

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,
Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum
Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

Q: I'd like to start just generally if you could discuss the Hoover/Wallace relationship, the family relationship and why the animosity did exist.

Richard Norton Smith: Well, it is complicated because in some ways they had a lot of things in common. First of all, Hoover is as unconventional a political figure as Henry Wallace. Hoover comes into politics as the great humanitarian, the man who fed Belgium, Soviet Russia after the war, ran the American Food Administration for Woodrow Wilson, great administrator, a great engineer was his other title but probably without a political gene in his makeup. Wallace, I guess a very unconventional political figure, a plant geneticist who turns out to be a superb administrator. His father, of course, Henry Wallace is Hoover's cabinet colleague, Secretary of Agriculture, and Hoover was a man who, well, Hoover had fingers in every pie in Washington, that's just the way he was. He was popularly known as Secretary of Commerce and under-secretary of everything else. And I think it chafed a number of his colleagues including Secretary Wallace. I think there was a personal element there, more important there was a policy element. Hoover walked a stance at McNary-Haugen and a lot of the efforts to address the domestic crisis of agriculture by subsidizing, in effect, the dumping of American surpluses overseas. On the other hand, he was much more willing to see government become involved in addressing the problems of agriculture than say Calvin Coolidge, his boss.

In 1924 Wallaces' Farmer endorses the Progressive Party of Bob LaFollette, not a step that would endear it to Hoover. More to the point, Henry A. Wallace breaks with the Republican Party to support Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. And then when he becomes Secretary of Agriculture the policies that he follows are as, if not more offensive to Hoover than any personal animosities that may exist.

Q: Why were the animosities there?

Richard Norton Smith: To the conservative, planned scarcity - slogan there - is Alice-in-Wonderland economics. Here you are in a desperately impoverished country where riches are just out of reach of most Americans, where people are going hungry and the government is paying farmers to destroy crops and slaughter pigs. It doesn't make sense, it doesn't make common sense. It does make sense if you conclude that the crisis of agriculture is rooted in overproduction. And indeed you can go back almost to the roots of World War I when Hoover was sloganeering under Food Will Win the War. And it became economically attractive for a lot of people to grow a lot more than they had before. And when the war ended the surpluses continued, the surpluses in the 20's contributed, in part, to the farm crisis. So, I suppose from Wallace's standpoint he was just applying perhaps radical medicine to address a disease rooted in Hoover's policies before he was President. But there was also a personal element to this. Wallace is not simply the dreamy mystic that his conventional critics on the right would have you believe. He could also play hardball politics. In one off the record, he thought, conversation with a reporter, he suggested the reporter might want to follow Alan Hoover, the former President's son and suggested Alan Hoover had profited by twenty thousand dollars from a firm receiving government surplus payments while he and his father were criticizing the program. It turned out he had actually received two dollars.

The former president urged his son to sue Secretary Wallace. It didn't happen but that kind of thing. You know, so it was a combination. As most political rivalries are it's a combination of personal animosity

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,

Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

and principal disagreement and above all conflicting ambitions because Hoover wanted to be President again. Hoover wanted to redeem 1932. He wanted it in 1936, he wanted it in 1940. It was not an occurrence.

Q: What was going on in America in the mid to late 20's that both led to Hoover coming into office and then also more or less being forced out? What were the economic factors? What was going on in rural America?

Richard Norton Smith: Well, it was a time of ferment in many ways. Technology had sped up almost beyond the control of society. The consumer revolution was literally too much of a good thing because we were producing more cars and more radios and more appliances and more homes often on the installment plan than the wage base including agriculture was able to sustain. Critics refer to the new era. Hoover insisted that he shouldn't be held accountable for the failure of the new era, that he had never embraced it but he was certainly sufficiently celebratory of technology, standardization, new ways of building things. He had made it a personal cause as Secretary of Commerce to build eight hundred thousand homes a year.

Beyond that, however, the great tragedy of Hoover is that this man was as much of an idealist as Henry Wallace and in the end he was done in by his ideal. His ideal was bred into him as a Quaker just as I think Wallace's ideals were bred into him as in many ways the son of Midwestern populism. Hoover wasn't always a fair conservative, believed passionately that those days were over and a good thing too. He had seen in Belgium, he had seen in the Food Administration, he had seen in the Mississippi flood of 1927 evidence, abundant evidence to confirm his belief that the American people were the most generous in the world and if there was a crisis and you described need, whether it was in your neighborhood or in Soviet Russia, they would respond and they did. And the problem was in 1930, '31, '32 came a crisis of dimensions that no one had ever experienced before and having raised him to the Presidency that philosophy of voluntary cooperation in many ways padlocked him intellectually, made it impossible for him to think outside that box.

Q: With respect to rural America at that time, a lot of people talk about the fact that the Depression hit farms long before it hit the cities. Can you elaborate?

Richard Norton Smith: Sure, sure, I mean Main Street was hurting long before Wall Street and indeed there are people who believe that the whole 20's were an era of depression in rural America, much of it, in fact, the consequence of overproduction hanging over from World War I. Government could stimulate production as an act of wartime patriotism but seemingly no one in government had an idea how to turn off the spigot. And as the surpluses piled up, market forces being what they were, and you had a growing dichotomy between the urban industrial worker and with all of his installment plan prosperity and agricultural America. You know, it was a formula for disaster. And again the irony is there wasn't a depression in 1929, there wasn't a depression in 1930, there was a recession. The depression is really ushered in, in agricultural America, with the Dust Bowl and that's when hard times become desperate times.

