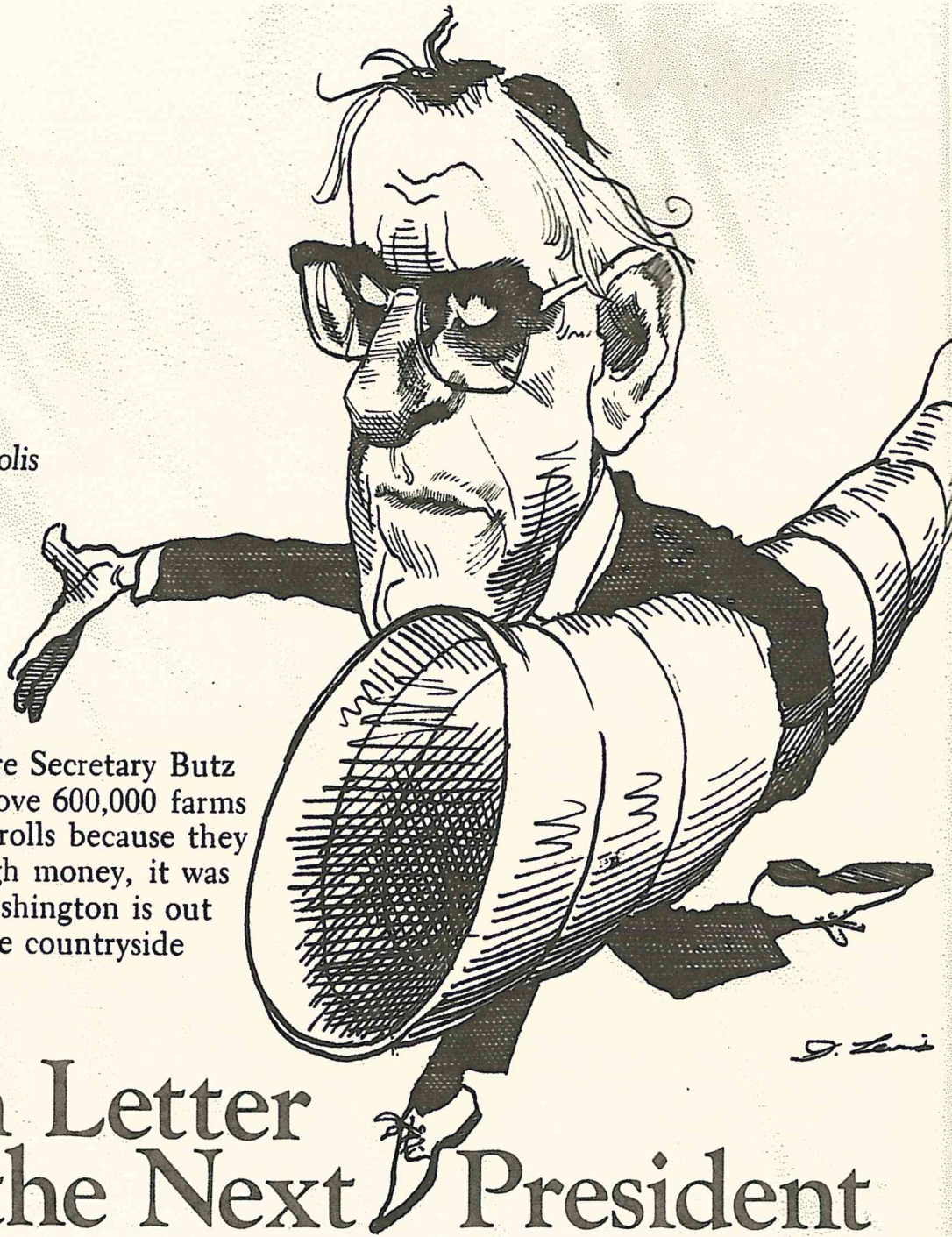


by Richard J. Margolis



When Agriculture Secretary Butz proposed to remove 600,000 farms from the census rolls because they don't earn enough money, it was obvious that Washington is out of touch with the countryside

## An Open Letter to the Next President

DEAR SIR:

I bring you greetings from rural America, where people are counting on you to be *their* next president. They haven't had a president in years — maybe not since Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the man who bestowed upon farm families the dual blessings of electricity and price supports.

