Norman Thomas: "Tribune of the Disenfranchised"

By JAMES THOMAS GAY*
West Georgia College, Carrollton, Georgia 30118

NORMAN THOMAS, it was said, was "the Isaiah of his times . . . the voice of the mute and the tribune of the disenfranchised. . . ."[1] Two decades have passed since Thomas's death, yet his ideals, concerns, and desires for the people remain alive, for they were timeless. Norman Thomas's place in history is marked by his simple honesty and compassion. Some have described him as America's greatest dissenter, but it is a role dominated by his unimpeachable sense of justice.

On countless, often obscure, battlefields he left his mark as he carried on his crusades against injustices. In many respects his sometimes lonely struggles were met with indifference, yet in not a few a responsive chord was struck — the public conscience was aroused and a small victory won. It is this sort of chord that the following account explores.

When the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) was passed in May 1933, socialist leader Norman Thomas voiced criticism on orthodox socialist grounds. In retrospect Thomas, who, in words of one observer, was "a prophet who condemns profits,"[2] found this aspect of the New Deal simply another attempt to revive the outmoded capitalist system. "Capitalism is based on the economics of scarcity":[3] its virtues are dead now that the plateau of abundance has been reached.

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*The author is associate professor of history at West Georgia College, Carrollton, Georgia. He teaches Recent America, American Diplomatic History, and Religion in America.

[1] Alden Whitman, Thomas's obituary, New York (N. Y.) *Times,* December 20, 1968, p. 43.

[2] Don D. Lescohier, "Norman Thomas," *The American Politician,* ed. J. T. Salter, (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1938), 247.

[3] Norman Thomas, *After the New Deal, What?* (New York, 1936), 34.

For Thomas the system of "private ownership for power and profit" had had its day — more ethical ideals were desirable and only a planned economy based on use rather than profit would answer the problem.[4]

His early attacks on the administration's farm program were biting: shortly after the passage of the AAA he declared:

> I am certain that if it works at all to help the farmer it will be at the price of artificially stabilizing a chaotic capitalist agriculture. Indeed, there is nothing more utterly damning in our whole capitalist system than that in a starving world and a hungry America the government can think of but one way to help the farmers, and that the way [is] of subsidizing an artificial scarcity. . . .[5]

Thomas argued that the program of reduction for scarcity would not be economically effective for very long. By "subsidizing everyone — manufacturers by tariffs, farmers by processing tax — it will be hard to change things even for the ultimate good of the subsidized."[6] His comment on the Civil Works Administration seems appropriate for the AAA as well: "you can keep a dog hungry for a good while and he won't bite you, but you'll have an awful time grabbing a bone away from him."[7] A permanent farmers' bloc was being created similar to the tariff or veterans' bloc.

It was a matter of philosophy of government that concerned Thomas. He feared the government's lack of an overall planned approach to the whole system. He said,

> the New Dealers are reluctant to give us a philosophy. Instead they rather exult in a pragmatism of an opportunistic sort. They will increase social control, they will protect the underdog, they will stabilize business, and yet somehow or other preserve individual initiative, private profit, and the rights of the little man. They have

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[4] New York *Times,* March 27, 1933, p. 16, and March 3, 1934, p. 7.

[5] *Ibid.,* June 18, 1933, IX, 3.

[6] Norman Thomas, "Surveying the New Deal," from *The World Tomorrow,* XVII (January 18, 1934), 37-38; *American Socialism: 1900-1960,* ed. Wayne H. Morgan (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1964), 118.

[7] New York *Times,* March 2, 1934, p. 3.

[8] Lescohier, "Norman Thomas," 255.

> not given the masses of the people any fanatic faith to sustain them or any new philosophy to guide them in a wilderness.[8]

Thomas was uncertain of the direction the New Deal was taking. He wished to set it on a socialist course.

> You can't expect to get a planned economy except by socializing. You have got to socialize everything. If this is not done, there will be more demagoguery. The Holy Rollers will increase in the hillbilly country and Father Coughlin and Huey Long will grow in influence, and out of this set-up someone will come along and put the pieces together and there will be a big Fascist movement.[9]

It is interesting that the Socialists had not earlier presented the farmers with a very concrete program. The Socialist party's platforms of 1928 and 1932 had been in favor of reduction of tax burdens, easier credit, social insurance against crop losses, and cooperatives; but they had said nothing about the farmer's greatest problem of his time: low prices for his product. This lack did not deter Thomas, however, from roundly attacking the New Deal's farm program. Every facet of the AAA was under scrutiny by the Socialist leader.[10] The killing of the little pigs and brood sows was a particularly sensitive issue, which Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace defended as cleaning up of wreckage of the earlier days of mismanagement.[11] The Socialists played up the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty and the effort to solve the matter by eliminating the plenty. The effort to inflate farm prices would be at the expense of city labor, they argued.[12]

This attack on the AAA was not just on standard Marxist terms. Norman Thomas was no Marxist or dogmatist. According to writer-lecturer Daniel Bell, a Marxist critic once sneered at Thomas "for entitling his study of poverty in the United States as *Human Exploitation*

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[9] New York *Times,* March 2, 1934, p. 3.