Q: And getting back to the Hoover/Wallace relationship, it certainly had to have pained Hoover to lose his home state of Iowa in 1932 and to figure that Wallace was a significant factor in that. Of these two men, given this economic situation, these two men have vastly different approaches to dealing with economic issues. Can you describe, some people would say... liberal conservative, but it's not that.

Richard Norton Smith: No, it's much more psychological than that. Most people

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,

Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

aren't aware that they have ideologies, they have instincts and those instincts are bred into them by nature and by upbringing. Herbert Hoover was born to worship at the altar of self-reliance, a Quaker who once said that he was ten years old before he realized he could do something for the joy it provided, orphaned at the age of eight, emotionally stunted in many ways and yet also bred into him a genuine sense of Quaker idealism, Quaker opposition to war, a sense of obligation to others and indeed the need to justify one's own existence, a purposeful life, a life of service to others. Those are the instincts that led Hoover.

And indeed one of the great ironies is that it's only after he left office that he became popularly identified with reactionary conservatism. In the 20's, the equivalent of today's movement, conservatives were appalled by his activism. Coolidge said, "That man's given me advice for five years, all of it bad." Well, the advice was, "Do something, don't just sit there."

And in that sense, before 1928, notwithstanding their personal rivalries, Wallace and Hoover were not that far apart in some ways and indeed in his later years Hoover, who had criticized the welfare state in the 30's came to be highly suspicious of the national security state in the 1940's and the 1950's. It's too easy to call him an isolationist. He wasn't an isolationist but in some ways he and Wallace overlapped in their foreign policy although Hoover was a militant anti-Communist.

Q: For different reasons?

Richard Norton Smith: For different reasons, yeah.

Q: A lot of the New Deal policies obviously came out of this economic turmoil. How would you describe the New Deal?

Richard Norton Smith: The New Deal was a historic improvisation summed up in a wonderful story about the morning meetings that President Roosevelt would have - Henry Morgenthau, his Secretary of the Treasury, the President having breakfast in bed and over his scrambled eggs deciding that day on the price of gold. And one day picking a number out of thin air and telling the Secretary of the Treasury, I like that number, it's good luck.

There was, about Franklin Roosevelt, a quality of, an openness of new ideas, new people, an essentially experimental mind. The great difference temperamentally and intellectually between Hoover and Roosevelt, Hoover was a rarity, Hoover was a man who came into office with a philosophy as well as a clear agenda of what he wanted to do. Most of the time, that's a prerequisite of success. Not in 1929. Roosevelt on the other hand had an extraordinary ability to look beyond ideology, the prison cell of ideology, and he understood, he had a tuning fork sensitivity to the mood of people including people outside his class, outside his background, outside his region.

He understood that the temperament of the American people by the summer of 1932 was for action. They almost didn't care what the action was. They wanted government to be a player, they were willing for the first time, since World War I which was an aberration, to look to Washington. They wanted someone to reassure them, to give them hope, to give them a job, to give them confidence about the future all of which were sadly lacking on March 4, 1933.

And given that temperament Roosevelt was naturally drawn to people who shared it. He had reasons to be politically indebted to Henry Wallace because of what he had done in 1932 and because of the influence of Wallaces' Farmer, because of the prestige attached to the Wallace name, but far more important than that I think was the two men had a shared temperament. They were not bound by inhibitions, ideological or otherwise. In 1940 Jim Farley was one of many professional politicians who tried to talk FDR out of putting Wallace on the ticket. And Roosevelt said the man's a philosopher, he has ideas, he'll help the people think.

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,

Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

Well, leaving aside the question of whether the people needed Washington to help them think or not, I mean from a conservative viewpoint you could also find, take exception to, some of the ideas that he had but it does illustrate, I think, one of the bonds beyond politics, beyond ideology, beyond programs. FDR (pauses) it turned out, FDR liked originals. Wallace was an original. Wallace wasn't horrified at the prospect of upsetting traditional agricultural policy. Wallace was a radical. It's no, and I don't mean that in some pejorative way, it's no accident that his closest allies in the early New Deal were people like Rex Tugwell, people who believed in a planned economy, people who looked at what Arthur Schlesinger called the Ill Order and concluded that it was hopelessly discredited and if the old order was history you needed a new order. And Henry Wallace was bold enough and experimental enough to be a champion of the new order. But anyone who knew FDR knew that Franklin Roosevelt was much less guided by philosophy than he was by temperament, and he was bold and he was original and he could be radical but he was, at the same time, cautious and calculating and supremely gifted with political intuition. And he was literally all things to all men. He is the most protean figure certainly in 20th century American politics.

Q: It sounds like, from what you're saying, that in America at this time there's a shift looking to government to help guide them and Wallace has often been described as a common man. But there had to be a lot of people...

Richard Norton Smith: Wallace was the least common. Wallace, it's fascinating you say that. The man who defined the century, the author of the Century of the Common Man was as uncommon a man as has ever risen high in the councils of American government. That was his strength. That was his undoing. Stop and think about what Henry Wallace brought to Washington. He was a plant geneticist, interesting background, a journalist, but he was much more than that. He was a mystic, he was a metaphysicist. Politicians aren't very good with metaphysics.

