

Alan Wolfe: Beyond Reagan

Cinderella and Supermom

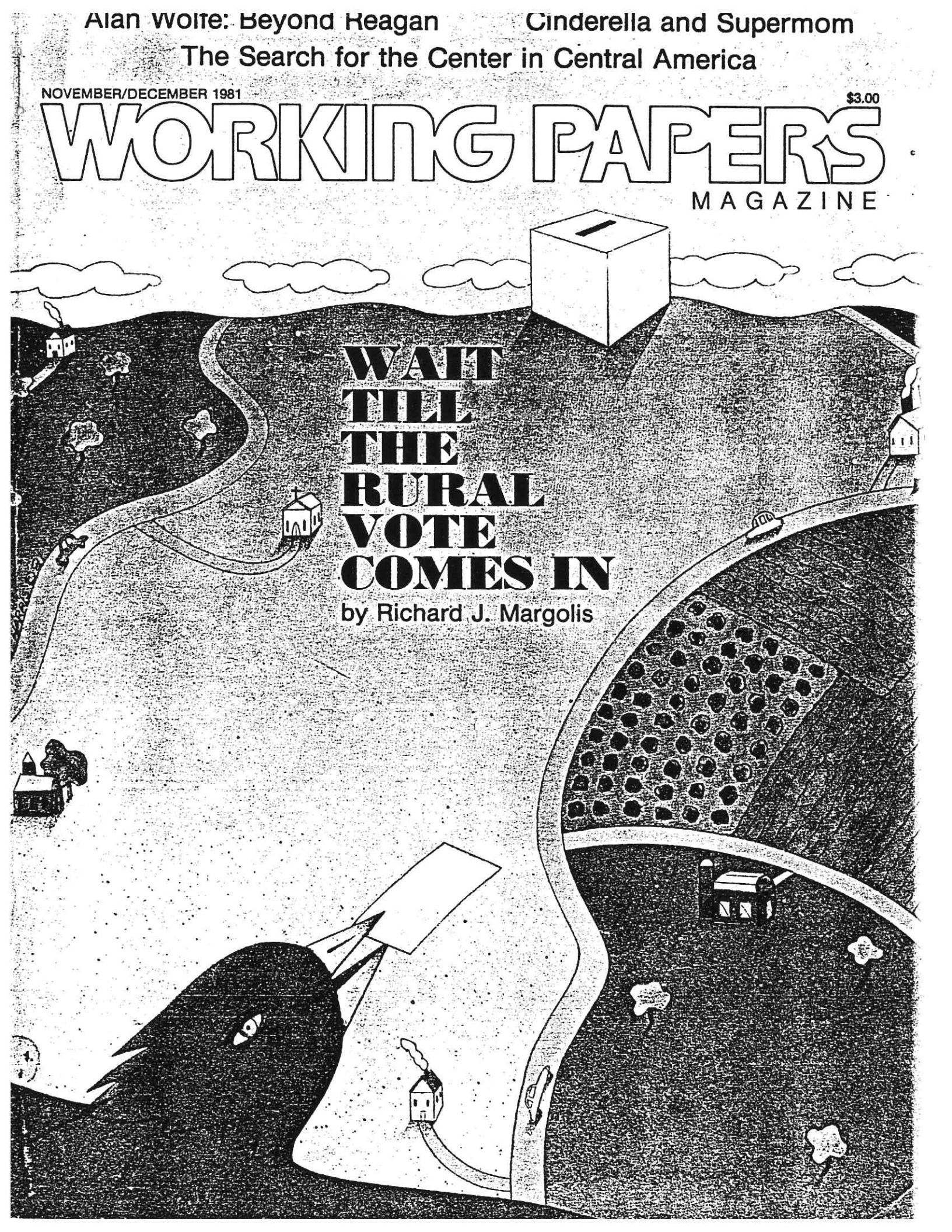
The Search for the Center in Central America

