

Interview with Dan Glickman
Former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture (1995 – 2001)
Interviewed by Jack Shepard

Q: Secretary Glickman, please tell us who was Henry Wallace.

Dan Glickman: Well, he was one of my predecessors as Secretary, and he probably had as profound a role on American agriculture as any other individual in the 20th century in terms of what he did to advise President Roosevelt on subsidy of farm programs, how he personally shaped those programs and to some extent determined the course of American agriculture through the entire 20th century.

Q: The New Deal programs...have had a huge impact on how government and agriculture deal with each other, haven't they?

Dan Glickman: Yes, for the first time we had a very interventionist role of government in agriculture. In fact, if you look at the history of the New Deal, it was the farm programs that probably determined the course of the New Deal more than any place else because that's where the great distress was. There was unemployment all over America but the horrendous personal problems, family problems, loss of income really occurred in small towns and on farms. And so, Roosevelt gave Wallace the discretion to go out and solve these problems. And Wallace wasn't bound by ideology. It's interesting, he actually came from a Republican background, but it turned into a very, very interventionist force in American agricultural policy which has basically stayed with us until the current times.

Q: You mentioned his coming from a Republican family. Does that surprise you that he would have turned into a Democrat, coming from that wealthy and influential Republican family in the Midwest?

Dan Glickman: But the Wallace family was a family that believed in education very strongly. There was a strong intellectual base that was encouraged, a great respect for writing and reading. And so, you can see how that family, that culture, that intellectual base, coupled with the times that we were in, produced somebody who was willing to go beyond traditional norms.

Q: Can you put into some historical perspective for me the clout and the importance of the agricultural sector back in the 1920's, when such a huge percentage of folks were attached to the land?

Dan Glickman: Today production agriculture is a very, very small part of the American population. Before the Depression and before the New Deal you had 30-40% of all Americans living either on farms or in rural areas. And they were a profound political influence [in] every single state in the country. They were influential not only in both houses of Congress but particularly in these private groups like the farm organizations, the Farm Bureau and others. These groups had amazing influence in the same way that today we'll look to groups like the National Rifle Association or perhaps the American Medical Association or the American Association of Retired Persons. Well, back then it was your farm and agriculture groups that really influenced the government

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profoundly, not only on farm policy, but on everything else as well. So, Wallace kind of came out of that movement too. He understood that movement. Because of that he was able to work it pretty well politically.

Q: You said that he has had a tremendous impact on the USDA. Tell me what the department was like before Henry Wallace and what has it been like since because of his influence?

Dan Glickman: Certainly the Department of Agriculture did some things prior to the New Deal. There was a research component. There were some rural development components and some extension components. But it was...the Department of Agriculture was kind of viewed as a backwater agency until Wallace came forward. He brought the best and the brightest in government to the Department of Agriculture. So, we had a lot of great thinkers. For a while in the 30's, the Department of Agriculture was viewed as the primary source for all the revolutionaries in America. If they wanted to go to work for the government, well you go to work for the Department of Agriculture because Wallace was there. He was encouraging all this brilliant and original thinking. Roosevelt was saying, "Okay." Maybe he felt it was a little bit "out of sight, out of mind." Maybe he honestly felt that Wallace had his finger on the pulse of this big part of rural America. It was an important political thing for Roosevelt to see that Wallace was successful at all of this.

Q: We interviewed John Kenneth Galbraith, whose first job out of graduate school was at the USDA. He said that was where the action was.

Dan Glickman: Well, Galbraith was one of those young bright intellectuals. There were others-- William O'Douglas, early, Abe Fortes who was on the Supreme Court. There were a lot of very famous people. Some of them later turned even more left than they were back in those days. But you did have the best and the brightest at USDA. You have to give that credit to Wallace. He was able to do that.

