

■ “The Century of the Common Man”

Date: May 8, 1942

Author: Henry A. Wallace

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

Henry Wallace was an influential American politician and editor who served as vice president under Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) from 1941 to 1945. He was also a prominent liberal advocate and former Secretary of Agriculture and Commerce. Wallace was known for his progressive views on economic reform, civil rights, and international diplomacy. He championed policies promoting social welfare, peace, and cooperation, often emphasizing the importance of government intervention to address social inequalities. His ideas contributed to the more progressive wing of liberalism during the mid-20th century.

In 1942, six months after the United States entered the Second World War, Vice President Henry Wallace gave an address in which he mapped out a broad vision of the nation’s reason for fighting and the Roosevelt administration’s goals for a postwar peace. In the speech, Wallace argued that the defeat of the Axis powers would lay the groundwork for a new era of international cooperation aimed at the economic uplift and freedom of average people (“the common man”) through the application of the New Deal’s progressive principles on a global scale.

Defining Moment

As the United States entered the Second World War in late 1941, one question on the mind of progressives was the fate of the previous decade’s New Deal. Would President Franklin D. Roosevelt abandon progressive reform as he became a wartime president? Besides Roosevelt himself, no figure was more associated in the public mind with New Deal liberalism than the current vice president and former agriculture secretary, Henry Wallace.

Wallace might have seemed an unlikely torchbearer for the progressive wing of the New Deal. He was a former Republican who only became a Democrat after endorsing Roosevelt in 1932. Wallace came from an Iowa family renowned for its agricultural expertise, and as agriculture secretary he rescued the long-suffering farm economy nationwide through an innovative combination of taking land out of production, price supports, surplus storage, and crop insurance. Wallace stabilized farm prices and through programs like food stamps made the bounty of American agriculture available to all.

Wallace was idealistic and visionary but also aloof and inflexible. Two biographers called Wallace an



Henry Wallace. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

"American Dreamer." Despite his idiosyncrasies, Wallace was a man of principle who passionately embraced the promise of the New Deal. He was messianic in his faith that the productive power of capitalism harnessed to an activist state could usher in a new epoch of equality and justice.

Unlike Roosevelt, who tacked to the left and the center as political expediency dictated, Wallace steadfastly staked out the left flank of Roosevelt's administration. Thus, it was to the delight of organized labor and progressives, and to the dismay of southern Democrats and party bosses, that Roosevelt insisted that Wallace replace his sitting vice president, John Nance Garner, on the ticket in 1940 for FDR's unprecedented run for a third consecutive term. Wallace's ascension was marked by a 1940 *TIME* magazine cover by American artist Grant Wood. Wallace pioneered the modern vice presidency by running part of the administration and embarking upon several foreign goodwill tours abroad. As head of the Board of Economic Warfare, Wallace was in charge of procuring raw materials for the war effort, often from Latin America. In this position Wallace's best and worst traits clashed. He insisted that contracts with foreign nations and companies include labor and health protections for workers, but he frequently argued with other department heads, as well. The result was that Roosevelt slowly soured on him.

Early in the war Wallace gave his most famous speech, "The Century of the Common Man," in which he articulated the vision of a just postwar world. The speech was widely reproduced in pamphlet form and inspired the American composer Aaron Copeland to compose "Fanfare for the

Common Man." It had two influential antecedents: FDR's "Four Freedoms," which called for a new world with freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear; and Henry Luce's influential *Life* article predicting a postwar "American Century." The speech marked the apex of Wallace's prestige and was seen as a bridge between the Depression-era New Deal and Roosevelt's vision for a progressive postwar world.

