The Price of Plenty: Getting Farm Policy Right in the 1960s

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At the press conference of May 22, 1963, the first question posed to John F. Kennedy concerned civil rights: How would the president respond to Governor George Wallace's threat to block the integration of the University of Alabama? After Kennedy answered (he hoped the students would be admitted without federal involvement), reporters quickly moved on to other topics: the National Aeronautics and Space Administration; India; trade negotiations with Europe; Guantanamo Bay; Vietnam; the nuclear test ban treaty; a newly documented link between cigarettes and cancer; and the president's upcoming audience with the Pope. The questioners circled back to civil rights just once more, making that subject and Cuba the only issues privileged by two questions apiece. There was one topic, however, on which the president was called to speak no less than five times in this brief session with the press: the wheat referendum of the previous day.[1]

The wheat referendum? On May 21 American farmers voted down an administration proposal that would have required significant cuts in grain output in exchange for higher guaranteed prices. The farm programs inherited from the New Deal had not successfully controlled production (despite the goal of "supply management") because a technological revolution in agriculture had raised farm productivity to unforeseen levels, and farmers were never really beholden to restrictions on *output,* only to limits on the acreage under cultivation. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the United States maintained farm prices higher than world market prices, and, at considerable expense, stored the portion—the surplus—that it could not sell, donate, or dump. At the peak of this storage regime, in the late 1950s, the government ran out of room in the usual holding spots—warehouses, elevators, and terminal markets—and started shoving grain into abandoned movie theaters and empty Texas oil tanks. By 1959, owing to commodity storage costs, agricultural

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[1] "Press Conference, 22 May 1963," sound recording, *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum,* https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHA/1963/JFKWHA-186/JFKWHA-186.

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expenditures made up the *third largest item* in the federal budget, following only defense outlays and interest on the debt.[2]

Not often remembered, given the justifiable attention to the Cold War and civil rights, are the enormous pressures that agricultural affairs still exerted on electoral politics. Throughout the 1960 presidential campaign, for example, Kennedy had insisted that agriculture was the nation's "foremost domestic problem." As much as the cosmopolitan senator might have wished to avoid the issue, he could not; the abundance presented him with intractable and thorny political problems. Into the Democratic voting coalition, Franklin D. Roosevelt had brought new rural voters, especially from the West and Midwest. But the still indispensable Democratic stronghold was the one-party South, committed both to farm support and to white supremacy. Their vile racism, however, did not make southern representatives the vanguard of the critical farm development of the 1950s: the push to align federal agricultural policy with free-market principles. That pressure emerged from the corn belt, where farmers were much more likely to vote Republican than Democratic if they felt like it, and they often felt like it. National politicians needed farm votes because agricultural influence remained exaggerated in Congress: every state sent two senators regardless of total population, and the composition of the House reflected state-drawn geographical districts that elected a disproportionate number of representatives from rural areas and small towns. In many midwestern states, the farm vote (as distinct from the small-town vote, which Democrats often wrote off) could still make or break an election.[3]

As managing the agricultural surplus became the responsibility of the federal government, it provoked significant intellectual and political debate. Many experts, assessing the profound effects of the technological revolution, believed that the national economy would function better when farmers found new occupations at an even faster rate than agriculture output was growing. They concluded that government price supports prevented this necessary market transition. Others, often more liberal in outlook and Democratic in commitment, tried to think of how to revise the price-support structure in a way that trimmed program costs, while still compensating for the distinct challenges of farming and keeping up the national political commitment to farm welfare. The choice between these alternatives became more urgent as surpluses mounted and storage expenses ballooned. Public policy needed to adapt to the perplexing state of permanent plenty, either by throwing agriculture more directly into the wringer of the free market or by dramatically restricting production with new controls.

Kennedy chose the control route. His economic advisers in the Department of Agriculture (USDA) developed a forceful and principled answer to the whole mess: requiring farmers to restrict the amount they produced in return for financial support—a step the government had not been forced to take since the late 1930s. The new secretary of

[2] U.S. Congress, House, *Commodity Credit Corporation Grain Storage Activities,* 86 Cong., 2 sess., Aug. 31, 1960; *Publications of the U.S. Government: Commodity Credit Corporation,* boxes A-2494 and A-2495, Publications of the U.S. Government, RG 287 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.); Willard W. Cochrane, *The Curse of American Agricultural Abundance: A Sustainable Solution* (Lincoln, 2003); Don F. Hadwiger and Ross B. Talbot, *Pressures and Protests: The Kennedy Farm Program and the Wheat Referendum of 1963* (San Francisco, 1965).

[3] For the "foremost domestic problem" quotation, see John F. Kennedy to W. M. Glasgow, Aug. 24, 1960, box 198, Democratic National Committee Records (John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Mass.). James N. Giglio, "New Frontier Agricultural Policy: The Commodity Side, 1961–1963," *Agricultural History,* 61 (Summer 1987), 53–70. Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., "A Study of the Farm Vote in the Midwest," July 1959, box 819, Pre-Presidential Papers (Kennedy Library).

agriculture, Orville Freeman, and the chief USDA economist, Willard Cochrane, took the lead. In collaboration with key southern farm representatives and the National Farmers Union, the Democratic party's farm-organization ally, they poured enormous effort into a program that attempted to address the "problem of plenty" by coupling the increased public distribution of food with rigorous new supply controls. This USDA cohort and the program's congressional supporters stood their ground against a wide range of critics who clamored for the realignment of domestic prices, currently inflated by government intervention, with world-market prices. In contrast to what might seem the obvious choice—having farmers produce for actual markets, not for government storage bins—the USDA fought instead to shore up the New Deal order.

The Kennedy administration hoped farmers would calculate that unrestricted, price-supported production was unlikely to remain sustainable in a Congress increasingly dominated by urban and suburban interests. But getting the budget under control was not the only motivation of the administration and its allies. The liberals in the USDA also articulated unabashed ideological and ethical motivations for their policy preferences, maintaining that their plans had the potential to shield midsized farms from the effects of total market logic by requiring a measure of restraint from everyone else. Market-oriented pricing would only accelerate the competitive forces that drove farmers to find other lines of work. While they recognized that New Deal price-support policy had always favored the largest agricultural interests, Freeman and Cochrane believed that the race was now on to save the midsized farm. They wanted to provide a protective floor underneath middling farmers, as only the largest, highest-volume producers would prosper in a free-market environment.