Q: When Henry Wallace was 15 years old, he was noticing that at the corn shows folks are judging the best looking ears of corn and deciding that these best looking ears of corn are going to be the best kinds of seed to be planting for next year's crop. And the corn shows are actually being sponsored by *Wallaces' Farmer* which is his family's periodical. He stands up and bucks the common knowledge of these corn shows and asks the professor, "What's looks to a hog? What would a hog care about this?" What kind of a fifteen year-old does that?

Dan Glickman: Wallace was somebody who was very entrepreneurial even at a young age. You know, if he had been in the business world I think he might have been the Bill Gates of our time period. He was the kind of guy that could see something, that everybody saw one way, and he could see it through the back side or through the sideways. He could just see it differently. He had this extreme streak of imagination and

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I think that's just something that was God given. You know, I'm not sure where he got it from.

Q: Well, the folks that worked in the USDA said he was the kind of manager that would entertain almost any idea. Does that atmosphere exist at the USDA today?

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Dan Glickman: The atmosphere of entertaining any idea doesn't exist anywhere in government today, because our government is mature. Back then in the '30s it was young. They weren't burned by experience. They were willing to entertain anything. Today, whether it's at USDA or in the government generally, we're burdened by budget constraints. We're burdened by special interest groups in agriculture who have a vested interest in the status quo that are much stronger than they were back in the '30s. You couple that with modern telecommunications, and it's much more difficult to turn the battleship today than it was back then. Henry Wallace did in 1932. We were dealing with catastrophic economic situations in the country as a whole and in rural America particularly. Today you don't have that. You have some stress in agriculture, but we have all these safety net programs. Plus Wallace was a great conservationist. A lot of the programs back then were geared at saving the soil. It was blowing away. We're still living with those. Today the conservation problems are much less acute than they were back then.

Q: Tell me a little bit more about Wallace's conservation efforts.

Glickman: There was some conservation movement in this country before the 1930s. It was local for the most part. But Wallace understood that preserving the soil was key to production agriculture. He helped organize and facilitated this creation of conservation districts around the country. He helped to create a program within the Department of Agriculture that became the Soil Conservation Service. It's called the Natural Resources Conservation Service. A big part of American agriculture was providing technical assistance to help farmers save the land. And this was different than Teddy Roosevelt who was engaged in the kind of maintenance of public lands. Wallace really saw private lands as the key. How do you get individuals on the land to do the right thing? He knew that this had as much to do with the success of farming in rural America as anything else. Other people saw it, but he was able to put it into programming context so that benefits and technical assistance actually started to go out to producers. In one respect he was in the right place at the right time. It was a crisis. It's hard to do great things when there are not outside forces pushing you. Crisis always brings smart people and makes them great people. Crisis allows you the opportunity to kind of push the political system to the edge. When things are coming along okay, it's very hard to do that.

Q: Why is corn so important to the U.S. and the world?

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Dan Glickman: I remember the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee when I was in the House. His name was Kika de la Garza. He used to say, "Everything that grows is important because it's good for you." But I think we have to get beyond that hurdle right here. Corn has revolutionized American agriculture because until corn was viewed as a feed grain it wasn't that important. People would eat corn on the cob. They might eat mixed corn, but corn was just another food crop and didn't have great value. We would feed corn, but it was not part of any kind of massive situation. Wallace and others pushed through technologies of corn. The new technologies make corn yields go up and made corn more resistant to outside problems and pests. This created an environment where you could feed corn in massive quantities to animals. And once we did that we changed the face of American agriculture because animal agriculture has done more to change American agriculture than anything else. The volume of meat and poultry consumed has probably been the dominant change in our eating patterns in the last 100 years. And that's largely due to the fact that we feed corn to animals. We couldn't do that before the hybrids came on board. You can tell from the health of our population. You can tell by the generations of Americans who keep getting bigger, stronger and taller. The feeding of corn to animals was a very profound change in American agriculture.

Q: Can you speak to the change in the relationship between farmers and the government before the New Deal programs and afterwards?

