

Interview with George McGovern

Former U.S. Senator from South Dakota and Democratic presidential candidate in 1972

Interviewed by John Hyde in Washington, D.C. on May 3, 2003

Q: Senator, I would like to start by talking a little bit about religion. You recently wrote an article in *The Nation* about religion and the experience of fighting in a war. As you know religion was very important to Henry Wallace. It was often said that to understand Wallace, you had to understand his religion. I wonder what you make of that strong undercurrent of religion all through Wallace's public life. Does it surprise you at all coming from the Midwestern tradition? When he spoke of religion he often spoke about it as an instrument of reform and progressivism, not in the conservative way that politicians often speak of religion today.

McGovern: Wallace always reminded me of Woodrow Wilson in his religious life. He did see it as an instrument of social justice. He is what I guess you would call a social gospeler. He believed in the social gospel. It isn't that he was disinterested in personal piety. He was interested in personal piety. He did live a life guided by moral and spiritual principles, but he also thought there had to be a practical application of one's spiritual faith to the everyday problems of life. I think it informed many of his insights on international relations. Wallace, of course, was a strong internationalist. I think he literally saw all the people of the Earth as God's children and in that sense he felt an obligation to try to lift opportunities and qualities of life for people everywhere.

Q: The kind of people that he encountered in Washington and in Congress found that element of him strange. Of course, it's expected that every politician is going to profess belief in God and to be very religious. But here is someone who took that very seriously. Does that strike you as strange that these people would react negatively to him?

McGovern: Some people saw Wallace as a man involved in mysticism. There is a certain amount of mysticism in religion. All of life, in a sense, is a mystery. The theologians talk about the mysteries of the faith, the mysteries of the universe. Wallace had a keen intellectual interest in theology, in the fundamental realities of life, and how one could bring his own life into harmony with whatever spiritual forces there were in the universe. He was willing to experiment and to try new ideas and to talk to people of differing perspectives on religious and spiritual matters. Wallace was curious about everything. Why would he omit religion from his field of intellectual curiosity, from his field of interest and contemplation? I think it made him a better man, not a lesser figure in terms of his qualifications to be a national and international leader.

Q: Did ordinary voters respond to that?

McGovern: They certainly did in my part of the country. I grew up in the 1920s, 1930s. I got out of high school in 1940, so I was thoroughly exposed to Wallace during those years. He was easily the most popular figure in the Roosevelt cabinet during that period. South Dakota after all is an agricultural state. But farmers loved Wallace. I can't think of any other Secretary of Agriculture in my lifetime, and I embrace almost 80 years, that didn't admire Wallace. He was one of the reasons that Franklin Roosevelt did so well in his first couple of terms out in my part of the country. Farmers never doubted that

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Wallace was a man of the soil. They never doubted his personal integrity, his devotion to the things of the spirit as well as the physical conditions of life. So, I don't think his reputation of being a religious man hurt him at all with the rural people that I grew up with. I think they admired him for that and for his dedication to the interests of farm people. I think that's really true. But people in the East seem to find it peculiar that Wallace's Farmer, the family's great farm journal, have articles about farming and giving practical advice for growing things, articles about the agricultural economy, and right beside that would be a Sunday school lesson. And yet I think people in Iowa and the Midwest and South Dakota understood that perfectly. Wallace wasn't the first religious man to be assailed for his views. He wasn't the first to be ridiculed. There's a kind of cynical sophistication. I always thought it was a superficial core that some people carry, where they think they stand outside and above any consideration of the spiritual or religious faith. Wallace didn't let that bother him. He was steadfast in his views, both his religious views and his political views. I find that one of his admirable qualities.

Q: Since you raised the matter of farmers and of agriculture and the importance that Wallace had with rural people, it might be a good opportunity to talk a little bit about food and Wallace. Wallace believed strongly that food played an important role in world peace, in helping to bring about a better world and a stable civilization. He said in his most famous speech during World War II that he had said half jokingly that the purpose of World War II was to let everybody on Earth drink a pint of milk every day. And I wonder what you think about that. He was assailed for that also, was made fun of, this couldn't possibly be the real purpose of World War II. Do you think in some sense he was right?

