

## AMERICAN AGRICULTURE, 1957 — AS IT LOOKS FROM THE GRASS ROOTS

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American agriculture was never in a sorrier position than it is today.

Farm prices have been lower and farm foreclosures more frequent than they are at the present time.

But never in our history have such an overwhelming majority of our total population been so totally unconcerned about agricultural welfare. Never have so few people, both in actual numbers and percentage, been seriously concerned with the maintenance of a sound, prosperous American agricultural plant.

Never before has our farm leadership gone in so many divergent directions at once.

Never has the farm bloc in Congress been torn by such regional interests and so completely disregarded by the overwhelming majority of urban representatives.

And over and above all that, looms the dismaying fact that because of the widely divergent forces at work in agriculture's house, farmers themselves, confused and bewildered and uncertain, in too many instances take an attitude of "to hell with it all" when they should be joining forces and acting cooperatively and cohesively as never before.

### "CHEAP FOOD" POLICY

By and large this nation has been characterized from the very beginning by its "cheap food" economy. Throughout our entire history, as we gradually progressed from an agrarian country to the world's leading industrial power, America's farm operation has been characterized by low farm prices, a series of foreclosures with each downturn of general economic conditions, agrarian revolts one upon another, and the general concept that the American farmer and his family—even though nominally American citizens—must be satisfied with a life of drudgery and toil and returns several cuts below those within the nation's towns and cities.

Truly, American farm people until relatively recently were traditionally second-class citizens from an economic standpoint and, in too many instances, rather humbly and meekly accepted that status.

Many people believed that only those with the least initiative, or at least the poorest intellectual faculties, stayed in farming.

And in too many cases farm people themselves, despite their angry and futile outbursts at a price structure which seemed always to place them on the short end of the double tree, rather prided themselves. They bragged about their long hours, their hard work, their hardships, their frugality, and how they could "tighten their belt" and "get by" another season no matter what the weather or market conditions.

### **LEGISLATION REFLECTS CONCERN OF FARM PEOPLE**

But in more recent times, particularly during the last three decades, some significant changes began to take place in American agriculture.

Growing out of the efforts of the Agricultural Extension Service, the increased circulation of farm magazines and newspapers, and wider use of the radio, farm people became more aware of their economic situation in relation to that of the large numbers of other people affected by American agriculture. They began to realize that this second-class citizenship of farmers was not necessary, that it was not inevitable, and that it was definitely undesirable from the standpoint of the nation as a whole.

Out of that feeling came the first feeble attempts at farm legislation on a national scale during the late twenties. This was followed by the grand rush of various farm programs which developed out of the great depression of the thirties.

Many tools were fashioned to strengthen economic conditions in American agriculture. Farmers became acquainted with these tools and indeed managed many of the farm programs themselves. They became convinced that they could be more nearly the masters of their own destiny than they had ever believed possible.

A new hope and sense of direction came to farm areas. Farmers, cooperating together through their farm programs and aided by dedicated leadership, gained new stature. Improved farm prices brought a standard of living to rural America that was beyond the expectations of even the most recent generations of farm people. For the first time in the entire history of this nation, urban people tended to respect the economic progress of American agriculture and even in some cases to envy the role of the farm family.

### **BRIEFLY, A MODERN OUTLOOK**

For the first time the general public seemed to accept the philosophy that agriculture, as our basic industry, had every right to expect returns comparable with those in industry for comparable effort and

capital investment. The old "cheap food" philosophy of the turn of the century seemed to be discarded with the last of the old fashioned, outmoded agricultural tools which farmers had finally managed to abandon as they converted and modernized their operations in the age of power farming.

But this happy state of affairs was destined to be of short duration indeed.

With the close of the Korean War and the easing of world tensions, America adjusted herself to new circumstances in a new day and age. American farmers once more saw the rest of the economy leap forward to unprecedented prosperity while its age-old problems of surpluses and low prices again marched out across the land.

The return of these grim specters of an earlier day was accompanied by a far worse catastrophe to American agriculture. This was the decline of concern for American agriculture on the part of urban people and the deliberate picture of confusion which was, and continues to be, painted by those who either do not have agriculture's welfare at heart or are grossly misguided.

#### **LAISSEZ-FAIRE FOR FARMING?**

Today after all of our generations of experience in agriculture, some people in extremely influential and high places in American agriculture assure us that we have no need for a farm program, that lower prices will bring about the necessary adjustment and American agriculture will thus return to a healthy and progressive condition. Some people assure us that we must have lower farm prices before we can have higher farm prices. They say higher farm prices "get us in trouble."

Some people would have us go back to the 19th century concept of a "free market" price as the major device for determining farm income and adjusting agriculture. They regard this process as overwhelming and inevitable and assure us that farmers can only live with this outpouring of farm abundance and hope that in some distant future, demand will catch up with the supply.

Some people assure us that the situation in which we find ourselves was only to be expected, that we have it "too good" and that we have been living in a fool's paradise.

Some people assure us that all we need to do is once more "tighten our belts" and that these problems which we face at the present time are only imaginary.

We hear also from those who assure us that good farm prices can

prevail only in times of war—although all other parts of our economy march on to unprecedented prosperity in times of peace.

Some people assure us that we need only to shift production to new crops with new uses and our headaches will become a thing of the past.

Some people assure us that our only problems are a result of the ever normal granary idea and that the farm economy would be wholly and completely satisfactory if our supplies—drouths and crop failures notwithstanding—were only sufficient to keep the pipelines of industry filled.

Some people tell us, complete with illustrations lifted out of industry's book, that our only salvation is more efficiency—greater yields, higher production, lower per unit costs.