Dan Glickman: Before the New Deal programs came on board there wasn't an active relationship between farmers and government. That doesn't mean the government wouldn't provide disaster benefits on occasion. But after the New Deal came along government and farmers were vivid partners. And some people believe that farmers became wards of the state after that-- that they couldn't do anything without getting the approval of the government. Some people believe that farmers, instead of farming the land, farmed the government, farmed the payment system, farmed the payment structure. But the truth is, without that, we would have lost thousands more farmers than we lost. And those programs, while they did create a very formal and structured relationship between government and farmers, saved a lot of farmers. But it changed the relationship. Today agriculture is very government dependent. You look at other sectors of the economy that are much less government dependent. Everybody in our modern society has some reliance on Uncle Sam. Agriculture probably has more reliance on Uncle Sam than about any other segment of the American economy. I think that is due to the programs that we created in the 1930s.

Q: Is that one of the lasting impacts of the New Deal programs? Are there others that you would want to mention?

Dan Glickman: Well, certainly this relationship between the government and the farmers is a different private sector relationship than we have almost anywhere else. And the irony is, if you look in farm country, small town country and rural country they reflect a more traditional conservative set of values. And I don't want to overstate this, but most

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viewers will probably understand that. When it comes to the farm programs, we have the most interventionist programs in the history. We have the kinds of programs, not like they had in Socialist countries, but many respects not too far in terms of what the government would tell farmers to do and not to do in order to participate in them. I'm talking about row crop farmers now for the most part. And that certainly is a strange anomaly that you have people who are very conservative politically but participate in a very non-conservative economic scheme with the government. That started with Henry Wallace. It's been ratified over the years and it's been accepted. It's been accepted in farm country, and it's been accepted in non-farm country. It's just a very interesting cultural fact in our society.

Q: It was organization by government, wasn't it?

Dan Glickman: Seems like it. You cannot really talk about the New Deal without talking about the fact that the land was blowing away. We did virtually no conservation in America. Out of those years we created shelter belts. We created a whole system of soil and water erosion prevention that changed the landscape of the country. That's been a profound impact on this country. We use those techniques today. We've improved upon them and made them more modern. If somebody were to ask me what the big legacy of the New Deal farm programs were, I'd be at a loss to say it was not the conservation programs.

Q: Maybe the most long-lasting?

Dan Glickman: The most long-lasting.

Q: Are we working our way back now to Wallace's theories of controlling production? Are these sorts of lessons still with us?

Dan Glickman: Certainly the Reagan years have tried to pull us away a bit from the micromanagement of production by the government, which is part of the Wallace years-- supply management, controlling the amount of production. It was the only way to keep prices up. But it involved an awful lot of the government telling a farmer how much and where and in what circumstances he or she can produce their crop. We've moved away a bit from that, but we haven't moved dramatically away from it. We still have programs that really keep the farmers in tow if they want to stay in the game. I don't think we're going to go back to the rigid supply management schemes of the 1930s. It's a different world. We're an international world now. We have to sell our products overseas. Before the New Deal, before modern technology, we did not do a huge amount of international business in agriculture. Now, we're in the year of globalization which means you've got to sell or smell as the old expression goes. So, the rigid government control days are probably not with us like they once were.

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Q: Neil Harl said that when Wallace began to head the USDA it was time for a national food policy. And Harl says it's time for a world food policy now. Are you in the camp that believes we really ought to be controlling production in a worldwide basis?

Dan Glickman: It's very difficult to control production on a worldwide basis. We can't even control behavior from one country to another. But I do think it's time for us to try to modernize in a kind of conforming way how both the developed and the developing world deal with each other on agriculture. What's happened is we've got a lot of basic conflicts between countries. We've got conflicts such as, "Should we use genetically modified foods or not? Should we subsidize or not? What level should we subsidize or not? What kind of crop should we subsidize or not?" Anything we do in our country now has an impact on the rest of the world. That wasn't the case when Wallace was there. But it's much more complicated when you deal with multi-national problems than when you're dealing with one country.

