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## The Emergence Of The American Agriculture Movement, 1977-1979

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# THE EMERGENCE OF THE AMERICAN AGRICULTURE MOVEMENT, 1977-1979

WILLIAM P. BROWNE AND JOHN DINSE

Beginning in late 1977, the media, television in particular, portrayed as a unique cultural phenomenon an emerging American Agriculture Movement (AAM), a pending farm strike, and a depressed farm economy that had caused this mobilization. Much was indeed unique, especially to the individual farmers and the specific manner in which they were attempting to apply political pressures, but the American Agriculture Movement itself was similar to other organizational attempts that have taken place in rural America.

In the following paper we chronicle the emergence of the American Agriculture Movement as a distinct entity, identify the common features in the emergence of new farm organizations, and examine the conditions of modern society and technology that affect group formation.

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## AN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPS

Despite impressions left from journal and media accounts that portrayed a grass roots insurgency, the emergence of AAM must be seen in terms of an active leadership directing organizing efforts to a relatively inactive constituency.<sup>1</sup> These leaders encouraged activism through a concerted strategy of mobilization with an emphasis on the national issue of a farm strike, the reintroduction of a traditional farm movement ideology, and the skillful use of public relations.<sup>2</sup>

AAM began in mid-summer 1977 in Campo, Colorado, as an outgrowth of those enduring cafe conversations typical in all farm communities. However, Bud Bitner, George Bitner, Alvin Jenkins, Darrel Schroeder, Gene Schroeder, Van Stafford, and a few regular listeners talked mostly about a new political spokesman for farm interests during this particular summer.<sup>3</sup> They saw a gloomy farm economy beset by both low prices and high costs, by an unresponsive government, and by an array of farm interest groups who were out of touch with real farm needs. Their immediate reaction to the 1977 Farm Bill, a piece of legislation that confirmed incentives for large-

scale production without high supports, intensified their frustrations about each of these conditions and precipitated a decision to protest. Encouraged by the reception their ideas found in their own community, these locally respected larger-scale farmers and farm-related businessmen proceeded to develop an organization based on rallies and protests against the political system.<sup>4</sup>

They would prompt and assist farmers throughout the country to organize as local groups, much along the lines of Farm Bureau county chapters, but without Bureau-related emphasis on nonpolitical services. AAM locals would be pockets of farmer interaction and discussion that would inspire political activism instead of emphasizing individual income.<sup>5</sup> The local organizations would join in statewide and, finally, national demonstrations of movement support. Farmers, the initial organizers believed, were widely concerned about their weakened economic status but politically lethargic because they lacked inspired leadership.

To organize and inspire, the six instigators called a meeting of local farmers for 6 September 1977. They were to form the core for an ever broadening series of similar gatherings. Approximately 140 residents attended that first rally and were presented the already constructed outline for a national farm strike of all food and fiber producers. This strike was to boycott the sale of all farm commodities until federal law backtracked from the last two omnibus farm bills and guaranteed one hundred percent parity in prices. The participants, who now had enthusiastic leaders along with a strategy and a goal, then were asked to provide the manpower to stage a larger meeting in the county seat at Springfield to draw up strike plans. For this they were allowed only one week in order to reinforce the urgency of economic conditions and to create organizational momentum for the American Agricultural Strike, as the group was called at first.

The massive use of flyers, personal calls to potentially sympathetic friends, and appeals for media coverage brought out an estimated

seven hundred farmers in Springfield. All areas of Colorado and neighboring states, primarily Kansas and Texas, were represented at the meeting. Participants were asked to observe how quickly a large and supportive turnout could be gathered. This demonstrated, the speakers argued, that farmers were angry enough, smart enough, and committed enough to matter politically. The Campo leaders then gained acceptance of a 14 December target date for withholding to begin. In addition, the leadership gained approval—as well as money and volunteer staff assistance—for establishing a national farm strike headquarters in Springfield. Approximately two thousand protesters from both east and west coasts, along with U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland, turned up for national television network coverage of the next rally, in Pueblo, Colorado, two weeks later.<sup>6</sup>

The strike movement took two distinct organizational directions, one decentralized and the other centralized. The nationwide system of locals was modeled on the successful Campo/Springfield rallies. The original organizers encouraged local pockets of activism where strike enthusiasm and peer pressure could encourage turnout. With limited resources gathered from participants and from sympathetic bankers and business people and with a three month deadline, AAM hit the roadways and airways. Volunteers at headquarters, who were usually the original founders, identified supportive acquaintances and set up meetings and rallies in as many states as possible. In other states, organizers went in blind and used local media coverage to encourage attendance.

By October, AAM strategy was to establish local offices, protests, and rallies, and to develop state organizations from the helter skelter of locals. The organizers communicated continuously with the locals as it became apparent that energetic supporters looked beyond themselves for direction, information, and motivation. As communications vehicles, the state organizations were seen as newly vital cogs in the plan. The state organizations also

worked to establish locals. For example, cash-crop farmers in central Michigan coordinated state level operations and traveled north to dairy country, east to the state's richest croplands, and west to the fruit and vegetable producing regions. While neither headquarters nor state efforts always paid off in new locals, there were high rates of success. Within three and one-half months of the Springfield meeting, AAM, according to its leaders, had opened eleven hundred local offices and had forty states represented at a national prestrike meeting.

The second direction taken by AAM in its organizing after the Springfield rally was toward centralization of planning, with part of the emphasis going toward a culminating protest in Washington that would bring a nationwide focus to the organization and the strike. Organizers originally believed that fragmented local farm interests could result in no common purpose. Organizing experiences and the development of state units reinforced this belief in the need for a strong headquarters role in creating both consensus and common activities.