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1981

\$3.00

WORKING PAPERS

MAGAZINE

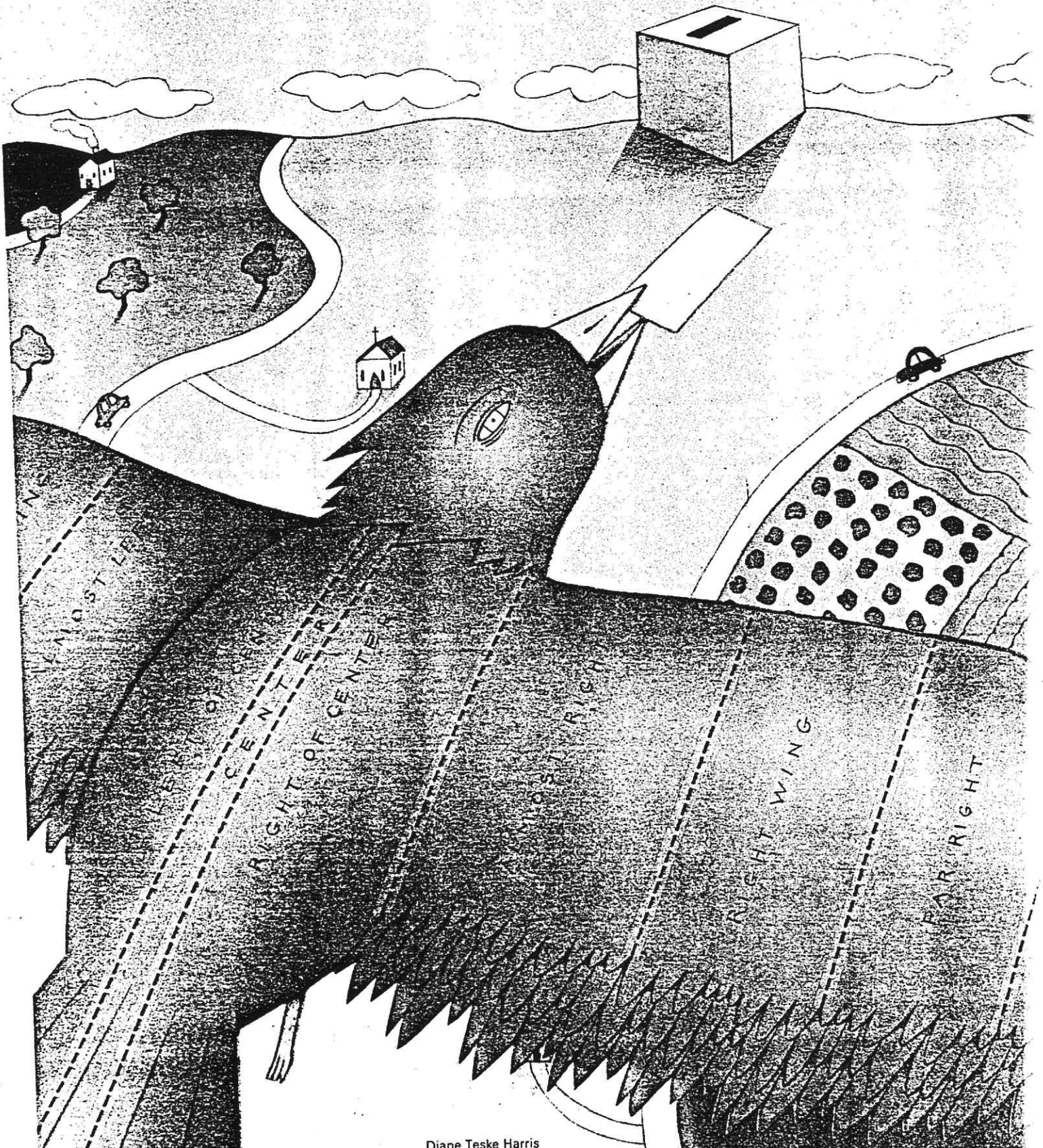


WAIT TILL THE RURAL VOTE COMES IN

by Richard J. Margolis

RURAL RETURNS

by Richard J. Margolis



After his surprise victory in 1948 Harry S. Truman took wicked delight in mimicking the British-born radio commentator H. V. Kaltenborn, who throughout election night insisted that Truman would lose. "Wait till the rural vote comes in," Kaltenborn kept telling his listeners.