McGovern: He was absolutely right. It's also true that he was assailed for that view. I remember as a young person growing up during that period. I later went off to become a combat bomber pilot in World War II, and I thought what Wallace was saying, both then and after the war, made a lot of sense. The way that was reduced by his critics is a kind of a scoffing reference to Wallace wanting to give a bottle of milk to "every Hottentot." That was the crude political depiction of these views. What Henry Wallace was getting at is that you can't have a stable, peaceful world evolving towards freedom if the major preoccupation of people from the time they get up in the morning until they go to bed at night is hunger. Where does the next meal come from? Where can I find a decent shelter for my family? What is the possibility of medical care for my children who suffer from various afflictions? Wallace knew, as a world traveler and as a man always with his eyes open, that much of the population of this planet was suffering, suffering from hunger, suffering from poverty, from disease, from illiteracy. Those were the problems that really turned him on. He was a 100% internationalist in the sense that he believed there couldn't be stability, peace and security for any of us as long as half the world was suffering under those conditions of hunger and poverty. And so repeatedly he made reference to the challenge to America as a country to share the knowledge of how you grow, handle and distribute food and good nutrition. That is one of the reasons I have admired him perhaps above every other reason-- that dedication he had to putting an end to hunger in the world.

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Q: Wallace frequently said we have the tools now to have an abundant life. It's a matter of economics, of political will to actually do it, to give everybody a decent life and allow them to have enough to eat, a place of shelter and proper education. I take it you would agree with that? We actually have the means at hand. It's not that we have a shortage of food. It's that we have a shortage of will.

McGovern: I think Henry Wallace would approve of a book I've recently written. The title is taken from the third of the four freedoms that President Roosevelt spelled out during World War II, the third freedom being freedom from want and from hunger. The opening sentence of that book is, "Hunger is a political problem." And I borrowed from Wallace's view of 60 years ago or more that we have the know-how to put an end to hunger in this world. We're already producing enough food to end hunger. Where it breaks down in terms of translation into enough for everybody is that a great many people don't have the money to buy that food. It's all well and good to say that the world can produce enough to feed everybody but if a third of the world or a fourth of the world doesn't have the money to buy it they're going to go hungry unless someone reaches out and says, "We'll help you for the time being on a gratis basis." That's what the US Food for Peace program was all about that I once headed. But that's also what Henry Wallace had in mind. He thought that ending hunger moved on two fronts. Number one, the immediate problem of distributing food to people who didn't have the funding to pay for it. Number two, helping farmers in the developing world improve their own food producing capability, teaching people about gardening, about plots of land that they could turn into food. So, he was both a scientist interested in helping farmers all over the world produce more efficiently, but he was also a humanitarian. He said, "We've got surpluses in this country we don't know what to do with. Let's make them available to hungry people in the United States, and let's make them available to friends around the world."

Q: Let's talk about his foreign policy views. I'd like to start with maybe 1945 or '46. What year did you get out of the military?

McGovern: I completed the last of 35 bombing missions, which is what you were expected to fly, in May of 1945. I stayed on in Europe for another couple of weeks to fly food that we had left over into Europe. The war had ended just a few days after I flew my last mission. And General Twining, the head of the 15th Air Force, suggested that instead of hauling our reserve food supply, medical supply, clothing, bedding and things like that, back to the States, let's get some of the crews to volunteer to fly it up to northern Europe, which is what we did. In some cases we were distributing food to the same people we'd been bombing just a few days or a few weeks before. Wallace, of course, would have approved of that enthusiastically. The war was not even over before he started talking and pushing for a United Nations as did President Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt. If you were to single out the three most effective champions of the United Nations in those months near the end of World War II right after the war, it would be President Franklin Roosevelt. He, of course, died a couple of months before the war ended, but he'd already helped launch the United Nations. Eleanor Roosevelt and Henry Wallace, those were the big three that I associated with it (and Senator Vandenberg, the

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Republican Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate). Those people were the ones that were really pressing for strong United Nations at the end of the war.