[10] David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America* (New York, 1955), 230; Kirk H. Porter and Donald Bruce Johnson, comp., *National Party Platforms: 1840-1960* (Urbana, Ill., 1961), 291-294, 351-354.

[11] Henry Wallace, *New Frontiers* (Princeton, N. J., 1941), 180-181.

[12] Shannon, *Socialist Party,* 230-231.

rather than *Capitalist Exploitation*." The point was well made, "for what arouses Thomas is the emotional and ethical, not the analytical and sociological." Thomas's "interest has always been the personal *fact* of injustice, committed by people, while socialism might remove the impersonal 'basic' causes, he was always happiest when he could act where the problem was immediate and personal."[13] This feeling came naturally to Norman Thomas. He grew up in a religious atmosphere. His father and both grandfathers were Presbyterian ministers; Thomas himself was a minister in the church before joining the Socialist party. It was during those early days that his concern for injustices became adamant. He worked in settlement houses in New York's poorer areas and came to know poverty and hopelessness well. Thomas ultimately became convinced that socialism was part of the answer.[14] In October of 1918, he wrote requesting membership in the Socialist party. Thomas's letter reveals much:

> I am sending you an application for membership in the Socialist Party. I am doing this because I think these are days when radicals ought to stand up and be counted. I believe in the necessity of establishing a cooperative commonwealth and the abolition of our present unjust economic institutions and class distinctions based thereon. Perhaps to certain members of the party my Socialism would not be of the most orthodox variety. As you know, I have a profound fear of the undue exaltation of the State, and a profound faith that the new world must depend upon freedom and fellowship rather than upon any sort of coercion whatsoever. I am interested in political parties only to the extent in which they may be serviceable in advancing certain ideals and in winning liberty for men and women.
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> My accepting of the socialist platform is on the basis of general principles rather than details. . . .[15]

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[13] Daniel Bell, "Marxian Socialism in the United States," *Socialism and American Life*, eds. Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons (2 vols., Princeton, 1952), I, 399-402.

[14] Murray B. Seidler, *Norman Thomas, Respectable Rebel* (1961; 2nd ed., Syracuse, N. Y., 1967), 1-29.

[15] Thomas to Alexander Trachtenberg, October 18, 1918, in Norman Thomas Collection (New York Public Library); cited hereinafter as NT Papers.

Thomas firmly believed that ideals would shape the world, but his acceptance of socialism was influenced more by "grotesque inequalities, conspicuous waste, gross exploitation, and unnecessary poverty. . . ."[16]

The condemnation of the AAA on analytical terms must have been somewhat drab for a man with Thomas's interest in the human side of affairs. For Norman Thomas's philosophy needed to be supported by substance. He was at his best when he could combine socialist philosophy with attacks on what he felt to be social wrongs. The ethics and morals of men were important to him. When these principles were involved, Thomas could be as eloquent as anyone.[17]

Several months after the Agricultural Adjustment Act was put into effect, Thomas received a letter from a Socialist party organizer in Arkansas asking him to visit the northeastern part of the state and see some effects of the AAA program.[18] Upon going to the area, Thomas found that the government's cotton reduction program was forcing sharecroppers from the land.[19] The cotton lands of the South had for years been operating under a system that dictated a lowly life for an estimated 1,600,000 families of which 1,000,000 were white. These were the black and white tenants and sharecroppers.[20]

The importance of the tenant in cotton farming can be shown by the fact that in the census of 1930, 73 percent of the cotton farms were cultivated by tenants.[21] In general, before the AAA, the sharecroppers received for planting, cultivating and harvesting the cotton crops theoretically one-half the income. The sharecroppers were paid with commissary scrip which could be spent only in the landlord's store. What with various levies, interest charges and high prices charged by the landlord, the cropper usually came out on the short end, barely surviving until plant-

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Bell, "Marxian Socialism," 399.

[18] Martha Johnson to Norman Thomas, November 7, 1933, NT Papers.

[19] M. S. Venkataramani, "Norman Thomas, Arkansas Sharecroppers and the Roosevelt Agricultural Politics, 1933-1937," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review,* XLVII (June 1960-March 1961), 229-230.

