

Preface

THE TWO-PARTY system has been a feature of the American political scene for all except a few brief periods in our history. Yet, during most of the last 130 years, the traditional two major parties have had in virtually every election at least one minor-party competitor. Despite this persistence, there has been a continuing pattern of failure. Never has an American third party been successful in displacing a major competitor. (Both the Whigs and the Republicans grew and came to power in two of those rare periods when a single major party was dominant.)

The presidential campaign of 1948 was not exceptional in that it witnessed new minor-party challenges to Democratic and Republican supremacy. One of these movements took shape as Henry A. Wallace's Progressive Party. The present study attempts to examine the background, the leaders, the organization, the campaign, and finally the disintegration of this third party. It attempts to present a history of the Wallace Progressive Party—a political history based to the greatest possible extent upon the firsthand accounts of those who participated in a movement sufficiently distinctive to merit the title of "crusade"—a quixotic crusade.

Why is it that minor parties have never been successful in this country? It appears that there must be substantial reasons for the repeated pattern of failure that has greeted their

persistence. Professor William B. Hesseltine had indicated some of them in *The Rise and Fall of Third Parties*:

. . . The obstacles that line the . . . way are indeed discouraging. In general they fall into two classes, the practical and the philosophical, and neither can be dismissed as unimportant. Both are imperatives—liberals must find a base upon which to make a valid appeal to the reason and conscience of the voters, and they must create a practical organization to carry out the program.

The practical handicaps which a new party must overcome fall into two groups: financial and legal. . . candor compels the admission that the barriers are formidable.

~ A postscript might be added that a successful third party also requires a fertile soil of crisis or a favorable climate of unrest in which to flourish. Surrounding conditions may not, of course, be created by the party; they may only be utilized. Nevertheless, their presence or absence may spell life or death to a minor party.

In examining these factors to ascertain the role they played in the life cycle of one third party, that of Henry A. Wallace, inquiry will first be made into the currents—streams both philosophical and political—contributing to the initial decision to embark upon such a venture. Since the party was essentially the creation and creature of one man, it seems necessary to examine briefly his personal philosophy, characteristics, and attributes that were to play so great a part in this undertaking. Attention must also be given to the “practical” obstacles mentioned by Professor Hesseltine: matters of party organization—the attempt to establish a new nation-wide group able to compete on the ward and precinct level with well-established party machines and the attempt to set up a structure sturdy enough to endure, regardless of the fate of the individuals connected with it. Part and parcel of these prac-

tical considerations are the dual legal-financial barriers referred to, including the statutory weapons so often used by parties in power to discourage or eliminate third-party competition by keeping insurgent groups off the ballot. Included also are fiscal obstacles—the need to secure funds to meet the tremendous expense of organizing and conducting a nation-wide campaign against well-entrenched machines possessing established donors as well as patronage favors to dispense.

In addition, there are numerous other obstacles that confront a third party—the traditional adherence of the American voter to the party of his forbears, the loss of popular policies to major-party “thunder-stealers,” the feeling that pressure group activity may be more productive, defeatism resulting from rebuffs at the polls, and the opinion that more certain—if more restricted—benefits will accrue from working within the two-party framework. Virtually all of these considerations played a part in the yearlong 1948 campaign of the Wallace Progressive Party, its rejection at the polls, and its subsequent attempts to carry on into the following years.

Besides these customary barriers to minor-party success, the Wallace venture was subjected to certain additional and very special handicaps—handicaps attendant upon the nature of the Party’s underlying doctrines and its attempts to introduce what might be described as tolerant politics into a period of intolerance. These special disadvantages must be inquired into—particularly as they were reflected in two aspects of the 1948 campaign: the Philadelphia Convention and the Communist-domination charges so persistently hurled at the party by a hostile press.