The administration's efforts failed. Despite the assistance of key congressional leaders, the USDA could not find adequate support for meaningful production restrictions. Kennedy had given both rhetorical and material cover for the USDA's bold proposal of production cuts by expanding domestic feeding programs (food stamps, school lunches) and international aid (Public Law 480, or Food for Peace). But the USDA could not gather enough support for the production-control part of the program. On May 21, 1963, after a last-ditch attempt to implement such a plan just for wheat, a majority of wheat farmers voted it down. In what came as a genuine surprise for the administration, far fewer than the required two-thirds of participating farmers voted for the measure. The "no" voters assumed (correctly, it turned out) that Congress would continue to assist them in the future without requiring stringent controls or worrying much about equity. "I felt [the farmer's] best interests would be served by attempting to bring production in line with demand with an adequate income for him," Kennedy declared at that press conference on May 22. "Now the farmers have chosen to plant freely without support. We will have to see what the effects will be."[4]

Agricultural historians have long understood the abrupt forcefulness of the Kennedy plans, one of the most "radical" attempts ever to handle the farm problem. Indeed, Willard Cochrane's biographer, the economist Richard Levins, has portrayed this episode as a clear agrarian loss. Since the 1960s, Levins asserts, agriculture has struggled under a system almost completely dominated by private corporations and free markets. Instructed to embrace international trade and to compete in the "Cheap Grain Olympics," "American farmers have been pitted against farmers throughout the world in a contest to be won by whoever could survive at the lowest prices." Cochrane, Levins proclaims, "carried the standard of liberalism . . . in the last serious fight to save the family farm." This is true, and

[4] "Press Conference, 22 May 1963."

that fight failed. Americans also missed a crucial opportunity to limit the prodigious production that undercut farmers and local markets in the developing world; this moment might have been a chance to recalibrate relations with the global South. But these are not the only reasons to remember the wheat referendum of 1963. We should mainly remember this forgotten showdown because it marked the end of one policy regime, opening the routes to another.[5]

The wheat referendum functioned as a key moment of transition from earlier policies based upon high guaranteed price supports and uninterrupted government storage, to measures put in place after 1964 that avoided coercive production controls, increased producer reliance on market signals, and facilitated the free movement of commodities around the globe. Despite popular assumptions that American farmers receive sizable subsidies inaugurated during the New Deal and delivered to them basically unchanged since that time, farm price-support policy underwent a market-oriented reconstruction beginning in the 1960s. Farm products began moving at uniform prices, with the government paying out a certain amount of direct financial assistance in compensation for low market prices. These price-relative benefits could fluctuate wildly; they were renamed and adjusted periodically in dizzying fashion; but, especially over the last twenty years, they have been greatly reduced.[6]

It is not a stretch to say that after the 1960s and 1970s, Congress put commercial farmers on a slow wean. Today, the roughly 40 percent of farmers who collect commodity-specific payments choose among a selection of short-term risk protection and crop insurance programs—forms of assistance that provide a modest cushion against the uniquely volatile fluctuations of commodity prices, and a cushion against the weather, but require of farmers a market mentality, a businesslike mind-set, and an internationally competitive orientation. Politically well-positioned farmers still receive commodity-specific aid, of course, but it arrives as forms of insurance far less generous than New Deal–style price supports—and often this aid is ad hoc and comes to farmers as dramatic executive-branch tariff and trade favors. In this respect the fate of farm policy is not unlike the market-oriented, even neoliberal, trajectory of other deregulated sectors, especially finance, that receive dramatic and reactive forms of protection and bailout.[7]

[5] On the "radical" attempt, see Giglio, "New Frontier Agricultural Policy," esp. 61. See also Hadwiger and Talbot, *Pressures and Protests;* Jon Lauck, *American Agriculture and the Problem of Monopoly: The Political Economy of Grain Belt Farming, 1953–1980* (Lincoln, 2000); R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 2002); Richard A. Levins, *Willard Cochrane and the American Family Farm* (Lincoln, 2000); J. L. Anderson, "Uneasy Dependency: Rural and Farm Policy and the Midwest since 1945," in *The Rural Midwest since World War II,* ed. J. L. Anderson (Dekalb, 2014), 26–59; and Jonathan Coppess, *The Fault Lines of Farm Policy: A Legislative and Political History of the Farm Bill* (Lincoln, 2018). Levins, *Willard Cochrane and the American Family Farm,* esp. 2, 4. Rural sociologists such as Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael have considered the effects of American surpluses, mainly inexpensive grain, on rural societies in the developing world, and have persuasively argued that these provisions have undermined rather than bolstered food security. See also Anne Effland, "Small Farms, Cash Crops, Agrarian Ideals, and International Development," *Agricultural History,* 84 (Winter 2010), 1–13; and Sterling Evans, "The 'Age of Agricultural Innocence': Trends and Concerns for Agriculture Knee-Deep into the Twenty-First Century," *ibid.*, 93 (Winter 2019), 4–34.

[6] James T. Bonnen, William P. Browne, and David B. Schweikhardt, "Further Observations on the Changing Nature of National Agricultural Policy Decision Processes, 1946–1995," *Agricultural History,* 70 (Spring 1996), 130–52; Willard W. Cochrane and Mary E. Ryan, *American Farm Policy, 1948–1973* (Minneapolis, 1976); Douglas E. Bowers, Wayne D. Rasmussen, and Gladys L. Baker, "History of Agricultural Price-Support and Adjustment Programs, 1933–84," *Agriculture Information Bulletin* (Dec. 1984), https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/41988/50845_aib485fm.pdf?v=1897; Coppess, *Fault Lines of Farm Policy.*

[7] Bowers, Rasmussen, and Baker, "History of Agricultural Price-Support and Adjustment Programs"; Carolyn Dimitri, Anne Effland, and Neilson Conklin, "The 20th Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture and Farm

Highly technical agricultural policy mechanisms such as "target prices" and "countercyclical payments" have no doubt served as a form of opaque power protecting the dwindling number of beneficiaries. But the maddeningly complex twists and turns of commodity policy have also discouraged historians from making new and useful claims about the political periodization of the support systems for a sizable portion of the modern economy, which includes all food production, trade, processing, and retailing, along with agricultural machinery, seeds, and chemicals. The United States is the world's leading agricultural exporter, and the third largest producer after China and India. Americans spend less of their personal incomes on food than most any other people in the world; U.S. industrial agriculture, for all its environmental and social flaws, released the human and financial resources necessary for the nation's urban, industrial growth in the nineteenth century and underwrote its development into a "postindustrial superpower" in the twentieth. Commodity policy also shifted to serve consumer and industrial ends.[8]