[20] *Ibid.,* 225. Although the terms tenant and sharecropper have various meanings, for the purpose of this paper the terms will mean simply, one who tills the soil owned by another, paying rent in cash or in shares of produce.

[21] *Ibid.*

ing time again. According to one report, a sharecropper's provisions for a family of five during the work season consisted of one half sack of flour, a gallon bucket of black sorghum molasses, and a twenty-four pound sack of corn.[22]

There was no security for the sharecropper regardless of color. He was subject to the whims of the landlord and could be reduced in a word to a wage laborer or even evicted from his home. The condition of the sharecropper varied from area to area, but his place at the bottom of the economic and social ladder remained constant. The depression brought more misery for a number of croppers because some landlords also had to struggle to survive and were economically forced to evict some of their sharecroppers. The AAA was designed to solve the farmers' struggle by forcing prices up. The program, however, brought on difficulties for some tenants.[23]

The cotton contract of the AAA had been drawn up with supposed protective measures for all classes of the farm population. The wording, however, was vague enough to cause questions of intent to develop. The first part of Section Seven of the contract read as follows (the italics are not in the contract but are added to show the vagueness of the section):

> The producer shall *endeavor* in good faith *to bring about the reduction* of acreage contemplated in this contract in such a manner as to cause the least possible amount of labor, economic, and social disturbance, and to this end, *in so far as possible,* he shall effect the acreage *as nearly ratable as practicable* among tenants on this farm; shall, *in so far as possible,* maintain on this farm the normal number of tenants and other employees. . . .[24]

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[22] New York *Times,* February 28, 1935, p. 4.

[23] Herman C. Nixon, *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* (Chapel Hill, 1938), 17-37; Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry* (Chapel Hill, 1936), 243-253; Raper and Ira De A. Reid, *Sharecroppers All* (Chapel Hill, 1941), 36-38, from report of Robert B. Vance, *Farmers Without Land,* Public Affairs Committee Pamphlet No. 12 (New York, 1938); Harry L. Lurie, "The New Deal Program—Summary and Appraisal," *Social Welfare in the National Recovery Program,* CLXXVI, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, 175-176.

[24] 1934-1935 Cotton Acreage Reduction Contract, *A Report of the Administration of the Agricultural Adjustment Act May 1933 to February 1934* (Washington, 1934), 331-332.

The weakness of the contract was in its phraseology, as illustrated in the italicized sections. Tenure was not guaranteed in lucid terms. Section Ten of the contract was supposed to guarantee tenants and croppers their usual crop shares of the parity payments. This division of payment, however, was placed in the hands of the landlord.[25] An unscrupulous landlord could take advantage of the weaknesses and some did so.

The plight of the cropper had existed for years, and Thomas had opposed absentee landlordism for some time;[26] however, in Arkansas the tenants' problem seemed intensified by the government! Here was as gross an injustice as Thomas had ever encountered. Thomas decided to carry on a campaign to arouse the conscience of the nation to the plight of the tenant in the cotton field in order to help these forgotten men of the New Deal.[27] Now the Socialist leader's criticism of agriculture had something more than the philosophical argument; here was a tangible wrong to be righted. Thomas prepared to launch a verbal assault that would eventually be felt in the White House.

In Tyronza, Arkansas, during February 1934, Thomas met with local socialists, prominent among them Harry L. Mitchell and Clay East, and found that the best course to take would be in organizing the black and white tenants into a union outside the political apparatus of the Socialist party. Thomas believed a single union of blacks and whites could be a powerful force in obtaining racial as well as economic equality. It would also aid the Socialist cause and divert the threat that the Share the Wealth Clubs might have in capturing the sharecropper for Huey Long.[28] Most sharecroppers had little formal education and no voice that could be influential politically. Henry Wallace, Rexford Tugwell, and others in the AAA had praised the local committees of the program as being of

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[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Norman Thomas, *America's Way Out: A Program for Democracy* (New York, 1931), 180-182.

[27] Venkataramani, "Norman Thomas," 229.

[28] David Eugene Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of the Sharecroppers in the New Deal* (Urbana, 1965), 85; Bernard K. Johnpoll, *Pacifist's Progress: Norman Thomas and the Decline of American Socialism* (Chicago, 1970), 148. There was also a concern that the communists might make gains with the black and white sharecroppers. See Philip S. Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* (Westport, Conn., 1977), 352.

"profound significance for democratic progress in the United States." These county committees were usually made up of the more prominent planters in the community. The committees were chosen by the cotton producers, but the more numerous producers, the sharecropper, had little power in the election process. Thus the bodies responsible for insuring compliance with the cotton contract were dominated by the landlords.[29] In Thomas's view only through organizing could the tenants gain any recognition of their plight. Thus the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union had its inception.