This leadership role was unlike that of traditional farm interest groups with their designated organizational hierarchies, specialized staff assignments, lobbyist-directed grass roots activism, chains of command, and governing rules.<sup>7</sup> From the beginning, AAM eschewed membership dues, rolls, officers, and any rules. To enhance supporter participation, and to more directly contrast AAM with general farm and commodity groups criticized by the organizers as no longer representative of farmers, the movement insisted that anyone and everyone could speak on its behalf as long as they supported the general ideals of the group.

Within this context, AAM leaders still developed a highly centralized organization with most responsibilities in the hands of the founders. The Springfield headquarters efficiently processed paperwork, monitored assignments, kept track of organizers and locals, and ensured daily routing operations. In

addition, a functional—if not formal—division of labor emerged within the first days of operation. Volunteer staffing, recruitment, fund raising, political liaison, economic analysis, public relations, and publications each were carefully coordinated by an undesignated management team composed mostly of the original organizers.

Building a centralized movement was different from building locals that focused only on the strategy of getting people together. Because farm interests have remained economically diverse in terms of region, products, and scale of production, headquarters committed its efforts toward maintaining supporters' involvement and creating an image of unity among its followers.<sup>8</sup> Thus, organizers in Springfield considered what to tell participating farmers, what indirect messages were needed to encourage nonparticipating farmers, how to transmit and reinforce these messages, and how to identify inexpensive secondary resources.

Several features came early to characterize AAM and distinctively marked its operation. The initial emphasis on one hundred percent parity developed into AAM's only articulated goal. Parity was demanded for all domestically used or consumed agricultural products and also for all foreign exports. In addition, parity was demanded as the basis for all contracting of products for national and international reserves. Marketing of American agricultural products also was to be guaranteed at one hundred percent parity, with farmer input in the marketing structure. Finally, meat and livestock imports were to be banned until parity was reached.<sup>9</sup> These specific but broad agricultural goals enabled all AAM spokesmen to direct their public remarks to common rather than individual or specific commodity interests. Second, in order to explain the emphasis on parity and to present further a view of integrated farm interests, AAM organizers drew upon a recurring theme of farm protests and reconstructed an agrarian ideology reflective of historic demands for "a larger share of the market value of" farm products.<sup>10</sup>

Leaders argued that the threat of farmer activism and a strike would force policymakers to act positively because agriculture, especially the family farm, was the critical link in the national economy. AAM argued that the economy could not withstand a farm action but that economic conditions for farmers had only reached this depressed point because most policymakers and the public had been kept ignorant of farm needs. Such a situation allowed the enemies of family farming to create structural conditions that would eventually lead to large diversified corporate agriculture.<sup>11</sup> This argument—as a side benefit—also stressed the AAM gospel of hope, that organizing in protest and not the proposed strike itself would turn the opinions of the public and policymakers around.<sup>12</sup>

With this simple set of goals and reinforcing ideology in place, AAM was able to construct its remaining strategic features. Continued cultivation of the media became the most important of these. The media was the most direct way to let the uninformed public and the as yet unactivated farmer become aware of AAM's effort. It was also a quick and inexpensive means of communication for a group strapped for both time and money. In the fall of 1977 and well into 1978, AAM leaders had only to keep the media informed of planned events to secure coverage whenever they wanted. Perceptions of uniqueness brought reporters and cameras out from local and national sources. Local coverage afforded advertising for organizing and protest activities, enhancing turnout. National coverage provided far more, showing AAM and its issue of hard times as having gained at least some temporary legitimacy since farmers from all sections of the country were portrayed as commonly bonded in protest.

The remaining central features were largely stylistic. These included the virtually patentable AAM rally, the rousing speakers, the publicity-oriented tractorcade, proliferating pamphlets, and continued use of peer pressure to generate turnout. All these tactics were promoted by headquarters through the state

organizations and to the locals as the appropriate format for AAM activism. According to the leadership, these had maximum shock value and added greatly to the national and consensual image that they desired.

As can be seen in almost every newspaper's coverage, a standard AAM protest emerged. Visible local activity began with Springfield-style mass meetings. Experienced organizers and a few local farmers did most of the early talking, hoping to encourage the loudest discussion possible from the floor. Then a flamboyant or beguiling outside speaker, usually advertised as a long-time critic of farm or business policy, launched into a rather ideological diatribe.<sup>13</sup> The rally led to phase two, a caravan of tractors and trucks scheduled to parade through the business district at a peak shopping period. Both the rally and tractorcade were accompanied by mass distribution of relatively short pamphlets on AAM, its goals, and ideological justification. A final ingredient was the coterie of broad-shouldered and heavy-set farmers, strategically placed at visible locations. Their purpose was to encourage the involvement of others in the ongoing activity, to pass attendance sheets, and to recruit for future AAM activities. In a more general sense, as one organizer acknowledged, such a farmer's purpose was "to intimidate, to serve as a slightly ominous figure."<sup>14</sup> The combined effect was one designed to demonstrate anger, activism, purposeful resolve, and an implied threat of disruption and perhaps even violence if cooperation was not forthcoming. AAM used these features of the organization to create an image that in turn was used to gain the attention necessary for getting its message across.

The image, the need for attention, and the belief that the message would eventually work all assumed more importance after the strike deadline when the passing of legislation, as well as the mobilization of farmers, became an AAM purpose. AAM organizers had been careful to note at the onset that three levels of increasingly costly participation were implied in their plans: turning out for a rally, working

to promote the group and traveling on its behalf, and, finally, not planting crops.<sup>15</sup> To their credit, they realized that fewer and fewer participants would continue their support as their costs of involvement escalated. This provided AAM resiliency and encouragement to continue as its efforts were thwarted in the early months of 1978. But this also made it difficult for AAM to maintain any long-term credibility.

