

# The Rural Challenge: Coping with Babylon and Boston

*Richard J. Margolis, our editorial advisor, last fall delivered a speech at the University of Vermont—one in a series of addresses the university was offering on “Rural Options in Urban America.” The speech contained much wisdom about the indispensable role rural America plays in the unfolding of the American dream, and we are reprinting a version of it here.*

I want to take up the question of whether or not the salvaging of rural America is worth our trouble. I shall argue that it is . . . that a strong and prosperous rural America is the only reasonable cure for many of the problems that afflict us as a nation. I am thinking in particular of two national crises—a crisis of energy and a crisis of democracy—that currently pervade our lives, and how the welfare of rural America relates to these. The crisis of energy is not simply a matter of dwindling gas and oil reserves; there is also such a thing as *human* energy—in fact, it is our chief national resource—and that energy, too, is dwindling at an alarming rate, chiefly for reasons that are social and economic.

Democracy also seems in trouble at this juncture—endangered by forces we but barely perceive, much less understand. In both cases, the recovery of our energy and of our democracy, rural Americans have a seminal role to play.

That is the argument—but first we need to clear away some of the rubble of history.

Man and woman were created in a rural setting,



## From *latifundia* to agribusiness, the barons have known how to consolidate rural wealth

been wandering in places like Babylon and Boston ever since, regretting paradise lost.

History may not be a precise straight line from Eden to Boston, yet when one surveys the past, one

some ways America may have been a fresh start for mankind; in others, it was merely an extension of state history.

The question before us, then, relates to our posture

the U.S. Forest Service announced that it planned to build a superhighway through southwest Virginia, thereby making that beautiful rural region more accessible to campers and tourists. There would be newly built tourist attractions along the way, said the Forest Service, all of them designed to promote a single theme: Rural America. But the Forest Service did not mean *contemporary* rural America; it meant what rural America may have looked like a century ago. Thus, one attraction the Forest Service is contemplating is a model 19th century farm.

Now the interesting thing about this sentimental and costly scheme is that it has earned the instant hostility of nearly everyone living in the region. Almost 20,000 rural Virginians have signed a petition asking the federal government to call off its plans to memorialize the rural past by tearing down the rural present. If the highway goes through, an authentic slice of rural America will be destroyed and hundreds of rural Virginians will have their homes condemned and be summarily displaced. More deserted villages; more stale history.

So we have to go forward, not backwards. The backward path leads us to imperial Rome and its *latifundia*. It is, despite the rhetoric of capitalism, the path of agribusiness, for with all its super-technology—its pivotal irrigation systems and its automated tomato pickers—agribusiness is essentially a throwback to feudalism, with corporations now taking the place of lords of the manor. I am for progress—which means I am for small farms, small-scale technology and small communities. In short, I am for people prosperity rather than corporate prosperity. That is my idea of progress, and it is hardly a new one. Isaiah had the same thing in mind when he inveighed against estate-owners in Judea who “laid their fields end to end,” creating huge, corporate nations out of small individually-owned orchards.

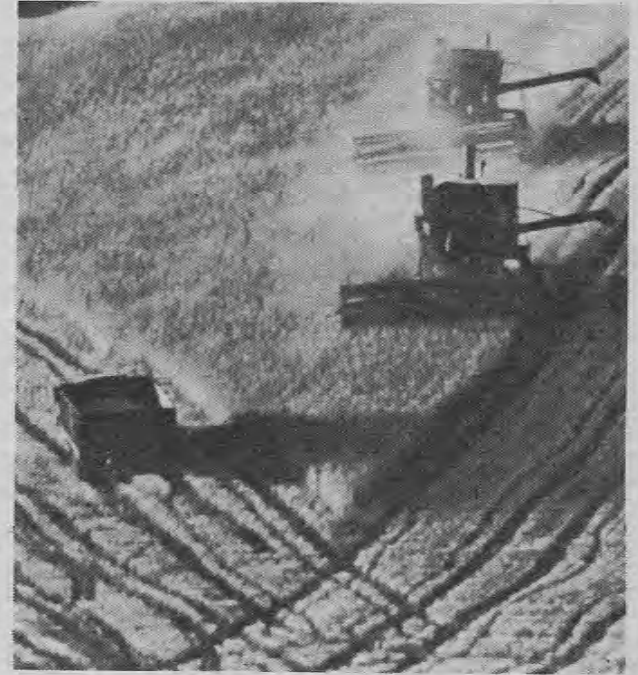
But let us turn to a more compelling subject—that

farms and for a great deal of the profligate expenditure of energy. The machines, the fertilizers and the pesticides are all elements in the so-called “green revolution” that has meant billions of dollars in profits for the petrochemical energy and billions of units in misspent energy for the rest of us. For each calorie of feed energy the American farmer produces, he expends eight calories of petrochemical energy—clearly a suicidal ratio. Add to this the national food-distribution system that now holds sway, with its need to truck produce thousands of miles cross-country and to store and freeze perishables—all of which require machines and petrochemicals—and you get some idea of the connection between the growth of agribusiness and the decline of our energy supply.