This was a man whose interests were catholic, sometimes embarrassingly so. He was as intrigued by Confucian economics and the aerodynamics of the boomerang as by anything that politicians talked about in Washington. He was said to commune regularly with the spirit of a dead Sioux Chieftain. Well, this makes him a fascinating character and I suspect FDR found him wonderful company, stimulating, decidedly unconventional. Beyond that he was a total loyalist to Roosevelt and more than that, he was an original New Dealer. He was a man ahead of his time in many ways, most notably in his attitude towards civil rights but he was also a man out of his time in many ways.

And so as David McCullough says, he was an easy man to make fun of and in politics that's a deadly amount of baggage to carry around. If you could become a joke then people don't have to address your ideas. And in some ways that's been Wallace's historical fate, not that he's a joke, but he's very easily, he lends himself to caricature. He did when he was alive and he does even more since 1965. But common, no, there's nothing common except in his affinity for the common man. Franklin Roosevelt was an uncommon man but he was an authentic champion of working people, of the dispossessed, of the marginalized. In that sense, Henry Wallace was at one with the common man but not for a moment was he common himself.

People have understandably contrasted the Century of the Common Man with Henry Luce's, The American Century. But there's actually a third point to this triangle. Hoover, as an ex-president was so distressed over the implications of Wallace's Common Man that he wrote a remarkable rejoinder called The Uncommon Man and it's classic meritocracy, what Jefferson talked about as the natural aristocracy of talent and virtue.

He said that when we get sick we want an uncommon doctor to operate, when we go to war we want an uncommonly skillful general or admiral to lead us. The great advances in human history have been brought about by distinctly uncommon men and women and he concluded by saying I've never found an easier way to rile an American parent than to suggest his son or daughter is common. Well, I mean, this

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,

Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

is the dialogue of the deaf. Hoover refuses to understand what Wallace is saying on his terms and likewise Wallace's Common Man is not as antithetical to Hoover's unfettered ability to ascend but that's how caricatures get formed.

Q: Specifically as it related to your comment that a lot of Americans were looking to Washington for guidance...

Richard Norton Smith: They were radicalized. This was a break, this was a radical break with tradition. Remember, the founders gave us a small government. The founders did not create an executive who was supposed to be a swashbuckling, domineering, self-dramatizing, agenda setter. Theodore Roosevelt created the modern presidency coinciding with the rise of the mass media and the emergence of America on the world stage. Foreign policy then as now tends to concentrate attention and power in the executive. But that was an aberration. Woodrow Wilson returned to that with considerable grief during World War I and after World War I. The 20's were much more typical of the American political culture than they seem today because we see, unfortunately, you know, life has moved forward but unfortunately history is always seen backwards and it should be the other way around. I mean, to understand we are all products of what goes before. And so it took an enormous earthquake for people to throw over their lifelong expectations regarding the role of the federal government but that's what the Depression was.

Today it seems a sure thing that FDR was foreordained to succeed. He didn't think that. On a train to Washington he said to someone that if he failed he would be the last President of the United States and failure was not an option.

The reason why Franklin Roosevelt is considered one of the great American presidents is because overnight he managed to transform the psychology of the American people. And the safety net that was put into place, largely improvised, and still in place. In 1980 Ronald Reagan's friend and admirer George Will said the American people are conservative, they want to conserve the New Deal and that's what great leaders do. They shatter the consensus before them and they replace it with one of their own.

As in the case of FDR it lasted 50 years, far longer than most consensus.

Q: At the time that Wallace comes along, the New Deal policies come along, what were the critics saying? I mean, this is a policy that's certainly not embraced by the conservatives.

Richard Norton Smith: No, certainly not. But you have to remember, the conservatives, for the most part, were so thoroughly discredited - the bankers who were thoroughly corrupt and who were discredited for a generation or more. Conservatism, I won't say it had lost its voice, but there were very few people inclined to heed its voice. And most of the opposition, really, was left to the nation's press which was by no means unanimously critical but it was still articulate, principal voices of conservative opposition, some of them extreme -- Carl McCormick of the Chicago Tribune is a great example yet even the Tribune was friendly to FDR for the first year or so.

It is true that Wallace very quickly became a lightning rod. FDR's very, well he was an amorphous leader, quick silver in temperament and program, difficult to pin down. He was surrounded by lightning rods, another mark of a brilliant politician and Wallace was one of the key lightning rods. Again, not only because of the kind of man he was but because of the policies that he was pursuing, piling up cotton, slaughtering pigs in a time of mass privation struck not just conservatives but many observers as an innovation too far.

And yet, it's interesting, by all accounts Wallace's agriculture department was one of the best administered in Washington. It certainly was a favorite around the Roosevelt cabinet table, it grew dramatically not from bureaucratic bloat but really soil conservation and the rural electrical administration. I mean, a whole host of innovative ideas addressing genuine and long neglected rural concerns and they were good politics too. And so you have this dichotomy of Wallace, the popular image of the dreamy, moony,

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,

Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

slightly other worldly mystic with a very skilled even hard headed administrator. To this day people who take umbrage of Wallace's policies concede his success as Secretary as Agriculture.

One thing too, I wanted to, because you look for a historical antecedent to Wallace and of course you can look at his father and his grandfather and the tradition there. He really is a populist and I mean, that's a term also loosely thrown around. But I mean, he's a populist in a lot of ways, populist of the 1890's who were absorbed by the Democrats and certainly by William Jennings Bryan. Talked about graduated income taxes and votes for women and a whole host of social reforms that were enacted by a later generation, many of them by Woodrow Wilson.