While U.S. historians debate the ascent, timing, and character of free-market thinking and market-based public policy, there is a broad consensus that the second part of the century can be usefully divided into two halves: before the 1970s, when the intellectual and largely elitist work of antistatist and conservative thinking accelerated; and after the 1970s, when economic, political, and cultural forces aligned to build actual constituencies for a wide range of deregulatory, antilabor, antitax, and business-friendly measures. A periodization of farm policy that more clearly aligns it with other instances of New Deal erosion therefore allows agricultural affairs to rejoin the larger narratives of American political development. As a uniquely fertile arena of scientific investment, bureaucratic governance, economic regulation, and rural political mobilization, farm politics have long animated historical interpretations of state formation and government intervention. These factors create an especially strong set of arguments for its centrality to the "age of reform" that arched from populism to progressivism to the New Deal. We should continue that story by integrating agricultural policy more fully within the conservative and neoliberal ascendance of the last sixty years. While social scientists have chronicled how agricultural policy became more market oriented and deregulated since World War II, historians could benefit from an analysis that pinpoints the ideological and political transition.[9]

Policy," *Economic Information Bulletin* (June 2005), https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/44197/13566_eib3_1_.pdf?v=7159.9; David Orden and Carl Zulauf, "Political Economy of the 2014 Farm Bill," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics,* 97 (Oct. 2015), 1298–1311; Coppess, *Fault Lines of Farm Policy.* On the history of crop insurance, see Shane Hamilton, "Crop Insurance and the New Deal Roots of Agricultural Financialization in the United States," *Enterprise & Society,* 21 (Sept. 2020), 648–80. Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011).

[8] For the classic formulation of agriculture's larger role in the economy, see William N. Parker, "Agriculture," in *American Economic Growth: An Economist's History of the United States,* ed. Lance E. Davis et al. (New York, 1972), 369–417. Today, agriculture and related industries provide over 10% of U.S. employment. See Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, "Ag and Food Sectors and the Economy," 2021, https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/ag-and-food-sectors-and-the-economy.aspx. Evans, "'Age of Agricultural Innocence,'" 5. Peter A. Coclanis, "Born in the U.S.A.: The Americanness of Industrial Agriculture," in *Food Fights: How History Matters to Contemporary Food Debates,* ed. Charles C. Ludington and Matthew Morse Booker (Chapel Hill, 2019), esp. 39.

[9] Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955); Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York, 2009); Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (Chicago, 1999); Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862–1928* (Princeton, 2001); Kenneth Finegold and Theda Skocpol, *State and Party in America's New Deal* (Madison, 1995); David E. Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928–1933* (Chapel Hill, 1991); Richard Stewart Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* (Columbia, 1966); Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration*

Here I revisit the Kennedy administration's bold attempt at agricultural reform to demonstrate how its fight for limited production, high prices, and equitable opportunity throws into clear relief the tail end of a policy era. In the early 1960s, there occurred a showdown over agricultural policy worthy of high political memory. While I do not track the emergence of the market-driven policies that followed its denouement, the Kennedy farm program and its last-stand defense of the New Deal structure first had to fail before the next policy era could emerge.[10]

The surpluses that Kennedy, Freeman, and Cochrane confronted had resulted not only from a budget-busting combination of high price supports and ineffective controls over production but also, and mainly, from a dramatic technological revolution in agriculture. The annual agricultural growth rate almost tripled after 1940, owing to advances in crop and animal breeding, the increased use of chemical inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides, and the adoption of more machinery. Astonishingly, this growth rate continued for the rest of the twentieth century—a record unmatched by any other economic sector.[11]

After 1948, on average, agricultural productivity grew by almost 2 percent each year, while in manufacturing, annual productivity growth averaged around only 1.3 percent. And this agricultural growth occurred without any change in the amount of land under cultivation. Yields shot up: American farmers got more crops per acre, more milk per cow, and more meat and eggs per pound of feed. As participants in a dispersed industry, farmers could not control prices, but they could lower their own costs with new technology, which they did, over and over, in response to the depressed farm prices that inevitably

(Chapel Hill, 1968); Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York, 2007); and Jess Gilbert, *Planning Democracy: Agrarian Intellectuals and the Intended New Deal* (New Haven, 2015). Newer takes on the era include Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, *Arresting Contagion: Science, Policy, and Conflicts over Animal Disease Control* (Cambridge, Eng., 2015); and Gabriel N. Rosenberg, *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America* (Philadelphia, 2016). For food-driven accounts of American political economy, see Shane Hamilton, *Trucking Country: The Road to America's Wal-Mart Economy* (Princeton, 2008); Joshua Specht, *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America* (Princeton, 2019); and Christopher Deutsch, "Beeftopia: The Red Meat Politics of Prosperity in Postwar America" (Lincoln, forthcoming). Agricultural policy making as both clientele politics par excellence and governing pathology found its classic formulations in Grant McConnell, *Private Power & American Democracy* (New York, 1966). The iron-triangle interpretation has been superseded by Graham K. Wilson, *Special Interests and Policymaking: Agricultural Policies and Politics in Britain and the United States of America, 1956–1970* (London, 1977); John Mark Hansen, *Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919–1981* (Chicago, 1991); William P. Browne, *Cultivating Congress: Constituents, Issues, and Interests in Agricultural Policymaking* (Lawrence, 1995); Adam D. Sheingate, *The Rise of the Agricultural Welfare State: Institutions and Interest Group Power in the United States, France, and Japan* (Princeton, 2001); Bill Winders, *The Politics of Food Supply: U.S. Agricultural Policy in the World Economy* (New Haven, 2009); and Christopher Bosso, *Framing the Farm Bill: Interests, Ideology, and the Agricultural Act of 2014* (Lawrence, 2017).

