

## Comment

CHET RANDOLPH

AS WITH MOST LEADERS, Henry A. Wallace's basic concepts were set by key experiences early in life. His early acquaintance with George Washington Carver encouraged his intellectual curiosity. Carver, the geneticist, taught Wallace, the boy, to be observant—to look for and notice the small differences in plants. This gave him insight into what was happening to corn plants in his garden far beyond what men thirty years his senior saw. While bigger boys were in sports, the association with Carver and others gave Wallace the courage to follow "intellectual" pursuits. Sunday morning hours spent walking and observing in his garden were important as he formulated innovative ideas. Not only did it lead to the development and widespread commercial use of hybrid corn, but that same individualistic innovative approach was evident in the 1930s in policy formation in Washington. His success in challenging the pretty ear winners of the late 1920s to a yield comparison with his smaller inbred/hybrid ears no doubt was helpful as he later challenged many of the big power brokers of the East, who largely ignored the farmer.

Wallace went to Washington, not for the prestige accorded to those who knew him personally, but because he had convictions about the needs of rural America and confidence to carry out such innovative concepts. President Roosevelt did not know agriculture. He liked the thoughtful outline and the breadth of vision of this Iowa editor. He saw Henry A. had a

clearly outlined plan and the perseverance to see it through. While Wallace was called an intellect by everyone who knew him, he was very practical according to those who worked with him. While others had understood hybrid vigor a decade earlier, no one saw how to put it to practical use. Wallace saw the potential to improve the lot of the farmer.

This intellectual from Iowa was often ten years or more ahead of his time. On several occasions he and the country profited by his foresight, but it later was to cause his fall from influence—he was too far ahead of his time at the wrong time.

He saw the attributes of hybrid corn as commercially important a decade before it was accepted.

He predicted the Depression ten years before it happened because he saw, accurately, that when the profit is taken out of agriculture, the nation later suffers the same fate.

He foresaw the disturbance in the city when many moved from rural areas to crowd the cities and saw the conflagrations of the sixties—but was ten years early in his timing.

He saw the value of farm exports to this country, but for decades it was the exports of industry and commerce that received the attention. Four decades later, the export potential for farm goods was recognized. He was right, but it took others a long time to be convinced.

Many things that have been said the last decade about the arms race, the power of the military-industrial complex, and relations with the Soviet Union were clearly enunciated by Wallace decades ago. He recognized the growing role the Soviet Union would play in world affairs. He encouraged trade and economic development, believing those who were fed were less apt to take up arms.

He foresaw the importance of China decades before others. Forty years ago he warned that Central America would continue as a time bomb unless the life of the common peasant was improved. He ordered development of tropical hybrids back at that time to improve yields in the area without regard to profits for the company. But in all of that, the timing was wrong. When he spoke out with courage as a presidential candidate, he was too far ahead of society and fell from influence. But he lived relaxed with his own conscience.

The normal conversations heard in the living room when

his father was secretary of agriculture made him conversant with the people and the workings in Washington. The work of the Country Life Commission (to which his grandfather contributed) was an important part of his thinking on social issues in the rural community. He was a strong believer in the League of Nations and very knowledgeable about the religions of the world.

In *Wallaces' Farmer* magazine he had to set down in writing his specific thoughts. Growing subscriptions and prestige indicated that he touched the basic issues of concern to farmers. His writing honed his thinking and gave him a chance to articulate his views. An expanding readership gave him support and encouragement. With that background, he went to Washington with strong convictions.

Few Iowans fully appreciate the contributions of this native son, who was truly an intellectual with a breadth of vision some believe has seldom been seen in Washington since. Yet the founding of a company was proof of more than just living room intellect. The programs implemented in Washington in the depths of the Depression were breath-taking in their day. They were the most revolutionary, most innovative programs undertaken. And they only have been adjusted over the decades. He did not get full credit for his achievement because he was not a part of the inner power circle and agriculture was not a prestige area. Industrial giants were king, and Wallace was shunted off to the side.

It was Wallace's earlier conviction that agriculture must limit its production, as industry does, that initiated government intervention right down to the county and individual level. His actions at that time were really revolutionary and may have prevented an uprising. Wallace understood that farmers felt so depressed and had so little to lose that a revolt or uprising was just under the surface. Rural women, who were not often active in politics in those days, were holding neighborhood meetings to discuss what might be done just to survive. Wallace, with Roosevelt's backing, saw the need for fast and dramatic action. Making loans available to farmers brought hope as well as needed cash because the cash economy had all but ceased in rural America. It dispelled the gloom and halted the downward spiral of prices and attitudes. In the thirties his intellect carried

him further than his speaking ability, but his time was right. America was ready for a change and farmers called for more than slogans and long range solutions.

Wallace was uncomfortable in high society. Social events were a chore and he went only when he felt obligated. He had little in common with the big city power brokers of the East. He was more comfortable with his shoes off in a corn test plot, than he was in a bow tie in a big banquet room in the city. Even though he served in Washington for more than a decade, including the second highest office in the land, he did not compromise his ideal for rural America nor try to become a big city banker or industrialist. He was a creator of ideas, not an administrator, according to those who worked with him. Political compromise was difficult for him because he saw what was coming down the road and the course that needed to be taken; nothing less was really acceptable.

He was a true champion of the farmer because rural America was a part of his very being. He was not one who had a lot of farmer friends as close companions or dinner guests, however, nor was he comfortable in a sale barn. While he loved to look at corn plots he was not a farmer's "farmer," as is often called for in a secretary of agriculture. He was an intellectual who knew rural America because of his upbringing, the state of his birth, his vocation, and his interest in plants and policy.

Even during his busiest days in the Roosevelt administration, as secretary of agriculture and vice-president, he still wrote personal letters inquiring about various inbred lines and how the crosses were doing, calling each by number. He kept a very personal contact with what was happening in production agriculture and his memory always amazed those who walked beside him. Once while he was at Algona to see a test plot the rain would not stop. So, the cabinet officer took off his shoes, rolled up his pant legs and for an hour followed his plant breeder through a driving rain to see the newest hybrid numbers and get them fixed in his mind. This was for his own interest; no reporters were around.

Wallace was not interested just in commodity prices, nor did he believe that getting bigger was progress in farming. His deep and abiding interest was in the well-being of rural

## THE ANNALS OF IOWA

America. He believed in, and fought for, the right of those in rural America to enjoy the same conveniences, education, and safety that city people take for granted. From his early years he saw food as vital and continued to carry that message wherever he spoke. He firmly believed government had a responsibility to give special attention to those who produced America's food. The Ever Normal Granary concept was called by some his second major achievement in addition to seeing the practical application of the scientific development of hybrid vigor.

While he achieved many firsts in farm legislation, he was not as successful as he wanted to be in working with the power centers to bring equality to rural America. That has not been achieved even today, as the federal budget shows. The census of 1920 first conveyed that America was no longer a nation of farmers. That gave impetus to those who equated progress with bigger cities and more industry, which moved farm lads into the city for cheap and dependable labor. Even the educational system was geared to that end. It was a momentum Henry Wallace could not stop, though he was tireless in his effort.

He had a vision of America as a nation and the undergirding role of farmers as food producers, and the people of rural America as a stabilizing force. His drive to limit production to improve prices was more than just a profit motive. It was larger than that. It was an intellectual view of what was good for the stability of a nation as he visualized it. Is it possible Iowa could produce another native son of his vision and his breadth of knowledge of the world, and America's place in it, supported by a stable productive agriculture?

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.