Q: How did the world look to you at that point? You were a young guy. You'd just been in a war. A lot of people were saying there was this rising threat from the Soviet Union. There was the threat of revolution everywhere. They felt we had to assert our will. I wonder how the world looked to an ordinary guy who had just completed his military service. Did you feel that there was a threat that we had to combat?

McGovern: Well, my first impressions after the war were that things were going to be a lot better than they had been at any time during my life. We had economic prosperity at home in the United States, part of which was the result of the New Deal measures, part of which was the result of the stimulus of the war industries and our shipment of supplies of all kinds all over the world. Everybody had a job. The factories were running full tilt. I didn't immediately see a serious problem with the Soviet Union. They, after all, were our allies in World War II. And Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin joined together in bringing about the victory over Hitler and his Axis friends. So, I thought with the United Nations in place and with a continuation of the kind of wartime cooperation we'd had with these soldiers, --we knew that they were Communist then, we knew that they had a different view of how society should be organized-- but we recognized we had a common threat in Hitler, Japan and Italy. So we put aside those ideological differences. And while it wasn't always easy, we managed to cooperate and to win the war. I thought that cooperation should have continued. I thought maybe both sides, both Washington and Moscow, gave up too early on the possibility of continuing the wartime cooperation. It's an interesting thing that Wendell Wilke, who went abroad at Roosevelt's suggestion after he was defeated by Roosevelt in 1940, came back and wrote a book on his findings. It was called "One World." That was probably 1942 when he got around to publishing his book. "Everywhere in this world," he said, "the chief source of power and influence of the United States rests on the attitude of goodwill that people everywhere have towards the United States." I think Wallace believed we could build on that reservoir of goodwill and that it wasn't simply that people admired us for our overwhelming military power. They admired us because of what we stood for in the world, for freedom, for dignity, for justice. Those were the things that the world admired. And those were the things in my mind when I came back from World War II. I was very proud of the United States. I had total confidence in our national leaders. I had great confidence in the United Nations. I came back from the war an optimist.

Q: The way Wallace articulated that view in his famous speech during World War II, where he spoke of what should follow World War II, was essentially of "the common man." This was his response of course to Henry Luce's vision of "An American Century." Wallace's view was that this should be the moment when ordinary people can find a decent life all over the world. Is that really the beginning of this debate that followed over the next decade about how America should conduct itself vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, in relation to Europe and the rest of the world and really resulted in the rise of the Cold War?

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McGovern: I think that Henry Luce's speech "The American Century" was the opening gun in an effort to emphasize the military power and force of the United States, the economic dominance of the United States. Each time he made one of those speeches he'd say, "We'll exercise this as we see fit. We're going to be in the forefront on the military front, on the economic front and in every other way culturally, politically, trade wise. Everything in the century is going to be in effect in which America orders the world according to our preferences." Henry Wallace never mentioned Luce's name in his reply, but he delivered a speech called "The Century of the Common Man," not the "American Century" but the "Century of the Common Man." Let me say first of all, that was in much better taste. Here we were fighting with the British as our allies. They were almost "done in" by Hitler in the Battle of Britain. Russia has 22 million of its citizens killed stopping the Red Army when it went east into Russia -- laid waste to at least half of the entire Soviet Union. It wasn't in very good taste for a leading American publisher saying in the middle of that war, this is 1942, "This is going to be the century of America. Forget about the Russians; forget about the British; the French, the rest of the world, the Asians, the Africans, those in the Middle East-- the American Century." Wallace said, "No, this is going to be the "century of the common man," a century where people everywhere --in the United States, in Britain, in Russia, in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America, in the Middle East-- the ordinary people that live in those countries. It's going to be their century." I think it was much closer to the vision of our founders, much closer to the spirit of Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson. It was within the spirit of a true American involvement in the life of the world-- not as a domineering factor-- but as a participant in the life of the world. I thought it was Wallace's greatest speech.