Q: Compared to the days of Wallace, how do American agriculture and the rural communities compare? Have we made life better for farmers, and are we keeping communities vital?

Glickman: It's a very complicated question. We've had massive out migration of people from rural America since the Depression. A lot of that has been just the mechanics of the marketplace. People couldn't find jobs in small communities. The out migration to the great urban centers, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Chicago, a lot of that really occurred because people couldn't make a living on the farm. They just flowed out to work in the factories. Certainly things are better for some than they were before. A larger successful family farmer has a fair amount of assets and can make a pretty good living. But smaller producers are having trouble everywhere in this country. Capital costs and debt requirements make it very, very hard. It's like we don't have this massive crisis in rural America that we had in the 1930s, but you go into small towns in this country, particularly the Great Plains area from North Dakota down to Texas, and things are really bleak. Towns have lost populations; school systems have been depopulated. It's hard to get kids to want to stay there. Part of that is because agriculture has changed. We've made life better for a lot of farmers. We have not kept every community vital in this country. Vast areas of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas-- just look at the Great Plains area plus areas of the South too. A lot of them have really been hurt, but it's not all because of agriculture. The country has changed. People have moved away. The real growth in America occurred in urban and suburban areas over the last 50 years. Agriculture suffered to some extent because of it. People could make more money or make a higher rate of return on their investment from something else rather than their land.

Q: Those were two of Wallace's main concerns. He's increased the yields and made fewer farmers necessary.

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Dan Glickman: It certainly did one other thing too. It created a new industry in America-- the livestock industry. I'm not sure Henry Wallace would be particularly pleased with all these massive animal feeding operations that we have in America today. But to some extent he had something to do with this because he created a system where we could feed animals much more cheaply. Whether it's corn or other feed grains, we are able to amass animals in the hotels and get them fed much more quickly and much more efficiently than the old-fashioned way. And I'm not sure he would have necessarily loved what he did in that area.

Q: What do you think he would think about modern agricultural practices such as using genetically modified organisms?

Dan Glickman: I think Henry Wallace would be in favor of new technologies like genetically modified foods and other engineering. Above all, he was very science based. He had a great respect for science. He would challenge it when he thought it was wrong. I don't think he would be afraid of a lot of these new technologies. Now, the other side of him is that he was basically a progressive. He believed in income distribution. He worried about the power of big industrial and agricultural forces taking over and how they would use that new technology and who would own the intellectual property right. So, I think he might be conflicted about that side of the picture. But I don't think he would be the voice of negativism when it came to looking at new technologies at all. I'm aware of the visits that Wallace made to Mexico and his understanding that new technology could have an impact in dealing with poverty and the problems of the developing world. His efforts helped lead to the Green Revolution, which others like Dr. Norman Borlaug and others pushed forward. It's a further example that Wallace respected technology and wasn't afraid of it. And under him, the Agricultural Research Service, the functions of the research part of USDA, really began to explode in terms of talent and dollars spent. To some extent that was based on what he saw not only at home but around the world. His legacy is pretty impressive. There's a lot of research going on out there. I was responsible for renaming one of the facilities in his name out there. We brought out his daughter, Jean, and John Culver. Senator Dale Bumpers was involved at that time. Former Senator Bumpers sponsored legislation in that area. But we named part of that research center after Henry Wallace and another part after George Washington Carver, who knew Wallace at a very young age.

Q: Would you say that's part of his legacy?

