

: Can decision support help political leaders make decisions?

by Daniel J. Power

Editor, DSSResources.COM

For many years, I have been systematically reading books by and about Herbert Clark Hoover and Henry Agard Wallace. Why you might ask? What do the writings of 2 dead politicians have to do with decision support? What do we learn about decision making from political biographies?

Some of you know I am an Iowa boy, born a few miles from where I now live. Both Hoover and Wallace have Iowa roots. Also, as I grew up in the late 50s and 60s, Hoover especially often returned to Iowa and I went to his Presidential Library dedication and memorial service in West Branch. My parents looked at both events as important in restoring Hoover's reputation. My maternal grandfather was a long time Democrat and Wallace had always done well with the Iowa small businessmen and farmers. By the end of the 1950s people whispered about Wallace more than shouted his praises because of rumors he was a communist. The red scare had hurt his reputation, even in Iowa.

Hoover and Wallace both wrote extensively about their ideals, values and beliefs and their decision making. Both served in the radio era of politics, especially Wallace. Hoover was a transitional figure and also a progressive (of the conservative sort). Wallace was a rousing speaker, Hoover less so. Both served as Secretary of Commerce. Hoover for 8 years, Wallace 18 months. Also, Wallace served as Secretary of Agriculture for 8 years and Vice President with Roosevelt for 4 years. Both were very smart men and neither fits your traditional image of a politician. Philosopher Kings would be a better analogy for describing their leadership orientation. Each was a paradox and a shy, curious good man.

One was an engineer, the other a largely self taught scientist and geneticist. Both were very successful financially. Hoover created a global engineering consultancy and made profitable investments. Wallace created hybrid corn and helped found Pioneer Hybrid seed corn company. Hoover was an orphan at age 9, but Wallace also had a childhood of hard work on the farm. Hoover was more the dandy and proper gentleman; Wallace was more the barefoot farm boy or unsophisticated "hick". Both are great examples of the American dream of hard work, creativity and merit leading to success. In many ways both were idealists.

What am I learning about decision making? The rational, analytical decision making approaches of both men were often thwarted by political and self-interest decision making. Both men had high integrity and strong religious beliefs and well thought out values. Neither was very sensitive to the emotional side of decision making. Yet based on their records and accomplishments it is appropriate to call them farsighted geniuses of the first or highest order. Despite, or because of,

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their brilliant minds both failed to deal with the conniving, self-interest and bigotry that got in the way of making their ideas a reality.

Today one can look at their ideas and especially their ideals and still find a solid anchor for action. Many of the solutions of both men over their political lifespan have been adopted. Some policies and programs each advocated were adopted many years following their deaths.

I plan to continue my research, but at this point my conclusion is that computerized decision support would not have helped either man be more successful. Both made decisions based upon principles that were deeply felt and not upon political expediency. Both men were rational and analytical in their thinking. Both men were knowledgeable and consulted with others. They kept the facts in their heads and had outstanding memories and excellent analytical capabilities. Critical thinking, within the context of personal values and relevant facts, was their decision support.

Author: Daniel Power

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