Author Biography

Henry Agard Wallace was born on October 7, 1888, in Adair County, Iowa, near the town of Orient. He was born into a famous farming family whose magazine *Wallaces' Farmer* had a wide readership. Wallace graduated from Iowa State College in 1910, writing his thesis on soil conservation. In 1914 he married Ilo Browne, with whom he had three children. In the 1920s he developed a successful hybrid corn and founded Pioneer Hi-Bred, a hybrid seed company. He served as Franklin D. Roosevelt's secretary of agriculture from 1933-41, as vice president from 1941-45, and as commerce secretary under Harry S. Truman from 1945-46. Alarmed by the emerging cold war, Wallace became an outspoken critic of Truman's cold war policies and called for peace between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1948 he challenged Truman and Republican Thomas Dewey for the presidency as the candidate of the Progressive Party, receiving one million votes. Wallace was the author of numerous agricultural and several political books and is best remembered for "The Century of the Common Man."



Historical Document

“The Century of the Common Man”

Delivered 8 May 1942, Grand Ballroom, Commodore Hotel, New York, NY

Madam Chairman, and you who have spoken so eloquently tonight, and you who represent 33 different nations on this particular occasion; and I wish especially to recognize those who are representing the 14 nations from Latin America:

I want to say to all—all who in a formal or an informal way represent most if not all of the free people—free peoples of the world who are met here tonight, that we are meeting in the interests of the millions of all the nations who have freedom in their souls. To my mind, this meeting has just one purpose: to let those millions in the other countries know that here in the United States are 130 million men, women, and children who are in this war to the finish. Our American people are utterly resolved to go on until they can strike the relentless blows that will assure a complete victory, and with it a new day for the lovers of freedom everywhere on this earth.

This is a fight between a slave world and a free world. Just as in the United States in 1862, we could not remain “half slave” and “half free,” so in 1942 the world must make its decision for a complete victory, one way or the other.

As we begin the final stages of this fight to the death between the free world and the slave world, it is worthwhile to refresh our minds about the march of freedom for the common man. The idea of freedom—the freedom that we in the United States know and love so well—is derived from the Bible, with its extraordinary emphasis on the dignity of the individual. Democracy is the only true political expression of Christianity.

The prophets of the Old Testament were the first to preach social justice. But that which was sensed by the prophets many centuries before Christ was not given complete and powerful political expression until our nation, here in the United States, was formed as a Federal Union a century and a half ago. Even then, the march of the common people had just begun. Most of them did not yet know how to read and write. There were no public schools. Men and women can not be really free until they have plenty to eat, and time and ability to read and think and talk things over. Down the years, the people of the United States have moved steadily forward in the practice of democracy. Through universal education, they can now read and write and form opinions of their own. They have learned, and are still learning, the art of

production—how to make a living. They have learned, and are still learning, the art of self-government.

If we were to measure freedom by standards of nutrition, education, and self-government, we might rank the United States and certain nations of Western Europe very high. But this would not be fair to other nations where education has become widespread only in the last 20 years. In many nations, a generation ago, 9 out of 10 of the people could not read or write. Russia, for example, was changed from an illiterate to a literate nation within one generation and, in the process, Russia's appreciation of freedom was tremendously increased. In China, the growth in education in reading—and the ability of the people to read and write during the past 30 years has been matched by an increased interest in real liberty.

Everywhere, reading and writing are accompanied by industrial progress, and industrial progress, sooner or later, inevitably brings a strong labor—labor movement. From a long-time and fundamental point of view, there are no backward peoples which are lacking in mechanical sense. Russians, Chinese, and the Indians both of India and the Americas, all learn to read and write and operate machines just as well as your children or my children. Everywhere the common people are on the march. By the millions they are learning to read and write, learning to think together, learning to use tools. They're learning to think and work together in labor movements, some of which may be extreme or a little impractical at first, but which eventually will settle down to serve effectively the interests of the common man.

When the freedom-loving people march; when the farmers have an opportunity to buy land at reasonable prices and sell the produce of their land through their own organizations; when workers have the opportunity to form unions and bargain through them collectively; and when the children of all the people have an opportunity to attend schools which teach them that truth of the real world—when these opportunities are open to everyone, then the world moves straight ahead.