AAM leaders soon became discouraged on two fronts: in Washington, where their legislative goals were long debated but finally failed, and in rural America, where all but a handful of fields were planted during the strike. In Washington, AAM's largest rally on 18 January turned out nearly three thousand farmers and brought a long tractorcade into town on the interstates. Official Washington opened up its arms as these farmer lobbyists spoke of the more than three million who had attended AAM rallies.<sup>16</sup> Secretary Bergland received AAM's statement of demands enroute in Omaha, and every congressional office was filled with courteous but angry protestors attempting to explain their position. Many of these farmers, perhaps a third, stayed throughout the spring as Congress found its house hoppers filled with AAM inspired proposals. Another hundred or so made plans to stay or to arrange periodic returns through the year to help support this seeming cornucopia of Washingtonian goodwill. As one of these participants remarked enthusiastically, "They poured out of every corner to meet with us—when I saw all that, I knew we were damned important." A fellow protest leader said, "We thought we owned the damned town, we knew it, by God. We knew we did."<sup>17</sup>

From January through April, these impressions seemed accurate. In addition to introducing the legislative proposals, the House of Representatives in February held Agriculture subcommittee hearings and, for two weeks, included AAM. Congress, over the next few months, continued to deliberate and eventually went on to pass a new farm loan program and to call a moratorium on all Farmers Home

Administration foreclosures. Both actions occurred in a year when no major items were on the agricultural agenda. Even more visible to the protestors, however, were the twenty or more legislators who left Washington and returned to their districts to ride in the unabating local tractorcades. But the triumph was short-lived as symbolic acts of support gave way to political realities.

The greatest frustration for the amateur lobbyists of AAM resulted from their greatest legislative achievement.<sup>18</sup> At the height of this Washington protest, Senator Robert Dole (R-Kansas) sponsored and, through the intervention of Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Herman Talmadge (D-Georgia) in amending a House-passed raisin marketing order, secured Senate passage of a flexible parity plan (H.R. 6782) that was geared to AAM's demands.<sup>19</sup> All indications, according to AAM leaders, were that the amendment had strong support in the House of Representatives, as well. Their feeling—and one expressed often by Washingtonians at that time—was that Congress could hardly turn them down with the proposal so far advanced and the protest at its peak. However, President Carter and his administration worked hard to defeat the bill on both budgetary grounds and the issue of food price inflation. Consequently, a House-Senate conference committee version failed to secure House passage. That bill subsequently went back to conference and the Emergency Assistance Act of 1978 was re-reported as a very different measure, an authorization for price support readjustments at USDA Secretary Bergland's discretion. The readjustment measure passed both houses, was signed by the president on 15 May, and led to an approximate eleven percent increase in supports. Although the measure would not have been considered in the absence of AAM's new prominence, organization leaders took it as a congressional sellout and an example of presidential backstabbing. Rather than view it as a product of political compromise negotiated between many bargainers, the leaders "knew we were sold out. It was a setup from

day one!"<sup>20</sup>

The strike, meanwhile, was so financially costly for already economically strapped farmers that few could participate. Most of those protestors who elected to come to Washington went home early to plant or make arrangements to do so. By late winter, protest leaders quietly began to call for ten percent production cutbacks among the Movement's activists as a symbolic show of support. Of the forty-nine leaders who were asked if they cut back production for strike-related reasons in 1979, only ten (or twenty percent) responded affirmatively.<sup>21</sup> For AAM followers, the numbers surely were far less, as all Economics, Statistics, and Cooperative Service documents of the U.S. Department of Agriculture showed continued increased production from 1977 to 1978. In short, the strike had absolutely no effect on food and fiber production.

AAM leaders were less disturbed with the failure of the strike than with the weakened emergency farm bill. The strike was explained away as an action that everyone wanted to avert and that Congress, through its delaying action, was able to subvert. Farmers, they noted, had to arrange financing and buy planting materials far in advance of 15 May. Few leaders really expected it to be a successful withholding action anyway, it appears. Fewer than half of the respondents in the leadership survey believed that a strike could succeed if organized; and only one-half who felt that it could work if organized actually believed that it could get underway. These responses seem to suggest why the strike and its failure were forgotten by AAM as the organization placed a renewed emphasis on protest for the remainder of 1978.

AAM efforts did not diminish after the flexible parity bill was dismantled in Congress. Although what eventually was to be a high degree of desertions among both activists and rank and file began in the spring of 1978, AAM's levels of activity and visibility remained high. The leaders and their remaining supporters continued and accelerated past tactics. They emphasized the development of

plans for a larger national protest, expanded local organizations and protest, and exerted more national influence on organizational events.

Alternatives were only briefly considered for two reasons. Most leaders sincerely believed that AAM had almost succeeded legislatively solely by focusing so much public and political attention on itself. AAM activists continuously spoke of the leader who voiced the opinion that "the squeaking wheel gets the grease."<sup>22</sup> Blacks and university students were pointed to as examples of those who had succeeded in this way. Politics as a more subtle process of negotiation and compromise was not defined in the AAM dictionary. As a result, those who remained with AAM were angry and frustrated with Washington politicians and agreed with the leader who said, "Next time, more of the same. More and better." They believed it when they said, "We can shut Washington down."<sup>23</sup>

The other reason for not deviating from AAM's ongoing strategy was simply that of sunk costs, in the phrase favored by economists. Those responsible for AAM had invested their available resources in order to organize a Colorado office, state organizations, locals, and a protest style. With its meager financial base and dependence upon volunteers, AAM could not afford to reverse itself and invest in new offices and tactics. In addition, supporters of AAM had their own sunk costs relative to their involvement in the rhetoric and unyielding demands of the Movement. Any attempt to change directions could potentially cost AAM its hardest-working followers.

As a result, AAM changed mostly by degrees during the second half of 1978. Headquarters stepped up communications with the states and locals. The highly critical *American Agriculture News* was regularly published and distributed. And, at least partially because of these messages, the ideology of AAM became more sharply focused and evident. It no longer extolled agrarian values. The anger of early 1978 was directed at the previously chastened

corporations; banking interests and internationalists were added to the list of enemies now portrayed as the primary reason for AAM's legislative defeat.