[10] A play-by-play account of the John F. Kennedy farm proposals appeared in 1965, quickly after their defeat, in Hadwiger and Talbot, *Pressures and Protests*. Most subsequent work on the history of postwar agricultural policy draws from that book. This includes the 1987 work that has become the definitive account: Giglio, "New Frontier Agricultural Policy." Over three decades later, however, we have the perspective to frame the Kennedy period as a key transitional moment in U.S. political economy, because the market-oriented direction of commodity policy has continued unabated. In addition, new research at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and the National Archives, and in congressional collections has allowed me to fill in critical gaps about Kennedy's political calculations; about the ideological positions of the agricultural liberals and their farm-organization allies; about the administration's strategic positioning of increased food assistance with proposed production controls; about the political motivations of key members of Congress; and about the Farm Bureau's oppositional tactics.

[11] Bruce L. Gardner, *American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How It Flourished and What It Cost* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).

resulted from this widespread increased production. And once the cycle started, it never stopped. The underlying economic reality of agriculture in the twentieth century was that production consistently outpaced all the new demand generated by population expansion and income growth.[12]

The shape of the nation's farm and food policy now hinged on this question: What could be done with the mountainous abundance unleashed by such rapid technological change? A 1960 presidential campaign pamphlet put the best spin possible on the government's groaning storage bins. Urging farmers to vote for Kennedy, the leaflet proclaimed this bounty a blessing for both Americans and the world. One image showed an infinite line of granaries stretching along flat plains to the horizon. A second image pictured a crowded and forlorn group of hungry women and children holding up empty bowls in an unidentified East Asian location. The abundant grain in these American bins, the pamphlet declared, constituted "one of the most potent tools in our effort for world peace."[13]

Pleading with his countrymen to yoke their nation's plenty to a renewed national and international mission was Kennedy's favorite rhetorical position, because he well understood the emotional appeal of distributing food to those in need. During the 1960 campaign, he outlined the expanded program of international food assistance eventually to be named Food for Peace. Those in need also included other Americans. During the politically critical West Virginia primary, he and his campaign workers found themselves surprised and deeply shaken by the poor diets and grinding poverty of Appalachia's rural and mining people, and by the haphazard and uncoordinated way that state charities doled out surplus commodities provided by the federal Commodity Credit Corporation: powdered milk one month, corn meal the next. Kennedy's first executive order as president, in fact, launched the modern food stamp program.[14]

The speedier and more generous distribution of abundance was an easily grasped concept. Less understandable to Kennedy were the complex and contested formulas of commodity support hammered out in Washington, D.C., or the puzzling and unpredictable relations among those parity percentages, farm incomes, and the predilection of any one farmer to vote Republican or Democratic. During most of the 1950s, Senator Kennedy cared little for farm policy or politics, and when he did take notice, his votes reflected the interests of Massachusetts, which contained both an urban population wary of high food prices and dairy farmers interested in low feed-grain costs. Thus, he supported President Dwight D. Eisenhower's controversial secretary of agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson. He also voted in step with the Farm Bureau, the largest of the agricultural lobbying groups, the one most aligned with the Republican party, and the group most in favor of market pricing and the further loosening of production controls. The Farm Bureau's position was that lower supports would clear away surpluses while assuring abundant supplies and low prices. It cared little for the farmers who would be pushed out. According to JFK's fellow Democratic senator Hubert Humphrey, who, by his own account, helped "bring

[12] Dimitri, Effland, and Conklin, "20th Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture and Farm Policy." See also Congressional Quarterly, *U.S. Agricultural Policy in the Postwar Years, 1945–1963* (Washington, 1963). Alex McCalla, Emery Castle, and Vernon Eidman, "The AAEA: Ever Growing and Changing Research Challenges," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics,* 92 (April 2010), 334–55.

[13] Campaign pamphlet, 1960, box 1028, Pre-Presidential Papers.

[14] On Kennedy's and his campaign workers' reaction to conditions in West Virginia, see John A. Baker oral history interview by George A. Barnes, June 28, 1964, transcript (Kennedy Library).

Kennedy around" on the farm issue in the late 1950s, Kennedy's voting record did not just go unnoticed in certain parts of the Midwest; it was despised.[15]

Partisan bickering over agricultural policy broke out in the 1950s because the expensive policies inherited from the New Deal had failed to control surpluses—which of course had been their original purpose. The first Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933 emerged from economic thinking that viewed low farm incomes as part of a larger underconsumption problem within the American economy. Farmers, along with industrial workers, represented a population whose "wages" had stagnated or even fallen in comparison with others' prosperity during the 1920s. The years 1909 to 1914 became the base period for calculating the ideal exchange relationship between farmers and other producers. This goal became known as "parity," though the term was not written into legislation until 1938. Parity was both an ideological rallying cry and a mathematical relationship that required ongoing calculations of an index of prices currently paid for goods and services (both production and living costs) in relation to the base period.[16]

At no time did legislation ever require that farmers be handed a single payment worth 100 percent of parity, but once ensconced in legislation and within day-to-day bureaucratic procedure, the parity figures of the various crops and commodities became yardsticks for determining how close farmers were to "equality." For decades afterward, farm politics revolved around whether parity percentages should be higher or lower, with Democrats usually on the side of increased support and Republicans on the other. The notion of a "parity price" quickly sparked opposition from critics who believed farmers should respond to the normal market signals of supply and demand. Farm-program defenders quickly learned to deflect these attacks by pointing out that parity prices set a floor under farmers' incomes in the same way that minimum wages set a floor under other workers' incomes.

In the main, the AAA reduced production of the major crops through voluntary acreage restriction contracts, financed by a tax on processors. After the Supreme Court in 1936 struck down the production-control provisions of the original legislation, the AAA of 1938 put the farm program on a permanent basis. For the first time, legislation included the words *parity prices* and referred to *parity incomes*. It dropped the processing tax and created mechanisms for determining national acreage allotments to be apportioned among states, counties, and individual farms. Finally, with "nonrecourse" loans, the government paid farmers a set amount for what they agreed to produce. The farmer could keep the money he had been lent, repaying it only if the market price of the commodity rose above that of the loan. Loan rates were set with reference to parity percentages, and in effect became the domestic price for the crop or commodity in question. Optimistic officials hoped that a sliding scale of flexible loan rates would mitigate, forever after, the punishing price fluctuations of the past: rates would be low in good times, so as not to encourage excess production, and high only in lean times. But that did not mean

[15] John A. Schnittker oral history interview by T. H. Baker, Nov. 21, 1968, transcript (Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Tex.); Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, "Farm Policy from FDR to Eisenhower: Southern Democrats and the Politics of Agriculture," *Agricultural History,* 53 (Jan. 1979), 352–71; Giglio, "New Frontier Agricultural Policy." Hubert H. Humphrey oral history interview by Max Kampelman, Dec. 14, 1964, transcript (Kennedy Library).