Thomas left most of the formal organizing of the union to others while he began a one-man campaign on behalf of the sharecropper. He sent a telegram to Secretary of Agriculture Wallace, pointing out the sharecroppers' problems. "Never in America," he told Wallace, "have I seen more hopeless poverty" than among the Arkansas sharecroppers. "My criticism is not of a section, but of the nation and of an economic program." He declared that "the miseries of these forgotten men have been increased by the AAA." Thomas appealed by specific example.

> Today I learned by telegraph that a family named Boston which I visited in Arkansas and with which, perhaps unfortunately for it, I had my picture taken, has been evicted . . . three of ten children still are ill with whooping cough. It is expected that this eviction will be a test case which will start a wave of evictions of sharecroppers who have previously been denied an opportunity to cultivate the land.[30]

Wallace was intensely interested in seeing the crop-reduction program continued and apparently felt Thomas's initial complaints a danger to the program. He avoided the issue. Thomas continued his persuasion by correspondence. He asked Wallace,

> What about the sharecroppers driven from the land under any system of limitations? Will the Bankhead Bill or any other legislation see that the rewards of *not* planting cotton are passed on to

[29] New York *Times,* April 22, 1934, p. 39; Henry I. Richards, *Cotton Under the Agricultural Adjustment Act* (Washington, 1934), 18-19.

[30] New York *Times,* March 11, 1934, p. 2.

> the men who have been forced to stop planting cotton? . . . I do not comment on the irony of compelling a reduction in the cotton crop when the children of cotton growers run naked or clothed in rags or sugar sacking.[31]

Wallace continued to deny the problem was serious. This was not because Wallace was unsympathetic but rather because the problem was politically sensitive. The administration needed southern support. New Deal historian William Leuchtenburg pointed out that "even the bolder New Deal spirits feared to jeopardize the rest of their program by antagonizing powerful conservative Southern senators like Joe Robinson of Arkansas."[32] This became obvious when Thomas was granted an interview with President Roosevelt. The President was interested in restoring farm prosperity through the AAA program, but he could see trouble for his plans if he tried to settle every social problem in the South. He counselled patience saying, "Norman, I'm a damned sight better politician than you are."[33] Roosevelt did not like the situation but could see little to be done at the moment. Thomas, who was no fool, realized the situation. He later recalled in his book, *After the New Deal, What?* that others including

> . . . Messrs. Allen & Pearson, well-known newspaper correspondents in Washington, were doubtless right in their repeated assertions in their syndicated column that the President was dissuaded from action in Arkansas by consideration of the possible adverse effect of such action upon the political forces of his Administration.[34]

Thomas, however, was intent on making the nation aware of the sharecropper. He believed, as the tenant union's newspaper later advised, "raise plenty of hell and you will get somewhere."[35] Thomas attacked the Triple-A through every means at his disposal: the press, the radio,

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[31] Thomas to Wallace, Wichita, Kansas, February 22, 1934, copy, NT Papers.

[32] William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal 1932-1940* (New York, 1963), 138.

[33] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston, 1959), 378.

[34] Thomas, *After the New Deal, What?* 50.

[35] *Sharecroppers Voice* as cited in Jerold S. Auerback, "Southern Tenant Farmers: Socialist Critics of the New Deal," *Labor History,* VII (Winter 1966), 14.

the speaker's platform, and in articles. Soon others began to respond. J. Clark Waldron, a newspaperman, visited the South and found that much of what Thomas claimed was true. In an article titled "King Cotton and His Slaves" Waldron declared that "thousands of sharecroppers" were victims of the Triple-A's acreage reduction program. "No act of God, no cyclone, hurricane, earthquake, or other natural phenomenon could have made their condition more desperate or more pitiable." He went on to claim that the cotton belt was "the largest slum in the world." Waldron then listed some "investigated samples of sharecropper distress." The following are a few examples:

> FRANK TURNEY—twenty-eight, a former soldier, has no job and his family is homeless, they have nothing but ragged clothes on their backs.
>
> THOMAS JORDAN—has three children who cannot go to school. His total earnings last year on fourteen acres of land amounted to $127.50 and he paid 10 percent for credit.
>
> DON HANNELY—has been forced to move from Poulters' farm . . . where he sharecropped for twenty-nine years.
>
> L. C. BROOKS—has been told by his landlord to move unless he agrees to pay five-eighths of the year's crop. The usual sharecroppers' arrangement is half for himself and half for the landlord, but owing to the scarcity of land under the acreage-reduction program many landlords are seeking a larger share of the crop.
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> One of the worst offenders is Twist Brothers, who have about seventy sections of land, they have pushed white sharecroppers off the land and substituted colored day labor at fifty cents a day. . . .