The second Washington tractorcade, occurring in January 1979, must be understood in the context of escalating anger, more extreme interpretations of economic conditions, and the increasing difficulty of gaining media attention. More moderate farmers, including many from the earliest stages of AAM protest, continued to leave the ranks as charges became more harsh and less politically acceptable to them. This desertion produced a longer tractorcade of nearly nine hundred vehicles but an actual turnout of only half as many farmers, although their ranks did grow. It also produced a group without many of the calming voices that earlier had urged temperate behavior. The second tractorcade, unlike the first, refused to park peacefully at a local stadium upon its arrival. Protestors immediately and frequently tied up traffic, blocked intersections, and damaged federal facilities. Finally, the police successfully confined them to the Mall.

This time Washington did not open its doors. AAM found most legislators unavailable except for the briefest discussions. No ranking administration officials made protestors feel at home. In retaliation, many farmers became belligerent and threatening, which further isolated them from their targets. By midwinter, with most television networks and newspapers criticizing their personal behavior and ignoring their political complaints, most AAM protestors left town despite their earlier threats to stay until spring.

This disastrous turn in AAM's public relations marked a dramatic shift in organizational behavior. AAM was, by February 1979, everyone's subject of criticism; and it had lost even more supporters from its own ranks. Its behavior was labeled a disgrace by the media, Congress, USDA, other agricultural groups, consumer groups, and many who had helped found it. Despite whatever sunk costs remained among the closing locals and disap-

pearing state organizations, the group had no option other than a sharp change in political tactics.

The rest of 1979 was devoted to keeping AAM afloat. Although some local and state protests continued, the few remaining diehards could not generate support for a return to Washington and a third protest tractorcade died in planning. During this period, all locals in twelve states were closed. In the remaining twenty-eight, delegates at the June 1979 AAM convention estimated that between sixty and ninety percent of their state locals were totally inactive. AAM was most evident through its *News*.

AAM kept functioning by keeping like-minded farmers informed and by invoking memories of how smoothly the organizational aspects of the strike had come together. A small Washington office with a single paid lobbyist was established. The protestors who remained in Washington or returned throughout 1979 worked to develop an image of continuous political involvement. They coordinated their activities through that office and attempted to work with as many congressional staffs and USDA bureaus as possible. As part of that new strategy, the tractorcade scheduled for February 1980 was replaced by a series of informational demonstrations, including several distilleries for producing gasohol, which was proposed as a solution to the nation's energy problems. These activists assumed more of the informational role that political scientists have observed to be typical of lobbies, although they did arouse some threats by emphasizing that AAM would become active electorally in the future.<sup>24</sup>

Within the organization, support and turnout continued to lag. The June convention had been seen as a time and place for formalizing the organization. The leadership presented a plan that they hoped would lend even greater structure to AAM while strengthening the commitment and support of its very fluid membership. The delegates found proposals for formal membership, dues, a strengthened Washington office, and bylaws



unacceptable because such innovations were ill-timed and inappropriate while AAM lacked an existing base of support. The delegates approved a loose organizational structure that designated formal leaders—a national chair, vice chair, secretary, and treasurer—to foster growth and purpose for the Movement. This action also passed on a governing national body of the designated state delegates whose status had been approved a year earlier.

The second 1979 convention in November elected Marvin Meek, a cotton farmer from the Texas panhandle and an early AAM activist, as AAM's first chair. At this point, AAM also possessed twenty-eight state delegations, parity as its political goal, a still organized headquarters, a small Washington office, a few thousand subscribers to *American Agricultural News*, and an almost completely inactive system of locals. It had emerged to strike, had wielded a formidable and well-organized protest, and had lost momentum as its protest met with public disfavor. The remaining leadership sought to continue as a viable farm interest and voice by regaining that momentum. Although AAM went on to stage some protests, its leaders never captured what they lost despite vigorous campaign work, attempts to take control of other farm groups, and continued national lobbying.<sup>25</sup>

#### AAM IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Much about this surge and decline in the organizational fortunes of AAM parallels the history of earlier American farm groups. Two political scientists who have formulated contemporary theories of interest groups provide some generalized insights into what links AAM to the past. Robert H. Salisbury, who in fact developed many of his ideas from observations about agricultural groups, discusses interest groups in terms of entrepreneurs and the creation of membership benefits.<sup>26</sup> Entrepreneurs are organizational founders who build a group structure and then generate a following. That following commits itself to some form of low- to high-cost group membership in exchange for specific benefits offered

by the entrepreneurs. These benefits may be of many different types, but all are important in that they can be gained only through group participation.

Jack L. Walker, on the other hand, finds that new groups can hardly be successful without what he identifies as their patrons of political action.<sup>27</sup> If the patrons—who may be some form of mass membership—are in no mood or position to support the group, no amount of entrepreneurship will succeed. For this reason, new interest groups are most likely to emerge in times of social upheaval, when an investment in a particular group seems most worthwhile.<sup>28</sup>

For agricultural protest groups with a general interest in farm conditions rather than in specific product or commodity gains, this conceptual framework specifies several factors generally important to group emergence.<sup>29</sup> These groups usually are organized during periods when farm prices are comparatively low. Thus, farmers perceive an upheaval relative to their own prior situations. In times such as these, entrepreneurs who have been active in the farm community become the major catalyst for organizing by selling discontented farmer patrons on the need for group action. The ongoing political order, but particularly institutions that directly gain from the farm economy, becomes identified as not only the cause of farm problems but also as the source of solutions. Although some organizations seek to address these problems through cooperative purchasing and sales arrangements and others do so by emphasizing strong social ties among themselves, all share some sort of a protest orientation directed toward a positive political reaction. That is, they all want material rewards for their members and pursue them through strategies that separate the groups from the political mainstream. Furthermore, each organization or movement develops or acquires a supportive ideology to differentiate their version of a stronger agrarian lifestyle from that of the rest of society. It seems true, as Don Hadwiger once observed of farmers in politics, that these organizations

emerge in crusades of dramatic change because their members do not feel part of the political system, being so far removed from the centers of politics and the stimuli produced there.<sup>30</sup>