[16] Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*. Bowers, Rasmussen, and Baker, "History of Agricultural Price-Support and Adjustment Programs"; "Background and Summary of Legislation Relating to Agricultural Adjustment, Conservation, Crop Insurance, Price Control, and Labor Programs," Aug. 15, 1946, box 17, Clinton P. Anderson Papers (Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Mo.); John D. Black, *Parity, Parity, Parity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1942).

lawmakers immediately pushed up prices to full parity; New Deal price guarantees remained fairly moderate, compared with what was to come during World War II. Indeed, the 1938 act stipulated the secretary of agriculture announce loan rates between only 52 and 75 percent of parity.[17]

Because farmers handed over their products when they received loan payouts, the federal government began to warehouse commodities forfeited during the course of the loan operations, and it also stored additional agricultural products under supplementary reserve provisions. These storage operations protected commodity price levels and ensured regular marketing to processors and consumers. The Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC), established in 1933, became the hub of the farm loan program as well as of the storage operations. Moved to the USDA in 1939, and its capitalization increased generously over time by billions of dollars, the CCC financed loans, managed commodity inventories, and oversaw distribution and marketing programs, both domestically and abroad. While only a handful of commodities at any one time were considered "basic," and thereby eligible for the renewable kinds of statutory support such as the nonrecourse loans, the CCC and the USDA continuously engaged in ad hoc activities to support the producers of almost every crop and commodity.[18]

Most farm-state representatives accepted the essential legitimacy of the agricultural programs. Agricultural policy making remained a relatively insulated affair, hammered out by a small collection of Democrats and Republicans in the House and the Senate. These agricultural committees maintained a close working relationship with the largest farm lobby—the Farm Bureau—and expressed minimal loyalty to the political parties or to the president. But the Farm Bureau grew increasingly hostile to the liberal tilt of the New Deal. The organization expressed the views of the most successful landowners and growers, openly criticized labor organizing, and was antagonistic to programs that assisted small farmers. The Farm Bureau echoed the opinions of rural businessmen, bankers, and local branches of the Chamber of Commerce. In all, it benefitted the landowners best equipped to take advantage of government aid and credit.[19]

In opposition to the Farm Bureau was the National Farmers Union. Carrying forth much of the rural radicalism of the populist temper, the Farmers Union had initially opposed the AAA. But new leadership moved aggressively in the late 1930s to rebuild the organization as an ally of the New Deal, as the liberal farm lobby, and as an advocate for organized labor. The Farmers Union, though less powerful than the Farm Bureau, carried the torch for the moral and economic alliance of America's workers and middling farmers—a partnership based on the idea that the nation's health required the purchasing power of both groups.[20]

In the 1930s, it might have been fair to suggest that the New Deal agricultural programs represented a "politics of scarcity," but this was certainly not the case after World War II. The war set the stage for a prolonged period of both generous pricing and

[17] *United States v. Butler,* 297 U.S. 1 (1936). Bowers, Rasmussen, and Baker, "History of Agricultural Price-Support and Adjustment Programs"; "Background and Summary of Legislation Relating to Agricultural Adjustment, Conservation, Crop Insurance, Price Control, and Labor Programs."

[18] Department of Agriculture, *Summary of 30 Years' Operations of the Commodity Credit Corporation, with Report of the President of the Commodity Credit Corporation, 1964* (Washington, 1965).

[19] Hansen, *Gaining Access,* 89. Lowell K. Dyson, *Farmers' Organizations* (New York, 1986); Wesley McCune, "Who Speaks for the Farmer?," *Current History,* 31 (Sept. 1956), 139–43.

[20] Michael W. Flamm, "The National Farmers Union and the Evolution of Agrarian Liberalism, 1937–1946," *Agricultural History,* 68 (Summer 1994), 54–80.

unrestricted production. Almost overnight, the goal of American policy shifted from trying to tamp down overproduction to encouraging ever-greater production to meet both wartime needs and overseas food-assistance goals. The USDA gradually relaxed penalties for exceeding acreage allotments and discontinued marketing quotas for most products.

Members of Congress also decided that farmers deserved a higher proportion of the prosperity that laborers and defense contractors were enjoying, and they passed legislation raising parity levels into the 90 percent range, both as a symbol of equity and as an incentive to produce. Congress also directed the USDA to support over one hundred additional commodities at no less than 85 percent of parity and to extend those supports for two years after the official cessation of hostilities. In general, though, robust wartime demand for farm products kept regular market prices high, and only for a few products did market prices slide low enough to trigger support payments.[21]

However smoothly and inexpensively the wartime system functioned, it indeed represented a significant extension to New Deal policy and an expansion of pricing generosity that would prove impossible to scale back in peacetime. Any observer could have predicted the inevitable: price guarantees for perishable crops, mandatory until 1948, would eventually result in the accumulation and humiliating wastage of some commodity or another. From 1946 to 1948 the CCC bought millions of bushels of potatoes to keep prices at 90 percent of parity. Potato farmers had planted only the number of acres requested by the USDA, but their lavish application of fertilizer and pesticides far outpaced the government's capacity to anticipate yields. The CCC worked doggedly to find outlets for fresh and dehydrated potatoes in school lunches, for animal feed, and in a famine-wracked Europe, but the cost of doing so often proved far more expensive than letting some of the harvest simply rot in the fields or be set aflame.[22]

An accelerating technological revolution in agriculture thus laid bare the incompatibility of high supports and prodigious production. Many voices began calling for "flexible pricing" to push farmers back toward the market: parity percentages should be lower so that farmers could adjust to consumer demand. The most support for flexibility came from midwestern legislators and the Farm Bureau, mainly representing corn and hog farmers, who felt the pull of expanding markets for feed grains. Corn, along with wheat, provided food for both humans and livestock. There appeared no limit to increasing demands for protein-rich diets, heavy with meat and dairy. Midwesterners rightly perceived greater export opportunities for corn, and greater opportunities for expanded meat production, were feed grains more abundant and affordable. Therefore, many corn belt farmers judged flexibility a good bargain. They believed they had more to gain in volume than they would lose with lower prices. In 1947 the Farm Bureau's leadership passed from an Alabama cotton planter to an Iowa hog producer, who explicitly endorsed flexibility as the route toward a "dynamic, expanding" domestic and world economy. "Lower support prices for surplus grains," the Farm Bureau avowed, "would encourage grain feeding of livestock [and assure] American consumers a firm supply of nutritious food."[23]

[21] Walter W. Wilcox, *The Farmer in the Second World War* (Ames, 1947).