I don't know whom among your predecessors you prize most highly, but my own rural pantheon houses just four presidents: Jefferson, Lincoln, and the two Roosevelts—and the greatest of these was Lincoln. In the middle of a civil war he and the Congress found time to put through the Homestead Act (cheap land) and

the Morrill Land Grant Act (public higher education for farmers and workers). Lincoln also established the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which he saw as a kind of agrarian ombudsman, a place where farmers could go for help. At first the idea seemed to work. In his 1864 State-of-the-Union message Lincoln was able to praise the new agency as "peculiarly the people's Department," one "in which they feel more directly concerned than in any other."

Alas, the department nowadays has lost touch with the people, as can readily be seen from a heady pronouncement by its recent secretary,

Earl Lauer Butz. "The Promised Land for American agriculture is near at hand," he declared. In truth, the Promised Land is nowhere in sight. Rural Americans are still wandering in the Wilderness—for Butz was no Moses.

Bear with me, Mr. Next President. I shall try to explain.

Ever since the 1930s American agriculture has been confronted with the paradox of rising production and a declining small-farm economy. The crops and the corporations have thrived, but the small farmers and the small village entrepreneurs have languished. Thus, since 1935 farms have

been folding at the rate of one million each decade (though it is true, with so few small farms remaining, that the rate of attrition has slowed in recent years). At the same time independent, small-town businesses—those tiny *laissez-faire* lights upon the prairie—have been flickering out as quietly as fireflies in October. Thousands of villages have been abandoned, and many of those that remain have been reduced to a state of indigence—communities deprived of decent housing, clean water, adequate schools, and humane health facilities.

Why this seeming contradiction? Is it not possible to have productivity and prosperity? It is—but it depends on who is calling the shots, and in the case of American agriculture nearly all the shots are being called by the big corporations, those aggregates of capital that we have come to think of generically as agribusiness.

The objective of agribusiness is profit, and its chief weapon is technology. Together they add up to a fundamental change in our agricultural system, a shift in rural values as well as in rural techniques. Do not be fooled by the hoary corporate myth that profits are all that Americans require to satisfy their deepest longings. There are other, equally powerful incentives to be taken into account, among them a personal sense of freedom, autonomy, and accomplishment. Such values have long been paramount in rural America; now they are disappearing. Oren Lee Staley, president of the National Farmers Organization, has put the case as well as anyone: "The farmhouse lights are going out all over America. And every time a light goes out, this country is losing something. It is losing the precious skills of a family farm system. And it is losing free men." Meanwhile, a national system of food distribution has overwhelmed traditional local markets, depriving farmers and communities of their right to bargain directly with each other. Family-farm attrition and the decline of localism turn farm-based communities into ghost towns and regions of plentitude into deserts of artificial food shortages. Small, urbanized states are growing increasingly dependent upon distant food sources. In New England recently, three different state commissions concluded that the new dependency was seriously jeopardizing local food supplies. Thus, we have the spectacle of national productivity leading to local

sterility.

Technology run rampant—or rather, technology run in the narrow interests of agribusiness—accounts on the one hand for agriculture's prodigious output and, from the standpoint of most farmers, for its niggardly returns. And the new technology is everywhere in evidence. FDR's first Secretary of Agriculture was the inimitable Henry A. Wallace, and among that worthy's many achievements could be counted the creation of several still-popular strains of hybrid corn. Hybrids are one reason farmers have been able to grow so much food of late—86 bushels of corn per acre last year, for example, compared to only about 25 bushels per acre back in New Deal days. Three other widely publicized explanations are machines, fertilizers, and pesticides, all elements in a "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. (For each calorie of food-energy the American farmer produces, he now expends eight calories of petrochemical energy.)