Ultimately, an evaluation must be made of the party’s performance in carrying out the announced objectives of its founder—Henry A. Wallace—and of its impact on the American political scene. Acting upon his basic faith in and

desire to assist the "common man," Wallace felt this third-party venture was a means—the only means—of carrying his "fight for peace" over the head of the President of the United States to the American people. For Wallace, the campaign battle reached far beyond America's shores; it was a battle for a war-free world in which the common men of all nations might live and prosper. If both major parties failed to give the American voter an opportunity to urge peaceful alternatives upon his government, then a new party must come into being—eventually to supplant one of them. "The people," said Wallace, "must have a choice."

But, beyond the immediate hopes and expectations of its founder and its followers, what was the party's impact? What were its ultimate effects on the American political scene, upon the conduct of American government? Here the additional perspective provided by the passage of time and the policies of succeeding administrations may prove helpful in arriving at a more balanced picture.

Much was written about the 1948 Progressive Party—at least in the columns of the press at the time—but little systematic attempt has been made to inquire with any measure of objectivity into the many facets of its history. Accordingly, it has been necessary to rely in great measure upon sources other than written for the present study.

The primary sources employed have included materials contained in the files of the Progressive Party (to the limited extent that party officials were willing to make them available), reports filed with the Clerk of the United States House of Representatives (for financial matters), and data gathered by the author and other persons during the course of the 1948 campaign—such as party press releases, letters of instruction to local affiliates, and other official communications.

However, more important than these documentary sources of information have been the personal interviews with officials of the Progressive Party and others connected with the Wal-

lace campaign. On the basis of firsthand reports from the people actually involved in the organization of the party, and from others who observed from points of vantage, it has been possible to fill in many of the gaps that otherwise would have existed.

This interview method of research, it should be noted, possesses both advantages and disadvantages. Persons close to events in which they played an important role are sometimes reticent, sometimes intent on proving a special point or on justifying their own actions. Other individuals, muted by the social climate in which our investigations were conducted, proved unwilling to admit even an interest, let alone actual participation, in the Wallace party. On the other hand, secondhand reports, hearsay, and unsubstantiated allegations must be evaluated for their worth and credibility. Consequently, it has been necessary for the author to make judgments concerning the relative merit of many conflicting claims. In instances where there has seemed to be substantial support for contradictory positions, an attempt has been made to indicate both sides, as well as the author's own opinion.

Inasmuch as this study constitutes a political history, it seems wise to keep in mind the telling remark attributed to the late Charles A. Beard: "History may be objective, historians never are." The author does not claim exception to this rule. In fact, had a sympathetic interest in this third-party venture of Henry A. Wallace's not existed, it seems unlikely that this work would ever have been undertaken. But this very sympathy, coupled with the author's own participation (slight as it was, as chairman of a student group—Republicans for Wallace—at Colgate University, Hamilton, New York) in the campaign, may have served to qualify him for a better understanding of the problems faced and a clearer judgment of the solutions adopted by the third party.

Because the interviews, research, and preparation for this book covered an extended period of time, the author finds

it difficult to acknowledge in a brief space the contributions of all those who have given assistance at one stage or another of the project.

Nevertheless, gratitude must be expressed to some whose contributions have been most substantial. Foremost of these has been Professor Malcolm C. Moos of the Johns Hopkins University, under whose guidance the work was planned, organized, and ultimately carried to completion. Indebtedness must also be expressed to those members of the Progressive Party who gave their wholehearted cooperation—particularly to the Honorable Henry A. Wallace, former Vice President of the United States, and to the Honorable Glen H. Taylor, former United States Senator from Idaho. Ladies and gentlemen of the press also provided many worthwhile suggestions. Thanks must be expressed to all of them who aided—particularly to Miss Helen Fuller of *New Republic* and to Mr. Barney Conal of *National Guardian*, who gave most generously of their time and personal recollections.

For the assistance rendered by these persons and the many others who must remain unmentioned, the author expresses his appreciation. For any errors of fact or interpretation which may remain, he accepts full responsibility.

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