Some people would have us disclaim all thought of acting together cooperatively through the democratic processes for fear that we will “lose our liberty to creeping socialism.”

Others assure us that the circumstances in which we find ourselves are only very temporary—that in a matter of a very few years we will be needing all that we can produce and more.

Still others are convinced, on the basis of the best scientific facts available, that production will continue to outrun our consumption needs farther into the future than any of us can foresee.

Some people are sure that the only alternative to our present troublesome problems is the “pleasant” task of eating our way out of our abundance.

As a matter of fact this compounding of confusion has reached such an incredible degree that even our chief administrative officer himself has stated that half of our net farm income would come from federal taxes.

#### **AGRICULTURE'S PUBLIC RELATIONS HAS SUFFERED**

Agriculture's public relations could not conceivably be worse. Farm morale could hardly be any lower than it is today. And, of course, we have relatively few farmers today. Only a handful of American people today are called upon to provide the food and fiber needs of this great nation. Yet we have done our jobs so well that staggering surpluses beat down our prices and our living standards while our own spokesman and other self-appointed spokesmen, with various and sundry motives, spread confusion on every hand and wreck the public's confidence and belief in the need for a clear-cut thoughtful program for American agriculture that will maintain this basic industry in a prosperous and healthy condition.

## INGENUITY CAN MAKE ABUNDANCE A BENEFIT

We must start over, fresh and positive, sure ourselves of those things we believe, re-establishing faith and confidence in farm people and farm programs and, where necessary, *changing farm leadership and farm spokesmen who fail to recognize these basic facts.*

To begin with, first and most important, we must divest ourselves and the public generally of the fatalistic attitude which holds that we are wholly incapable of controlling our destiny in any way, shape, or form.

The people of this nation, cooperating together through their department of agriculture and a unique and magnificent land-grant college system, have made possible an outpouring of agricultural abundance such as the world has never before known or dreamed possible.

People intelligent and resourceful enough to have created this abundance are intelligent and resourceful enough, and willing, to devise ways and means by which this system will work both for the benefit of those who produce the nation's food and fiber as well as those who consume it and who have been the primary beneficiaries of our national agricultural policy for the past hundred years.

To begin with, then, we throw out lock, stock, and barrel, all thinking and all those who think that we cannot control our economic destiny in a way that will make the benefits of our agricultural revolution equally beneficial to producer and consumer.

I believe, and quite firmly, that the initiative and inventiveness which we have directed toward increasing production could, if redirected, find solutions to this problem of over-abundance.

I do not believe it is inevitable, or desirable, in the face of production constantly outrunning market demand, to proceed blindly, willy-nilly to pour ever more resources into our productive plant without concerning ourselves with the intelligent use of the ultimate product and the effects on the welfare of farm people.

## FARM PROGRAMS, POLICIES MUST BE REVAMPED

I firmly believe that all our farm programs and policies from the national down through the state and county and farm level should be completely reappraised and re-examined to determine which of these policies and programs are contributing to a solution of our present farm problems and which—through custom, habit, and lack of initiative—are only worsening our plight.

I believe scientific methods, every bit as satisfactory as those which have startled us with their tremendous effect upon production, can be applied to our problems of abundance. Some efforts may be in the direction of increased consumption. Some may involve adjusting production downward. Others may be in the direction of new farming methods that lower costs without expanding output. New pricing policies may be needed. Programs may be needed to hasten the transfer of resources of agriculture and also maintain the farm economy in a healthy condition.

I have faith in democracy. I am not concerned with "losing our liberties" nearly as much as I am concerned with losing our farms and a standard of living that will in time lead to the deterioration and disappearance of the American family farm.

We must rid our minds of the "boogies" and "never, nevers" and analyze problems and solutions fearlessly. We must not be sidetracked by such terms as "creeping socialism" and "rationed opportunity." Let us analyze and evaluate and test thoroughly and disregard reactionary "scare" type tactics. We must rid ourselves of agricultural leaders who label others with differing ideas as "Communist dominated," "non-Christian," or suspect. These men fear new ideas; they basically distrust the capacity of people to work out their own destiny.

#### THE WAY OUT

I believe that we can cooperate together through our farm organizations, our farmer cooperatives, and the democratic processes of state and federal government, to bring the agricultural situation into balance with the rest of the economy.

I believe in progress, but I do not believe that we must become unwilling and unfortunate automats caught in this technological treadmill, where we gradually, but quite relentlessly, produce ourselves into poverty.

I believe that those speaking for American agriculture and those in positions of influence in our Department of Agriculture should have as their first concern the welfare of American agriculture and not that of the ever-growing phase of our economy which is concerned with the processing, packaging, and distribution of the farmer's product.

I believe that some fundamental changes are needed to prevent a chronic farm depression and a permanent second-class citizenship on our farms. I believe that the philosophy of a great many of the self-styled spokesmen for American agriculture today is out of step with the economic facts of life, out of step with the temper and desires

of farm people, and completely off base in its thinking concerning a program that will ever restore agriculture to any semblance of balance with the rest of the prospering American economy.

Agriculture is one of the few major industries where free competition of small producers still prevails. In the managed and administered economic system of the 20th century, 3.5 million farmers with their ancient price and marketing system and excess production are caught in an ever-declining industry which is fast becoming sick.

I believe that the people of America with the intelligence and resources at our command, can and should find ways for farm families to share financially in the blessings of their productivity. The bounteous and efficient production of farmers must not condemn them to chronic poverty. The U. S. Department of Agriculture and the land-grant colleges are magnificently equipped to meet this challenge.

Agricultural policy in the immediate future should give first priority to agricultural adjustment.