

Doris Kearns Goodwin
Roosevelt biographer
Interviewed by Dave Povero on November 15, 2003

Q: Can you please tell me about Franklin Roosevelt's impressions of Henry A. Wallace?

Goodwin: There's no question that President Franklin Roosevelt understood what an extraordinarily solid liberal Wallace was, that he could depend on him to fight the good fight about the New Deal, to fight the fight about economic mobilization during World War II. It was a time when the liberals and the conservatives were really battling each other. There were a lot of enemies out there. I think he knew he had an ally in this man who he could trust absolutely, every step along the way.

Q: Why did President Roosevelt choose Wallace as his running mate?

Goodwin: In 1940 the conservative resurgence had really taken a hold of a lot of pieces of the government. In 1940 there was a real sense that liberalism was under attack from a rising conservatism. I think when he chose Wallace he wanted somebody that would be a dependable liberal ally that could fight the fight with him. He knew that if he had somebody with him that he wasn't going to have to argue with, that would be as strong or stronger than he was on those liberal issues, then he could somehow have a weapon against the conservatives. And I think it was a very important choice for him.

Q: Why was there so much resistance to Wallace's nomination at that 1940 convention?

Goodwin: Part of the resistance was from more conservative forces who didn't want somebody so liberal. Part of it was the old party bosses who felt that Wallace had not worked his way up the Democratic Party ladder having once been a Republican. But I think part of the resistance was because Roosevelt himself was not at that convention. And delegates want to be loved. They wanted Roosevelt to be there. They were mad that he wasn't there. I think in some ways they made Wallace the scapegoat for the fact that they wanted Roosevelt there. They were worried about a third term. So they decided, "He's trying to force this choice on us. Well, we're going to rebel a little bit." So, I think that had a lot to do with it. It wasn't simply Wallace, but it was their feelings at that moment of wanting Roosevelt to be flirting with them a little more than he was by not being there.

Q: And then what were the circumstances that led to Eleanor's "no ordinary time" speech?

Goodwin: What happened was that because the delegates were in a kind of angry mood, they started booing Wallace from the floor. There was a real fear that had they put forth other nominees, that they might vote for somebody else other than Wallace. And meanwhile, Roosevelt is back in the White House in his study writing out a statement saying that, "If they do not go for Wallace, I'm not going to run for President." And he wasn't going to give the acceptance speech. He wasn't going to accept the nomination. Because he saw it that if they wouldn't go for Wallace, it meant they were choosing a more conservative trajectory in the future. And he didn't want to be part of that.

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So had they not been able to quiet those delegates down, and if Wallace had been voted down, the whole history might have been very different if indeed Roosevelt had followed through. So Eleanor gets up at that critical moment to give a speech, and it's amazing! The minute she stands up, there's sort of a hush over the crowd. And what she's able to do is to say to the crowd, in a sense, "This is no ordinary nomination. This is no ordinary time when a president is under the pressure that he's under." And somehow as soon as she said that, it gave them the feeling that he couldn't be there. She said, "He can't campaign as he ordinarily could," which was the reason he wasn't there. And as soon as they saw it in a different light, that he wasn't there because of the situation in the country, and that he was going to put himself forward for a third term given his age, given his health, then they voted in Wallace. Her speech was incredibly important, first time a woman had ever spoken at a national convention. To come before that convention with that incredibly, obstreperous crowd booing as they were... Wallace sitting there must have been feeling horrible hearing the boos... and to be able to quiet them down and get them to eventually then say, "Let's forget what we're doing. We're going to go for Wallace eventually." It was a great moment.

Q: What do you think was Henry Wallace's greatest contribution?

Goodwin: I think the greatest contribution that he made was to be somebody who came into Roosevelt's administration with a philosophical belief in the New Deal, with a sense of total idealism that government could be active on the side of social justice and to implement those ideals as agricultural secretary, as Vice President, an economic boss as he was during World War II and never waiver from that belief. When a lot of other people lost their way when context changed or the situation differed, he just kept fighting. And that's an incredible thing to say for somebody. He kept it through his entire life. When I look back at him, he was a champion of the common man, as was said. He was a champion of social justice from the beginning until the end. And there are not very many lives that we can say that about. So, he deserves enormous praise.