

Toward a Great Society

by WALTER RYBECK

EIGHTY-SIX years ago Henry George gave the world a vision of a great society. This vision was at once so sweeping in its idealism and so coldly scientific in its analysis that George's followers — to say nothing of his critics — rarely have been able to grasp and portray the breadth and depth of it. Some of Lyndon B. Johnson's concepts harmonize, I believe, with George's vision.

From where I stand in Washington, the programs and policies that most excite in me a watchful optimism are these: civil rights, the war on poverty, aspects of tax policy, trade, foreign aid, a new focus on local government, the campaign for beauty, and a planned confrontation with land speculation.

The civil rights struggle is more than a new era of justice for Negroes. The reaffirmation of the dignity and rights of any among us is a victory for all humanity.

Many take a dim view of the way the war on poverty is headed and I am not without certain misapprehensions. Yet the President has awakened America from smugness. Overnight he demolished the old saw that *Progress and Poverty* was outdated. He made the crime of poverty amidst affluence the most current item on his domestic agenda.

The Kennedy-Johnson administration first urged tax cuts coupled with tax reforms. The hopeful note here is official recognition that taxes on production can be too burdensome, not only to business but to the entire populace and the whole productive system. A sustained period of increased productivity with somewhat reduced unemployment seemed to bear out the wisdom of easing the tax burden. But

one shudders to think what will happen to prices, real wages and production levels if these gains are translated — as past gains usually have been — into higher land values and higher rents.

When I first became acquainted with Henry George's analysis of protection in international trade, free trade was considered almost subversive. Today the country strongly supports, if not free trade, at least freer trade. With our ideological allies we have been negotiating the "Kennedy round" of tariff reductions. With some of our ideological rivals, we are looking into token trade as an alternative to the form of warfare known as trade blockades.

We encouraged the growth of European free trade areas, naively ignoring that the same countries practicing free trade among themselves may become the worst trade monopolists as against the rest of the world. Look at the outside of a free union and too often you find a tariff union.

Expect to hear a great deal about a free trade area for the whole Western Hemisphere if the Inter-American conference, long postponed, convenes this summer in Brazil. This is a race against time. Unless free trade provides a base for maximum market freedom without exploitation, international price-fixing agreements on commodities such as coffee threaten to dominate world trade.

American aid to underdeveloped nations too often has made the rich richer, the poor poorer and tyrannical governments more firmly entrenched. Belatedly we have begun to consider social and political readjustments to complement our financial assistance. Both land and tax reform thus have

found their way into the bag of foreign aid devices we are peddling around the globe.

When we initiated a beefed-up development program for all the Americas, big doses of meaningful land and tax reform were written into the basic charter of the Alliance for Progress. After several years, little genuine land or tax reform is apparent in Latin America, however.

The most charitable observation is that it takes time for right action to catch up with right thinking. Reforms are often most strenuously resisted where they are most needed. On the hopeful side, American policy statements often stress improved systems of land tenure, incentive taxation and the concept of taxing idle land into use.

Chances for new vitality in local government spring less from White House pronouncements than from a little known agency called the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations. The long-neglected fiscal underpinnings of democracy are getting a new look thanks to this commission's careful research, well documented reports and strong recommendations backed up by draft bills prepared for use by state legislatures. For source material on local and state tax policies, get on the mailing list of this commission.*

The idea that America belongs to all Americans was heard in magnificent variety during the White House

Conference on Natural Beauty. The trick is to foster private use without doing any injustice to the general interest. The formula for reconciling these seemingly conflicting interests under maximum personal freedom, worked out by Henry George, surely was one of the high watermarks of his genius. The point here is that the land problem, long considered something only other nations need worry about, is on America's agenda.

One of the most significant prospects is Johnson's proposal to prod around the sacrosanct institution of land speculation in his drive for "revolutionary improvement in the quality of the American City." He called for establishment of a Temporary National Commission to study the impact of local and federal tax policies on "land speculation and on the ability of private enterprise to respond to the public interest" [See April HGN, "Toe in the Door"], and is awaiting passage of a bill to create a Department of Urban Affairs before acting.

Innumerable trends and programs running counter to those mentioned could be cited. A vast expanse of darkness still pervades the scene. We are challenged as never before to enter the main stream of public discussion. A great society is never the product of any one person, nor of one president nor of one great thinker like Henry George. To the extent we or any Americans have answers to some of the big questions being asked, we should try to take advantage of the opportunities. This is no time to cower in isolation, fearful of harsh criticism.

*Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, Washington, D. C. 20575

Max M. Korshak of Chicago, a vital and forthright lawyer, well known in the Henry George movement, died while on vacation in Miami Beach last month. He was a master in chancery in the Circuit for 29 years. Mrs. Korshak and the family have the profound sympathy of many Georgist friends who met them and heard the Judge speak at conferences through the years.

Howard T. Colvin, a labor relations expert, who was a valued benefactor of the Washington D.C. extension, died in April at Hagerstown, Maryland. He served in many arbitration issues and took an active part in civic affairs.