He was not the first to have been fooled by rural returns, a persistently puzzling element in the calculations of urban-based analysts. The mystification seems as much a function of the contradictions of rural history as of urban bias. What are we to think, after all, of a citizenry that created both the People's Party (1892) and the Moral Majority; that organized the first chapters of the Ku Klux Klan as well as the first cooperatives in America; that displayed alarming signs of pacifism before World War II and alarming signs of jingoism during the Vietnam conflict; that gave us Joseph McCarthy and George Wallace on the one hand, and George McGovern and Henry Wallace on the other? How are such anomalies to be interpreted, and what do they portend?

My purpose here is to bring us closer to an understanding of rural returns and the critical role they are likely to play in future political struggles. Not all rural returns, however, need be considered electoral. Also on our agenda are the remarkable returns of the 1980 census, whose long-range consequences we have already begun to grasp, as well as the returns that metropolitan America expects to reap from its growing reliance on rural skills and resources. Taken together, these three outcroppings on the rural landscape—political, demographic, and economic—offer progressives their toughest challenge, and perhaps their richest opportunity, since the days of the Great Depression.

Anyone hoping to build a solid alliance atop the ruins of the New Deal coalition will have to take rural voters into far stricter account than has been customary for at least two generations of progressives. The dramatic outward shift in population during the 1970s and the simultaneous decline in northern big-city voting power suggest that it is no longer possible for the democratic left to write off rural ballots and still win national elections. If in the past that practice was merely small-minded, these days it is suicidal.

Richard J. Margolis is a contributing editor of Working Papers.

To be sure, metropolitan voters continue to outnumber their nonmetro compatriots by at least two to one. (The 1980 voting age population percentages were 68 and 32, respectively.) But if we divide the metropolitan electorate into its urban and suburban components, we then have three voting groups of nearly equal strength. Moreover, since all signs point to a steady growth in rural population, it may be that within a decade or two rural citizens will challenge suburbanites as the country's single largest voting force—which is another way of saying that more and more politicians may soon be staking their careers and their fortunes on the rural vote. Thus the somnolence into which progressives often sink when presented with rural political opportunities has begun to resemble what anthropologists call "cultural lag," meaning a group's delayed response to decisive social or technological change.

In fairness, the progressives' attitude is by no means unique. Certainly it is shared by much of the public, whose salient view of rural America has long been characterized by a mixture of nostalgia and condescension, a blend that sentimentalizes the rural past while discounting the rural future. For many politicians and government officials the idea of inevitable rural decline became an axiom to be discriminatorily applied in the making of national policy. The New Frontier used it in restricting the development of Appalachia to "growth centers," a euphemism for cities; the Great Society invoked it in the title that President Johnson's Commission on Rural Poverty chose for its report: "The People Left Behind."

To an extent rarely acknowledged, the policies turned out to be self-fulfilling. Those were the years (1950-1970) when rural schools by the thousands were being consolidated out of existence, joining rural post offices, churches, and other local institutions in a parade of extinction. They were also the years when small farms were disappearing at the rate of more than one million every decade. One could sympathize with Oren Lee Staley, the president of the National Farmers Organization, when he uttered his dark, oft-quoted jeremiad: "The farmhouse lights are going out all over America."

The federal government, meanwhile, did little to rekindle the lamps. To vary the metaphor, the current of reform that from time to time flowed through the nation—the New Deal, the Fair Deal,

Rural Americans are emerging as the most important swing voters. The future of progressive politics may well hinge on whether it can once again serve rural interests.

the Great Society—flowed *around* rural Americans, leaving them largely untouched. To this day, in the middle of a demographic boom, rural Americans as a group face sharply disproportionate hardships: they comprise one-third of the nation's poor, one-half of the ill-housed, and nearly three-fifths of the medically underserved. (Ninety percent of the counties designated by federal officials as "Health Manpower Shortage Areas" are rural.)

The point to bear in mind here goes beyond rural suffering: it speaks to the inability of metropolitan Americans to accept their rural brethren as full partners in the national enterprise. The failure has distorted our understanding of rural life and thus of rural politics, both its new energies and its new significance. The progressives' myopia, in short, is part of a larger blindness that has prevented many of us from seeing the rural forest for the urban jungle. If we hope to win elections now, we must open our eyes.