Q: And yet he was attacked so often during that period. The word that kept coming up was that he was naive, that he didn't understand the real threat facing this country from Russia and elsewhere, from Communist movements in Greece or in Eastern Europe.

McGovern: Well, let's be clear on one thing. Wallace had no use for Communism. He had no use for Stalinism. A dictatorship of that kind was repugnant to Henry Wallace. Wallace was a Progressive American capitalist who believed in the American system of free enterprise and who, incidentally, made a personal fortune as a businessman. Not that somebody gave it to him. He went out there and built the Pioneer seed company and, working with his family, turned it into one of the most successful private corporations in America. He always believed that free enterprise was the way to go and that the government should respect that and function in a way to encourage business and agriculture and other aspects of our private economy. So he was never, as some people said, "soft on Communism" or "soft on the Kremlin." But like Roosevelt, like Churchill, like Wendell Wilke (Roosevelt's opponent in 1940), he believed that we belong to one world and that we had to live that way. Wilke, another Republican-- which Wallace was until 1936, -- believed that we had to find a way to get along with the Russians after World War II. You can't read that little book of his "One World" without seeing that turn

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up every few pages. He was absolutely certain that it would be a catastrophe if we didn't find some way to get into a working relationship with the Russians.

Who is to say they're wrong about that? We took the other route. We armed ourselves to the teeth. We built up enough nuclear power to obliterate the Earth time after time. The Russians did the same thing. Is it possible that Wallace was right that we should have been a little more patient, a little more imaginative in trying to sort out the common ground between the Russians on one hand and the Americans on the other?

By the way, John Kennedy raised some of those questions in 1963, the year in which he was assassinated. He raised the questions, "Had we looked at the various possibilities of finding common ground between these two great superpowers?" I think Wallace suggested a corrective there that should have been given more consideration than it was.

Q: What if he had prevailed? What if he had somehow or other won this debate of the "century of the common man" versus the "American century?"

McGovern: You know the assumption of the Cold War is that if we let our guard down one inch the Russians would attack us the next day, that the only thing that kept the Russians from taking over Western Europe and then attacking us was our main military power, our NATO alliance, our unprecedented military budgets. That's the only thing that stood between us and annihilation. Wallace never believed that. I'm not sure I've ever believed it. I think that both sides were terrified at the prospect of a nuclear exchange. We could have put a lid on that arms race much sooner than we did. We could have pressed for reasonable controls on arms. I would like to have seen that route tried. I think that if there's any alternative that was never really thoughtfully considered that was it-- the possibility that maybe Russians and Americans could live at peace on the same planet. It took us about half a century or more to come around to that view after Gorbachev started expressing those views to President Reagan and found a ready listener in Reagan. I wish we'd have tried it sooner as Wallace suggested.

Q: Even as Wallace was literally on his deathbed, he had been trying to talk to people about his views of what was then the emerging war in Vietnam. And he said (I think in rather powerful words) that policies of Truman and James Byrnes (former Secretary of State), will yet make this country bleed from every pore. And I'm wondering if you feel that there's a line stretching back from that fight up to the war in Vietnam, which he became a prominent critic of?

McGovern: Well, the war in Vietnam was the most costly by-product of the Cold War. We never would have gone into Vietnam had it not been for decades of conditioning that convinced us that we couldn't let Communism succeed anywhere. That's what 'containment' was all about. Every place in the world where the Communists had any kind of a foothold, we had to move in and see what could be done to contain it and turn it back. And I do think the early decisions that eventually pulled us into Vietnam with an army of over 500,000 men began in 1945 and '46 when the Truman administration decided to back France in its effort to recover its colonies in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. That was the fateful first step in what became a 30-year American involvement in