[22] Allen J. Matusow, *Farm Policies and Politics in the Truman Years* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

[23] Clinton Anderson, "Is the Farmer Heading for Trouble Again?," *Saturday Evening Post,* Dec. 22, 1945, p. 96; Clinton Anderson, "Equality for Agriculture," Address before the National Association of Directors of Agriculture, Nov. 12, 1945, box 8, Anderson Papers. Allen B. Kline, "Cheaper Food—Promise or Political Lure?," *Collier's,* May 13, 1950, p. 13.

But the positions of the southern cotton and tobacco interests in Congress were decidedly inflexible. Southern Democrats had sublimated long-standing fears of federal interference in race relations to channel vast amounts of New Deal assistance to the impoverished and preponderantly rural region for farm support and economic development. Southerners had shaped the AAA and aggressively protected high support prices along with production-control measures, because the demand for most southern crops was relatively insensitive to cost. Southern producers especially valued a lucrative domestic market for cotton, and they wanted it protected from foreign competition. Most of the region's farmers, in other words, had a greater fear of depressed prices than of lost volume, and they willingly voted to impose production limits upon themselves in return for high levels of support. But southerners had also planted many of the acres that had been diverted from cotton with corn and other feed grains—an expansion that accelerated merrily outside the regulatory framework applied to the base acres of the corn belt.[24]

While Congress avoided hard decisions throughout the 1940s and 1950s, professional agricultural economists began to debate the merits of a policy mechanism that would allow the market to set agricultural prices while Congress ensured that farm incomes did not fall below politically acceptable standards. These were "compensatory payments." The standard rules of supply and demand would determine prices, which would align with world market levels. But during economic downturns, farmers would receive direct payments to make up the difference between world market prices and a rolling average of very recent prices.[25]

The idea of compensatory payments appealed to some Democrats because it seemed like a way to lower food costs and keep together the precarious coalition of farmers and consumers, but the plan had actually originated as an attack on parity and the whole price-support structure. Indeed, the person most responsible for the formulation and popularization of market pricing and direct-payment ideas—the economist Theodore Schultz—disdainfully criticized the "concealed subsidies" of the farm program. Chair of the University of Chicago economics department for almost twenty years, Schultz enjoyed institutional connections with private industry and cultivated a neoclassical expertise in agricultural economics. Aligning himself with corporate-funded groups that promoted free enterprise, Schultz believed that farm policy had to move away from state-administered prices and toward the active promotion of agricultural modernization and international trade. "Rather than price supports," he explained to the public, it is better "to price farm products so that they will move readily into internal and external trade, and to provide compensatory payments to farmers to sustain farm income when business recedes and unemployment spreads." Schultz was more candid in private. The program, he explained to a free enterprise planning board, "is based on classical economics—if earnings are too low then there are too many people and some must get out."[26]

[24] Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, "Farm Policy from FDR to Eisenhower"; George Bruce Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913–1943* (Baton Rouge, 1967); Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938–1980* (Durham, N.C., 1994).

[25] Willard W. Cochrane, "Income Payments as a Substitute for Support Prices," *Journal of Farm Economics,* 28 (Nov. 1946), 1024–29; Lauren Soth, "Agricultural Economists and Public Policy," in *Economic Analysis and Agricultural Policy,* ed. Richard H. Day (Ames, 1982), 46–56; T. K. Cowden, "Current Trends in Agricultural Policy," *Journal of Farm Economics,* 31 (Nov. 1949), 800–805. See also Virgil W. Dean, *An Opportunity Lost: The Truman Administration and the Farm Policy Debate* (Columbia, 2006).

[26] For the "concealed subsidies" quotation, see Theodore W. Schultz, "That Turbulent Brannan Plan," *Farm Policy Forum,* 3 (Feb. 1950), 5. On Theodore Schultz, see Paul Burnett, "The Price Is Not Right: Theodore W. Schultz,

Not all critics of the farm program offered such harsh medicine; many economists, for example, remained sympathetic to the basic setup but still felt the need for a system of price supports that would over time facilitate longer-range adjustments, in particular a move toward less cotton and wheat, and more meat and dairy. Such concerns dovetailed with those of Harry S. Truman's secretary of agriculture, Charles Brannan, who proposed a major overhaul of farm policy intended to keep content all of the members of the Democratic coalition. The Brannan Plan, presented to Congress in the spring of 1949, proposed essentially to maintain the established structure for the storable commodities, but to apply a new system of income payments to the perishable commodities, the abundance of which would not be held back with production controls. Inspired in part by the idea of compensatory payments, the Brannan Plan would have directed the USDA to determine a certain standard of support, still tied to parity percentages; then the government would issue direct payments to producers to make up the difference between that promise and the market price.[27]

Congress did not approve the plan. Brannan had developed and presented it without input from the farm leadership of either party. And despite the esteem that the Brannan Plan has occasionally earned for representing the lost potential to heal divides among farmers, labor unions, and consumers, it would have actually required a great deal of diplomatic and fiscal irresponsibility. In setting farm products to roam free at world prices, the plan amounted to undisguised export dumping, an exercise of American power against which other exporting nations would have retaliated in the sensitive nation-rebuilding years after World War II. But most important, the public costs of the Brannan Plan would have gone through the roof, because it preserved all of the high parity promises for the storable commodities but contained no clear mechanism, no production controls, to hold down the inevitable surpluses of perishables. Market prices would have been driven down, and the cost for direct payments would have skyrocketed.[28]

Sidestepping hard decisions, the Agricultural Act of 1949 instead provided for 75 to 90 percent of parity support for the basic commodities, to be replaced after two years with lower levels of support. The Korean War intervened, however, causing an upward spike in markets for farm products, and Truman signed legislation in 1952 that extended high mandatory supports of 90 percent of parity until 1954. By that end date, Eisenhower had taken office and had appointed the most polarizing secretary of agriculture up to that time: unrepentant free-market advocate Ezra Taft Benson. The new secretary believed the New Deal price-support system not only froze production patterns and failed to adapt to changes in demand but also undercut free enterprise and weakened individual initiative.