For progressives to embark on a rural strategy is not so wild a dream. Truman tried it and won in 1948. Jimmy Carter had the sense, but not the talent, to try it in 1980. Commentators have understandably passed over this aspect of the Carter campaign, even though, according to some former aides, it became the virtual centerpiece of his administration's electoral hopes. As early as December 1976, before Carter and his Georgian retinue had actually settled into office, his pollster Patrick Caddell was writing in-house memos concerning the pleasing tendencies of small town voters.

As Caddell has recalled in a recent interview, "We understood from the beginning that a lot of our support came from rural areas. We upset Udall in the Wisconsin primary thanks to the heavy rural vote upstate; and against Ford we won both Ohio and Pennsylvania by more or less breaking even in rural areas, something most of our (Democratic) predecessors hadn't been able to do."

Carter strategists also noted that big-city Democratic strongholds were not the ballot bonanzas they used to be. The votes cast in the five largest cities—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit—had dropped from 13.8 percent of the national total in 1960 to 9.2 percent in 1976. (By 1980 they were down to 8.4 percent.) Quite clearly, if Carter was to win again, he would have to continue to run well in regions beyond the city limits.

To hear ex-staffers tell it, the administration

responded by spending the next four years aggressively cultivating rural votes. It began with a series of so-called "rural initiatives" in housing, health, community facilities, and several other categories. Carter appointed a three-person White House Rural Task Force to steer the "initiatives" through the Washington labyrinth, instructing the trio to find ways to "make government work better for rural people." At the same time he enjoined them from advancing any solutions that might cost money. The prohibition typified Carter's rural strategy throughout, combining minimum commitment with maximum fanfare.

The strategy got what it deserved on November 4, 1980, when an estimated 54 percent of rural voters chose Ronald Reagan. We need not fret too long over the implications. For surely it was not Jimmy Carter's campaign that repelled rural voters, it was his presidency. Had he arranged to run for reelection on a genuinely progressive record, he might have done much better in rural America, with or without a strategy.

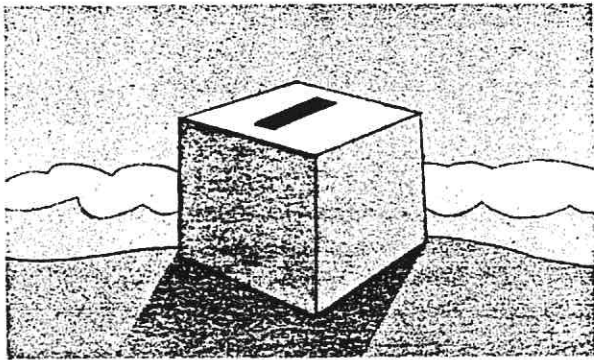
It is already possible here and there to find hopeful portents of the coming realignment. In Vermont, for instance, it was essentially the new settlers of old villages—the young fugitives from New York and Boston—who gave progressives one of their few victories in 1980, the reelection of Senator Patrick J. Leahy. His surprisingly strong showing in the small towns more than made up for his equally surprising losses in the state's two major metropolitan areas, Burlington and Montpelier.

Still more telling, I suspect, were the results in Missouri of a 1977 statewide right-to-work referendum. It was soundly and unexpectedly defeated when rural Missourians turned out in force to vote No. Delighted labor officials attributed their victory to the support of former city residents, mainly workers, who had shifted their places of residence but not their political allegiances.

Skeptics may point out that despite such occasional progressive detours led by newcomers, the mass of rural voters continues to travel conservative roads. In point of fact, since Andrew Jackson's day rural voters have been more radical than some and more populist than most. It is only in recent times that they have consistently failed to rally to liberal causes—and that may say as much about the causes as it does about the voters. Even today, when neoconservative candidates hold most of the cards, signs are that many rural voters would

When North Dakota's tax collector couldn't get AT&T's attention, he sent them a bill for \$54 million.

prefer to be dealt a populist hand. The election of Byron Dorgan to Congress is one case in point. Certain national opinion polls, though less lucid, are another.



Dorgan first. He is a thirty-eight-year-old former tax commissioner from North Dakota, who in 1980 attracted 57 percent of the vote in his bid for a seat in the House. Dorgan's victory is worth pondering—and relishing. He was the only Democrat that year to win a House seat previously occupied by a Republican, and he did it in a state that gave Ronald Reagan a 68 percent endorsement while throwing out every Democrat who held state office. Dorgan's opponent, moreover, was a *bona fide* right-winger of the kind one would have expected to ride on Reagan's coat-tails.