Waldron went on to point out other abuses and to attack the so-called "shiftlessness" of the sharecropper as due largely to malnutrition and lack of education in public health.[36]

British Socialist Naomie Mitchison found the worst housing she had ever seen and added in an article in the *New Statesman and Nation* that the only possible exception was some pre-revolutionary peasants' huts

[36] J. Clark Waldron, "King Cotton and His Slaves," *Nation,* CXXXVIII (June 29, 1934), 703-705.

near Leningrad. She also found that Thomas had made a profound impression on the sharecropper. ". . . and when I spoke of Norman Thomas, they stirred and their eyes brightened. He was the man who remembered them in their misery, who had come down to help them."[37]

Thomas's articles were caustic. In an article entitled "Starve and Prosper!" Thomas berated the AAA, "the attempt to enforce restricted production will be more difficult than the attempt to enforce prohibition . . . the successful bootlegging of a crop will be profitable much as was the bootlegging of liquor." Secretary Wallace was a special target.

> When the day comes, which Secretary Wallace regards as possible, when every cultivated field has to have its license tag, we may perhaps end the problem of unemployment by enlisting the unemployed in the enforcement army. . . . It is enough to make devils laugh to listen to an argument for the drastic reduction of the cotton crop or of milk reduction and then to consider that the children of the sharecroppers and of most textile workers do not have two sets of underclothes a year and that their wives have not enough sheets to go around.[38]

In order to substantiate his charges that the AAA had operated to intensify conditions of veritable peonage among the cotton sharecroppers, Thomas collaborated with a committee of six southerners headed by Professor William R. Amberson of the University of Tennessee in a survey of 500 farm families. The conclusions reached supported Thomas.

> The acreage-reduction program has operated to reduce the number of families in employment on cotton farms . . . due . . . to failure . . . to reduce acreage ratably, forcing some tenants into "no-crop" class . . . at least fifteen percent . . . of all . . . families. . . . Many plantation owners eliminate the share-cropping system . . . forcing . . . croppers to accept day labor instead. . . . Widespread replacement of white by colored labor. . . .[39]

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[37] Naomi Mitchison, "White House and Marked Tree," *New Statesman and Nation*, IX (April 27, 1935), 585-586.

[38] Norman Thomas, "Starve and Prosper!" *Current History*, XL (May 1934), 137-139.

[39] William R. Amberson, "The New Deal for Share-croppers," *Nation*, CXL (February 13, 1935), 185; see also New York *Times*, May 10, 1934, p. 41.

The Adjustment Committee, which was to oversee and regulate local programs, and federal officials, accomplished little in correcting these injustices.

It is interesting to note that publications from the Department of Agriculture during this period did not mention the tenants' troubles. The government's public position was still affected by the politics surrounding the issue.[40] It was natural for the government to play up its program, but Thomas may have felt AAA Administrator George Peek had gone too far when he proclaimed the Agricultural Adjustment Act "a Magna Charta for the American farmer."[41] Even a first year review of the AAA made no reference to the plight of the cropper. It did, however, in presenting its case for the AAA, give Thomas more ammunition for his attacks. As an example of the return of prosperity the report cited the increase in automobile sales in rural areas.[42] Thomas declared in *Current History,* "No wonder automobile sales in the rural South have had the highest ratio in the country!" The New Deal "has taken risk and responsibility off the shoulders of the landlord, increased his reward and made out of thousands of miserable share-croppers more miserable beggars who may envy the foxes their holes in the earth."[43]

With the formal establishment of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in July 1934, a new force came into the fight for the sharecroppers, but also new trouble. The tenant plight attracted various individuals and groups to the South, especially to the Arkansas area. Some of these people were sincerely interested in helping, some had selfish motives. Radicals

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[40] George N. Peek, *The First Four Months Under the Farm Act,* U. S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, October 1933); Peek, *Progress on All Fronts Under the Farm Act,* U .S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, November 1933); *Dollars to Farmers Boom Business,* U. S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, December 1933); *Achieving a Balanced Agriculture,* U. S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, August 1934); *Regional Problems in Agricultural Adjustment,* U. S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, March 1935).

[41] George N. Peek and Alfred D. Stidman, *Recovery from the Grass Roots,* U. S.Department of Agriculture (Washington, February 1934), 7.

[42] Chester C. Davis, *One Year of the AAA, the Record Reviewed,* U. S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, June 1934), 266.