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French Indochina. Most Americans had never heard of Vietnam or Cambodia or Laos at that time, but our policymakers had heard about it. I don't think they knew much about it, but they knew where it was. And they knew the French wanted to get back in there and re-establish their colonies after Japan had been defeated. And so they offered to finance a major part of the French effort there to recapture their colonies. As you know, the Vietnamese finally defeated them. It took about eight years to do it-- 1946-1954. But they did smash the best the French had to offer in military forces, the cream of the French army was out there. And they were defeated. And it was after that point, having invested billions of dollars in this losing French effort, that we took it over-- not so much to establish American colonies but to make sure that whoever lived in those French colonies was not a Communist. So, Wallace is right in tracing the bleeding that we eventually underwent in Vietnam to the decisions being made in 1945 and '46 in the Truman administration--decisions by the way which the Republican Congress strongly backed too.

Q: I'd like to ask you a little bit about your recollections or your views of the Progressive Party. As a young man you attended that convention that nominated Wallace, really the only major convention in the party's history. What attracted you initially to the Progressive convention? Was it your admiration for Wallace or just your general idealism? I think some people maybe were disgusted with the activity or the actions of the two major parties in the country. Were you?

McGovern: I was a graduate student at Northwestern University at that time. I'd just put away my flying togs as a World War II pilot, and I enrolled at Northwestern. I discovered after I'd been there a couple of years that practically the whole faculty in the history department there (and most of the graduate students studying history) were sympathetic to Wallace. In fact, there was a poll conducted at that time nationwide among professors of history and graduate students in history as to what American most closely resembled Thomas Jefferson. Henry Wallace won that poll. It wasn't a scientific poll, but its purpose was to get the opinion of professors and their students. That view was very strong after World War II among graduate students and history professors and political science professors. And so when Wallace announced he was going to run as a third party candidate on the Progressive ticket because he was unhappy with the drift into the Cold War and the need for a stronger stand on civil rights and on the rights of labor and working people and so on, that struck a favorable response with me. I was then writing a doctoral dissertation on the Colorado coal strike in 1913 and '14. I saw how the miners had been mistreated by absentee owners. So, I had a deep sympathy for working people, especially for miners and for farmers, the people I had grown up with in South Dakota. What Wallace was saying resonated strongly with me as it did my fellow graduate students and my teachers there at Northwestern. So, Eleanor and I decided, when we were invited to do so, to be delegates to the Progressive convention meeting in Philadelphia. I discovered that Quentin Burdick, later to become a United States Senator from North Dakota, was also there. Neither one of us had any thought then we'd be United States Senators, but we were there at that convention. There probably were a few Marxists there too. I didn't meet any of them, but I'm sure there were a handful at the

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convention, although Wallace certainly had no sympathy with Communism. But there's always a few fringe groups like that, that turn up at any convention. They used to turn up for Roosevelt too when he was running. But the people that I'd met at that convention were just ordinary farmers, workers, small business people, doctors and lawyers, just ordinary Americans from across the country. I thought it was wonderful. There were some aspects of the convention that went a little too far for me. But I thought that it was a very constructive and healthy convention.

Q: What was it like? Did you attend meetings?

McGovern: There was a lot of singing. Pete Seeger was there leading folk singing and everybody entered into that. It was wide open. There were "no holds barred" at that convention. It's the only one I had attended up until that time in my life. But I thought that it was a free and open expression of what a minority of Americans thought was important. A lot of the major papers went out of their way to portray this as somehow tightly controlled by Communists and far leftists and so forth. But when you read the account of it, it's much as you described it. Well, as I say, I'm sure there were people trying to pull strings as there usually are in any convention. But I didn't see where it was any kind of a Stalinist operation; that's ridiculous. These were church people and right out of the soil of America. I'd say that 95% of them were people that could have been attending a Democratic or a Republican convention almost as easily. They had an idealistic streak. They thought America could do better. They didn't think the world was as evil as some people did. They thought the possibilities of reform and constructive change were available to us both in foreign and domestic policy. I didn't find it an experience that turned me off on politics at all. By the way, I went there as a registered Republican. My dad and mother were lifelong Republicans, and I grew up that way. I married a Democrat. Eleanor's father was the Democratic County Chairman in Sanborn County, South Dakota. So maybe she had something to do with switching me over to the Democrats, but I suspect Wallace had something to do with it too.