Policy Planning, and Agricultural Economics in the Cold-War United States," in *Building Chicago Economics: New Perspectives on the History of America's Most Powerful Economics Program,* ed. Robert Van Horn, Philip Mirowski, and Thomas A. Stapleford (New York, 2011), 67–92. See also Paul Burnett, "The Visible Land: Agricultural Economics, U.S. Export Agriculture, and International Development, 1918–65" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2008). For the "Rather than price supports" quotation, see Theodore W. Schultz, *Agriculture in an Unstable Economy* (New York, 1945), 137. Committee for Economic Development Advisory Board Meeting, Jan. 20, 1945, quoted in Burnett, "Price Is Not Right," 67–68. To be fair, Schultz advocated a more comprehensive system of "forward pricing" to compensate for the unique volatility of farm prices while doing away with high administered prices. His ideas proved crucial for the market reconstruction of farm policy, but he was not a conservative ideologue.

[27] Walter W. Wilcox, "Comments on Agricultural Policy," *Journal of Farm Economics,* 31 (Nov. 1949), 806–13. Dean, *Opportunity Lost,* 148. See also Reo M. Christenson, *The Brannan Plan: Farm Politics and Policy* (Ann Arbor, 1959).

[28] Roy R. Green, *An Analysis of the Brannan Plan Prepared by the Research Department of the National Association of Manufacturers* (New York, 1949), 18.

Benson desired a direct assault on the price-support structure, but he had to contend with a Congress unprepared for a total overhaul, as well as with hostility from farm voters. He did, though, manage to lower some support levels to the 75 percent range and to relax controls over corn and feed grains.[29]

Because the Eisenhower administration stood firm against production controls, it presided over an unprecedented accumulation of government-held commodities. This surplus cost the federal government over a million dollars a day, an expense that became the third largest budget item by 1959. According to USDA economist John Schnittker, an ally of Willard Cochrane, if Benson had really wanted low grain prices to solve both the surplus and the budget problems, the Eisenhower administration would have had to lower support levels to under 50 percent of parity—certain political suicide.[30]

The Farmers Union, though not as powerful as the Farm Bureau, worked closely with the Democratic National Committee in the late 1950s and later provided robust farm-organization support for the Kennedy administration's proposals. The Farmers Union found intellectual affiliates in liberal economists such as Willard Cochrane and John Kenneth Galbraith. In contrast to the Farm Bureau, it did not support flexible pricing; it endorsed high prices along with more stringent production controls. It believed that unrestricted production would lead to torrents of low-priced oversupply and drive many midsized, owner-operated farms out of business. The Farmers Union also did not initially care much for Senator John F. Kennedy. Apparently, "all hell broke loose" from the Farmers Union when Hubert Humphrey announced his intentions to bring the Massachusetts senator to Minneapolis for a joint political appearance. But the stark political reality was that a Democratic presidential contender could not remain unwelcome in a state like Minnesota.[31]

For Kennedy, the farm problem was at first an electoral and fiscal problem, but not a moral, ideological, or even particularly interesting one. As he remarked to Galbraith, "I don't want to hear about agriculture from anyone but you, . . . and I don't much want to hear about it from you." But he had to hear from someone. How did these farmers, divided by commodity and preferred lobbying group, really think? For answers to that question, candidate Kennedy turned to professional pollsters. Lou Harris and Associates interviewed six hundred farmers from several Midwest states and presented the results to Kennedy in the summer of 1959. They narrowed in on this "politically sensitive" region because there, unlike in the South, Democrats and Republicans competed vigorously for the votes of corn-hog farmers, grain and wheat growers, livestock producers, and dairy farmers—a population that voted based on recent economic memory rather than for any consistent political philosophy. These voters also accounted for roughly one-third of all

[29] An Act to Stabilize Price of Agricultural Commodities, 63 Stat. 1051 (1949). U.S. Congress, House, *Commodity Credit Corporation Grain Storage Activities.*

[30] Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture: The Eisenhower Years, 1953–1961* (Danville, 1975); Ezra Taft Benson, *Freedom to Farm* (Garden City, 1960). John Schnittker to George Barnes, Oct. 3, 1963, box 1860, Grain—Storage folder, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, RG 16 (National Archives).

[31] John K. Galbraith, "The Farm Problem and the Policy Choices" (1958), in *Problems of the Modern Economy,* ed. Edmund S. Phelps et al. (New York, 1966), 151–59. See also J. A. Baker, "Supply Control: Farmers Union View," *Journal of Farm Economics,* 42 (Dec. 1960), 1180–82; and W. E. Hamilton, "Comprehensive Supply Control: The Farm Bureau Viewpoint," *ibid.*, 1182–90. Humphrey interview.

ballots cast. Indeed, the farm vote remained pivotal given that the nation's electoral system guaranteed less populous farm states equal representation in the Senate. As well, reapportionment had not yet altered the fact that one farm vote outweighed one urban vote by a factor of 1.5 in the House and the various state legislatures.[32]

As clear as the political calculations had to be, however, Kennedy still had other options for his campaign rhetoric and farm policy plans than the controversial supply-control positions he ended up adopting. He could have remained noncommittal regarding specific proposals and might have offered only the usual Democratic assurances that parity guarantees could be raised and incomes protected. He might have even veered in the opposite direction, given the pressure from certain members of the professional economic community who believed that farmers should be encouraged to leave agriculture and that resources should be released from farming, not retained in it. Specifically, after his election, Kennedy's own Council of Economic Advisers wanted to encourage competition among farmers and felt exasperated by the supply-management crowd in the USDA who continued to insist that free markets would ruin the agricultural sector.[33]

But Kennedy tuned out these critiques, turning instead to Willard Cochrane, whose views embodied the path of higher supports and fewer products. The president gave the green light to a counterintuitive plan combining increased food distribution, higher supports, and the *contraction* of supply. Why? Cochrane was already involved with the Democratic National Committee; the Farmers Union supported his ideas about the necessity for a contraction in supply alongside expanded domestic and international food assistance. And the 1959 farm poll bent Kennedy's mind toward the need for a definitive new direction in farm policy. Indeed, the report rewards a close reading.[34]

The poll's authors first painted a sympathetic portrait of hardworking farmers beset by exasperating economic forces. One of the challenges they faced was the "productivity paradox": a significant portion of the farmer's increased efficiency showed up as a larger volume of production rather than as a real reduction in the per-unit cost of his operation. No wonder that, from the perspective of these producers, falling markets, however short term, always portended economic disaster and expanded markets always promised salvation. The "cost-price squeeze" added an equally vexing layer: as the prices received by the farmer for his larger volume decreased, the cost of inputs—machinery, fertilizer, seeds, interest rates—climbed ever higher. The poll, in other words, offered validation for many farmers' feelings that they worked harder than anyone, and for fewer rewards.[35]

But the sympathy voiced by the report ended there. The pollsters mainly argued that however hardworking these farmers might be, they were handicapped by a myopic, even vindictive, political memory and by a hopelessly confused set of ideological guideposts. According to the report, the historical record demonstrated that long periods of

[32] John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times: Memoirs* (Boston, 1981), 357. Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., "Study of the Farm Vote in the Midwest."

