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Henry A. Wallace Remembered

A trip to Mexico

Bill Murray, as I know from many conversations with him, had a strong interest in Henry A. Wallace's role in bringing the technologies of the American agricultural revolution to the Third World, and had Bill's good life lasted even longer he surely would have added some of that story to the one he and Ray Beneke tell here.

Although designed to influence politics, not economic development, a trip to Mexico soon after Wallace's election as vice president in 1940 played a crucial part in the story. Wallace was very interested in and concerned about Latin America and its relationship with the United States and had studied Spanish while serving as secretary of agriculture during the 1930s. Soon after the election, as war clouds moved closer to the United States, Wallace suggested to Roosevelt that he be permitted to visit a Latin American country to enlarge his understanding of the region and its main language. The president discussed the proposal with one of his favorites, Sumner Welles, a high-level official in the State Department, and found him worried about the disputed presidential election in Mexico. Welles suggested that Wallace attend the inauguration of the more pro-American and anti-Nazi of the candidates, Manuel Avila Comacho, as a way of demonstrating U.S. support for him.

Making the trip by car, the vice president-elect did more than show the flag. He did what his grandfather and other Wallaces had always enjoyed doing: he got out into the countryside to observe farm people at work. Aided by a corn breeder who had studied at Iowa State College, and by another man, who was soon to become secretary of agriculture in the Comacho government, Wallace quickly concluded that Mexico needed a corn-breeding experiment station capable of adapting techniques already increasing yields in the United States to

conditions south of the border.

With war raging in Europe and imposing rising costs on the U.S. government, Wallace recognized that this was not the time for a new government program of the kind he envisioned. Thus, soon after he returned home, he discussed the idea with Raymond B. Fosdick, the president of the Rockefeller Foundation, an institution with a long history of rural programs. Forced by the war to pull out of Europe, the foundation was already thinking about expanding its activities in Latin America. Seizing the opportunity, the vice president argued that the private agency should develop a program to increase corn yields, rather than a health program that would enlarge the population without expanding the food supply. If the foundation promoted agricultural improvement there, he predicted, the whole economy of Mexico would improve. Agricultural development, in other words, was, in his view, fundamental to general economic growth.

The argument produced results. Impressed by it, Fosdick dispatched a team of scientists to Mexico to report on agricultural conditions and problems, and soon the foundation had established a program much as Wallace had recommended. As it achieved success, scientists involved in it gave credit to Wallace for getting the work started, and one, Norman Borlaug, another Iowan, received a Nobel Peace Prize for his contribution to the Green Revolution.

Wallace himself, when his career in politics ended soon after 1948, continued to do what he could to export the American agricultural revolution to the Third World, confident that it would improve the lives of people and guide world politics in directions beneficial to the United States and other nations. His efforts owed much to this trip to Mexico late in 1940. ■

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