{essays in history}

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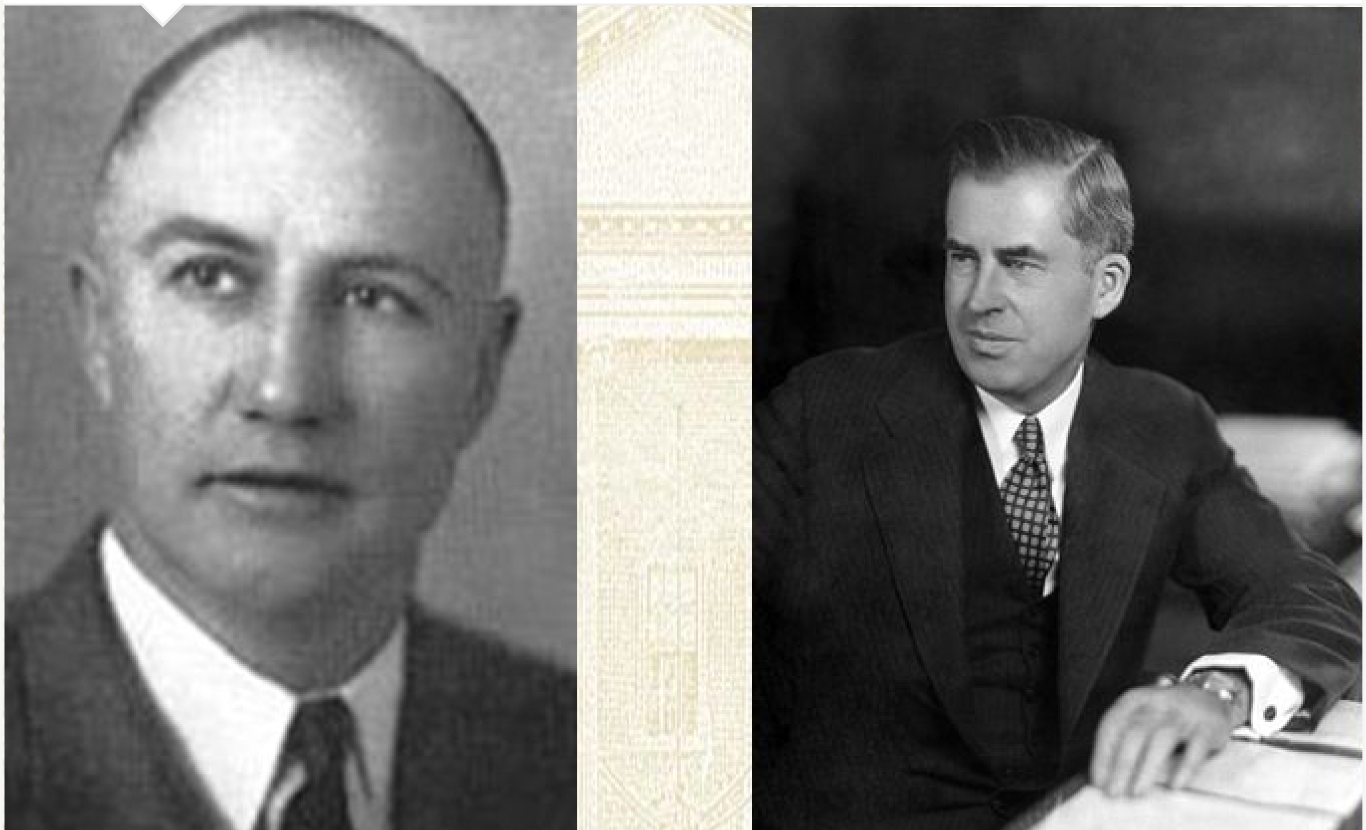
Diverging Paths: Strom Thurmond and Henry Wallace's Third-Party Presidential Campaigns and their Influence on Postwar Politics



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Reviewed Work(s)

Strom Thurmond's America. By Joseph Crespino (Hill and Wang, 2012). x + 416 pp. Cloth, $30.00. Paper, $17.00. E-book, $14.99.

Henry Wallace's 1948 Presidential Campaign and the Future of Postwar Liberalism. By Thomas W. Devine (University of North Carolina Press, 2013). xiv + 424 pp. Cloth, $39.95. E-book, $39.99.