One obvious upshot of these innovations has been a long-term trend toward bigger and bigger farms, or what the Department of Agriculture has described as "the march of progress toward greater efficiency." The size of an average farm today is 385 acres, a far cry from the old ideal of "forty acres and a mule." A recent USDA news release boasts that one farm worker can now produce enough on a single acre to feed and clothe 56 other persons; that amounts to a 350 per cent gain in productivity since 1950.

The statistics and the sunny USDA rhetoric are impressive. They inflate our national pride and assure us that all goes well out there in Farmland U.S.A. Yet nothing could be more misleading or more subversive of the American people's welfare. I say to you, Mr. Next President, what Jeremiah said to Josiah, king of Judea: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

The "efficiency" about which the USDA continually chortles turns out upon closer scrutiny to be nothing but the old law of the jungle, whereby the corporate lions are encouraged to devour the small-farm gazelles. For tooth and claw the corporations have substituted cash and credit, scarce items in most farm families but items that have become increasingly essen-

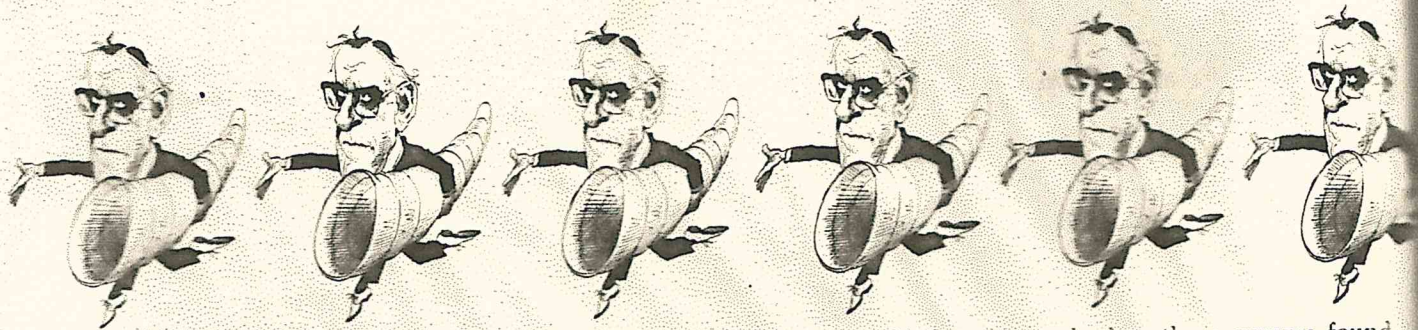
tial in this era of capital-intensive, petrochemical agriculture. (A single eight-wheeled tractor, for example, can cost as much as \$50,000.) In consequence, the moneyed corporations have been muscling in on our agricultural network, either swallowing small farms whole or else reducing farmers to a state of peonage through a system of supply contracts and purchase agreements.

The chicken industry, which only a generation ago was a bastion of small-farm enterprise, furnishes us with a melancholy example of corporate takeover by contract. During the 1960s, big feed producers like Ralston Purina, Cargill, and Pillsbury moved in on independent chicken farmers in the South. According to Jim Hightower in his enlightening book on the food industry, *Eat Your Heart Out*, the corporations came bearing gifts, "offering credit to financially strapped farmers who could not find credit elsewhere. The farmer had to agree to use only his benefactor's feed."

Then these vertically integrated companies began to supply the baby chicks as well as the feed, and to buy the grown chickens, paying the farmer a piece-wage for each bird and compelling him to build a new chicken house, install new equipment, and allow corporation inspectors on his property at any time. It wasn't long before farmers realized they had let a Trojan chicken into their barnyard, but by then it was too late; they were already indentured to agribusiness. "Today," notes an official of the Mississippi Farm Bureau, "a Mississippi farmer could not sell broilers on the market if he wanted to produce them. Only integrators [the vertically integrated corporations] now sell and produce broilers. Farmers do not own the birds. They furnish only the labor and the houses. They do exactly what they are told..."