Q: Were you surprised at all by the coverage that it got which portrayed it as something other than what you felt it was?

McGovern: I was surprised. It's always been hard for me to accept the fact that the press is controlled by anybody. I still think the American press is the best in the world. But it's a fact that the rebels have a little harder time getting their case stated fairly in the press than the people that 'go along' do. I think the people that own newspapers, radio stations and television stations are a little more comfortable with people that don't rock the boat. So I suppose I wasn't entirely surprised that the press gave Wallace kind of an unfavorable treatment. And, by the way, some of that was fed by very clever politicians around the country who did not wish Wallace well. They saw him as a possible threat to the election of the Democratic president, that he might pull just enough votes away from President Truman to defeat him in 1948. So they weren't happy about this third party challenge. As it turns out, Truman won anyway. But that was the fear that I think drove some of the 'spear throwing' at Wallace.

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Q: What went wrong? He ended up with only a little over a million votes-- although the votes in Illinois were never really counted-- and no electoral votes. He came in fourth behind even Strom Thurmond. What do you think happened to that campaign?

McGovern: There probably were some political misjudgments in the campaign, a tendency to let some of those who were much further to the left than Wallace get too much attention. Wallace himself might have been a little more forceful in asserting his own commitment to the American system of economics, the American system of government. When you're under attack, though unfairly, you have a tendency rather than lean in that direction to go further the other direction. It's almost a defensive reaction. I think that maybe the public relations aspects of the campaign could have been handled a little more effectively than they were. On Wallace's central views, his internationalism, his progressive capitalism here at home, I think the average American would have bought into that if it weren't for the way it was cluttered by the press, by his enemies, by his critics, to the point where he was always painted as a wild-eyed radical. Anybody who knew Wallace knew that that was a lie. They knew that he was a genuine 100% American patriot, no question about that. They knew that he was committed to free enterprise and was a practitioner of it. They knew that his heart beat for the American farmer, the American worker and the independent businessman. And it's just a tragedy of American politics that those central truths of Wallace's character and beliefs were blurred as they were in that campaign. He was marginalized like many reformist candidates are. And I suppose the going establishment is always going to go after anybody that disturbs their equanimity.

Q: The party didn't last too long after that. It made it through one more election cycle. By that time Wallace himself had broken with his own party over the issue of the Korean War. Why do you think it didn't survive more than about four years?

McGovern: I think this is a two party country. That may or not be our biggest virtue, but it's awfully tough. We haven't had a new party come into being and make it since Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans in the 1860s. I think we're a two party government. I think we're somewhat skeptical of third parties. Almost invariably they'll be depicted as so far out of the mainstream that they're not relevant. I think that's what happened to the Progressive Party. It happened to other third parties too. Where is Ross Perot these days? Third parties don't have a very long life in the United States. And those that have had a little longer life than the others have found their platforms being adopted by one or the other or both of the major parties.

Q: Is there a sense in which the Progressive did have some influence? If you look at the Progressive Party platform in '48, it's virtually the agenda of American politics and American liberals for the next 50 years.

McGovern: Yes, that platform was a very, very traditional progressive or liberal platform. Wallace was a confirmed New Dealer, confirmed follower of Franklin

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Roosevelt. I don't think he ever had a basic quarrel with Roosevelt. If he did, I'm not aware of it. So it doesn't surprise me that the platform that was drafted that year wasn't all that different from what became the platform of Truman, Johnson, Kennedy, Carter, other Democrats since then. I don't know whether the Progressive Party is responsible for the fact that those things were carried over later on, but certainly they didn't do anything to discourage people in that direction.