But in countries where the ability to read and write has been recently acquired—mind you, 62% of the world today do not yet know how to read and write. But in those countries where the ability has been recently acquired or where the people have had no long experience in governing themselves on the basis of their own thinking, it is easy for demagogues to arise and prostitute the mind of the common man to their own base ends. Such a demagogue may get financial help from some person of wealth who is unaware of what the end result will be. With this backing, the demagogue may dominate the minds of the people, and, from whatever degree of freedom they have, lead them back into a most degraded slavery. Herr Thyssen, the wealthy German steel man, little realized what he was doing when he gave Hitler enough money to enable him to play on the minds of the German people.

The demagogue is the curse of the modern world, and of all the demagogues, the worst are those financed by well-meaning wealthy men who sincerely believe that their wealth is likely to be safer if they can hire men with political “it” to change the—the sign posts and lure the people back into slavery. Unfortunately for the wealthy men who finance movements of this sort, as well as for the people themselves, the successful demagogue is a powerful genie who, when once let out of his bottle, refuses to obey anyone’s command. As long as his spell holds, he defies God Himself, and Satan is turned loose on the world.

Through the—Through the leaders of the Nazi revolution, Satan is now trying to lead the common man of the whole world back into slavery and darkness. For the stark truth is that the violence preached by the Nazis is the devil’s own religion of darkness. So also is the doctrine that one race or one class is by heredity superior and that all other races or classes are supposed to be slaves. The belief in one Satan-inspired Fuhrer, with his Quislings, his Laval, his Mussolinis—his “gauleiters” in every nation in the world—is the last and ultimate darkness. Is there any hell hotter than that of being a Quisling, unless it is that of being a Laval or a Mussolini?

In a twisted sense, there is something almost great in the figure of the Supreme Devil operating through a human form, in a Hitler who has the daring to spit straight into the eye of God and man. But the Nazi system has a heroic position for only one leader. By definition only one person is allowed to retain full sovereignty over his own soul. All the rest are stooges. They are stooges who have been mentally and politically degraded, and who feel that they can get square with the world only by mentally and politically degrading other people. These stooges are really psychopathic cases. Satan has turned loose upon us the insane.

The search of the freedom—The march of freedom of the past 150 years has been a long-drawn-out people’s revolution. In this Great Revolution of the people, there were the American Revolution of 1775, the French Revolution of 1792, the Latin-American revolutions of the Bolivarian era, the German Revolution of 1848, and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Each spoke for the common man in terms of blood on the battlefield. Some went to excess. But the significant thing is that the people groped their way to the light. More of them learned to think and work together.

The people’s revolution aims at peace and not at violence, but if the rights of the common man are attacked, it unleashes the ferocity of the she-bear who has lost a cub. When the Nazi psychologists tell their master Hitler that we in the United States may be able to produce hundreds of thousands of planes, but that we have no will to fight, they are only fooling themselves and him. The truth is that when the rights of the American people are transgressed, as these rights have been transgressed, the American people will fight with a

relentless fury which will drive the ancient Teutonic gods back cowering into their caves. The *Götterdämmerung* has come for Odin and his crew.

The people are on the march toward an even fuller freedom than the most fortunate peoples of the world have hitherto enjoyed. No Nazi counter-revolution will stop it. The common man will smoke the Hitler stooges out into the open in the United States, in Latin America, in India. He will—He will destroy their influence. No Laval, no Mussolini will be tolerated in a Free World.

The people, in their millennial and revolutionary march toward manifesting here on earth the dignity that is in every human soul, hold as their credo the Four Freedoms enunciated by President Roosevelt in his message to Congress on January 6th, 1941. These four freedoms are the very core of the revolution for which the United Nations have taken their stand. We who live in the United States may think there is nothing very revolutionary about freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and freedom from fear—freedom from the secret police. But when we begin to think about the significance of freedom from want for the average man, then we know that the revolution of the past 150 years has not been completed, either here in the United States or any place else in the world. We know that this revolution can not stop until freedom from want has actually been attained.