The chicken chronicle, sad as it is, typifies what is occurring throughout agricultural America. In the 1960s, more than 7,000 corporations entered production in agriculture, with the result that today only 5 per cent of all farm owners control 51 per cent of the nation's farmland. Most of the other 95 per cent are just barely hanging on, eking out a pitiful subsistence while trying their best to avoid being flattened by agribusiness's grim reaper.

Some figures that the USDA never mentions tell the story. More than half the farms in America must get along on annual sales of less than



\$5,000: together these meager enterprises account for only 8 per cent of total farm sales. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to learn that almost half of all farm families have annual incomes *below* \$5,000. The picture these numbers suggest is one of the numerous weak in thrall to the powerful few. Elsewhere in the world we call such societies "banana republics."

So you see, not all the corn emanating from Washington was invented by Henry Wallace. Much of it is the product of a resolutely cheerful Department of Agriculture. Indeed, Secretary Butz's oratory and writings were fairly strewn with golden kernels, all of them meant to delight the spirit and distract the intellect from the many urgent problems that beset us. "It is nothing short of amazing," Butz rhapsodizes in the department's 1976 *Yearbook*, "to see the new machines in agriculture, and the new techniques. Farms are getting larger, as they should."

The entire yearbook, in fact, is tainted with technology-worship and with that peculiarly cruel fatalism in the face of rural America's agony that appears to have gripped our government. Consider the following item, found on page 228, which features an outdoor photograph of a farmhouse and a few sticks of furniture, all being auctioned off before a shirt-sleeved gathering. The disingenuous caption is soaked in crocodile tears:

Another farm is gone. The terminal ritual is an auction. The vibrancy that was a going farm, and a house filled with life and laughter, have been reduced to a few material items offered to the highest bidder. The auctioneer's sing-song chant is a familiar requiem in rural America as farmers retire, die, or just "go away." The 2.8 million farms in 1975 are only half the number of 25 years ago. *But change is inevitable. The farms that remain are larger, more prosperous, more durable.* (emphasis added)

The passage underlines the USDA's policy of purblind optimism. One concludes that the official response to rural misery is a governmental shrug, suggesting that the ultimate triumph of agribusiness is neither to be ques-

tioned nor resisted. It is to be aided and abetted. On more than one occasion Butz gave small farmers his best neo-Darwinian counsel: "Adapt or die: resist, and perish."

Butz was perfectly cast as agribusiness's bulldozer. A former director of such vertically integrated corporations as Ralston Purina (broilers and feeder pigs), International Minerals & Chemical Corporation (pesticides), Stokely-Van-Camp (canned fruits and vegetables), and J. I. Case (farm machinery), he had labored tirelessly in the vineyards of big business. His role, by and large, had been that of a Robin Hood in reverse, taking from the poor and giving to the rich. The Butz-engineered wheat deal with the Russians, for instance, robbed the consumer and the small farmer alike, jacking up the price of flour while swelling the bankrolls of a few favored grain producers.

I single out Earl Butz for special reproof, not because of what he is—by his own testimony he is a good and God-fearing man—but because of what he stood for. His six-year rule over the USDA, it seems to me, was essentially a reign of error, symbolizing all that is wrong and heartless about our national rural policy. For at bottom it is rural *policy* and not rural *fate* that has brought us to this difficult juncture. The fault, Mr. Next President, lies not in our stars but in our elected and appointed officials, and in the laws and regulations they promulgate. Powerful corporate interests have captured our leaders and overwhelmed our own best instincts. The result has been one disastrous decision after another.