That's a parallel with Wallace. We could talk later on about Wallace's, sort of what I think is unlikely as it may seem his greatest historical contribution. But, I mean, certainly Wallace's admirers are entitled to claim that he was a prophet with or without honor and particularly whatever else you say about that '48 campaign and it's easy to ridicule that campaign. One thing that he deserves credit for is the courage that he shows going into the South, braving the hail of eggs and worse and standing up for civil rights long before it had entered the political mainstream. That in a lot of ways is his finest hour.

Q: I'm going to come back to '48 so we'll talk about that. But, you know, as we moved through the 30's and we hit the 1940 election I can understand your comment that Roosevelt would have liked him as a lightning rod, would have liked him as a person of interest to have around the table. But why as the Vice President?

Richard Norton Smith: I think he was sincere in what he said to Jim Farley, that he was a philosopher, that he had ideas, that he would help people think. He was sick of John Nance Garner who was not only not a philosopher but who was arguably more of a Republican. You have to remember that the 30's are a fascinating time because of the realignments that are taking place. For the first time you have the nexus of the Republican Dixiecrat Coalition. It's still a minority for most of the 30's, not after 1938. The New Deal essentially ended with the 1938 elections and what emerged from there was a somewhat revised, somewhat revitalized Republican Party, still a minority but a working majority if you added in the Southern Democrats who were hostile to much of the New Deal, certainly to the centralization of power in Washington and certainly to Henry Wallace.

Wallace was a polarizing figure, there's no doubt about it. Roosevelt admired him for that. Roosevelt was already looking down the road toward more radical political realignment. I mean, in 1944 he and Wendell Wilkie would all but reach agreement before that year's election to create a new political party where liberal Republicans would join New Deal Democrats and they would leave Southern Democrats to join conservative Republicans.

Q: In '40 the way you're describing it, it's one thing to admire Wallace but how do you win with Wallace?

Richard Norton Smith: Well, you know, there were certain arrogant streaks to Roosevelt. Running for a third term struck many people as a sign of arrogance implying no one else in this country can possibly take us through these dangerous waters. And 1944 is supreme arrogance of a dying man who believes that he's never going to die. I think Roosevelt legitimately believed that if the New Deal was to have historical permanence then it would have to be accompanied by a political realignment.

No more of this short-term balancing act geographically, ideologically. He would pick a running mate who was his comrade. And Henry Wallace was a New Dealer, reliable, he'd been through the fires and politically you could make the case that he would have strength in agricultural America, traditionally

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,

Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

Republican area. What's interesting is how he went about it because he cut his Dutch up, as he would say, and he basically told the convention if you don't nominate this man, find yourself another Presidential candidate. Of course that was also the famous convention, the convention in Chicago, the voice from the sewers. If enthusiasm wasn't sufficient enough you could always manufacture some. And so this disembodied voice from beneath the convention floor in the employ of the Chicago Democratic machine would periodically shout out, New York for Roosevelt, Illinois for Roosevelt, the world for Roosevelt. And following his nomination Mrs. Roosevelt did an unprecedented thing, not just going to the convention and speaking to the convention as her husband's surrogate, something we take for granted today, but in 1940 it was one of the more radical steps in a radical administration. But making it crystal clear the reason she was there was to secure Henry Wallace's nomination.

Hers was a fighting faith, a militant liberalism. Wallace embodied that, that's why both Roosevelts were drawn to him, Eleanor I think more passionately, certainly more enduringly than Franklin. So, in the end, the 1940 convention became a test of Franklin Roosevelt's control over his party and equally important of that party's willingness to move at least a little down the road of radical political realignment. And I have to say Wallace, because there was a Rockefeller book - Nelson comes into the administration in 1940 as a coordinator of inter-American affairs - Henry Wallace was a man of many enthusiasms and one of the most intense was Latin America. He went to a weekly luncheon of tamales where only Spanish was spoken, he read his Bible in Spanish every night. He was passionate about Latin America as was Nelson Rockefeller. And Nelson had a genius for ingratiating himself with people who could do something for him and the Vice President of the United States was one of those. And they became regular tennis partners at Rockefeller's estate on Fox Hall Road. But not only that - marvelous story - Sunday evenings at Fox Hall Road there was a weekly get together and dedicated to the glories of Latin culture and again, Spanish exclusively was spoken where possible, Spanish songs were sung.

And one evening Nelson gets up and says, number 23, number 23, Expropriation. And they started singing this song and they're bellowing out a chorus, Expropriation, Expropriation. And it's a Mexican ditty whose lyrics among others read "we've expropriated the oil wells, now we'll expropriate the Atlantic Ocean."

Q: A curious thing for the Vice President of the United States to be singing or I suppose the grandson of...

