Floors Under Farms

by Oliver Ackerley

Why does one speak of a "farm problem" as if it were a distinct phenomenon, unique in itself and quite unrelated to other economic issues? Assuming that the tiller of the soil is essentially a producer and marketer of a particular kind of commodity (which he is), subject to the same economic facts of life as are producers of other commodities (which he should be), why is the farmer's problem deemed different, greater or more serious than the "problem" of the shoemaker, and hat manufacturer or the steel fabricator? And why is it of such singular importance?

Obviously the man with the hoe is a prominent unit of society, and those who crave their bacon, eggs, bread, potatoes and such must perforce think gratefully of the yeoman whose efforts bring these delicacies to the table. But it is questionable whether this feeling of gratitude should be exaggerated to the point where the farmer, solely by reason of the occupation he pursues, becomes the recipient of largesse generously bestowed upon him by every consumer, by way of higher market prices and taxes for subsidies.

In the days of the Great Depression of the mid-thirties, effective demand for farm produce was lessened by curtailed buying power. Quick to alleviate the farmer's problem, (and incidentally disregarding everyone else's), the Federal government granted subsidies to him, which in effect guaranteed both an assured market and a minimum return for his products. This procedure, of course, aimed at encouraging the farmer to continue producing, to which extent it was a curiously sound idea, pointing up clearly the sole incentive to production. But while it made the farmer as contented as his cow, it did so at staggering cost to every producer and consumer except the farmer.

Since that time, the farmer has comfortably enjoyed a continuation of guaranteed markets, minimum prices, subsidies, parities and supports, which change occasionally only as to amount and flexibility. Today the farmer has no worries about finding customers, or whether the customers he has have the money to pay. He can operate at maximum productive capacity, knowing the government will buy his products if no one else will, or he can refrain from producing, confident of payment for his restraint—with all this compensation coming from tax moneys. And the tax-paying consumer? Well, if he eats, he pays higher-than-normal-prices for his food; if he doesn't eat, he pays just the same, and thus the farm problem is "solved."

Imagine the producer of hats or pencils or automobiles or soap having the temerity to demand payment for *not* producing, or parity support for minimum price levels. (He must press for other forms of "protection.") Yet if the farm policy prevailed in other fields, one might envisage the government's buying up all unsold vehicles made in Detroit, and storing them in warehouses indefinitely. Unthinkable! But that is precisely what is done with unsold eggs, wheat, butter and potatoes. Fortunately for the farmer, *he* has a "problem." Thanks to his problem, he is spared the competition of the open market, he is insured against the cost of his own inefficiency, and he is propped up by crutch-like supports and subsidies which increase every American's living costs immeasurably and sap the productiveness of every other commodity.

The toll exacted from all other producers to try unnaturally to alleviate the "farm problem" has reached alarming and harmful proportions. Perhaps the time has come for the farmer to admit that his problems are comparable to other producers, and to take his proper position in the market place with all the rest who have commodities to sell. Let him recognize that economic selfishness, evidenced by special privilege, in time will hurt the entire economy of the country, including those who may benefit temporarily.