This wasteful system has been orchestrated by the big corporations with the full support of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and many of the land-grant universities. So pervasive has been their influence that nearly all Americans have come to believe they would starve without the blessed intercession of agribusiness—that only large farms are efficient, and the larger the better.

Yet all over America there are farmers proving just the opposite—farmers working small plots and using organic methods, who are getting yields at least equal to those of the corporations, and doing it with dramatically less petro-chemicals. In truth, these methods may be the only viable option we have left. And their adoption could instantly change the face of rural America. No more laying of fields end to end; no more deserted villages.

Of course, we need not stop at agriculture. The expended human energy of rural working people throughout America—in the fields, the mines, the mills and the lumber camps—is by and large *exploited* energy. The wages are lower and the working conditions are shoddier than those usually enjoyed by urban and suburban workers. It seems likely that



## Americans believe they would starve without the blessed aid of agribusiness

But in rural America, where residency is relatively stable and the political jurisdictions are relatively small, democracy can thrive, and with it autonomy and freedom. Here is where people still have a chance to speak up, to challenge entrenched authority and bureaucracy, to turn their private opinions into public issues. Here, in short, is where the old Athenian and American dream of civic in-

energy and of our democracy, rural Americans have a seminal role to play.

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Man and woman were created in a rural setting, the Garden of Eden, and the forced abandonment of that rural place was brought on by guile: "The infernal serpent (in Milton's words); He it was whose guile/ Stirred up with envy and revenge deceived/ The mother of mankind." Poor Eve bit from the apple of the Tree of Knowledge; and knowledge, alas, led to civilization, or anyway to cities. We have

## The yeoman farmer would be a new Adam; America, a new Eden



been wandering in places like Babylon and Boston ever since, regretting paradise lost.

History may not be a precise straight line from Eden to Boston, yet when one surveys the past, one does see a procession of forced marches from farms to factories and from rural places to urban places. And one sees serpents, too, who are full of guile and cunning, not to mention wealth and power. In Roman times, those serpents owned huge agricultural estates, called *latifundia*. They gobbled up small farms with a speed and efficiency that would certainly inspire envy among today's minions of agribusiness, and their acquisitiveness over several centuries forced millions of ruralites to flee to the city, there to subsist on bread and circuses.

In England, perhaps a millenium-and-a-half after the fall of Rome, the serpents fenced in what had previously been common grazing grounds, thereby starving out the peasant shepherders and compelling them either to join the *lumpenproletariat* in London and Liverpool, or else to try their luck in the New World. The 18th century poet Oliver Goldsmith described the whole melancholy process in his ballad, "The Deserted Village."

*Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey;  
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.*

Being a good poet, Goldsmith fretted about the social consequences of rural erosion:

*Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade—  
A breath can make them, as a breath has made;  
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,  
When once destroyed, can never be supplied.*

So the New World, our America, was in part populated by peasants forced to desert their English villages. And they, in turn, became the embodiment of Thomas Jefferson's yeoman farmer—the ideal citizen of Jeffersonian democracy; that uncommon man who owned land (but not too much), worked hard and maintained a sturdy independence. He was to be a new Adam, just as America was to be a new Eden.

Of course, things didn't work out quite the way Jefferson had planned. In truth, what we got in America was not Eden but imperial Rome—that is, a continuation of the ancient process of urbanization, complete with teeming slums and deserted villages. In

some ways America may have been a fresh start for mankind; in others, it was merely an extension of state history.

The question before us, then, relates to our posture toward the past: Is it possible to reverse history, and ought we to try? My answer to the first question—Is it possible?—is borrowed from Karl Marx, and he was cautious. "Men make their own history," Marx said, "but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past." In short, and contrary to the spirit of radicalism, we can never wipe the slate clean: we must begin where we find ourselves, where history has brought us.

My answer to the second question—Ought we to try to change the course of history?—is an unequivocal yes. We owe it to ourselves and to our country—and not least to those 66 million of our fellow citizens who still reside in rural America.

I want to make it clear that my concern for a revitalized rural America is in no way an attempt to turn back the clock. Nostalgia is not my game. Indeed, it is just such nostalgia—or the sentimentalization of rural America—that constitutes a threat to our well-being. The proliferation on television in recent years of shows like the *Waltons* and *The Little House on the Prairie* only serves to confirm the myth in our minds that rural America is already a dead letter, something we can easily reminisce about but not anything we can do something about. The *Waltons*, whom we are asked to believe are a family from the 1930s, live in a never-never land of rural bliss—alongside Norman Rockwell and the *Pepperidge Farm* bread man. Never mind that there happened to be a Depression raging; never mind that during that decade nearly two million real farm families, presumably similar to the *Waltons*, had to give up their farms and migrate to urban tenements. What we have in the *Waltons* is an idealized rural past, and they carry an implicit message that there is no rural present. Nostalgia is the opiate of the people.