Richard Norton Smith: Yes, well, and so you have the Vice President of the United States and the grandson of the founder of Standard Oil extolling musically the glories of violent revolution and anti-capitalist politics. Not a lot of irony in either man, the only reason I think they got along so well. There's also, there's a wonderful story which richly illustrates Wallace at his loopy. Nelson Rockefeller would often visit him at his apartment in Washington and would bring friends along and it was a salon and there were acolytes and the great man sort of sat with his eyes closed and people would wait for pearls of wisdom to emerge. And one night he says, apropos of nothing, liberty and unity. The liberty of the individual and the unity of mankind, that is the issue and he fell silent and his eyes fell closed again. And then after a few minutes he says, corn, and there's this pause. People lean forward and he said, the rest of the world is a wheat civilization, we are a corn civilization, so is Latin America, that's the tie that binds, corn. And he fell silent, the oracle was out of business for the evening. But it was, Nelson is bowled over and he says, there's no two ways about it, that man has got to be President of the United States. One begins to understand why a lot of more orthodox Republicans even then looked upon Nelson as not one of them. But there was this sense, I mean, you do understand why professional politicians would look upon Wallace as an odd duck. Quite apart from, well, the 1940 campaign, the famous - what's the name of the Russian mystic? - Roerich or anyway, he has a story that has only recently come to light. FDR had a taping system, incredibly primitive, big boxy equipment under the floor of the oval office and one of the tapes that has surfaced involves Henry Wallace and FDR's opponent in that year's election, Wendell

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,

Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

Wilkie. And the Republicans are threatening to release these embarrassing, if not worse, letters that Wallace had written to a Russian mystic in the mid 1930's and FDR, extreme pragmatist, is talking out loud. Well, you know, Wendell has a girlfriend and she's a book editor at the New York Herald Tribune. She was...Rita Van Dorn was her name. And he's strategizing that well, you know, if the Republicans think they can hurt us, you know, we can hurt them. And in fact, the letters were not released, Rita Van Dorn's name never surfaced, wouldn't happen today but I think 1940 is fascinating because you had two of the oddest men ever to get close to the Presidency or certainly two of the most unlikely. Wallace, who is this Republican turned Democrat, never accepted fully by his party's professionals at least and regarded as highly unorthodox. And Wendell Wilkie, Democrat turned Republican, my god he's a utilities executive, this Fifth Avenue Hoosier whose message basically is, you know, let my utilities go, and whose spontaneous campaign ignites in the spring of 1940 with a great deal of help from the New York media, the eastern establishment media. Alice Roosevelt Longworth famously said that... It's funny, I mean 1940 really is a crossroads in American history in so many ways. But I mean Wilkie is this, there's a reason Wilkie is forgotten today. I mean, Wilkie was a flash in the pan, a meteor but in many, many ways an artificial phenomenon. Alice Roosevelt Longworth said that his support sprang from the grassroots of every country club in America. Wallace - equally offbeat in a lot of ways. I mean, arguably the most unconventional man ever to almost become President of the United States. And he was really foisted on the Democratic Party in 1940.

I think, to be fair to the bosses, you know, to the Ed Paulys and Ed Flynn's of the world and even the Harry Trumans, Wallace wasn't a very good politician. And you've got to be at that level. He often seemed out of his element, didn't have instincts for politics, never ran for office like Herbert Hoover, one thing they have in common. And it showed but it was more than that. You know, he wasn't the kind of guy who would take your spare time and raise a glass for liberty in Sam Rayburn's board of education.... He preferred to stay in his apartment practicing Spanish. He was an intellectual. FDR was right, he was a man of ideas but he wasn't a man of political instincts. And story, I think it's Ed Duffy, Senator, New Dealer, the summer of 1943, first time anyone mentions to Truman the Vice Presidency. It's a Sunday afternoon in Washington, brunch and Duffy takes Truman aside, outside, and in strictest confidence he says, what do you think of Vice President Wallace? And Truman says, I think he's the best damn Secretary of Agriculture this country ever had. And that in a nutshell sums up the attitude of the professional politicians. And who is to say they were wrong? And indeed, I mean one thing you're obviously going to grapple with in looking at not only Wallace's historical legacy but the might-have-beens with Wallace more than most political figures. Tom Dewey is another, the question of what might have been hangs over this man and that's where conservatives, I mean, where he still obviously touches on the wrong nerve.

Q: Why do you think that is?

Richard Norton Smith: If you believe in a kind of moral equivalence between the United States and the Soviet Union, if you believe that the Cold War was as much a byproduct of the Truman Doctrine or the Marshall Plan, American aggressiveness if you will, as of Soviet domination or the desire for domination, if you believe that, then Henry Wallace is a prophet without honor, a man run over by militant nationalism, militarism and a kind of patriotism run amuck. If on the other hand you believe that Joe Stalin was a murderous psychopath atop a system that placed little if any value on human life and determined to annex Europe and any other portion of the world that it could and that the Truman Doctrine was a belated yet principled response to a genuine threat posed by the Soviet Union, then you believe Henry Wallace was, at the very least, criminally naive, not a dupe of the Communists as his critics said. The man was too intelligent to be a dupe, no one duped him. He was thoughtful, he had given a lot of thought to these issues but he was on the wrong side of history. And that's the cloud that hangs over

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,

Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

Wallace. But that's also what makes him, in many ways, a continuing subject of fascination. I think that it is the height of naiveté to put your faith in Stalin in 1947, 1948, to oppose the Berlin airlift, to oppose the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine.