The American Agriculture Movement emerged in reaction to a farm policy that, through the 1973 farm bill, had created fencerow-to-fencerow production following a period of high farm prices. Policymakers had hoped to encourage production in order to tap international markets—which, unfortunately, proved to be unstable and did not continue to expand with U.S. farm efforts. Thus, as supply increased, demand decreased and prices dragged. The importance of this price decline was exaggerated because inflation in the general economy was pushing up both annual costs of production and interest rates. For some farmers, increasing interest rates were unusually troublesome because of recent land and equipment purchases they had made to step up

personal production. When no corrective action was proposed as part of the 1978 farm bill, farmers were indeed left at an extremely low economic point.<sup>31</sup>

Similar conditions plagued the earliest farm organizers and inspired their protests. The earliest large-scale farm organization, the Grange, began in 1870 during a period of U.S. agricultural expansion at the conclusion of the Civil War. High war prices gave way in the face of production increases and by 1878, as the Grange grew, corn prices had steadily declined thirty-two percent from 1866. This period also spawned agrarian participation in the Greenback Party and the Free Silver movement after they had spread from urban centers. As they would be in 1978, agrarian protestors were disenchanted by federal legislation in 1878, when the touted Bland-Allison Act failed to appreciably expand the money supply despite the coinage of silver.<sup>32</sup>



FIG. 1. Tractors at Capitol after tractorcade 5 February 1979, about 2 PM, while police were busy boxing them in and farmers were listening to speeches and unaware of what was happening. The sign on the left hand side of the right foreground tractor reads "DOGING IT TO WASHINGTON," while the sign on back reads "With Prices and Tails Cut WE ARE STILL WAGGING." Photo by J. Fetterolf, courtesy of American Agriculturist.

The National Farmers Alliance (NFA) emerged out of these conditions as well. Its base, however, was the yeoman farmer of the South who, more than his northern neighbors, lived in economic, political, and social dependency. The average farmer relied on credit to finance future crops. Eventually, because of continuing low prices, many southern farmers were so deeply in debt that they lacked hope for ever being cleared. The Texas Alliance, Louisiana Farmers' Union, and Agricultural Wheel—the three arms of NFA's 1888 merger—all originated in that context.<sup>33</sup>

The early twentieth century saw three new farm organizations develop: the National Farmers Union (NFU) and American Society of Equity in 1902 and the Nonpartisan League in 1914. The NFU was built on the ruins of the Alliance in Texas while Equity began in Indiana. Farmers in neither movement faced historically low prices during this period of relatively sustained agricultural prosperity.<sup>34</sup> They, however, still experienced at least minor swings in the market place and remembered the major ones. Organizational momentum was provided by fear of lower cotton prices for the NFU and, in the case of Equity, by an avoidance of what farmers saw as continuing violent price fluctuations. The League, with its North Dakota origins, began after a dry season combined with lower prices to drive some farmers out of business. Arthur C. Townley, the founder of the Nonpartisans, had expanded during the good years of 1910–1911 and was financially vulnerable to severe losses for which he would not take blame as profits dropped in 1912.<sup>35</sup> The Farmers Holiday Association was the only major protest group spawned during the Great Depression and it was largely ad hoc in nature.<sup>36</sup>

The last general agrarian protest prior to AAM's emergence was in 1955 as prices fell after the Korean War. The National Farmers Organization (NFO), also Iowa-based, emphasized collective bargaining during a period that saw a ten-year decline in the price index of eleven percent, accompanied by a seventeen percent increase in the costs of services and

goods for farmers.<sup>37</sup> They had more success than all farm organizations but the Grange and NFU in developing a lasting organization. But the routes to success and failure were similarly tumultuous for each of these organizations.

Entrepreneurship characterized these groups just as it did AAM. Without what Saloutos and Hicks identified as "gifted farm organizers," many of them never would have existed.<sup>38</sup> In other instances, entrepreneurs were only interested in their own initial groups. Oliver Hudson Kelley of the Grange and the NFU's Newton Gresham left government and newspaper careers to organize while living off credit and neighborly largess. Milo Reno, a preacher and NFU worker, coordinated and symbolized the Farmers Holiday protests. Arthur C. Townley, a professional organizer with a history of work in radical causes, organized the Nonpartisan League using "high pressure salesmanship." Although these and most other dominant leaders worked with activists who also played important roles in organizing, Equity was totally centered in the hands of publisher James A. Everitt. The NFO originated in a similar fashion with Iowa feed salesman Jay Loghry but was taken over by the charismatic Oren Lee Staley. The Farmers Alliance with its merger of groups owed its organizational successes to a greater variety of individuals, but the Texas Alliance's John R. Allen and A. P. Hungate had great influence, as did professional activists Charles Macune and S. O. Daws after the union.<sup>39</sup> Within AAM, farmers Darrel Schroeder and Bud Bitner and elevator operator Van Stafford were particularly and continuously influential in articulating the purpose of the protests. Marvin Meeks's firelike commitment, tremendous dedication to work, and skills at developing strategy won him an early position in the group's small leadership cadre.

