

Summary of Discussion

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ALTHOUGH the enumerators were varied, discussions featured a common denominator—the apparent inconsistencies with which Henry A. Wallace had to cope in his intellectual and political life. Discussion was frank and lively, but it was limited to the concluding portions of two of the four conference sessions. The delivery of scheduled papers and commentaries filled the time allotted at the remaining two sessions.

The interchange opened with the statement that Wallace created a paradox when he, a man of science trained in genetics and statistics, urged the protection and preservation of the “family farm.” The effect of the application of scientific principles to the practice of agriculture could only lead to fewer and larger operations, in spite of Wallace’s roseate hopes, the speaker claimed. Wallace himself, time after time, seemed all but overwhelmed by the collision of his personal philosophies with political and democratic realities, said a Wallace scholar. He added that, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Wallace struggled with such dilemmas and at certain crisis points—such as when conflicting elements within the AAA argued on one hand for enforced production controls and on the other for maintenance of the farm population—he was obliged to side with the forces of centralization.

Several persons commented on Wallace and his identification with farmers. One said Wallace detested farm work while

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he hailed the virtues of the rural environment. The rural environment—since the days of the pioneer migration—has been identified with freedom of thought and action; Wallace could be considered an innovative product of that egalitarian environment. But Wallace was an editor, not a farmer, said another observer; although Wallace long urged that horses be maintained on America's farms, he did not have to curry, harness, and feed the critters!

Wallace was interested in genetics, but depressed by agricultural mechanization and off-farm management. These were consistent observations in view of agriculture's shift, with increased mechanization and reliance on chemicals, from energy exporter to energy importer, an economist stated. A farm operator reported that Iowa State University economists have verified that efficiency tied to scale does level off—that there is no intrinsic economic advantage in the heavily capitalized operation. Tax policies, inheritance laws, and credit policies, however, offer significant advantages to larger operators with correspondingly greater assets.

Wallace sought a harmonious balance. He may have foreseen the kind of agriculture practiced today in Poland, said a conferee who recently returned from that country. In Poland, she saw that the latest biological findings are put to use, but in small, labor intensive, productive operations where animals are used for power and to help maintain soil fertility.

While Wallace favored the small in his social and political theories, his economic theory conflicted with them. According to a Wallace scholar, this was a conundrum that, "so far as I can see," Wallace never solved. It was a conflict, however, that existed within the New Deal itself as it attempted to preserve small farms and small industries while it centralized policy and power over them. No natural law requires a certain size of agricultural enterprise, a participant commented, and the exercise of political power has had much to do with determining farm size. Wallace perceived that political power could work for the benefit of society—including farm society.

Discussants seemed unable to decide whether Wallace was correct in his assumptions about mechanization and its effects on farm size and whether the eventual triumph of large-scale agriculture was due to technology or politics.

Wallace, for all his philosophical troubles, may have been better equipped than many to deal with conflicting values, a farm organization representative offered. He suggested that a trained scientist—and a mathematician in particular—is accustomed to seemingly irreducible concepts (such as negative numbers and infinity) and might be better equipped than others to accommodate to the absence of clear-cut answers. A mathematician might also readily perceive that the New Deal needed big farmers to make its farm programs work.

Wallace's creation of the first corporation whose sole purpose was the production and sale of hybrid seed corn also raised questions of consistency; but it was not an inconsistent move, according to persons familiar with the beginnings of Pioneer. Wallace had cooperative arrangements with small, individual corn breeders before the company was formed. The company was intended to serve as a model for a system that Wallace hoped would work with numerous individual breeders. Iowa State College also tried to limit availability of hybrid seed stock by making it available first only to small farmers.

Was soil exhaustion hastened by the widespread adoption of hybrid corn and might this have manifested, in yet another way, the dissonance and conflict within Henry A. Wallace? A representative of Pioneer argued that hybrid corn, on the contrary, may have saved soil. As demand for food increased, the need could be met with fewer acres in production, thanks to the higher yields of hybrid corn.

Wallace's curiosity in the field of genetics is best known, but he was curious about other phenomena and was a natural experimenter, said a historian. Wallace also had unusual opportunities and leisure to pursue his curiosity, an agronomist pointed out, while most individuals must concentrate their limited resources in a field of specialization if they are to be productive. Wallace was interested in genetic conservation as well as soil conservation, according to an historian, and devoted much editorial space to sounding the dangers inherent in limiting varieties. At the same time, he accepted the economic necessity of adding fertilizer to the land as one result of the widespread growth of a single crop.

The discussion underscored the characterization of Wallace as a dreamer, an inventor, a free thinker existing in the rough

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and tumble of party politics at the highest levels, where idealism must often give way to realism, compromise and accommodation. Wallace was unusual in the range and power of his intellect. Even so, the discussion suggested, any human being whose intellect and actions were as carefully scrutinized as Wallace's would likely exhibit apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in thought and deed.

Wallace is also being judged from a vantage point that covers a fifty-year interlude embracing dramatic change in social and political values, a writer and commentator emphasized. With all Wallace's vision, he could not foresee the post-World War II explosion in science and technology that would change dramatically the practice of agriculture in the United States.

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