The 1948 presidential election was a watershed in American politics. While the election included the first televised party conventions and election results, it also led to splintering within the Democratic Party. This splintering produced two short-lived, third-party presidential campaigns that operated to both the political right and left of the incumbent president, Harry S. Truman. Strom Thurmond's States' Rights Democratic Party and Henry Wallace's Progressive Party, while garnering less than five percent of the national popular vote, aided the eventual rise of the modern conservative movement and gave an early indication of the path postwar liberalism would take.[1] These lasting results and, to a lesser degree, the two men's lives before, during, and after 1948 are the focus of Joseph Crespino's *Strom Thurmond's America* and Thomas W. Devine's *Henry Wallace's 1948 Presidential Campaign and the Future of Postwar Liberalism*.

In *Strom Thurmond's America*, Crespino supplements previous publications concerning Thurmond, which have traditionally revolved around major events like Thurmond's third-party presidential campaign in 1948, his authorship of the 1956 Southern Manifesto, his record breaking filibuster of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, his defection to the Republican Party in 1964, and his role in the election of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. In recent decades, there has been a renewed scholarly interest on the Dixiecrats and Thurmond's effect on the eventual rise of the Republican Party in the South by the mid-1960s—a focus most notably, Kari Frederickson's *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (2001). While Frederickson's narration of the political readjustment of the South is broad, she provides in-depth details about the Dixiecrats' organization in 1948, which Crespino robustly builds upon.

Both Frederickson and Crespino depict Thurmond as the Dixiecrats' principal figure and solon of the reconfiguration of southern politics. However, Crespino crisply describes him as "the avatar of the Republican Party's 'southern strategy,'" an early post-Second World War Sunbelt conservative, ardent anti-communist, pro-business and anti-union, and early associate of conservative Christians.[2] Essentially, Crespino argues that Thurmond's life and political career serve as a middle ground with regard to time and place to better understand American politics in the second half of the twentieth century.[3] As a result, Crespino's description of Thurmond suitably fits into Bruce J. Schulman's narration of the development of the Sunbelt in *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1930-1980* (1991).

Bucking previous analyses of Wallace's presidential bid and its shortcomings, Devine argues that the communists within the Progressive Party manipulated, to their advantage, and commandeered the campaign. This manipulation and commandeering, as he reiterates throughout *Henry Wallace's 1948 Presidential Campaign and the Future of Postwar Liberalism*, not only doomed Wallace's campaign but also postwar liberalism. Previous analyses of Wallace have ranged from describing him as a benevolent man with lofty and seemingly unreachable domestic and foreign goals to a well-meaning figure pitted against the mounting anti-communist tone of the time. Most notable of these analyses include Karl M. Schmidt's *Henry A. Wallace: Quixotic Crusade, 1948* (1960). A major difference between Schmidt's and Devine's books is that the latter scholar had access to several manuscript collections, such as the Henry A. Wallace Papers and the Progressive Party Papers, which were almost certainly not available to Devine.[4]

Similar to Devine's coverage of Wallace's life prior to the 1948 presidential election, Crespino provides a detailed account of Thurmond's life before he became governor of South Carolina in 1947 in a manner that is consistent with previous scholars' "New South" narratives. Thurmond's early years factor significantly into Crespino's overall argument. After a succinct introduction, Crespino commences *Strom Thurmond's America* with a description of Thurmond's childhood in Edgefield, South Carolina, a town that had previously produced several prominent politicians.[5] Following this

description of Edgefield, a town often filled with racial violence and political infighting throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, Crespino provides readers with the story of Thurmond's sexual relations with a family servant named Carrie Butler, which produced a daughter, Essie Mae.[6] Throughout the remainder of the book, Essie Mae sparingly, yet resourcefully, drifts in-and-out of the narrative, which Crespino seemingly does for two, intertwined reasons: first, to reflect "on the legacy of slavery and segregation," and second, to use this depiction of Thurmond to link the past to the present.[7]

Crespino details Thurmond's early political career as indicative of the wider story of southern politicians' shift from guarded devotion to the New Deal to hostility to Roosevelt's domestic agenda. As a member of the South Carolina Legislature in the 1930s, Thurmond "described himself as a 'friend to capital but more of a friend to labor.'"[8] While the first part of such an assertion illustrates Thurmond as a devout New Dealer, it further elucidates Crespino's assertion that Thurmondwas an early Sunbelt conservative. However, Thurmond's amity toward labor did not last. Thurmond's split with labor came during his gubernatorial campaign in 1946. In the same anti-communist political and social culture that destroyed any chance Wallace had of a respectable showing in the 1948 presidential election, Thurmond shed any connections he had with labor.[9]