And now, as we move forward toward realizing the Four Freedoms of this people's revolution, I would like to speak about four duties.

It is my belief that every freedom, every right, every privilege has its price, its corresponding duty without which it can not be enjoyed. The four duties of the people's revolution, as I see them, as of this day, are these:

1. The duty to produce to the limit.
2. The duty to transport as rapidly as possible to the line of battle.
3. The duty to fight with all that is in us.

And,

4. The duty to build a peace—just, charitable, and enduring.

The fourth duty is that which inspires the other three.

We failed in our job after World War Number One. We did not know how to—how to go about it, to build an enduring world-wide peace. We did not have the nerve to follow through and prevent Germany from rearming. We did not—We did not insist that she “learn war no more.” We did not build a peace

treaty on the fundamental doctrine of the people's revolution. We did not strive whole-heartedly to create a world where there could be freedom from want for all the peoples. But by our very errors we learned much, and after this war we shall be in position to utilize our knowledge in building a world which is economically, politically, and, I hope, spiritually sound.

Modern science, which is a by-product and essential part of the people's revolution, has made it technologically possible to see that all the people of the world get enough to eat. Half in fun, half seriously, I said the other day to Madame Litvinov: "The object of this war is to make it sure that everyone can have a quart of milk to drink every day." And she said: "Yes, even half a pint." The peace must mean a better standard of living for the common man, not merely in the United States and England, but also in India, Russia, China, and Latin America—not merely in the United Nations, but also in Germany, Italy, and Japan.

Some have spoken of the "American Century." I say that the century on which we are entering—the century which will come into being after this war—can be and must be the century of the common man.

Perhaps it will be America's opportunity to—to support the Freedom[s] and Duties by which the common man must live. Everywhere, the common man must learn to build his own industries with his own hands in practical fashion. Everywhere, the common man must learn to increase his productivity so that he and his children can eventually pay to the world community all that they have received. No nation will have the God-given right to exploit other nations. Older nations will have the privilege to help younger nations get started on the path to industrialization, but there must be neither military nor economic imperialism.

The methods of the 19th century will not work in the people's century, which is now about to begin. India, China, and Latin America have a tremendous stake in the people's century. As their masses learn to read and write, and as they become productive mechanics, their standard of living will double and treble. Modern science, when devoted whole-heartedly to the general welfare, has in it potentialities of which we do not yet dream.

And modern science must be released from German slavery. International cartels that serve American greed and German will to power must go. Cartels in the peace to come must be subjected to international control for the common man, as well as being under adequate control by the respective home governments. In this way, we can prevent the Germans from again building a war machine while we sleep. With international monopoly pools under control, it will be possible for inventions to serve all the people instead of only the few.

Yes, and when the time of peace comes, the citizen will again have a duty; the consumer will have a duty—the supreme duty of sacrificing the lesser interest for the greater interest of the general welfare. Those who write the peace must think of the whole world. There can be no privileged peoples. We ourselves in the United States are no more a master race than the Nazis. And we can not perpetuate economic warfare without planting the seeds of military warfare. We must use our power at the peace table to build an economic peace that is charitable and enduring.

If we really believe that we are fighting for a people's peace, all the rest becomes easy. Production? Yes. It will be easy to get production without either strikes or sabotage, production with the whole-hearted cooperation between willing arms and keen brains; enthusiasm, zip, energy geared to the tempo of keeping everlastingly at it day after day. Hitler knows as well as those of us who sit in on the War Production Board meetings that we here in the United States are winning the battle of production. He knows that both labor and business in the United States are doing a most remarkable job and that his only hope is to crash through to a complete victory some time during the next six months.

Then there is the task of transportation to the line of battle by truck, and railroad car, and ship. We shall joyously deny ourselves so that our transportation system is improved by at least 30 percent. And there will have to be some denying, and you're going to hear plenty about it.