Q: Wallace maintained that for the Democratic Party to survive and thrive, it had to be a progressive party. It had to be representing liberal ideals and ideals of Franklin Roosevelt. Do you think he was right about that? Or is there a way for the Democratic Party to just sort of muddle down through the middle?

McGovern: I don't know how to answer that. All I can say to you is this: I don't want to belong to a party that's not progressive and liberal. That's why I'm a Democrat. If the Democratic Party deserts those essential progressive and liberal ideas, then I have no real enthusiasm to participate in the process.

Q: Henry Wallace was a very complex man and was involved in all kinds of different things. He was a talented plant scientist. He made important contributions to economics and statistics. He started a famous business. But he was also a political figure who had very strong views on things. What do you see as his legacy?

McGovern: Wallace, more than any other prominent American I can think of that ever served in government, married science to agriculture. The revolutions in agricultural production that occurred in the '30s,'40s,'50s and since then, directly trace back to Wallace. The development of hybrid seed corn which is now used everywhere, his constant fascination with plant life and the modification of plants, his interest even in insects and the soil.... The legacy of food, agriculture and science is a very strong one for Henry Wallace. He was, without question, the greatest Secretary of Agriculture in American history. I don't think anyone who has studied the history of American agriculture will dispute that. Secondly, he wanted to share that knowledge and that abundance with the rest of the world. Thirdly, he was an internationalist in the sense that from the beginning he thought the United Nations was crucial to our proper role in the world. And of course this great message-- "the century of the common man." No one is ever going to forget that phrase entirely. So I'd say those are the areas in which Wallace's legacy rests most firmly.

Q: I'd like to get a sense of your perspective on what was going on with the American farmer from roughly World War I through the New Deal policies. What was the lifestyle like? What was happening on the farm, and how did that motivate Wallace's perspective, views and New Deal policies?

McGovern: Most Americans think the Depression began in 1929 when the stock market crashed. Every farmer knows that it began in 1921, when farm prices collapsed at the end of the First World War. We had then been exporting everything we

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could scrape together and sending it over to the war effort. But that all collapsed. Farm prices went down to a "below break even point." So, farmers in South Dakota, in Iowa, in Nebraska, all across the whole farm belt, they were struggling seriously with economic problems a full eight years before the stock market crashed. And because farmers were in trouble, they were defaulting on their loans. So the banks were going broke. We had 150 banks go broke in South Dakota in the period of the early 1920s before anybody even heard about a stock market collapse. We had other problems out there. In addition to the collapse of the farm prices, we had drought. We had grasshopper invasions. We had dust storms. We had rot on the part of some of the crops because of bad environmental conditions. So farmers were in deep trouble throughout the decade of the 1920s, and that's when Henry Wallace developed his early interest in doing something about those problems.

Q: Some Americans today seem to have a sentimental view about the family farm, maybe not a realistic view. What is the attraction to making a life off the land? How does that land draw you in?

McGovern: The good soil is really what people in this country were out there in search of. The Homestead Act of 1862 that was passed right in the middle of the Civil War, the Morrill Act created the land grant colleges, the creation of the Department of Agriculture, all of those came at mid-century. I think all three in 1862. It was partly because of the pull of the land, the feeling that a farmer out there with his family working that land was somehow the backbone of America. That was Jefferson's view even earlier. He said that the small landholder is the most precious part of the state. Jefferson was always a little suspicious of people who lived in the cities. But those who had their feet in the land and their hands in the soil he thought were the real sinews of American economic power. And I think that view is carried over so that many Americans today, even those who have never lived on a farm, are drawn to the image of a farmer out there toiling in the field, bringing in his crops, taking care of the cattle, producing the dairy products, all the other things that sustain life.

Q: Would Wallace have been the same man had that soil and the agricultural landscape not been a part of him, do you think?

McGovern: No, Wallace would not have been the same man. He was so tied to the land, the farmers and the rural way of life that it's quite possible we would have heard little or nothing from Henry Wallace except for that background in the soil and in agriculture.