All I can say is, as I suspect a lot of Democratic professionals said, thank God that Harry Truman and not Henry Wallace was President on April 12, 1945. I mean, you have to go back to, I mean, the reason that the, you know, the Flynn's and the Paulys and the Mitchells were eager to replace Wallace was because of their conviction that Franklin Roosevelt was a dying man. Pauly said as much. He didn't expect Roosevelt would live out his term and I don't think anyone really expected him to live very far into his term. And they believe that Henry Wallace would be a disastrous replacement for FDR and I think not just for their own political reasons but for larger geo-political reasons. And I think they were right. Interestingly enough, and part of the poignancy of the Wallace story, is that he was evicted from his own political movement for the crime of endorsing Truman's police action in Korea in the face of a blatant invasion by the North of the South.

I don't know whether the scales had fallen from his eyes but in any event 1948 is fascinating for a lot of reasons. Election night '48 is, so much about '48 has entered the realm of myth and myths are fine. But it's a lazy kind of history. On election night 1948 George Gallop told me this story. He was watching the Wallace vote in Connecticut, that was his bellwether of how the election was going to go. And particularly he was looking at Bridgeport and Stamford and New Haven, old industrial towns, the core of the old Roosevelt coalition. He was watching those cities and to a lesser degree Massachusetts, the Fall Rivers and the Attoboroughs to see if Wallace would get eight or nine percent of the vote and he didn't, he didn't come anywhere close. And at eight o'clock on election night Gallup turned to his associates and said, well boys, I think we're in trouble. The conventional wisdom in 1948 was that politics is a zero sum game and that there's no way that Harry Truman, battered about as he is, could possibly cross the finish line first if you peeled away from the Roosevelt coalition the solid Democratic South, arguably the racist south which went with Strom Thurmond and the Dixiecrats, and an even greater threat, if you peeled away elements of labor, the urban vote, the old militant New Dealer that were thought to be attracted to Henry Wallace.

What conventional thinkers missed at the time and some historians have missed since is that it liberated Truman, that in fact it was removing so much dead weight from Truman. And the case can be made, in effect, I would make the case that Henry Wallace's greatest historical impact was driving Harry Truman convincingly to the left in 1948, not only stylistically but programmatically. The myth is that the Truman campaign is, of course, as everyone knows, is the patron saint of underdogs. It's a scrappy, feisty, never say die, come from behind, little guy. The truth is, in addition to all of that, it was class warfare with a verbal ferocity that had not been seen certainly since the populous days of the 1890's. Truman talked about Republican bloodsuckers on Wall Street who are going to stick a pitchfork in the back of every farmer. At one point he even cleverly likened Dewey with his little mustache to Hitler and the forces of fascism. It wouldn't happen today. It would be too hot for Marshall McLuhan's cool medium of TV. But it's part of the American mythology and it's a very powerful part. But if you look at Truman's campaign, it was a steady progression to the left. Israel, a great example, his own Secretary of State George Marshall threatened not to vote for Truman if he went ahead and recognized Israel precipitately, but Truman did it. I have no doubt whatsoever that he did it because he believed in the righteousness of a Jewish state but at the same time he very skillfully split the Wallace movement, much of which was based in New York City, Jewish support, union support. Um, if you look at the whole tone of the Wallace campaign it's us versus them. Sort of the old economic royalists, to use FDR's phrase, versus the people - don't let them take away from you what we together, the new dealers have brought to you. And in the end Truman was able to keep enough of the New Deal coalition to prevail.

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,

Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

Q: It sounds to me like Wallace's contribution that you're talking about, his greatest historical contribution was pulling Truman to the left but that sounds like that was his whole career, that he pulled Roosevelt to the left in 1940, Roosevelt had the guts to take a stand. But, I mean, is the arc of this man's life that he is the person, the quiet architect who helped create this...

Richard Norton Smith: No, because I think in Roosevelt, I think Roosevelt is so hard to pin down anywhere on the political spectrum. I think it was more personal than it was political or ideological in 1940. I'm the President of the United States, god damn it, you know, I won two elections for this party, I get to have my choice as Vice President. I mean, I think it was, there was a veneer overlaying that of liberal principle realignment if you will. And I think with Mrs. Roosevelt it was much more ideological.

Q: In '48?

Richard Norton Smith: In '48 people forget that at the end of 1947 and early in 1948 there were polls showing Wallace getting seven to ten percent of the vote. Wallace himself talked about getting ten million votes. The 1948 campaign is a slow fade but that should not obscure the larger reality that as Wallace faded away Truman strengthened and the two phenomenons were directly related. And it wasn't simply that people didn't want to waste their vote. I mean, that's a phenomenon of the third party's experience. It's because Truman gave Wallace sympathizers justification to vote for him and also because of a number of mistakes that Wallace made. There's one thing I want to read, there's one quote I want to read.

Q: You talk about the shift to the left and today it would be that everybody goes back to the center for the election...

