



Because the Past is the Present, and the Future too

History News Network

12-20-02: News at Home

The Real Third-Party Candidate in 1948

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There's an odd, poetic justice in Trent Lott's downfall over his incautiously fond reminiscences about Strom Thurmond's 1948 Dixiecrat revolt against Harry Truman's Democratic re-election campaign. Thurmond had an opponent in that race whom almost no one has mentioned, because he and his followers were swept immediately into history's dustbin after that election. Now is the time for that untold half of the story.

Everyone knows by now that Thurmond's States' Rights Party meant to thwart Truman's unprecedentedly strong commitment to civil rights. The segregationist apostates didn't expect Thurmond to win the election (he carried only four Southern states); they meant to divert enough Electoral College votes from Truman to throw his contest with Republican Thomas Dewey into the House of Representatives. There, the next President would have to sell out civil rights to win all-powerful Southern committee chairmen's backing.

But Thurmond wasn't the only "third-party" candidate endangering Democrats and civil rights. If anything, he was the fourth-party candidate in the 1948 popular vote, coming in behind another candidate who, like him, had bolted the Democrats to run on an insurgent ticket. Never mind that this challenger was running left, accusing Truman of timidity on civil rights. Because this challenger had held a higher public office than Thurmond and was far better known, his defection gave segregationists an unexpected, unintended boost by drawing more votes from Democrats than Thurmond did.

Like Ralph Nader's voters in 2000, the leftist insurgent's supporters in 1948 cost Democrats several states: Michigan, New Jersey, and New York went narrowly to Dewey, whose civil-rights posture was at best platitudinous and ephemeral and whose antipathy to labor was legendary. Dewey carried his own state, the solidly New Deal New York, by 61,000 votes only because nearly half a million votes which should have been Truman's went instead to the leftist challenger, who claimed to be Roosevelt's true legatee.

I'm being a bit cute in withholding the mystery man's name, to tease those whose recent account of the 1948 campaign never mentioned him. "A Sanitized Past Comes Back to Haunt Trent Lott-And America," read the headline on one of the *New York Times's* many fulsome accounts of the controversy. The nation needs "a crash course in the rougher and more complicated parts of its own history," the story advised. "The urge to tidy up the story is strong." Apparently so.

Last week, the *New Republic* did mention someone else's passing mention of him on TV. But the magazine didn't mention that when Henry A. Wallace decided to run in 1948, he had recently become editor of... the *New Republic*. Why the eerie silence about Wallace, who was Vice-President of the United States during Franklin D. Roosevelt's third term (1941-1945) and became the 1948 presidential nominee of the Progressive Citizens of America party? A visionary but quixotic New Dealer with impeccably Midwestern roots in agriculture and business, he would have become president upon FDR's death had he not lost re-nomination as vice president to Truman at the tumultuous 1944 Chicago convention. Roosevelt seems to have dropped him because Wallace was drifting too far left: Out of office, he fell into the Communists' grip by agreeing, after mysterious visits to him at The New Republic, to head their PCA ticket.

There is no ambiguity about the PCA's backing and strategy. Leftist journalists such as I.F. Stone spoke proudly of it, for many of Wallace's positions were ahead of their time. He was a stout foe of racism and sexism when most Americans still sentimentalized them. He risked his life to address integrated audiences in Thurmond's South during the campaign. And his "vision of a vibrant American economy stimulated by government and generating vast number of jobs closely resembles what actually happened--and what almost no one else anticipated--in the postwar years," according to the centrist-conservative writer Michael Barone.

But these positions dovetailed or got hopelessly entangled with darker Communist goals, and Wallace stopped drawing distinctions. He kept denying Stalin's brutalities and the war-ravaged Soviet Union's imperialistic, nationalistic designs on Europe. He attacked the Truman Doctrine and even the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe against Stalinist advances. When the Soviets blockaded West Berlin, Wallace even attacked Truman's airlift to keep it free. Wallace thus handed segregationists an excuse to link civil-rights activism with Communist subversion.

By the end of the campaign, he had become an embarrassment and a threat to liberals such as the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the journalist James Wechsler, and the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who rallied to Truman against Wallace, Thurmond, and Dewey. Wallace had held some real power in the early 1940s, but he and his Communist backers lost it all--and not only because J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy made sure of it, viciously, thereby tainting even the anti-Communist liberals' efforts to outflank him. No wonder that no one today, conservative or liberal, wants to be caught sounding as sentimental about the Wallace campaign as Trent Lott did about Thurmond's. Some old leftists still do reminisce about the warm glow of old struggles, denying that, wittingly or not, they, too, wound up defending a system that, even then, was enslaving and murdering as many people as racism had.

Unlike American racism, Communism did most of its dirty deeds abroad. Shouldn't we indeed forget the illusions of its American apologists like Wallace?

Forgetting has its uses, of course: In daily race relations, it can help Americans of all colors make fresh starts. "The old strategies of accusation, isolation, and containment have broken down," the late black historian C. Eric Lincoln wrote. "It is time now to reach for the hand that is reaching for tomorrow, whatever color that hand may be."

As for ideologues and their apologists, we can only hope that those who've "forgotten" the Wallace campaign in this month's accounts of the 1948 election aren't condemning themselves to repeat its mistakes. Unacceptable as Thurmond and Lott's politics have been, the antidote can't be to whitewash everything that has passed for anti-racism since the 1940s. Journalists' and historians' job is to help us all by telling the whole story.