

Comment

ELLIS W. HAWLEY

LET ME BEGIN by congratulating Mr. Soth on an interesting and thoughtful paper detailing both the nature of the farm crisis and Wallace's role in response to it. Wallace, I would agree, was a major figure in changing the whole relationship between farming and government and between rural and urban society. I would also agree that he was a complex mixture of ideologue and pragmatist, as many New Dealers were; and I find little to quarrel with in the paper's depiction of his background, editorial positions, and actions in implementing and administering the agricultural New Deal. On all of these matters, it seems to me essentially sound, accurate, trustworthy, and commendable.

What I have more difficulty with is the view, expressed or implied at several points in the paper, that Wallace's solutions represented triumphs for economic democracy, social justice, and agrarian ideals. In making such an assessment, it seems to me, the paper tends to accept too uncritically Wallace's own rhetoric and explanations, while tending to ignore those aspects of the historical record to which contemporary critics and recent reinterpreters of the New Deal have pointed. I would not push matters as far as Lowell Dyson does in his recent book, *Red Harvest* (1982), in which he depicts Wallace as a man "to whom efficiency and hybrid corn were more important than people." But there is something to be said, I think, for this rival point of view—for the view, in other words, that Henry

Wallace was really one of the great bureaucratizers and corporatizers of American agriculture, a man who helped to devise the machinery through which an agribusiness elite came to share power with Big Business and Big Labor, rather than a fighter for or implementer of democratic, egalitarian, or Jeffersonian ideals. And it is to a consideration of this possibility that I want to devote most of my remaining remarks.

One matter needing fuller appreciation is the extent to which the reigning model for agricultural change during this period was that of the modern corporation rather than the anti-corporate citizens' action group. The central vision was of a managerial and technical elite, a technostructure as it were, developing for agriculture a creative balance between technical progress and long-range stability. It was to do for agriculture what a similar elite was believed to have done for the progressive sectors of American industry, borrowing where necessary the government's power and resources. And like the "new business," the result was to be not a new formation of monopoly capital but the emergence of responsible self-government, a new system consciousness, and an enhanced capacity for social cooperation. In major respects such a solution was the very antithesis of that envisioned by populist champions of agrarian democracy. It would turn farmers into "organization men" rather than breaking corporate and financial power and thereby restoring their independence and revitalizing their community life. And not surprisingly, it met with strong criticism from those who saw the farm crisis as an opportunity for implementing populist ideals.

Wallace, to be sure, was not always an avowed opponent of these populist impulses. They did, after all, appeal to ideals that he had earlier embraced; and like Roosevelt, he tried to steer them into "constructive" channels or to use them in battles against business opponents, flirting at times with monetary reform schemes, antitrust programs, redistributive tax proposals, or designs for creating independent yeomen. But such flirtations tended to be temporary, unstable, and unproductive. And as Soth's paper brings out, in the key clashes between the heirs of populism and the builders of agribusiness mechanisms, Wallace chose to side with the latter and support the arrangements that they considered to be sound, practical, and

American. He chose domestic allotment over the kind of market intervention expressly designed to protect family farms or landless tenants. He shared power with county agents, farm bureaus, and committees of local notables, not with anti-establishment groups imbued with populist ideals. He was one of the purgers rather than a purgee in 1935. And while he sought parity in the relationship between agriculture and urban industry, he did relatively little that would reduce extremes of income among those engaged in agricultural pursuits.

In defense of such choices, Wallace sometimes argued that real alternatives had not existed. Farmers had to become organization men if they were to survive at all in a world of increasingly complex and powerful organizations. Established power had to be accommodated if anything at all was to be accomplished. And practical men had to do what they could within existing constraints. This is also the line of defense adopted in the paper, the line that allows it to depict Wallace both as a promoter of modern business organization for the agricultural sector and as a man driven by the ideals of social justice and democratic citizenship. But the validity of such a defense is not something that Wallace's populist-minded critics accepted at the time or something that all historians of the period would accept today. There was, so these dissenters would argue, an alternative route that the agricultural New Deal might have taken, one that would have used the state to foster agrarian democracy and liberate truly oppressed rural groups rather than lending its power to those intent upon making agriculture more business-like. And the rejection of this route they would see only partly as pragmatism operating within an arena constrained by the realities of political and social power. It was also due, they would insist, to the New Dealers' own set of "ideological blinders," their notions in particular of organizational, technological, and market imperatives, which kept them from seeing the potentialities and ultimate viability of such a route.

In the view of such dissenters, moreover, the struggle to shape the agricultural New Deal was not really between those with farming experience or backgrounds and those having neither of these and hence no basis for making sound judgments. The latter characterization might apply to the young

lawyers of Jerome Frank's AAA legal division. But it was hardly true of those involved in the Farm Holiday protests and movements, the southern tenant farmer rebellions, the anti-establishment activism of the Farmers Union, and various other expressions of agrarian radicalism or populist revival. Many of these people clearly had farming experiences and backgrounds, although of the sort that gave them a quite different outlook on what kind of agricultural New Deal was needed and what could be accomplished by working with and through established power structures.

Some interpreters, then, both contemporaries and subsequent students of the period's history, have had difficulty in seeing the new political economy of agriculture that Wallace helped to create as bringing clear gains for economic democracy, social justice, or agrarian ideals. Some, myself included, would also be less inclined than Mr. Soth's paper is to celebrate the results as one of our great national success stories.

It is true, to be sure, that using governmental power and resources to bring modern business methods to the agricultural sector has moved us toward the goal of parity for agriculturalists, both in terms of a price index and in terms of income, living standards, and bargaining power. Farming, as Mr. Soth says, was turned into a first-class occupation rather than a second-class one; and American agribusiness, generally speaking, emerged as one of our industrial "winners" noted for its productivity, efficiency, progressiveness, and capacity to penetrate foreign markets. Market intervention here, over the long haul, seems to have produced not the "lemon socialism" or "protected backwardness and inefficiency" that free-market theorists keep warning us against, but rather the kind of results that current advocates of an "industrial policy" or a "developmental state" envision as being the outcome of their efforts.

But, as Mr. Soth also notes, producing such a "winner" has reduced the nation's farm population from nearly a third of the total to less than 3 percent of it. It has required institutional machinery ever more difficult to reconcile with our professed commitments to democratic goals and processes. And the other side of providing first-class positions for our remaining farmers has been a massive displacement of former agriculturists to

second-class occupations in urban ghettos or rural backwaters. All this, too, has been part of the transformation of America's agricultural sector that Henry Wallace helped to set in motion in the 1920s and 1930s. When one takes this side of the change into account, the case for a national success story appears a good deal weaker.

What I would have welcomed in the paper, then, is somewhat less celebration of Wallace's achievements and somewhat more recognition of how they departed from agrarian ideals, how the choices producing them have been seen by less friendly interpreters, and how they involved social losses as well as benefits. Beyond this, I would also have welcomed some footnotes that would enable a reader to determine which sources were being drawn upon for particular points and statements. But on balance, as I said at the beginning, I found the paper interesting, thoughtful, well-informed, and helpful to anyone seeking to understand the role of Wallace and the inter-war farm crisis in the making of our current agricultural system. It stands, in my judgment anyway, as another solid contribution toward achieving the ends for which this conference was convened.

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