Richard Norton Smith: Sure, yeah. But in 1948, remember 1948, all these people who thought that Republicans were a shoe-in overlooked something. America in 1948 was a New Deal country. It was a country that owed its prosperity, or at least it believed it owed its prosperity, and indeed its security in the world, to the architects of the New Deal and their heirs. In 1948 America was a prosperous country.... All the horror stories about postwar depression, another depression hadn't panned out. Sure, there had been times of inflation in 1946 - Republicans had taken over. But, I mean, the Republicans learned the wrong lesson in 1946, they figured that if the pendulum had swung this far it would inevitably swing further. Truman's challenge was, and he rose to the challenge brilliantly, was to remind people of the great depression and that these people could take it all away from you. It's a kind of full employment liberalism, lunch bucket liberalism and it broke up the emerging Wallace coalition. I mean, what happened with the CIL is a classic case, how unions sympathetic to Wallace in 1947 and early 1948 were won over by the President. In part that's because of what Truman did, in part that's because of mistakes Wallace made.... Third parties shouldn't have conventions. Third parties work much better conceptually than they do in writing platforms and playing the game by the rules of the two parties. But the Progressives had a convention and it was a convention that in many ways put the worst face on this new movement. Vito Marcantonio is chairman of the rules committee. Well, Vito Marcantonio is a name no one remembers today but he personified the hard left, indeed the Communist left in this country - Congressman from New York. The platform that the Progressives adopt denounces the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, calls for immediate independence from Puerto Rico and the nationalization of all utilities, banks, railroads. It also denounces, at one point, the convention actually takes a vote on denouncing H.L. Mencken. No friend of the establishment, who nevertheless cannot resist the urge to ridicule what he calls grocery store economists, moony professors in one-building universities, editors with papers with no visible circulation, preachers of lost evangels and customers of 100 schemes to cure

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,

Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

all the sins of the world. That was Gideon's Army. And it's never quite recovered historically from Mencken's description.

Q: How would you describe that '48 campaign of Wallace's? There were some strengths, there were some weaknesses...

Richard Norton Smith: Well, you know, Wallace had, Wallace was an unconventional politician in many ways. He was in politics because of ideas and because of convictions and you could take exception to the ideas and the convictions but you couldn't deny them, or the courage that accompanied them. And the fact is when Wallace went south and denounced segregation and was hit by eggs and was spat upon and denounced in terms he went into the lion's den and no other national party politician was willing to do the same. And so his admirers I think have every reason to look at that chapter in his life which in fact was consistent with his entire life and praise him for it. He was ahead of his time. He was certainly ahead of the political party structure in America.

On the other hand, 1948 was also an election about foreign policy, the first election after the Second World War, the first election of the Cold War, it was referendum on America's role in the world, whether we were to slip back into isolation, what kind of world power were we going to be, what kind of leadership were we going to provide for the forces of freedom? And yes, what kind of principal rivalry would we commit to vis a vis the Soviet Union and the perceived threat that it posed? And I think anyway you look at it, Wallace was on the wrong side of history. Now, that doesn't cancel out the fact that he was on the right side of history on civil rights. It's simply part of a complex equation of this man and his ambivalent place in the history books. For a man who inspired such polarizing feelings while he was alive and to some degree I suppose still does, to me the most intelligent response to Henry Wallace is ambivalence. Because, on a personal level there's much to admire about him. He lived a purposeful life, he improved many things that he dealt with, he is a major figure in the New Deal, he's a significant figure, certainly a significant figure in American agriculture. He was a man of compassion, he was absolutely dead on right about civil rights, he was far ahead of FDR. One of the poignant chapters of the story indeed is when, in 1948 Eleanor Roosevelt, his great soul mate, his liberal brethren feels compelled to publicly denounce, which he refers to as his ninth day on the foreign policy front.

Q: How do you think history plays out on the Cold War today?

Richard Norton Smith: I think Wallace was dead wrong and I think it's hard to forgive him for that. I think he willfully deluded himself about the nature of Stalinism and the threat that it posed and that will forever be a blot on his historical record. Now, there are worse crimes than self-delusion. Neville Chamberlain deluded himself in the 1930's about the menace of Hitlerism. And from time to time iconoclastic scholars come along and write books pointing out that Neville Chamberlain was also a pioneering social Democrat in many ways as Minister of Health and that he shouldn't be simply remembered as the apostle of appeasement. Henry Wallace deserves better than to be remembered as an apostle of postwar appeasement. But it's a large chapter in the story even though he himself seems to have repudiated it, giving his support of the police action in Korea.... You know, not long before he died, Hoover was asked how he outlived the long years of ostracism, mostly coinciding with the New Deal. And he said, it's simple, I outlived the bastards. Well, in some ways Henry Wallace outlived the bastards. But just as Hoover decided he was no politician and he had the opportunity to go back to doing what he did best which was feed people, Wallace, likewise, withdrew from politics, edited the New Republic, he stayed engaged certainly in the political arena, but in the arena of ideas, just as Hoover was for many years an embarrassment to his own party. So many Democrats, including, especially liberal Democrats, all but disowned Wallace. He was too painful a reminder of divisions in their own ranks. Absolutely,

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,

Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

absolutely and this is why, for all their personal animosity, there was such professional overlapping. Their instinct was, first and foremost, to feed people not to play political games, not even to advance particular ideologies. They were, they came out of the American breadbasket and they wanted to expand the bounties of American agriculture and distribute them as widely as possible. When John Kennedy came into office in 1961 he made sure that Henry Wallace was invited to the inauguration and he asked Herbert Hoover to be honorary chairman of a new program called Food for Peace. There's a symmetry there of not old scores being settled, just the opposite, of old wrongs being righted, in some ways of two old men long past their political prime being invited out of purgatory. They died within less than a year of each other. So, there is a curious kind of symmetry to their lives. I hadn't really thought about it.