[43] Norman Thomas, "Decline in the Cotton Kingdom, II—Victims of Change," *Current History,* XLII (April 1935), 36-37.

of various sorts began to appear — a number of socialists came from outside Arkansas to help direct the new tenant union and some of them had questionable motives, also communist agitators appeared trying to take advantage of the situation. Because the tenant union accepted the membership of both white and black, racism was also involved. These developments were bound to have an adverse effect on the provincial attitudes of the planter. The organizing of the tenants was shocking enough but to have outsiders, some of dubious character, whipping up opposition, was too much. It was a case of extremes with no middle ground. Anyone on the side of the tenant became a radical and very possibly a "red"; while supporters of the tenant felt any opposition was in support of the unscrupulous planter. In an area where the farmer gave overwhelming support to the AAA program, it is not difficult to imagine the reaction when a well-meaning socialist supporter of the tenant union described the AAA as the "bastard child of a decadent capitalism and a youthful Fascism."[44] This type of language was not popular with the planter. Senator Joseph T. Robinson pointed out on the floor of the Senate that

> finding a fallow soil in which to sow the seeds of discontent, professional agitators, representatives of communistic and socialistic organizations and schools have gone into the neighborhoods affected, organized the tenants, insisted that their rights have been disregarded and that to secure what is due them they should resort to violence.[45]

Robinson then quoted from a circular distributed among some of the tenants. This circular was obviously Soviet literature, according to Robinson.[46]

In this atmosphere it was difficult for Thomas and others in sympathy with the tenant situation to gain an honest hearing. Cully Cobb, head of the cotton section of the AAA accused the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union of being "red."[47] There were increasing numbers of persuasive

[44] Auerbach, "Southern Tenant Farmers," 9.

[45] *Congressional Record,* 74 Cong., 1 Sess., 5928 (April 18, 1935).

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] H. L. Mitchell and J. R. Butler, "The Cropper Learns His Fate," *Nation,* CXLI (September 18, 1935), 328.

tactics used to harass the tenant movement. Union organizers were threatened, arrested and beaten; tenants were evicted for joining the union; nightriding became evident.[48] On top of this, distortions developed, such as the article in the New York *Times* describing socialist minister Ward Rodgers, after speaking to a group of tenants, as having been arrested on charges of anarchy, breach of the peace, conspiracy and intimidation and of being a professed communist and connected with the International Labor Defense, a communist organization. This was not correct, but no letter of correction could erase the seed of doubt.[49] (The communists, seeking to gain a sounding board, had offered to help Rodgers, thus the mistaken connection.)

To retaliate against opposition, the union and sympathetic groups sent a flood of protests to officials on the state and federal level. Thomas returned to the area in March 1935, and while speaking in Birdsong, Arkansas, was beaten and driven from the speaker's platform by a drunken mob of planters and sheriff's deputies and was told in profane terms that he was not welcome in Arkansas. Thomas left more determined to carry on the fight to gain national awareness of the sharecropper. On nationwide radio he declared a "reign of terror" existed in Arkansas.[50] In the *New Republic,* an article, written by a tenant union organizer, entitled "The War in Arkansas" described harassments. The article ended with a list of methods used by the planters which included the following:

> to influence the sharecropper and day laborer against the union by telling them the union is unnecessary, that the planters "furn-

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[48] John Herling, "Field Notes from Arkansas," *Nation,* CXL (April 10, 1935), 419-420; see also Venkataramani, "Norman Thomas," 225-246; C. T. Carpenter, "King Cotton's Slaves," *Scribner's Magazine,* XCVIII (October 1935), 193-199; Lucien Koch, "The War in Arkansas," *New Republic,* LXXXII (March 27, 1935), 182-184; "Starvation in Arkansas" (editorial), *ibid.,* LXXXVI (April 1, 1936), 209-210; Mitchell, "Organizing Southern Sharecroppers," *ibid.,* LXXX (October 3, 1934), 217-218.

[49] Thomas Fauntleroy, "Anarchy Suit Stirs Arkansas," New York *Times,* January 27, 1935, IV, 6; New York *Times,* February 5, 1935, p. 18.

[50] Auerbach, "Southern Tenant Farmers," 12; see also Herling, "Field Notes from Arkansas," 420; Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal,* 378; and W. A. Swanberg, *Norman Thomas: The Last Idealist* (New York, 1976), 182-183.

> ish" them, that the union is only a ruse, led by outsiders to take their money. To force local leaders of the union out of the vicinity by boycott. . . . To intimidate by terror and arrest . . . introduce the Red Scare . . . foster yellow-dog contracts . . . evict members of the union . . . discriminate against leaders and members of the union on the relief question . . . forbid street meetings without a permit from the mayor.[51]

Other articles and comments appeared in the newspapers. This added to the effectiveness of the campaign.[52]

Thomas went to see Governor Futrell shortly after the Birdsong incident. The governor was not persuaded by Thomas's report. "You can't go around preaching social equality in the state of Arkansas, or economic equality either," the governor declared.[53] A delegation of croppers went to Washington and picketed the Department of Agriculture. Cully Cobb commented on their presence declaring that "few of them knew a cotton stalk from a jimson weed."[54] These comments were deceptive, however, because already earlier there had been signs of concern from officials. Investigators were making inquiries into the problem. The public was beginning to talk more about the tenant. Thomas was at least getting more of a hearing.[55] He was intent on more concrete efforts by the government. Thomas had two impulses inspiring his tenacity. He was leader of a political party and believed his party's philosophy was the answer to many of the country's problems. The other factor was his constant desire to right what he considered to be an injustice. Thomas continued his prodding of the administration.