Dan Glickman: He was certainly very comfortable with research functions because he was in many respects a self-educated scientist. The great productive leaps that were taken in American agriculture were largely the work of USDA scientists-- both working on their own as well as working through the land grant college system. Wallace had a lot to do with it. Congress also helped in terms of the visionary appropriations over the years. I still think one of the most interesting things about Wallace was that you had this agrarian-- I wouldn't even call him a populist-- he was an agrarian reformer that became the most provocative and progressive member of the Roosevelt administration. In some

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senses you've seen this in people like George McGovern or Hubert Humphrey, who come from the upper Midwest, and have this very strong tie to the farmer but also these very progressive views of social policy. And that strain is real in certain parts of the Democratic Party. But then you have this other strain that involves much of rural America, which is extreme conservatism and distrust of government generally. It's just fascinating to watch a guy like Wallace to not go down that road, to go down the first road towards aggressive, progressive thinking. He was a man who certainly was not adverse to wealth, although he didn't live like a wealthy guy, and who created one of the big fortunes of all times. That's the irony of this whole thing. I know people have thought he was a Communist. They thought he was a Communist, but the family is worth several billion dollars now because of their interests in Dupont or all the after markets of the Wallace Pioneer seed fortune. So the Wallace family history and particularly Henry is a very interesting story of American entrepreneurship. It just shows you how in our country not everybody walks down the same road. Everyone walks down different paths in life.

Q: Tell me how important it is for a country's agricultural systems to be strong. What does it mean in terms of what a country can do, its security, its well being?

Dan Glickman: If you're self-sufficient in food then you really don't have to worry about ever going to war because of shortage of meat, poultry, dairy or grains or anything else. It gives you great comfort to know that you have a well-fed population. Not everybody in this country is secure from hunger; most people are. And we have created an infrastructure in America that's unequalled in the world. We don't have to rely on very much from anybody with a few exceptions in the tropical foods area because of climate. Even with that, with new technologies we can produce a lot of this ourselves. And we've got this great geographical bounty where you look at the Great Plains area that produces so much grain and meat. But then you look at California and Florida that produces extraordinary quality and quantity of fresh fruits and vegetables. We basically can produce about anything we want to produce. Wallace understood that, and he didn't want to see that lost. It's what has made our country what it is really. It certainly made us economically secure so that we can then go do other things. To some extent the fact that we created an industrial economy unequalled in the world and now a modern technological economy unequalled in the world is based on the fact that we have a totally secure agriculture. It is never anything we really have to worry about.

Q: Henry Wallace thought that food could be used diplomatically, that we could make friends by helping people make their food system more secure. Do you agree with his ideas in that respect?

Dan Glickman: Certainly we have done a lot to help other nations become more food independent and self-sufficient. We have provided a lot of technical assistance. I agree with that. In recent years we have tended to use food in the rest of the world as a way to dispose of our surplus foods, rather than helping countries become as food-independent and self-sufficient. It's in our economic interest to see them continue to want to buy or

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eat our surplus food. Food diplomatically is a little different than what Wallace had originally intended. He saw this in a most beneficial way we can help all these countries pull themselves up with their boot straps. But in modern years we do some of that and certainly America has been the first to respond in natural disasters, drought, famine and floods all over the world. We are so productive in producing so much food in this country that we've got to sell it. If we can't sell it, we've got to give it away. And so food diplomatically is less of a tool to build up the rest of the world than maybe Wallace had in mind.

Q: Do we still have too many farmers?

Dan Glickman: Certainly not from a social policy structure we don't have too many farmers. The country would be better off if more people lived in small towns and rural America. Families would be happier, and social structure would be better. We could relieve some of the stress in urban areas, but that's easier said than done. People won't do that unless there's some economic reason to do it.

Q: Neil Harl said he thinks it's time for another Henry Wallace to come around and that there are enough food-related, pollution and conservation problems that we need another Henry Wallace.

Dan Glickman: In the Americas today I don't think you're going to find one Henry Wallace. You've got to look for dozens of Henry Wallace types. We have a country which is not capable of one bright person imposing one solution on the country. It just won't happen.

Q: Would you call Henry Wallace an agricultural revolutionary?