Unlike Crespino's coverage of Thurmond's early life and political career prior to becoming governor in 1947, Devine references Wallace's earlier political career to give context to his ever-diminishing role as a mainstream Democrat. After being dismissed from his position as United States Secretary of Commerce in 1946, due to disagreements over President Truman's policies toward the Soviet Union, the "Wallace movement" almost automatically came to fruition.[10] As Devine notes, due to Wallace's "liberal idealism," which revolved around finding a "middle ground between pro- and anti-Soviet extremes, and in so doing reduce the chances of war," and reviving the "militant spirit of the New Deal," he became seen by the left-leaning democrats and independents as the successor to FDR-style progressivism.[11]

When read together, Crespino's *Strom Thurmond's America* and Devine's *Henry Wallace's 1948 Presidential Campaign and the Future of Postwar Liberalism* provide a thorough examination of the motives of,

acts by, and outcomes for the two third-party candidates in the 1948 presidential campaign. While Crespino's book evenly covers the life of Thurmond and his role in orchestrating the rise of the modern-conservative movement, Devine all but devotes most of his book to Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign and its consequences for post-war liberalism. From the outset, Wallace's campaign faced innumerable internal and external challenges. After a chapter-and-a-half, Devine dives immediately into the ebbs and flows of Wallace's campaign. Along with failing to garner the support Wallace hoped for from major labor federations, the Wallace campaign's biggest issue quickly became the unpleasant relationship between non-communist progressives (known simply as "Wallaceites") and communist progressives. Devine focuses most of his book on this contentious relationship.

The Progressive Party's National Convention, in Philadelphia and Wallace's fall 1948 tour of the South are two events that best illustrate this unpleasant relationship between non-communist and communist progressives. Devine skillfully focuses on these two events in two concise chapters. In "The Whole Place Has Gone Wallace Wacky," Devine highlights the turmoil that ensued at the Progressive Party's National Convention, which took place in July 1948. But first he describes, the difference between the Progressive Party's convention and the Democratic and Republican parties' conventions—which has largely to do with racial makeup and age–and he offers a brief history of various forms of Progressive parties' assemblages prior to 1948.

On the second day of the convention, the first noticeable signs of dissent began to develop regarding the acceptance of rules on the way representatives would be chosen for the party's national committee. Devine explains that in an act of democratic practice (and in opposition to the two major parties' representation formulas, which divvied up two seats per state), the Progressives chose to correlate states' populations with the number of seats they received.[12] This formula backfired and all but ensured that the Communist wing of the party, which thrived in the most populated states in the country, would control the national committee.[13]

Devine thoroughly details the swift collapse of Wallace's campaign in the months following the convention, and argues that the campaign's implosion was largely caused by the communists' slapdash takeover of

the party and the press's coverage of it. Next, Devine superbly highlights the candidate's tour of the South. Over the course of seven days, Wallace forthrightly confronted segregation and unsuccessfully attempted to unite southern working and lower-class whites and blacks against those responsible for dividing them and establishing and maintaining racial divisions.[14]

Wallace's tour, which travelled through the South immediately after the Dixiecrats launched their third-party campaign, ran into Thurmond supporters head-on, and quickly began to unravel. After beginning the tour in Virginia, Wallace first encountered backlash and brazen Thurmond supporters in North Carolina. The climax of the southern tour occurred along various stops throughout Alabama, in which the Progressive candidate received chants of 'Kill Wallace!' and endless heckling. Adding to this, Devine explains that, "By the time the Dixiecrat movement emerged … it seemed that economic liberalism had once again proven no match for social conservatism."[15]

In describing the final weeks of the presidential election, Devine notes two outcomes emergent through Wallace's campaign. The first, which initially became apparent at a luncheon in St. Louis in late-September, was the final realization that the Communist faction of the Progressive Party destroyed any chance Wallace had of a respectable showing at the polls in November.[16] Then, after this harsh, yet late, realization, Wallace's tone, when addressing crowds, became stern.[17] Instead of referring to persons he disagreed with as "opponents," Wallace began to label them as "enemies," who he correlated with "the same kind of men who built up Germany for world conquest after World War I."[18] As Devine contends, Wallace compared American leaders in both in his public speeches and personal correspondence to the Nazi Party in the years before the Second World War