I need say little about the duty to fight. Some people declare, and Hitler believes, that the American people have grown soft in the last generation. Hitler agents continually preach in South America that we are cowards, unable to use, like the “brave” German soldiers, the weapons of modern war. It is true that American youth hates war with a holy hatred. But because of that fact and because Hitler and the German people stand as the very symbol of war, we shall fight with a tireless enthusiasm until war, and the possibility of war, have been removed from this planet. We shall cleanse the plague spot of Europe, which is Hitler's Germany, not the real Germany, and with it the hellhole of Asia, which is Japan.

The American people have always had guts and always will have. You know the story of Bomber Pilot Dixon, and Radioman Gene Aldrich, and Ordnanceman Tony Pastula—the story which Americans will be telling their children for generations to come as an illustration man's ability to master any fate. These men lived for 34 days on the open sea in a rubber life raft, 8 feet by 4 feet, with no food but that which they took from the sea and the air with one pocket knife and a pistol. And yet they lived it through and came at last to the beach of an island they did not know. In spite of their suffering, they stood like men, with no weapon left to protect themselves, no shoes on their feet or clothes on their backs, and walked in military file because, they said, “If there were Japs, we didn't want to be crawling.”

The American fighting men, and all the fighting men of the United Nations, will need to summon all their courage during the next few months. I am convinced that the summer and fall of 1942 will be a time of supreme crisis for all of us. Hitler, like the prize fighter who realizes that he is on the verge of being knocked out, is gathering all his remaining forces for one last, desperate blow. There is abject fear in the heart of the madman and a growing discontent among his people as he prepares for his last all-out offensive.

We may be sure that Hitler and Japan will cooperate to do the unexpected—perhaps an attack by Japan against Alaska and our northwest coast at the time when German transport planes will be shuttled across from Dakar to furnish leadership and stiffening to a German uprising in Latin America. In any event, the psychological and sabotage offensive in the United States and Latin America will be timed to coincide with, or anticipate by a few weeks, the height of the military offensive.

We must be especially prepared to stifle the fifth columnists in the United States who will try to sabotage not merely our war material plants but, even more important—ininitely more important—our minds. We must be prepared for the worst kind of fifth-column work in Latin America, much of it operating through the agency of governments with which the United States at present is at peace. When I say this, I recognize that the peoples—the peoples both of Latin America and of the nations supporting the agencies through which the fifth columnists work, are overwhelmingly on the side of the democracies. We must expect the offensive against us on the military, propaganda and sabotage fronts, both in the United States and Latin America, to reach its apex some time during the next few months. The convulsive efforts of the dying madman will be so great that some of us may be deceived into thinking that the situation is bad at the very time when it is really getting better.

But in the case of most of us, the events of the next few months, disturbing though they may be, will only increase our will to bring about complete victory in this war of liberation. Prepared in spirit, we cannot be surprised. Psychological terrorism will fall flat. As we nerve ourselves for the supreme effort in this hemisphere we must not forget the sublime heroism of the oppressed in Europe and Asia, whether it be in the mountains of Yugoslavia, the factories of Czechoslovakia and France, the farms of Poland, Denmark, Holland, and Belgium, among the seamen of Norway, or in the occupied areas of China and the Dutch East Indies. Everywhere the soul of man is letting the tyrant know that slavery of the body does not end resistance.

There can be no half measures. North, South, East, West, and Middle West—the will of the American people is for complete victory.

No compromise with Satan is possible. We shall not rest until the victims under the Nazi and Japanese yoke are freed. We shall fight for a complete peace as well as a complete victory.

The people's revolution is on the march, and the devil and all his angels can not prevail against it. They can not prevail, for on the side of the people is the Lord.

He giveth power to the faint; [and] to them that have no might He increaseth strength....they that wait upon the Lord...shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; [and] they shall walk, and not be faint.

Strong in the strength of the Lord, we who fight in the people's cause will never stop until that cause is won.