Early in 1935, the sharecroppers received a blow when some individuals, including Jerome Frank of the Legal Division, were purged from the AAA because of their insistence on more protection for the tenant. Secretary Wallace and AAA Director Chester Davis were concerned

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[51] Koch, "The War in Arkansas," 182-184.

[52] Herling, "Field Notes from Arkansas," 419-420; New York *Times,* March 24, 1935, p. 12, and May 5, 1935, IV, 9.

[53] Governor Futrell as cited in Herling, "Field Notes from Arkansas," 419.

[54] Cully Cobb comment in New York *Times,* May 1935, as cited in Auerbach, "Southern Tenant Farmers," 13.

[55] Mitchell and Butler, "The Cropper Learns His Fate," 328.

about the tenant but feared the general aim of the program would be threatened — they were quite pragmatic in this respect.[56] This setback proved to be only temporary, however, for just shortly after the purge Wallace declared before a Senate subcommittee hearing on a bill to create the Farm Tenant Home Corporation, "we have been talking about the evils of farm tenancy in this country for a great many years. It is high time that America faced her tenant situation openly and pursued a vigorous policy of improvement."[57] Obviously the administration had shifted in its position.

In April 1935, the Resettlement Administration was set up by executive order of the President. It was designed to meet the problem of rural poverty by giving the impoverished tenant a start on his own land. The program was never a big success, but it was a start toward helping the tenant.[58] Other programs would follow. Norman Thomas continued his crusade for the tenant; at least now there were some concrete efforts being made. The next year found more open recognition of the problem. The government made a number of studies and President Roosevelt called on Governor Futrell to name a committee to investigate the tenant problem. Thomas, who had been rebuffed so many times in the past, could not resist commenting on these efforts with some skepticism.[59]

Both federal and state groups found the sharecroppers' plight disheartening. One investigator commented, "What I saw and learned on that trip would cause you to shed more tears than Christ did at the tomb of Lazarus."[60] The nation was becoming aware of the tenant.

One difficulty in assessing Thomas's fight for the tenant during the first Agricultural Adjustment Administration was in evaluating the extent of the problem and the effect the AAA had on it. The early studies both by the government and groups in sympathy with the tenant were unreliable. The political atmosphere apparently caused some

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[56] Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, "Henry A. Wallace: Agrarian Idealist or Agricultural Realist?" *Agricultural History,* XLI (April 1967), 133-137; Russell Lord, *The Wallaces of Iowa* (Boston, 1947), 494-509.

[57] *Cong. Record,* 74th Cong., 1st Sess., 8 (March 5, 1935).

[58] Lord, *The Wallaces of Iowa,* 428-429; Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt,* 140.

[59] Thomas, *After the New Deal, What?* 49-50.

[60] New York *Times,* September 27, 1936, p. 5.

misjudgements. The assumption that the AAA was the cause of the whole trouble was, however, erroneous. The tenant plight had existed long before the AAA. The depression intensified the problem by displacing thousands who relied on sharecropping. When the Triple-A was created, it tended to "freeze" the number employed in cotton culture because of acreage reduction. Thus in effect the program barred the *return* of tenants. The price rise the AAA brought about also contributed to the problem. Some planters were able to mechanize more, thus the need for labor diminished.[61] Later studies showed the displacement of tenants during the first three years of the AAA to have been negligible except in a few cases. There were cases of tenants losing their homes, being reduced to occasional wage laborers or being denied their share under the AAA contract, but these were the exceptions rather than the rule. The most reliable independent study made on the problem was that by the Brookings Institution whose report came out in 1937. The following are some pertinent comments on that report.