The roles of the entrepreneur in each of these instances must be understood as critical to the group's emergence. The fact that economic times have often been difficult for farmers, yet protests and groups did not come

together, demonstrates the organizer's importance as a catalyst. Given the potential for new groups to emerge, there have been surprisingly few. As Kohl has so succinctly stated, "Farmers do not rebel as an instinctive response."<sup>40</sup>

The social benefits of agrarian fraternity and just plain friendship facilitated many of the organizational attempts, including AAM's; and solidarity benefits have certainly been important for group maintenance, especially for the Grange. But it must be noted that each group sought political satisfaction for their members' problems during these particularly bad economic times.

The growth years of the Grange began in 1872-73 as Kelley focused on securing cheaper transportation from what farmers perceived as repressive railroads.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, the Grange grew most rapidly during that period in regions of greatest economic distress. The Alliance also was most successful when most politicized. They used the "too slow" Grange as a foil to claim that the Alliance was more militant, cooperative, and successful. When NFU came forward from the ranks of the defunct Alliance, it did so as an anticapitalist effort to build counter institutions for marketing cotton. NFU aimed to succeed by holding cotton off the market. Equity, at the same time but under the guidance of an entrepreneur with free market rather than socialist values, was also organizing to withhold. Everitt, however, wanted farmers to emulate big trusts and gain control of the market through such an action.<sup>42</sup>

The Nonpartisan League was the most overtly political of the farm groups, aiming to take over state government and elect a percentage of representatives equal to a state's percentage of farmers. By 1918, they had captured the governorship and control of both legislative houses in North Dakota. Despite these successes and the permanence of Minnesota's Democratic Farm-Labor Party, the difficulties of maintaining an electoral coalition proved disadvantageous to the League's existence. Both the Farm Bureau and Farmers Union drew away its membership base in the

early 1920s with their emphasis on membership services.<sup>43</sup> During economic good times, politics appeared too time-consuming for busy farmers. At least that was the lesson farm organizers seemed to learn because the Farm Holiday, NFO, and AAM all mobilized later around threats of withholding and collective action. The lack of interest in permanent political control by farm movement organizers should not be surprising. Farming has always been an all-encompassing enterprise and, as AAM's attempt indicates, most of its practitioners have neither the time nor inclination to become deeply enmeshed in governmental activity. As a result, farmers can be organized around a plan or an idea, but their continued commitment is unlikely.

The Grange began a decline by 1875. The Alliance was dead by the turn of the century. Equity's protest activity lasted eight years. The Farmers Holiday Association went into eclipse in four. The strike activity of NFO was evident sporadically over a period of years and then peaked in 1962. Even the NFU, which survives with the greatest degree of political presence and largest membership of any general farm group except the Farm Bureau, put member activism aside and by 1910 had settled into organizational routines of cooperative, social, and educational activities.<sup>44</sup>

Entrepreneurs, in order to organize successfully, must know their markets, or what appeals to potential patrons. The history of farm group organizing indicates that farmers find appealing the quick fix with its emphasis on dramatic protest and a comforting ideology. Protests, as visible demonstrations against those who are seen responsible for the farmers' plight, have been characteristic of these groups. AAM indiscretions during these actions seem remarkably tame and free of violence compared to those of many preceding groups.

Tobacco farmers associated with Equity used night riders who set fires, sabotaged the tobacco trust, and dynamited its machinery. NFU night riders also served as enforcers, in this case attempting to insure participation in

the 1908 "plow up" campaign. The Farmers Holiday directed violence at nonparticipating farmers and blocked roads to disrupt marketing. NFO withholding was accompanied by shootings. Even the recurrent counter marketing institutions were primarily protests against dominant middleman interests and those in politics who countenanced them.<sup>45</sup> In all these instances, farm groups viewed protests as instrumental to obtaining capitulation and cooperation from those who opposed their interests. As political outsiders without bargaining power, they used the protest to demonstrate farm power to the targets and, to at least some degree, to the subjects who were being recruited and mobilized. American farmers always appear to have needed a forceful and reassuring display of their own ability to matter. They have had little time for anything else.

Farmers, however, have needed more in order to be reassured. Consistently, ideology has been used to reach farm supporters and back up displays of force. AAM's rhetoric glorified the family farm, agrarian virtues, and the economic contribution of agriculturalists as producers and consumers. It also criticized politics, farm groups, and the public for being inattentive to farm needs and, thus, responsible for low farm prices.<sup>46</sup> In 1977 and through mid-1978 this justified AAM's strategy, but as AAM demands were turned away in 1978 and as attacks on the organization and its political style intensified in 1979, group leaders developed the enemies of agriculture argument much further. A hard and fast ideology—or perhaps a second-stage ideology—developed quickly. High costs, which had always been advanced as a reason for increasing prices, were blamed on a corporate conspiracy rather than on the conditions of the economy.<sup>47</sup> The "corporates" increasingly were portrayed as having ruined that economy through their monopolistic handling of agricultural products. They did so in league with bankers and other international interests who, as "master swindlers," controlled all facets of society including agricultural and economic research

that might otherwise have proposed solutions. Moreover, these enemies created a moral crisis in the nation by advancing their interests through welfare economics, propaganda, and the victimization of all working Americans.<sup>48</sup>

While this broad set of beliefs might not have been entirely accepted by AAM's supporters, and indeed was not generally accepted by its activists, it was important nonetheless.<sup>49</sup> With it, during mobilization, AAM possessed a general explanation for its existence and protest strategy. As losses mounted, the ideology hardened and was used to encourage the hardliners who still fought for AAM's existence.

Ideology has been similarly useful for other farm groups, and there is certainly very little new about AAM's rhetoric. The idealization of farm life and its contrasts to the rest of society were integral to populism, the Grange, groups of the Alliance, NFU, the Farmers Holiday, and NFO. The Free Silver and Greenback movements and the Nonpartisan League provided economic arguments compatible with AAM's fears of farmer repression. The Alliance, NFU, Farmers Holiday, NFO, and to some extent Equity all mounted attacks on the monopolies that were seen as victimizing farmers. Even the rhetoric of Granger attacks on the railroads and calls for cooperatives were similar. Moreover, most of these groups shifted, like AAM, from agrarian idealism to more radical criticism. As the organizations began to decline and lose supporters, ideologies became more pronounced and more critical of the institutions that farmers depended upon—an example of the way ideology traditionally has been used for entrepreneurial purposes in structuring farm protests against low prices.