The illusion that rural America no longer exists, that it is merely an exercise in sweet nostalgia, has surprising, often melancholy consequences. Recently  
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when he inveighed against estate-owners in Judea who "laid their fields end to end," creating huge, corporate nations out of small individually-owned orchards.

But let us turn to a more compelling subject—that of shaping a rational and humane policy for rural America, one that will benefit not only the rural sector but the entire nation. We owe it to ourselves to attempt to change the course of history, to shake off our fatalism and work hard to infuse rural America with new life and prosperity. And, as was noted, we should do this as part of our larger efforts to solve some national problems—that is, for the sake of our energy and of our democracy.

It is certainly not necessary here to spell out the energy crisis. We are all too familiar with the dimensions. But we seldom relate these problems to the rural crisis or to rural solutions. The federal government in this regard is the most blind among us. In the seemingly endless and fruitless debate over energy policy, neither the administration nor the Congress has ever bothered to take a hard look at agricultural policy. Yet it is precisely here, in agriculture, that much of our energy is being wasted; and it is precisely here where new policies could pay big dividends—both in terms of saving energy and of saving small forms.

It is agricultural technology run rampant—or rather, technology run in the narrow interests of agribusiness—that accounts for both the decline of small

*"There is a need for intimate human relationships, for the security of settled home and associations, for spiritual unity, and for orderly transmission of the basic cultural inheritance. These the small community at its best can supply. Whoever keeps the small community alive and at its best during this dark period, whoever clarifies, refines, and strengthens the vision of the small community, may have more to do with the final emergence of a great society than those who dominate big industry and big government."*

From the preface to the St. Johnsbury, Vermont, Town Plan.

throughout America—in the fields, the mines, the mills and the lumber camps—is by and large exploited energy. The wages are lower and the working conditions are shoddier than those usually enjoyed by urban and suburban workers. It seems likely that we shall never solve our energy crisis until we first recompense human energy in an equitable fashion. And the place to begin is in rural America, where the inequities are most conspicuous and the injustices most cruel.

Now does it seem likely to me that we shall succeed in preserving democracy without first assuring the social health and long-range survival of rural America. For the democracy of America—like the democracy of Athens of old—is one based essentially on place. It presupposes a more or less geographically stable population, one that both takes strength and gives strength to local political institutions. The New England system of Town Meetings typifies this system; it relies on a direct, decentralized democratic structure from the ground up.

It was Alexis de Tocqueville, back in the 1830s, who first perceived that we were "a nation of joiners." And he saw a connection between our penchant to form voluntary associations and our egalitarian society. The citizens, he said, are "powerless if they do not learn voluntarily to help one another. If men living in democratic countries had no right and no inclination to associate for political purposes, their independence would be in great jeopardy . . ."

What we seem to have today is an increasingly large group of men and women who still have the right to associate for political purposes but no longer have the inclination. Instead of democracy we are getting political alienation.

The system no longer works so well in big cities, in part perhaps because people need small groups in which to participate. It's hard to speak up in a crowd, especially in a crowd of strangers. And lately it hasn't worked so well in the suburbs, either, because the corporations keep moving managers and their families in and out of these bedroom communities, giving people little chance to form the sort of lasting ties and friendships on which democracy depends. Transiency and democracy simply don't

and freedom. Here is where people still have a chance to speak up, to challenge entrenched authority and bureaucracy, to turn their private opinions into public issues. Here, in short, is where the old Athenian and American dream of civic involvement—where being a fully-participating citizen is both a right and a responsibility—still lives and still has room to develop. In an increasingly bureaucratic and centralized society, the rural sector, it seems to me, can set an example in the practice of daily democracy, a democracy based on stability of place, on face-to-face contacts with friends and foes alike, and on an accepted sense of individual responsibility toward the commonwealth. The oversimplified formula I am arguing for goes something like this: Without small-group stability, no friendships; without friendships, no community; without community, no democracy.

Max Weber, in his critique of the bureaucratized society that he so clearly foresaw, put it another way. He feared a society of "specialists without vision and sensualists without heart." And this nullity, he predicted, will "imagine that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved." One of the missions of rural America, it strikes me, is to spare the country that sad delusion.

To sum up: if you agree that America is worth saving, then perhaps you will concede that rural America is worth saving as well, for the two are inextricably linked, and you cannot bless one by overlooking the other. Each of us is both a child and a parent of history, a pawn of the past but a king or queen of the future. The future of rural America is collectively ours to shape, as free citizens in a free society, and the process begins in rooms like this, with speeches, discussions, questions and arguments. It ends with policies enacted in places like Montpelier and Washington, policies that ultimately affect the quality of our daily lives, for better or for worse. I hope we can make things better for rural Americans. I hope we can redistribute the wealth—downward, to the rural poor—and that we can redistribute the power, too, so that rural people will no longer have to assume the inevitability of second-class citizenship. That, truly, would signify a fresh start for America—a new Eden for all of us. Eves and Adams who persist in thinking the unthinkable: namely, that America can be born again.