> Those who have most strongly criticized . . . the program . . . contended that it should have operated to correct conditions which have been more than a century in the making, which the Adjustment Act was never designed to correct. . . . Much of the criticism which has found its way into the press has been founded upon the scattering instances of violation of the terms or intent of the contract that will be found in most communities, or upon a few situations made acute for reasons that are very little connected with the AAA undertaking. . . .[62]

The report did, however, admit that the net displacement of sharecroppers on *cotton* farms was "fairly large." But that report went on to say

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[61] Amberson, "Starve and Prosper!" 185-187; Edwin G. Nourse, Joseph S. Davis, and John D. Black, *Three Years of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration* (Washington, 1937); Fred C. Frey and T. Lynn Smith, "The Influence of the AAA Cotton Program Upon the Tenant, Cropper, and Laborer," *Rural Sociology,* I (December 1936), 483-505; T. J. Woofter, Jr., *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation,* Works Progress Administration, Research Monograph (Washington, 1936); Richards, *Cotton Under the Agricultural Adjustment Act.*

[62] Nourse, Davis, and Black, *Three Years of the AAA,* 345.

that the acute tenancy situation in the South was not due to the AAA program. The AAA's part in the problem was minimized.[63] A later report by the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy recognized the tenant problem and even acknowledged that civil liberties had been denied when the farm laborers tried to organize, but the blame again was not placed on the AAA. The committee included W. L. Blackstone, a representative of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, who agreed in substance with the report.[64]

In general, it can be said that Norman Thomas's fight for the tenant began with a philosophical criticism of the capitalist system. The AAA had bestowed a partial and temporary prosperity on agriculture; it had contributed to the loss of export trade; it was just part of the New Deal's failure "because it uses the old cards and accepts the rules of the old price and profit system. . . ." argued Thomas.[65] The tenant problem was just one aspect of the outmoded system; but as Thomas became more involved, that aspect took on more importance.

Norman Thomas was an uncompromising crusader when wrongs went unnoticed or unattended. The AAA became the whipping-boy of the tenant problem because it was the principal legislation in agriculture. Despite the fact that the AAA had only limited designs, mainly to raise farm prices by curtailing production, Thomas persisted. He recognized that realities shaped political action, and he intended to influence those realities by enlightening the public to the need for measures to help the tenant farmer.

The tenant fight was basically a clash between divergent approaches. Both approaches were politically influenced, but only one had the difficulties of putting a program into immediate practice. One was thus oriented by its ideals, the other by pragmatism. The realities of the time dictated that the administration proceed along a particular course in order to have its program carried out. Thomas was aware of this, for he

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[63] *Ibid.*, 344-348.

[64] *The Report of the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy,* 75th Cong., 1st Sess., 1937, House Doc. 149, pp. 1-28.

[65] Thomas, "Decline of the Cotton Kingdom, II—Victims of Change," 36-41; New York *Times,* June 1, 1934, p. 14.

too was subject to the realities of the day. He was aware that his party's philosophy was not accepted by the majority of the American people. His approach was to educate the public about socialism by pointing to the problems of the capitalist system. But beyond that injustices of the tenant system had to be fought.

Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., recognized Thomas's efforts were, in part, to give his party identity.

> It also stemmed from a growing moral concern over aspects of New Deal policy. . . . His essential contribution, indeed, was to keep moral issues alive at a moment when the central emphasis was on meeting economic emergencies. At his best, Thomas gave moving expression to an ethical urgency badly needed in politics, to a sense of the relation between means and ends and of the hope for "the end of the long night of exploitation, poverty and war, and the dawn of a day of beauty and peace, freedom and fellowship."[66]

Thomas had an acute sense of responsibility, an intense passion for justice for the underdog, the voiceless. Any attempt to probe further into the reasons for Thomas's actions in the tenant fight would be guesswork. Some observers have commented on his susceptibility to emotion, his tendency to take political attacks personally. There is some evidence which might support such suggestions; however, this is conjectural.[67]

For Thomas public recognition of the tenants' plight was half the battle; he knew action would follow. Edward Levinson summed up Thomas's accomplishments well when he said, ". . . Thomas has succeeded in making local sore spots in our democracy the concern of the nation. He taught the nation the meaning of the word sharecropper."[68]

Various influences brought about national awareness of the tenant, but Norman Thomas was the first prominent figure to take the initiative in crusading for public support. Thomas's efforts on behalf of the tenant no doubt influenced the public and had some effect on the Roosevelt

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[66] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston, 1960), 179-180.

[67] Bell, "Marxian Socialism," 401; Lescohier, "Norman Thomas," 247-260.

[68] Edward Levinson, "Norman Thomas," *Current History,* XLV (October 1936), 72.

Administration in recognizing a serious problem. Thus, though Thomas was hardly satisfied, a small victory was gained. It represented a tiny patch in the quilt that made up Norman Thomas's numerous crusades to keep the faith and seek the good life. Thomas said it best.

> The secret of a good life is to have the right loyalties and to hold them in the right scale of values. The value of dissent and dissenters is to make us reappraise those values with supreme concern for truth.[69]

[69] Whitman, Thomas's Obituary, New York *Times,* December 20, 1968, 43.