the need for them to work closely together on a program of decentralization of industry so that most of the smaller and more inefficient farmers may be in commuting distance of a job in town." He repeated his concern about the impact of "short hours and high wages" on urban life and on the "more inefficient farmers" and black farm laborers who moved to the cities. Once again, he deplored the fact that "less than 10 percent of the people knew what it was to get the hay in out of the rain or cultivate corn in the hot June sun, or fix up the fence so that the cows would not break out." After advising the President of his own work experiences as a boy and their benefits, he expressed his worries about "the future of the USA...if 90 percent of the children have not had some type of farm discipline" and his "fear" that "we are following the path of Ancient Rome." "You have a better opportunity than any man in the history of the USA," he exhorted the President. "Decentralization of Industry is what I am preaching. There are too many people in the Northeast and in California."

Wallace also proposed that he "come by the back entrance" for he had "a very game left leg and a serious impediment" in his voice that would make it "inadvisable" for him "to meet newspaper men." So healthy only a few months before that he expected to live to be 100, Henry had at first blamed the trouble in his leg on a strenuous climb up a pyramid in Guatemala in March of 1964, but his doctors had concluded that he was suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. By spring, 1965, he had trouble talking and his "bum leg" made his work — the crossbreeding of chickens, strawberries, gladioli, and corn — "very difficult," and he hated "not being able to weed" his plants, had to get others to do the work, which he supervised, and was "beginning to wonder what might happen" to his "strawberry crosses if anything should happen" to him. Afflicted with a disease of "unknown cause,...unknown cure," he went from one doctor to another, desperately trying many things. One doctor recommended that his energies would be "better spent working and writing about the things" he knew and did "very well," but Henry refused to give up and treat his disease as one of his many experiments. As to his ongoing agricultural work, he was determined to see what his "plant children" would look

like in 1966 and 1967, and wanted to play his "part in developing a superior brown-egg chicken, a strawberry with a unique flavor, and a find type of miniature gladiolus."

The disease may have raised concerns in Wallace's mind about one of the technologies involved in the revolution. His speculations led him to suggest in the summer of 1965 that insecticides might have caused his ALS. Earlier, he had rejected Rachel Carson's warning against them, published in her 1962 book, *Silent Spring*. "The birds have never been so abundant as around here this spring," he insisted in 1963. Accidents happened, he knew from attacking weeds with chemicals, but they did not mean he should "stop using an arsenical weed spray...." They only meant he should use poisons with care, as the chemical companies advised. He guessed that nearly a million lives had been saved by DDT for every life that had been lost and was confident that the chemical companies had done "an enormous amount of good" and had supplied farmers with very useful products. Did he now have second thoughts about the heavy use of chemicals in modern farming? He noted in his memoir of his bout with ALS, completed in November, 1965, that studies of its distribution paid attention to "special types of farming," but he did not go farther.

The President's invitation gave Wallace "a great lift of spirit," but his wife and his doctor forced him to decline, insisting that the steadily deteriorating condition of his leg and speech dictated that he do so. He could not disagree, but he regretted the decision and so did Johnson. "I need the advise and counsel of a wise and humane person like you," the President responded, "so I shall mask my disappointment by praying that you will be feeling well enough soon to...talk with me in the White House."

On October 25, in the midst of a long stay at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Henry wrote again, making what he regarded as his "last effort to influence contemporary affairs." HUD, he suggested, was dealing "with symptoms not causes." "As long as wages in big cities are 2 to 10 times as high as on the land and as long as automation on the farm cuts down the need for labor, there will be a drift to the slums of the city whether it be New York or Rio, Chicago or Lima," he warned. "...Small farmer can survive if within driving distance of an industry. Children who have had a background of small farm experience are of inestimable value to our future." And he concluded: "The great cities of the Ancient World destroyed themselves. I see no reason for believing our great megalopolis will not do likewise. This is the critical period." The only letter he wrote during this hospital stay, it caught Johnson's attention. "You are familiar with my background in rural areas and also with my continuing interest in the problems which you discussed in your letter," the President responded. "It is my hope that we can take steps to solve the imbalance in our population between the rural and the urban areas."

We can imagine a healthy Wallace persuading a President focused on the War on Poverty to give that program a rural dimension that it lacked, but that was not to be. By autumn, Henry could not speak or eat solid food, and on November 18, he died. During the same period, another war, this one in Vietnam, increasingly dominated Lyndon Johnson. Thus, Wallace's second thoughts on the agricultural revolution had no consequences. He could not halt a trend that by 1997 would leave fewer than 1 percent of Americans on farms.

Henry A. Wallace's idea of an alternative agriculture emphasized the expansion of part-time farming, not technological change. His alternative could serve his enthusiasm for the psychological benefits of living on farms without threatening the modern farming in which he also believed. The nation, he maintained, needed both the new ways of using the land and a large population living and working on it. The modernization of farming had sharply reduced the percentage of Americans who experienced farm life, but Henry proposed a way of turning the movement of the farm population around that would not overturn the modern farming system and its practices. He advocated the decentralization of American industry so that more people could live on farms and learn to get the hay in on time.

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A world-renowned historian with longstanding interest in the development and politics of American agriculture, Dr. Kirkendall has devoted a considerable part of his research, teaching, and writing to the life and philosophy of Henry A. Wallace and the Wallace family. His many published articles and essays include "Commentary on the Thought of Henry A. Wallace," "Corn Huskers and Master Farmers: Henry A. Wallace and the Merchandising of Iowa Agriculture," "Henry A. Wallace and the Mystique of the Farm Male," "In Wallace's Defense," "The Second Secretary Wallace," and "Reflections of a Revolutionary on a Revolution."

Dr. Kirkendall is the author of a book, soon to be published, *At the President's Side: Historical Perspectives on the Vice Presidency*. One of its chapters is entitled "In the Shadow of FDR: The Vice Presidency of Henry A. Wallace, 1941-1945."

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