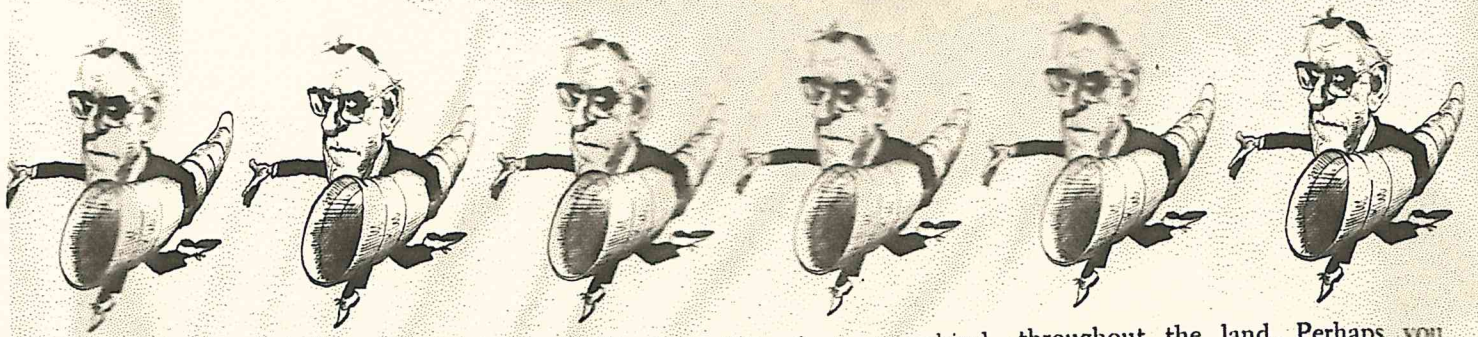
The USDA's research policy is a case in point. The department subsidizes one-fourth of all the agricultural research undertaken at our land-grant universities, research that was originally intended to help the small farmer, but which nowadays is almost exclusively oriented toward the needs of agribusiness. Thus, it was federal funds that helped college-based scientists invent an automatic tomato picker, to be used chiefly by the big growers out

west; and when those growers found that the new picker bruised their tomatoes, it was again federal funds that supported land-grant agronomists in their successful search for a tough-skinned tomato. Apparently it did not worry USDA officials that these tax-supported "breakthroughs" would throw thousands of farm laborers out of work, making it more difficult for small, non-automated farms to compete with the large orchards, and presenting the consumer with a juiceless, tasteless, and expensive tomato.

Similarly, to quote again the indefatigable Jim Hightower, "The University of Georgia is working to breed a chicken with no feathers, so the big processors don't have to pluck the birds..." And the same university has built a machine to remove the fuzz from peaches and coat them with fungicides in order to prolong their storage life. Such a machine would be unnecessary, of course, if peaches were sold fresh at local markets, as they once were. But the logic of agribusiness dictates that peaches be distributed *nationally*, and that entails many shipping miles and storage days. So we keep getting new and bigger machines as well as new fungicides and pesticides, and we keep paying for them—in publicly subsidized research, in chemically loaded foods, in wasted energy, and ultimately, in nationally monopolized markets that inflate food prices.

The tragedy is that it all could have been different. Butz and his predecessors *could* have chosen a policy that gave a fair shake to small farmers and consumers—in which case they would have channeled precious research funds into such areas as the development of organic farming, the promotion of consumer co-ops, and the design of small, inexpensive machinery that farm families could afford to buy. But such measures would not have reflected the USDA's vision of rural

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progress: *Adapt or die; resist, and perish.* At a time when virtually everyone conceded the truth of the *New York Times'* recent assertion that "the pesticide strategy has been both an economic and environmental disaster," Butz continued to encourage the widespread use of chemicals. "We have to go slow on this ecology stuff," he said recently. "It's very tricky."

Misguided as such pronouncements and policies may be, they seem less ominous than do some of Butz's other directives. The secretary, apparently having embarked on a rural mop-up campaign, did all he could to make the world safe for agribusiness by driving out those small farmers, farm workers, and villagers who make up rural America's saving remnant.