Unlike Wallace, Thurmond was wearily thrust into the limelight as the Dixiecrats' candidate. After a speech in which he uncharacteristically acted out of his socio-economic class by using a racial epithet to denounce the Truman's civil rights suggestions, Thurmond was thrust onto the national stage.[19] This speech and the immediate aftermath, mixed with his 'Southern Liberal' views, engendered popular characterizations of him as a new brand of state rights democrat. [20] When it came to racial issues, this was far from the truth; however,

with regard to economic issues, Thurmond, as Crespino notes, "promoted 'free enterprise' politics that was critical to the rise of the Sun Belt."[21] Similar to his support for the construction of the Clarks Hill Dam during the Great Depression, he advocated for states' rights concerning tideland oil, which South Carolina possessed in abundance. When summing up 1948, Crespino alludes to Thurmond's statement that the year was a turning point. According to him, not only did the Dixiecrats' campaign serve as a precursor to the "modern Republican South," but also Thurmond became the first southerner in the postwar period to meld the "visceral politics of white supremacy with southern business and industrial opposition to the New Deal."[22]

Much like Wallace did with the Progressive Party, Thurmond disassociated himself from the Dixiecrats in the wake Truman's reelection.[23] While Thurmond's and Wallace's third-party campaigns certainly influenced the eventual orchestration of the rise of the modern-conservative movement and unsteady path postwar liberalism would take, Crespino's and Devine's coverage of these after effects diverge significantly. After covering the 1948 presidential election, Crespino examines Thurmond's use of anti-communist, anti-populist, and pro-business rhetoric to solidify his role as a leader of the New Right and "Sunbelters." This rhetoric, cloaked in anti-communism and pro-business stances, as Crespino suggests, also served to mask his utter defense of segregation, while skillfully and carefully disassociated himself from the old and straightforwardly racist Deep South.

Aside from his 1948 third-party presidential campaign, Thurmond's endorsement of Barry Goldwater and his switch to the Republican Party in 1964 became the most influential decision of his political career. In the third part of his book, titled "Sunbelt Republican," Crespino explains, "Thurmond's work for Goldwater in 1964 connected his 1948 States' Rights run with Ronald Reagan's conservative triumph in 1980."[24] In making this claim, Crespino again defines Thurmond's life and political career as a middle ground with regard to time and place between the past and the present.

In his conclusion, Devine explains how Wallace's unsuccessful third-party campaign severely hurt any chance for the formation of a future independent progressive movement. From a short-term strategic standpoint, Wallace's campaign kept liberal democrats and independents

out of Truman's camp, which, according to Devine, kept republicans from labeling an entire faction of the Democratic Party as communists.[25] In the long run, however, he explains that Wallace's stance against Truman's foreign policy only solidified the Cold War consensus.[26] Ultimately, in the waning pages of his book, Devine brilliantly demonstrates that the Progressive Party, hindered by infighting between non-communist and communist members, "could not become the politically influential, broad-based mass organization" they hoped to become, and instead collapsed, to never reemerge in the postwar period.[27]

While Crespino's book covers Thurmond's entire life, Devine's book largely focuses on Wallace immediately before, during, and after the year 1948. In spite of these differences, the books, when read in conversation with each other, provide an in-depth analysis of the two men's third-party campaigns and their effect on both the modern-conservative movement and postwar liberalism.

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[1] Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 9; Thomas W. Devine, *Henry Wallace's 1948 Presidential Campaign and the Future of Postwar Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 286. Hereafter, the States' Rights Democratic Party will be referred to as the Dixiecrats.

[2] Crespino, 3-6, 8.

[3] Ibid, 4.

[4] Devine, 356, 357.

[5] Crespino, 15.

[6] Ibid, 32.

[7] Crespino, 11.

[8] Ibid, 50.

[9] Ibid, 48.

[10] Devine, 18.

[11] Devine, 18.

[12] Devine, 159.

[13] Ibid, 159-60.

[14] Ibid, 233.

[15] Devine, 254.

[16] Ibid, 277-78.

[17] Ibid, 278.

[18] Ibid, 278.

[19] Crespino, 71.

[20] Crespino, 73.

[21] Ibid, 80.

[22] Ibid, 84.

[23] Devine, 288; Crespino, 85.

[24] Crespino, 167.

[25] Devine, 290.

[26] Ibid, 290.

[27] Ibid, 292.

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