#### FARM PROTEST IN A MODERN SOCIETY

If the American Agriculture Movement has been much like its predecessors in farm politics, it has also benefited and suffered as a result of conditions found only in modern society and its technology. The electronic media most impor-

tantly, modern transportation, and other innovations in communications made AAM possible as a rapidly emerging national protest group. These had been unavailable even twenty-three years earlier to the NFO, although that organization did gain extensive midwest newspaper coverage.

The technology and AAM's skillful use of it allowed the organization to develop a national image, reputation, and support group that no other farm protest group had ever possessed. At the onset, local protestors brought in farmers from other states and regions. When organizing locals, AAM emphasized their broad dispersment and sent its own leadership around the county as facilitators. By becoming a nationally recognized interest and moving its protest to the midst of political decision-making in Washington, AAM developed its bargaining power as politicians countrywide sought out its spokesmen. AAM also established an ongoing communications system linking its headquarters with the locals. Telephones, printing operations, and rapid mail delivery enabled messages to be disseminated quickly and on a large scale. This resulted in well-coordinated rallies and allowed the organizers to continue to prod reluctant locals. As a result, AAM's grass roots involvement was most impressive and added further to its credibility.

AAM's most important decision, however, was to rely on the media, especially television, to advertise its activities. AAM was able to reach all potential targets: the public, politicians, and likely farm supporters. To gain that coverage, AAM was creative enough to emphasize its flamboyance. Releasing goats on the Capitol grounds, harrassing a West German consul, throwing tomatoes at Secretary Bergland, and similar incidents all became important for their news appeal. As Marvin Meek was quoted as saying, "We may be stupid but at least we're smart enough not to buy TV time."<sup>50</sup> The media's coverage was the cornerstone of the American Agricultural Movement. Without it, AAM could not have spread its message of hard times, protest, and the value of farming so quickly or so efficiently. The national uprising

caught everyone but AAM's own activists off-guard and created a look of spontaneity that few interest groups have had. In addition, AAM initially possessed few financial or manpower resources and could hardly have organized in any other way.

Although modern technology and AAM's brand of marketing served the organization well during its emergence, it also became a negative factor. News representatives were less eager to get involved as AAM events became routine. This led to a continued escalation of the protests. Combined with the anger and frustration accompanying the second Washington tractorcade, this escalation proved a disaster. Media coverage and public opinion became especially critical of AAM, and a positive image proved to be impossible to recreate. As a result, by the time AAM became most critical of political and economic events, there was no one left to report or to listen.

The American Agriculture Movement played a short but central role in the politics of U.S. agriculture. It did so by behaving much like those few other protest groups who have appeared locally over the past 110 years. But its organizational successes were very different from those of preceding groups because of AAM's ability to achieve a national following. The use of modern technology allowed AAM to reach both farmers and the public to a truly extraordinary degree, but the organization's mobilization did little to ensure its future. In this respect, AAM suffers the fate of those various other farm organizations that have either died or gone through periods of very poor health.

## NOTES

1. AAM received ongoing attention in every U.S. newspaper and magazine with any interest in agriculture. Each television network provided nightly coverage of most activities. The most pointed article about uninspired mass protest, and the one from the most surprising source, was by David Harris, "Bitter Harvest," pt. 2, *Penthouse* (November 1978): 125-26, 156-62. Another barbed article from a far more expected source was Lauren Soth, "AAM Achieves

Partial Success," *Agricultural World* 4 (May 1978): 11.

2. Much of the information here comes from a series of interviews with AAM leaders and activists between October 1978 and January 1980. Fifty-three of the respondents completed a prepared questionnaire while over a hundred others answered specific questions related to the questionnaire. Some were interviewed more than once. Because many respondents desired anonymity and to conserve space, only direct quotations are attributed by additional footnotes.

3. Leo V. Mayer, "The Farm Strike," *Policy Research Notes* (July 1978): 6-16.

4. William P. Browne, "Mobilizing and Activating Group Demands: The American Agriculture Movement," *Social Science Quarterly* 64 (March 1983): 19-34.

5. Mancur Olson, Jr., *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).

6. "Bergland Offers Sympathy to Farmers Threatening a Strike," *New York Times* (23 September 1977): A18.

7. Don F. Hadwiger, "Farmers in Politics," *Agricultural History* 50 (January 1976): 156-70.

8. William P. Browne and Charles W. Wiggins, "Interest Group Strength and Organizational Characteristics: The General Farm Organizations and the 1977 Farm Bill," in Don F. Hadwiger and William P. Browne, *The New Politics of Food* (Lexington, Mass: D. C. Heath, 1978): 109-21.

9. AAM, mimeographed leaflet, Springfield, Colo.: undated. See also Darrel Schroedor, "Parity: The Only Solution," *Communicating for Agriculture Highlight* (Summer 1978): 1.

10. Barbara A. Kohl, "Farm Movement Ideology in the Late Seventies: The American Agriculture Movement," unpub. ms., Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, Ohio State University (1979); Terry L. Anderson and Peter J. Hill, "The Role of Private Property in the History of American Agriculture, 1776-1976," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 58 (December 1976): 42.

11. AAM, *Cheap Food Policy: It Is Not a Coincidence* Springfield, Colo. (n.d.).

12. Browne, "Mobilizing and Activating Group Demands," pp. 28-29.

13. Frequently used examples were antirilateralist J. C. Lewis, Arnold Paulson of the National Organization for Raw Materials, and Charles Walters, Jr., of ACRES, USA.