Dan Glickman: I would call him an agricultural entrepreneur who was witness to changes in our times and moved with the changes rather than resisted them. The programs were revolutionary, but truthfully they were conservative because they saved the American system. I believe that the revolution, if it had come in America because of the economic plight of the Depression, would have started in rural America as it started in rural Russia or started in peasant China. Wallace and his programs kept people believing that the American system worked. They actually kept the country from a much more serious political problem. We had a little bit of violence out there. There were a few people on the edges who flirted with Communism, Fascism. But for the most part Americans stayed true. Rural America stayed very true. The programs kept people on board. I would call Wallace in the end not a revolutionary, but a conservative who did a lot to save America and the American political system.

Q: By any means necessary, if he needed to be a Republican or needed to be a Democrat?

Dan Glickman: I don't know whether he thought about it in that way. He loved this country. His father and grandfather were involved in politics and business. He

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wasn't a revolutionary in the way that was a political revolutionary. He had some exotic ideas. He went down some tangents that got him into trouble in terms of spiritual advisors and that kind of thing. But, for the most part, if you look back at the Roosevelt programs that you have to give Wallace most of the credit for, they did a lot to keep this country in the middle and not to go down to the edges of the political spectrum.

One of the things that he left behind was a delivery system for farm programs which is unequalled anywhere else in the government. We created this massive farmer-run system, county committee system, extension networks. It's brilliant when you think about it in terms of how to give assistance. Before the age of telecommunication we have designed a system so in rural America people could get information almost instantaneously. In the area of agriculture Wallace helped set up this infrastructure to make people believe that the government was there to help them. That system still exists today. It's changed a little bit. It's had to adapt to modern times. The fact that we had county committee men and women-- then it was all county committee men-- at the county, district and state level was a ready-made political organization for President Roosevelt too. A lot of this was done to lock in those votes in the presidential election. It was not only a very good political arm for the Roosevelt administration, but it was a great way to get government out to people. That was also one of the geniuses of the Wallace administration.

When Wallace was secretary of agriculture, USDA was a very, very dominant agency. Because the rural population has declined so dramatically, USDA doesn't quite have the same role that it had in the Roosevelt administrations. When I was secretary I used to think about that a lot. I used to think that Wallace wouldn't want me to be a shrinking violet. He wasn't one. My personality was not exactly the same as his, but I did my best to try to emulate his thinking patterns. Some of my predecessors and I took on issues like food safety, hunger, food stamps and international food assistance-- the kinds of things that would rebuild the image and the ability of the Department of Agriculture to influence the country. Since we have such a small farm and rural base to serve, for the USDA to have an influence it's got to have impacted other areas.

I studied Wallace's style and learned some tips of the trade in terms of how to create that influence in a modern America where the world has changed so dramatically. And Wallace was a very dominant personality. Even though there's only a small number of Americans who still live on farms or in rural areas, in order for them to be well represented, the secretary of agriculture has to be a very dominant personality. You've got to wade through all of the non-rural flack that's out there in our government. And certainly Wallace dominated the attention. What I learned from him is that if you didn't try to dominate the attention in the areas of your jurisdiction, you're going to get swallowed up pretty quickly.

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Q: May have been a little easier for him because the ag sector was such a much larger portion of the economy?

Glickman: And the problems were out there. Today we have different problems. We have problems to make sure the food supply is safe and free from terrorism. Certainly that is an enormous problem. We have problems of nutrition in the diet. We have problems of hunger in America in addition to all the problems that we had before. It also requires that same pragmatic, aggressive view of our jurisdiction. Wallace never voluntarily released jurisdiction to anybody. He was a smart enough politician; he used to have these fights with Harold Ickes. Harold Ickes was secretary of interior and was known as somebody who was very, very strongly geared towards preserving his turf. One of the big battles in the Roosevelt administration was who was going to run the United States Forest Service, which now is the biggest part of the Department of Agriculture. It dwarfs the farm programs and the conservation programs. Ickes threatened to resign unless Roosevelt would give him the forestry programs. Wallace did the same thing in his own way. Wallace won that battle, and so today the United States Department of Agriculture manages the US Forest Service. And that story shows that Wallace had a very good political streak as well as this kind of idealistic streak.