Always resourceful, Earl Butz hit upon two devices that may be equal to the task. One was to curtail an already miserly food-stamp program, thereby starving out the rural poor who buy a disproportionately large share of food stamps. The program's formula is complicated, but at present a poor person can buy about \$46-worth of food stamps for \$33. Last year Butz tried to persuade the Congress to hike the price to \$45, using the quaint argument that the old "bargain" rates attracted too many buyers. "If the price of food stamps rises," a Butz underling happily explained to members of the House Agriculture Committee, "people will drop out of the program and the government will save as much as \$645 million."

We need not linger over this particular piece of barbarism, because thus far it has been effectively checked by the Congress and the courts. Butz's other mop-up device, however, bears inspection. His plan was to manipulate U.S. Census data in such a way that 600,000 farm families—one out of every five in the nation—would instantly vanish from the rolls.

Butz and the Census Bureau hoped to accomplish this by omitting from the agricultural census (taken every five years) all farms that have incomes of less than \$1,000, thus defining into

oblivion—to cite a few geographical examples—25 per cent of all the farms in New England, 23 per cent of all the farms in Texas, 26 per cent of all the farms in Michigan, 40 per cent of all the farms in Alabama, and 46 per cent of all the farms in West Virginia. Some Promised Land; some Wilderness.

One insidious element in all this—and there are several—is the USDA's casual usurpation of the right to tell us what a farm is and what a farm is not. If the proposed rule is allowed to stand—it is being considered by Congress now—one can easily foresee a steady escalation of income cut-off points, with \$5,000 soon replacing \$1,000, and then—who knows?—perhaps \$10,000 eventually becoming the price of a farmer's admission to the census rolls. Indeed, before announcing the new definition, USDA officials considered a variety of cut-off levels ranging as high as \$20,000.

Do not be misled by the department's assurances that the revised rule is merely a bookkeeping adjustment and would in no way affect the welfare of small farmers. A farmer deprived of official census status would be in a position similar to that of Bishop Berkeley's famous tree, the one that "did not make a sound" because when it fell in the forest there was no one there to hear it. As Louisiana Representative Gillis Long has noted, "One of the things I fear most . . . is that the definition will become the reality. By eliminating the identity of these very small owners and operators of farms, we are insuring their invisibility as farmers. . . . As a result there may seem even less of a need on the part of USDA to serve them as farmers through farm programs. . . ."

What all this adds up to is a policy of extinction. If the resolute minions of agribusiness can convince the public that the old rural America no longer exists—that it has been struck from the national rolls—then they will be free to kill it at their leisure, without serious objection from the rest of us.

Unfortunately, the report of rural America's death can already be heard

throughout the land. Perhaps you have noticed how fashionable rural nostalgia has become. We are asked to eat chemically infested bread because it is said to be "farm fresh," and to drink canned, ersatz lemonade alleged to taste just like the lemonade Grandma made back on the old homestead. The implicit message in these "front porch" commercials is that rural America is just a pleasant memory, something to be saluted at bicentennial ceremonies but dismissed in political deliberations.

In consequence, while we celebrate the television Waltons and their little farm as embodiments of old-fashioned but obsolete rural virtues, real farms are rapidly disappearing and real Waltons are being written off by the USDA in ways that would make Lincoln weep. Rural nostalgia is the opiate of the people.

Well, I've run on longer probably than either of us expected, though I suppose a president must sooner or later grow accustomed to windy supplicants. The gist of what I have been trying to tell you is this: if you hope to preside over all the people, and not just over those who happen to live in our cities and suburbs, you will want to do everything possible to protect farm families from being harried off their land and small-town residents from being chased out of their chosen communities. You will look for ways of enhancing the independence of husbandry and the dignity of small entrepreneurship. You will eschew robotlike obeisance to technology, which has its own mindless logic, or to agribusiness, which has its own acquisitive agenda. And you will make every effort to restore the U.S. Department of Agriculture to its original purpose, so that once again it will be "particularly the people's Department."

In brief, Mr. Next President, I am betting on you to forge a new plain-talking rural policy for America—a policy with no ifs, ands, or Butz. GOOD LUCK!

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