"People think it was a conservative year," says Dorgan, "but I think you can go out and be a voice for folks who don't own big blocs of Exxon. You can be a voice for people buying gas at the pumps who are angry that it is helping Mobil buy a department store."

The *Washington Post* has labeled Dorgan a "scourge of corporate America," which may be only a slight exaggeration. As North Dakota's tax collector he discovered in the early 1970s that many large, absentee corporations had been earning income in the state but had never filed tax returns. "It was easy to send an auditor to the drugstores or the gas stations or the mom and pop stores in Fargo and Grand Forks," Dorgan recalls. "But North Dakota had never bothered to send auditors to the big corporate headquarters of firms that were competing with these local businesses."

So state auditors were duly dispatched to the corporate East—the same region that William Jennings Bryan had once called "the enemy's country"—and with surprising results. "We'd send a guy to New Jersey for three weeks," Dorgan says, "and he'd come back with a check for \$625,000. It was phenomenal, incredible. We would start checking up on these people and they would just pay up."

Not all the corporate giants rolled over so obligingly. Western Electric, an AT&T subsidiary, claimed it didn't have to pay state income taxes

because the work it was doing in North Dakota was for "national defense." (The firm had a Pentagon contract for an ABM project near Grand Forks.) "We couldn't get their attention," says Dorgan, "so we sent them a bill for \$54 million. . . . Well, that got their attention. Within weeks they were here with eight lawyers and a general. The first thing they tried to do was say, 'Hey, you're crazy. Nobody has ever tried to tax a missile system.' Then we went to court. Three years later North Dakota got over \$4 million."

Dorgan calls himself a progressive, and progressives have much to learn from his vote-getting ways. His philosophy is vintage populist: "Little people," he says, "slave and pay taxes while big corporations duck everything possible." The assertion is instantly understandable. Especially in rural regions, where citizens have long extolled the virtues of "plain people" while deploring the evils of fancy faraway institutions, does Dorgan's short summation of how the world works have the ring of justice. It *feels* right. "The populist," writes the historian George McKenna in *American Populism*, "believes that the 'plain people' of America, which for him includes almost everyone, are in basic agreement with each other about what is right and wrong, fair and foul, legitimate and crooked. Fancy dialectics are unnecessary to discover these kinds of truths: we need only search our hearts."

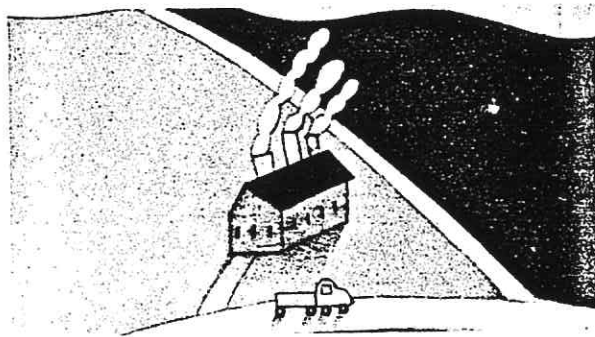
What do opinion pollsters tell us about rural hearts and politics? Mainly, that factors other than rurality—race, religion, region—can be decisive. Because, for example, 91 percent of rural Americans are Protestant, a large majority favors abortion laws that permit free choice; but in Catholic rural strongholds like some towns in northern New England and the Plains states, anti-abortion sentiment runs strong. Similarly, civil rights legislation as a rule gets short shrift among a rural population that is 89 percent white; yet there are sections in the rural South—a region that is still home to nearly one-fifth of the country's blacks—where no local candidate can win an election without endorsing desegregation.

In his recent book, *Politics in the Rural States* (Westview), Frank W. Bryan, a political scientist at the University of Vermont, examined scores of national opinion surveys in hopes of pinning down rural-urban differences. The results proved ambiguous. Bryan concluded on the one hand that "on several of the 'gut issues' that dominate public concern in America—women's rights, the rights of the accused, minorities, welfare spending, and civil disobedience—rural people still stand to the right of urbanites." On the other hand, "Very little difference appeared when rural and urban respondents were asked to prioritize government spending." The two welfare-type spending categories that rural people overwhelmingly favored were health and education.