Richard Norton Smith: There's one other story...Lillian Hellman tells us a marvelous story which, considering its source, may be made up out of old cloth. But about her last meeting with Wallace, and needless to say, Lillian Hellman was an unrepentant Stalinist who no doubt regarded Wallace as hopelessly naive in falling away from the party line, which in all fairness he never adopted. In any event, he invites them, he invites Hellman to dinner, they both live in upstate New York on farms and dinner consists of shredded wheat with a poached egg, and the conversation is not much more nourishing. And at the end of this strange, awkward little meal, Wallace says to Hellman, "Come on outside, I have a present for you."

And they go outside and she opens the back of her car and he gives her this enormous bag of fertilizer to put in the car, and that's the last time they ever see each other. And what Hellman clearly is trying to do is to belittle Wallace, to play upon those very themes of his essential oddness that his critics on the right exploited throughout his political career.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about some of Wallace's other ideas before their time of failure - in support for the UN or the Jewish state, things like that?

Richard Norton Smith: Well sure, it is true. I mean, Wallace was an internationalist and passionate believer in collective security and therefore in the United Nations. Indeed much of his criticism of the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan where they existed outside the UN but they were unilateral, a debate that we're reenacting today. So, in essence he's a very contemporary figure, he's a very contemporary liberal - the whole notion of collective security as opposed to unilateralism, I guess, I suppose is part of the Wallace legacy - passionate on civil rights, passionate believer in young people, wanted an end to the draft, I believe certainly an end to nuclear testing. You know, his falling out with Truman in 1946 - again, I think perhaps naively, but again one cannot question the sincerity of his conviction - he believed that the United States should share its nuclear knowledge with the world. And he was quite outspoken in that. Secretary of State Jimmy Burns from South Carolina, an old line conservative Democrat friend of Truman's, was aghast at Wallace who at that point, after all, was Secretary of Commerce. He was the only Secretary of Commerce with his own foreign policy. But then again he was a former Vice President of the United States and he had a constituency that expected him to speak out. So, the spring of 1946 he's scheduled to deliver a major address at Madison Square Garden and is characteristically outspoken about the need for closer relations with the Soviet Union and at the very least a rethinking of the early sides of the Cold War. And out of courtesy he shows the speech to President Truman who casually looks at it, doesn't really read it all and is later quoted as endorsing it. Indeed, he told Wallace that it was fine. So, to be fair to Wallace he thought he had, from the President of the United States' own lips authorization to go out and deliver this speech which outraged Burns and a lot of other folks as well and led to Wallace's firing. And it was not Truman's finest hour. I'm not sure it was Wallace's finest hour either but it is one example where he was victimized.

Interview with Richard Norton Smith,

Presidential Historian and Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mr. Smith was interviewed by Chip Duncan on September 10, 2003.

Q: Some of the picture that you are painting that we were missing is actually not about Wallace but it's about Truman, it's about FDR, it's about some of the other characters that you may . . .

Richard Norton Smith: Yeah. And that's important.

Q: One of the things that have been bothering me is that - we live in a society where we think back about 5 minutes and so the story's perspective is uniquely interesting to me and I think that the role of the Vice Presidency has probably changed enormously since he was Vice President. It always struck me as incredibly odd that in the middle of World War II he was down looking at farm fields in Mexico. This is the middle of the war, anything could happen. Roosevelt could die and the Commander-in-Chief is down looking at plants somewhere. So my question is really basically more or less how has the Vice Presidency changed? What evolved there? Was this normal at the time? Was the Vice Presidency a weak position?

Richard Norton Smith: Well the Vice Presidency has always been a constitutional fix - it's an afterthought. In the case of Wallace though, remember, right before the 1944 Convention, in May of 1944, when speculation is feverish about who does FDR really want to run with him, he sends Wallace on a trip to China, which is widely regarded by everyone except Wallace as signaling - it's as close as Franklin Roosevelt comes to being ambiguous. No, I think in some ways, again, a lot of what makes Wallace terribly attractive as a human being -- the very catholicity of his interests, the originality of his mind, his refusal to be bound by narrow political conventions, makes him unthinkable as a President. And the fact that he could be in Mexico inspecting, you know, agriculture. Well, you know, it's um, Harry Truman was right. He was the best darned Secretary of Agriculture we ever had. But he's more than that. I mean, it's interesting the fact that we talked about all these other people, tells you one thing. Wallace is, I think until now, largely unglimped centrality. You know he's like the hub of a wheel and there're all these spokes coming out of it. There's FDR, there's Truman and there's the transformation of the Democratic Party and Mrs. Roosevelt and blacks and urban liberals and the Red Scare. It's interesting, they all ultimately converge in this one unlikely, in many way poignant, non-politician who, through the force of events, finds himself thrust into the political arena.

I see a sadder but wiser man at the end. I see a man who was in a lot of ways burned by his political exposure. But on the other hand, I don't think of Henry Wallace as a tragic figure. I mean I think any more than I think of an Adlai Stevenson as a tragic figure. Losing an election is not a tragedy. Being wrong, historically, is not a tragedy. The fact is, the man fought for principles, he inspired millions of Americans. He coined a phrase, "The Century of the Common Man," which will live longer than most phrases for most professional politicians. He was ahead of his time in ways that are honorable. But in the end, he allowed himself to go off on a crusade that was also a tangent, fundamentally at odds with the course of history. It's a harsh thing to say, but about the defining issue of the 20th century - the role of the state and indeed collectivism versus the individual - he gave off, at very least, mixed signals. And that along with "The Century of the Common Man", and hybrid corn is part of his legacy.