Intersections

Henry A. Wallace not only shared with George Washington Carver, Norman Borlaug, and Herbert Hoover a strong and effective commitment to increasing the world's food supply, but his life also intersected with theirs in fascinating ways.

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The first official U.S. representative at a Mexican presidential inauguration, Henry A. Wallace extended his 1940 visit to Mexico so he could see the country on his own terms. "I want to stop and get out and look at some corn if I feel like it," he said—and he did. He then pushed for the creation of an experiment station in Mexico. In 1943, Norman Borlaug came there to work.

Wallace was a child not yet in elementary school when he met George Washington Carver. Wallace's father, Henry C. Wallace, an instructor at Iowa State College in Ames, occasionally invited the gentle, brilliant, somewhat lonely young African American student to his home to share food and companionship. There Carver formed a friendship with Henry A.—Young Henry, as he was called—that lasted a lifetime. Together they walked the meadows around Ames, and Carver schooled the boy in identifying the parts and species of plants. Young Henry thrived on both the information and the attention. But Carver's greatest gift to the boy was spiritual. Carver saw the Infinite—that is to say, God—in all living things. "His outstanding characteristic was a strong feeling for the immanence of God," Wallace later remarked. Much the same could be said of Wallace himself.

Wallace's link to Norman Borlaug began taking shape in late 1940, after Wallace had been elected vice president of the United States but before he had taken office. President Franklin Roosevelt asked the vice president–elect to attend the Mexican presidential inauguration as his personal representative. After the ceremonies, Wallace and his wife, Ilo, remained in Mexico for another six weeks, driving around in their Plymouth inspecting the dreadful—and deteriorating—condition of Mexican agriculture. Upon his return, Wallace urged the Rockefeller Foundation to establish an experiment station in Mexico devoted to improving the condition and productivity of Mexican farmers. An increase of only two bushels of corn per acre would make an enormous difference in Mexico's national life, he said. As a result of Wallace's initiative, the experiment station was established, Norman Borlaug was hired, and a great Green Revolution began its spread around the world.

Wallace's relationship with Herbert Hoover was not so positive. The enmity between Hoover and the Wallaces—father and son—long predated Hoover's presidency. It began during World War I, when the Wallaces fought for a plan to increase hog production; Hoover, then the national food czar, rejected the plan. It continued during the Harding and Coolidge presidencies, when Hoover, then secretary of commerce, and Henry C. Wallace, the secretary of agriculture, bitterly disagreed over proposals to assist the economically distressed farm sector. And it culminated in the 1928 and 1932 presidential elections, when Hoover's presidential candidacies led Henry A. Wallace to bolt the Republican Party and endorse the candidacies of New York Democrats Al Smith and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Even today, more than three decades after Wallace's death, personally autographed pictures of every president since Theodore Roosevelt line a wall in Wallace's farmhouse in Westchester County, New York. Every president, that is, except one. There is no picture of Herbert Hoover.

—by John Hyde