Another analyst—Norval Glenn, professor of sociology at the University of Texas—discovered from surveys he conducted that rural opinion was shifting, even on some “gut issues.” He found, for instance, a softening of rural resistance to feminism, perhaps because so many small town women had taken jobs outside the home. In addition, while rural residents continued to oppose big government, they seemed no happier with big business. Finally, “Rural people appear to have lost their long-standing aversion to federal aid.”

For metropolitan-based progressives in search of rural support such foggy findings may not seem overly helpful, but neither should they seem overly discouraging. The picture that emerges through the murk is of a large, diverse electorate whose values are changing and whose political loyalties are accessible. My own impression is that many rural citizens today feel abandoned by both major parties—by the party of Theodore Roosevelt no less than by the party of William Jennings Bryan—and that their sympathies will most readily be enlisted by candidates able to transcend urban habits of thinking and make rural sense.

Later we shall explore some likely issues around which an urban-rural coalition takes shape. Suffice it here to observe that today’s rural electorate is nobody’s fool and everybody’s potential prize. It need not be forfeited by progressives any more than it ought to be taken for granted by conservatives. And if that cheerful supposition should eventually prove false, we are bound nonetheless to proceed as if it were true. Demography requires it, as does democracy.



It is characteristic of this country that it should define its rural populace in metropolitan terms. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a rural resident is someone who lives in neither a city nor a suburb; he or she is said to live outside any officially designated “SMSA,” the Bureau’s shorthand for Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. In the 1980 census, about 61 million Americans, or 27 percent of the national total, were counted in that “nonmetro” category.

The figure, which represented a net rural gain of four million over the 1970 totals, caught some by surprise; for by shifting their geographical points of focus outward, Americans had been making demo-

graphic history. Not only had the rate of rural expansion outstripped the parallel metropolitan rate, but the long, heartbreaking tailspin—nearly two centuries of uninterrupted rural decline—had at last been reversed.

Equally astonishing were the breadth and consistency of this rural tilt. It embraced all regions, not just the Sun Belt; all ages, not just the elderly; all races, not just whites; and all classes, not just the poor in search of low rents or the rich in search of vacation homes. Many of the gains, moreover, occurred in genuinely remote places, and thus could not be dismissed as merely symptomatic of suburban sprawl. In a recent *Population Bulletin* (Vol. 31, No. 4), the demographers Peter A. Morrison and Judith P. Wheeler conceded the point. “Even non-metropolitan areas that are far distant from urban and metropolitan influence,” they wrote, “—the kinds of places that used to be regarded as ‘nowhere’ in the 1950s—have been registering net migration gains instead of their once perennial losses.”

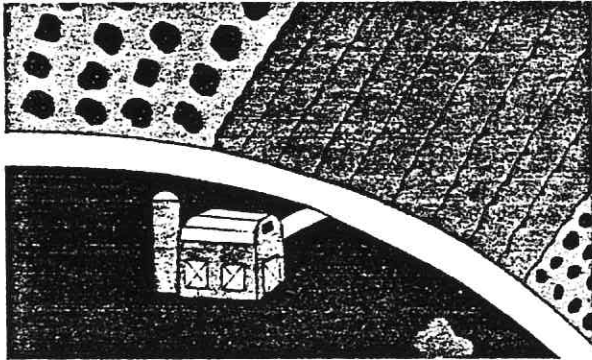
It would be unwise, however, to see in all this the stirrings of a “back-to-the-land” movement, since the actual direction taken thus far has been non-agricultural. If the rural American future looks expansive, it also looks distinctly unagrarian, at least in terms of the small farmer. Indeed, conventional meanings of “rural” may well be swept away in the wake of the new demographics. Of the 25 million rural Americans now gainfully employed, fewer than two million (9 percent) pursue such traditionally rural endeavors as farming and forestry. The largest proportion (23 percent) worked in manufacturing, the second largest (20 percent) in professional and related services and the third largest (16 percent) in retail trades.