14. Interview respondent from Colorado (Jan-

uary 1979).

15. Browne, "Mobilizing and Activating Group Demands," p. 28.

16. Official AAM policy, as dictated from Springfield, was to keep membership lists and numbers concealed. These were only lists of rally participants and the fear seemed to be that someone would use them to gather embarrassing information about "membership" support in order to weaken AAM's credibility. Nonetheless, the three million figure was leaked continuously by national leaders and published in Allan J. Cigler and John Mark Hanson, "Group Formation through Protest: The American Agriculture Movement," in Cigler and Burdett A. Loomis, eds., *Interest Group Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1983), p. 88. The best estimate of the number of AAM protestors is from an early survey by *Doane's Agricultural Report* 40 (December 1977): 4. Those data indicate about a nine percent turnout of all American farmers, considerably below the three million figure.

17. Interview respondents from Michigan (January 1979).

18. Douglas E. Bowers, "The Setting for New Food and Agricultural Legislation," in *Agricultural-Food Policy Review: Perspectives for the 1980's*, Economics and Statistics Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (April 1981), pp. 120-34.

19. *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1978), pp. 435-50; Jerry R. Skees, "Conflict within a Changing National Agricultural Policy-Making Process: Major Agricultural Legislation in 1977 and 1978," unpublished paper (Michigan State University, n.d.), pp. 13-16. The flexible parity plan would have given one-hundred percent of parity to those who would set aside fifty percent of their production. For less set aside, proportionally smaller percentages of parity were granted.

20. Interview respondent from Texas (July 1979).

21. Leadership survey question.

22. Interview respondent from Colorado (May 1978).

23. Interview respondent from Texas (May 1978); respondent from Tennessee (May 1978).

24. The seminal work of Lester Milbrath on lobbyists showed this as their most valued asset. See *The Washington Lobbyists* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963). One of the most recent treatments of American interest groups confirms this finding. See Graham Wilson, *Interest Groups in the United States*



(New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

25. AAM, and especially Marvin Meek, campaigned for Ronald Reagan in thirty-four states during the election of 1980. AAM also organized a small PAC for the 1982 elections. As a result of the Reagan support, an AAM representative was given a job and office in USDA but left frustrated after a few months as an "insider" in 1981. AAM worked against the 1981 farm bill, and its activists still come to Washington as opponents of most legislative proposals.

26. Robert H. Salisbury, "An Exchange Theory of Interest Groups," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 13 (February 1969): 1-32.

27. Jack L. Walker, "The Origins and Maintenance of Interest Groups in America," *American Political Science Review* 77 (June 1983): 390-406.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 403.

29. The American Farm Bureau Federation is the major group not included because its roots are not tied to agrarian protest. Rather it is a creature of governmental relationships. Orville M. Kile, *The Farm Bureau Movement* (Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1948).

30. Hadwiger, "Farmers in Politics," p. 158; Lowell K. Dyson, "Farmers in Politics: Comment," *Agricultural History* 50 (June 1976): 172.

31. J. B. Penn, "The Structure of Agriculture: An Overview of the Issue," in *Structure Issues in American Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture; Economics, Statistics, and Cooperative Service, 1979), pp. 2-23.

32. Solon Justus Buck, *The Granger Movement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1913), 33; Theodore Saloutos, *Farmer Movements in the South, 1865-1933* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), p. 51; Allen Weinstein, *Prelude to Populism: Origins of the Silver Issue, 1867-1878* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 351.

33. Saloutos, *Farmer Movements in the South*, pp. 23-24, 57-87.

34. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 109.

35. Saloutos, *Farmer Movements in the South*, p. 187; Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), pp. 114, 154.

36. John L. Shover, *Combelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana: University of

Illinois Press, 1965).

37. George Brandsberg, *The Two Sides in NFO's Battle* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1964), p. 9.

38. Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West*, p. 152.

39. Buck, *The Granger Movement*, p. 44; Saloutos, *Farmer Movements in the South*, p. 85; Shover, *Combelt Rebellion*, p. 201; Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West*, pp. 59, 116; Brandsberg, *The Two Sides in NFO's Battle*, pp. 67-69; Robert C. McMath, Jr., *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers' Alliance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

40. Kohl, *Farm Movement Ideology in the Late Seventies*, p. 45

41. Buck, *The Granger Movement*, p. 53.

42. Saloutos, *Farmer Movements in the South*, p. 42; Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West*, p. 114.

43. Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West*, pp. 190, 213-14.

44. Buck, *The Granger Movement*, p. 69; Saloutos, *Farmer Movements in the South*, pp. 151-52, pp. 211-12; Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West*, p. 147; Shover, *Combelt Rebellion*, p. 211; Brandsberg, *The Two Sides in NFO's Battle*, p. 263.

45. Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West*, p. 124; Saloutos, *Farmer Movements in the South*, pp. 198-99; Shover, *Combelt Rebellion*, pp. 43, 49; Brandsberg, *The Two Sides in NFO's Battle*, p. 109.

46. American Agriculture Movement, *American Agriculture Movement* (1977); Schroeder, "Parity," p. 3.

47. *American Agriculture News* (12 December 1978); *Ibid.* (15 June 1979).

48. *American Agriculture News* (24 October 1978); Van Stafford, "The Big Swindle," *American Agriculture News* (2 January 1979), pp. 4-5; "Farmers Seek Patriotic Coalition in Washington," *The Spotlight* (12 February 1979), p. 16; Micki Nellis, "We'll Never Pass This Way Again," *American Agriculture News* (9 January 1979) p. 4; Kohl, "Farm Movement Ideology in the Late Seventies," pp. 11-23.

49. Browne, "Mobilizing and Activating Group Demands," p. 29.

50. Cigler and Hansen, "Group Formation through Protest," p. 106.