Glossary

Bolivarian era: the time in Latin American history dominated by the figure of Simón Bolívar (1783-1830)

fifth columnist: a clandestine organization working inside a country to further the aims of foreign interests

gauleiter: a person in a petty position of power who behaves in an authoritarian way

***Götterdämmerung* has come...:** a reference to the final battle of the gods in Norse mythology; a turbulent, violent ending

half slave and half free: a quote from Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" speech of 1858

He giveth...: Isaiah 40:29-31

Herr Thyssen: Fritz Thyssen (1873-1951) of the wealthy Thyssen family of industrialists

Laval: Pierre Laval (1883-1945), French leader of the Vichy government that collaborated with Nazi Germany

Madame Litvinov: Ivy Low Litvinov, English-Russian wife of Soviet foreign minister Maxim Litvinov

Quisling: Norwegian Nazi collaborator Vidkun Quisling (1887-1945)

Document Analysis

Wallace's speech is a remarkable work of synthesis that connects New Deal egalitarianism to a 150-year march toward freedom and a Biblical struggle between good and evil. He weaves all these strands into America's war aims and vision for the postwar world.

The New Deal themes emerge in Wallace's faith in organized laborers and farmers to mobilize the power of industrialization to create a just and equitable postwar world. Material abundance, education, and science were the foundations upon which "the people's revolution" would be built. The pillars of this revolution were Roosevelt's Four Freedoms and a new international system led by the "United Nations" (the wartime term for the allies).

Victory in the war could fulfill the promise birthed by the American Revolution. Wallace declares, "The march of freedom of the past 150 years has been a long-drawn-out people's revolution. In this Great Revolution of the people, there were the American Revolution of 1775, the French Revolution of 1792, the Latin American revolutions of the Bolivarian era, the German Revolution of 1848, and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Each spoke for the common man.... Some went to excess...[but]...the people groped their way to the light."

Standing in the way were only "the demagogues" who mislead and divide the common people, often with financial support of the wealthy and "international cartels." Among these demagogues he includes the "Quislings," "Lavals" and "Mussolinis" (respectively, a Norwegian and a French Nazi collaborator and Hitler's junior Italian ally). Wallace counters notions prevalent at that time that Americans had become "soft" and will not fight, asserting that when "the rights of the common man are attacked, it unleashes the ferocity of the she-bear who has lost a cub." Wallace especially scorns Nazi racism and predicts a *Götterdämmerung* ("Twilight of the Gods") which "will drive the ancient Teutonic gods back cowering into their caves."

Wallace, a deeply spiritual man, then connects these themes to an eternal war between God and Satan. On God's side are the "prophets of the Old

Testament," the United Nations and the common man. In league with Satan is Hitler and his allies. To vanquish the forces of evil, the Four Freedoms must be accompanied by four duties: (1) to produce to the limit, (2) to transport as rapidly as possible to the battle line, (3) to fight and (4) to build peace. He adds, "The fourth duty is that which inspires the other three."

And indeed, Wallace's speech was enlisted to boost national morale, as pamphlets of "The Century of the Common Man" were mass produced and reprinted extensively in the nation's newspapers.

Perhaps most astonishing about Wallace's speech as a rallying cry was its lack of appeals to American exceptionalism. It is internationalist throughout, eschewing Henry Luce's "American Century." Wallace proclaims, "Some have spoken of the 'American Century.' I say that the century on which we are entering—the century which will come into being after this war—can be and must be the century of the common man." "Common," in this context, can mean "universal."

Wallace's address envisioned a postwar global New Deal. However, Wallace's stirring address would instead become a swan song of New Deal liberalism. In 1944, conservative forces at the Democratic Convention replaced Wallace with Missouri Senator Harry S. Truman as vice president. As the world war ended and the cold war emerged, Wallace's hopeful vision of a united world gave way to a fearful world divided by national and ideological differences. And upon Roosevelt's death in 1945, the new president moved America in a more conservative direction. (Some have said that Truman was Roosevelt's successor, but Wallace was his heir.)

—Robert Surbrug, PhD

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