Although none of those vocations can be considered especially rustic, together they account for nearly three-fifths of today’s rural work force. When one recalls that only a few decades ago more than half of all rural workers were engaged in agriculture, one must conclude that a quiet revolution has occurred. Some might justly insist that “revolution” understates the event. “We have a new distribution of people upon the land,” writes Howard E. Conklin, professor of agricultural economics at Cornell University, “one that has never before existed in the history of the human race. It is a pattern in which non-farm people live in the country, far outnumbering farmers in most rural communities.”

Though seemingly sudden in occurrence, the “new distribution of people upon the land” has been a long time developing. For at least two decades city dwellers and suburbanites alike have been expressing their residential preferences for small communities and “simpler” environments. In a 1966 Gallup poll, people were asked, “If you could live anywhere in the United States that you

wanted to, would you prefer a city, a suburban area, small town or farm?" Only 22 percent said they would live in a city; 28 percent preferred a suburban area, 31 percent a small town, and 18 percent a farm. By 1977 the contrasts had grown sharper. A Harris poll taken that year revealed that 73 percent preferred to live in "open country" rather than in a city. It was just a matter of time before Americans began to act out their preferences. In the end the nation's gradual drift to the countryside became an open secret that only the experts—the counters of heads and the spotters of trends—failed to notice.

Calvin Beale, chief demographer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and one of the few scholars who ten years ago saw which way the wind was blowing, recently paid professional tribute to the perceptions of us amateurs. "The collective triumph of the layman and the business community," he said, "was that they perceived the situation. Through a host of individually made decisions they began to shift the net flow of population and business before either the academic community or the government understood what was going on." Beale might have included progressives in his list of slow learners.



What lessons for us, then, do these demographic wonders hold? First, as Beale implies, something more than personal preference has been at work here. Part of the shift in living patterns is being engineered by corporations in search of traditional rural endowments like low taxes, abundant resources and cheap, unorganized labor. In consequence, many old urban crusades—for workers' rights, for decent housing, for accessible health care—must now be fought on rural ground. These bread-and-butter liberal causes are anything but stale to rural Americans, who represent only an estimated twelve percent of the nation's organized

labor force, and who occupy more than half the country's substandard housing. The rural population surge thus presents the heirs of the New Deal with an excellent chance to complete unfinished business.

In addition, for corporate interests the energy crisis has made of rural America an irresistibly attractive repository, a region that can be profitably probed and pumped without stint. It can also be "recycled" as a dumping ground for slag, tailings, and radioactive waste. Indeed, the new demographics should be seen as part of a new symbiosis between the nation's rural and metropolitan sector, whereby rural residents are offered the blessings of social and economic revival in exchange for their skills, their space, and their geological possessions.

We have come to rely on rural acquiescence for provision of nearly all the necessities of national life. Cheap food and abundant energy are only part of the story, albeit a significant part; also to be taken into account are such essentials as urban environmental safety and national security—each a contemporary rural responsibility imposed in large part by metropolitan requirements.

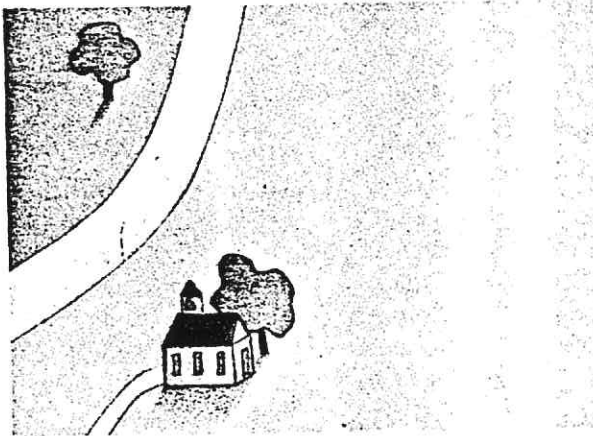
Yet the risk to rural communities can be considerable. The strip mines, the underground missiles, the nuclear waste storage bins—these and similar, nationally oriented enterprises come replete with local perils: they may threaten health and safety, disfigure the land, divide communities, engender cycles of boom and bust, and syphon wealth out of the region. The rural dilemma is to find ways to define and defend its social integrity—its values, its villages, its very survival—while contributing to the larger society's sustenance. In truth, it is everyone's dilemma, for it poses two perplexing questions of our time: not only, "What price prosperity and security?" but ultimately, "Who among us will pay that price?"

