

"RURAL AMERICA: WHY BOTHER?"*

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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, I think rural Americans have a seminal role to play.

That is what I intend to argue -- just as soon as we have cleared away some of the rubble of history.

A good place to begin, perhaps, is "in the beginning."

It is interesting to recall that man and woman were created in a rural setting, one known as the Garden of Eden, and that the forced abandonment of that rural place was brought on by guile: "The infernal serpent (in Milton's words); he it was whose guild./ 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, a word and an invention that derive from civilization. We have been wandering in places like Babylon and Boston ever since, regretting paradise lost and seeking paradise regained.

But you can see I have oversimplified. History is not precisely a straight line from Eden to Boston. Yet when one looks at the long sweep of history, one does see a procession of forced marches from farms to factories and from rural settings to urban settings. 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 millennium-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:

Prices 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. If they had, we wouldn't be saying to each other, "Rural America, why bother?" 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 stale 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 millions 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 serve 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 1930's, 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.

Have you noticed those front-porch commercials on T.V. -- commercials that link food products with rural good old times, when apparently everything tasted fresher and better? The people in those commercials are invariably country bumpkins -- deaf, simple-minded and barely capable of uttering a complete sentence. They can't even win at checkers, which seems to be the only game they ever attempt to play. And what are they selling? They are selling products with names like *Countrytime* and *Country Yogurt*. Some of these products are made up almost entirely of chemicals and ersatz colorings; yet they are presented as the real rural thing. How we must long for the old rural life! We can even taste it!

The illusion that rural America no longer exists, that it is merely an exercise in sweet nostalgia, has surprising, often melancholy consequences. Recently the United States 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 was contemplating was a model 19th century farm.

Now the interesting thing about this sentimental and costly scheme is that it earned the instant hostility of nearly everyone living in the region. Almost 20,000 rural Virginians signed a petition asking the federal government to call off its plans to memorialize the rural past by tearing down the rural present. Eventually the unlikely scheme was abandoned -- a tribute to the efficacy of citizen action. If the highway had gone through, hundreds of rural Virginians would have been displaced, more deserted villages; more state 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 hardly a new idea. 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 plantations out of small individually-owned orchards.

But let us leave the federal bureaucrats to wander in the Virginia wilderness. 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. I said earlier that 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 I said 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. In the time remaining I shall make a stab at fleshing out those arguments.

It is certainly not necessary here to spell out the energy crisis. We are all too familiar with its 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 farms.

It is agricultural technology run rampant -- or rather, technology run in the narrow interests of agribusiness -- that accounts for both the decline of small farms and for a great deal of the profligate expenditure of energy. The machine, 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 industry and billions of units in misspent energy for the rest of us, clearly a suicidal ratio. For each calorie of food energy the American farmer produces, he expends 10 calories of petrochemical energy. 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. There is a man in Palo Alto, California, by the name of John Jeavons who with his agronomist colleagues is actually making a profit from produce grown solely on one-tenth of an acre. In very detailed written language, Jeavons recently explained how he did this to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, only to get back a form letter noting that the USDA had already looked into organic farming methods and had concluded they were not "a viable option."

In truth, these methods that Jeavons and others are pioneering 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.

One further point about energy. It relates to coal and to those who mine it -- but I can best make the point through an agricultural analogy. Throughout history agriculture's chief source of energy has been human muscle. So long as farmers owned their own land and enjoyed markets for their produce -- that is, so long as farmers were decently motivated -- sufficient food was produced and starvation was prevented. But in times of latifundia, when small farmers with a stake in their work were squeezed out, agriculture lost efficiency, and serious food shortages often developed. This was true in the latter days of the Roman Empire, when agriculture depended for its energy not on entrepreneurial power but on slave power. Famine came during the reign of Marcus Aurelius because, in the words of the scholar W.E. Heitland, Rome was forced to depend on "an agriculture without hope, an agriculture of despair."

It is my perception that today we are dealing with a coalmining industry without hope -- that is, with one in which the miners have little stake. Their union is weak; their health plan, once the envy of the nation, was jettisoned in bargaining in 1978, after 30 years of successful operation; and their prospects for organizing in the new mines of the West seem very poor. The federal government keeps saying we need more coal, but it keeps throwing its considerable weight on the side of the mine operators and against the workers, thereby creating an economy of despair. In such a climate we can expect more unrest and less production. It is a good example of the link between rural suffering and national suffering.

Of course, we need not stop at coal and 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 shoddiest

than those usually enjoyed by urban and suburban workers. It seems likely that we shall never solve our energy crisis until we first re-compense 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.

Nor does it seem likely to me that we shall succeed in perserving 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..."

I agree, and I suspect that what we 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 mix.

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 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 commonweal. 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.

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