The questions turn out to be political, even when framed in nonpolitical language. For example, Ronald Reagan's hesitations over how to deploy the MX missiles may be explained in terms of national defense, yet everyone in Utah and Nevada knows that what has stymied the administration is not military strategy but rural politics. With conservatives taking the lead (two Republican governors plus the Mormon church), residents there have rushed to defend their towns and their ecology. Rural Americans may be super-patriotic but they are far from super-stupid. If the Pentagon threatens to tear up their turf, then the Pentagon is their enemy. The very names of some of the opposi-

If the rural American future looks expansive, it also looks distinctly unagrarian.

Close encounters of the MX kind go far to raise rural consciousness.

tion groups tell the story: Families Against MX, Utahans United Against MX, General Assembly to Save People (GASP). These alliances represent local responses to a nationally induced challenge, a point well understood by all citizens concerned. As a GASP spokesperson remarked, "We're not going to sell our birthright for a mess of missiles." (Rural people still rely on the Bible to bolster their political arguments, whether on the left or the right.)



Close encounters of the MX kind go far to raise rural consciousness as well as rural doubts about the wisdom of neoconservative policy. In countless places—wherever chemicals are being stored, shale is being processed, coal is being mined, or weapons are being tested—Reagan's "new federalism" begins to look a lot like Carter's old "liberalism": Just another way of bullying "plain people." Rural residents have started to see themselves through a glass darkly and along classic populist lines: as victims of a plutocracy that is part Pentagon, part Exxon.

Those institutions and their like, whose purpose is to amass rural resources for power or profit, are really our most dependable allies, because their habits of extraction stretch both the capacities and the patience of small-town America. What absentee control of rural life chiefly jeopardizes is the efficacy of local democratic practice, or what the Russian political scientist M. I. Ostrogorski called "the ordeal of self-government." In too many villages nowadays people are being asked to discard normal community processes in the name of some temporary advantage—a missile site, a uranium mine, a superhighway.

Not all rural citizens take the bait. In southeast Virginia a few years ago, thousands successfully

petitioned the U.S. Forest Service to call off its plans to convert sections of the countryside into a major tourist attraction. Among other things, the agency's scheme featured an eight-lane highway that would carry visitors from the city to a "model 19th Century rural village." But while instructing urban tourists on the rural past, the Forest Service would have destroyed large portions of Virginia's rural present.

In Beauty, Kentucky, not long ago residents turned down a \$2.8 million, HUD-sponsored housing project meant to rescue valley dwellers from perennial flooding. The new, higher ground housing was to have been built on three separated sites and thus would have effectively extinguished old forms of social intimacy. For people in Beauty the risks of flooding seemed preferable to the risks of alienation. Their fight to stay put was self-government at its best.

Self-government, as it happens, is an ideal the Reagan administration claims to hold sacred. Yet the forces that Reagan has consistently befriended are both anti-local and anti-rural. To cite a few instances: Reagan has encouraged monopoly by permitting ever-larger and more byzantine corporate mergers—e.g., Dupont's recent takeover of Conoco, the nation's seventh largest oil company. He has virtually destroyed our chances as a nation of organizing a decentralized energy system—one untethered to the big utilities and oil companies—by refusing to support solar research; and he has given an unneeded boost to agribusiness by deleting from the federal budget more than \$1 billion in small-farm loans.

The drying up of credit? The pressing down of monopolies? These are familiar rural grievances that Ronald Reagan neither invented nor allayed. The path he has followed, a path of least resistance to the corporate will, merely places him in a long, undistinguished line of anti-populist presidents, from Grover Cleveland to Gerald Ford. If Reagan had run in 1896, rural voters would have seen through him instantly, just as they saw through William McKinley and his small town, front porch pretensions. Even today, given half a chance, significant portions of the rural electorate seem prepared to accept Byron Dorgan's observation that "Ronald Reagan doesn't understand what rural America is about."

Our task is to forge a strategy that dramatizes Dorgan's dictum. Then, with a bit of luck, we can all confidently "wait till the rural vote comes in." ■