[33] Hadwiger and Talbot, *Pressures and Protests,* 71–74; Robert J. Lampman, "Goals for the American Economy," in *Farm Goals in Conflict: Family Farm, Income, Freedom, Security,* by Iowa State University, Center for Agricultural and Economic Development (Ames, 1963), 94–102.

[34] Baker interview; "Statement of James G. Patton, President, National Farmers Union, before the House Agriculture Committee," July 22, 1959, box 219, Democratic National Committee Records; "For This We Stand," Farmers Union Policy Leaflet No. 4, box 220, *ibid.* On the influence of the 1959 poll on Kennedy's farm policy, see John A. Baker oral history interview; and Willard W. Cochrane oral interview by Barnes, June 16, 1964, transcript (Kennedy Library).

[35] Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., "Study of the Farm Vote in the Midwest."

conservatism always followed brief but radical farm revolts. This conservatism, though, was nonpartisan in character: farmers changed parties swiftly and rarely endorsed incumbents in national elections. Their policy preferences were equally erratic. Said one South Dakota dairyman to an interviewer: "Supports are too low . . . Old Benson is just making the rich farmers rich . . . I'm all for an open and free market." And a similarly confused rancher: "The farmer is always in a squeeze . . . I would favor a free market . . . So I'll vote Democratic this time."[36]

Not all farm voices came across so contradictorily. The authors drew attention to several interviews in which participants confessed their confusion in perceptive language. "Now we farmers are caught in a dilemma," explained a corn-hog producer in Nebraska: "If we ask the government to help us, then we have to expect them to direct our operations. And we don't like that . . . You ask if I have a solution, and I don't have one . . . The surplus has depressed prices. The surplus is the key to the whole situation . . . I personally favor a free market… But farmers can only trust what they can do themselves. And we don't do the best job of it."[37]

The report deployed these bewildered yet perceptive voices to reach the most sweeping conclusion in its forty-one pages: farmers would never provide Congress or any presidential administration with a coherent agricultural policy. "We are frank to say that no answer to the so-called 'farm problem' will emerge from the mouths of these farmers themselves," the poll's authors declared. "And it is perfectly possible that in their fundamental dilemma of individualism vs. need for government action, farmers will not in the long run behave according to their own best economic interests."[38]

Nor could the predominant farm organizations be trusted to represent farm interests. The pollsters found that only among dairy farmers did the majority of producers belong to one of the two main groups, the Farm Bureau or the Farmers Union. Among corn-hog, grain, and livestock producers a majority of farmers belonged to *no* organization, and of those who belonged to an organization, only a quarter thought it did "a very good job." Indeed, the poll's authors had stumbled upon a fundamental political fact: there was no "farm bloc." Even if a candidate wanted to pander to "the farm bloc" and wipe his hands of the deed, he could not. He had no way of simplifying its preferences or reducing its members to an abstract, unified constituency.[39]

These conclusions, absorbed by Kennedy and his staff, precipitated a broad reform agenda rather than more of the same. Given the farmers' confusion, the situation demanded responsible, executive leadership. A permanent policy solution was also necessary, given the farmers' short-term political and economic memories (calculations of Democratic congressional majorities and of his own potential for reelection cannot have been far from the senator's mind). Absent this poll there is no satisfying way to explain why the candidate handed over responsibility for farm policy planning to Cochrane and then to the likeminded Minnesotan Orville Freeman, with directions to fix the problem for good. During the campaign Kennedy even successfully quieted a group of quarrelsome farm organization representatives with this sharp retort: "We have no right to expect you people to agree among yourselves . . . On the contrary, [we] will have to call on you

[36] *Ibid.*, 12–13.
[37] *Ibid.*, 13–14.
[38] *Ibid.*, 9.
[39] *Ibid.*, 34.

people to tell us why you have these different opinions, to give us the reasons for arriving at your respective positions. Then we must be prepared to make some judgments of our own!"[40]

Naturally, in the campaign Kennedy first attacked the Benson record. The Republicans, he declared, had engineered a farm program "administered by a Secretary of Agriculture who believes that farmers unable to compete with corporation farms should leave their homesteads and seek other employment." This unsurprising line of attack, however, was not the cynical political maneuver it first appears. Kennedy was channeling the genuine and rational concerns of liberal economists such as Cochrane and Galbraith, who strongly believed that owner-operated family farms were facing unfair competition from larger units, which produced more at lower cost and thus were better able to prosper in a world of depressed prices.[41]

These liberals viewed the agricultural economy as distinct—a diffuse sector in which technological advance and inelastic consumer demand would always mean great instability. There was not some lower number of farms that would magically produce a stable equilibrium between free-market prices and producers: farmers would always be, as Cochrane described it, on a "treadmill," relentlessly adopting the latest technology just to keep their heads above water. Furthermore, unlike in industry, all of these individual farmers were unable to restrict production on their own. As Kennedy put it, there was no need for the government "to plow under every third steel company"; industry took care of that task itself. The candidate chose to articulate a clear moral position early in the campaign. "The farmer, like the small businessman, has the right to protection against the rapid advance of vertical integration." "Our whole vitality as a nation depends upon the promotion and preservation of the family farm," he affirmed.[42]

While Kennedy eked out victory margins in the farm regions of Minnesota, Illinois, Missouri, and Wisconsin in the general election, he did not win an overwhelming number of midwestern farm votes. The poor showing was probably not the result of his controversial policy positions, though he did receive a lot of mail indicating displeasure with Cochrane's ideas. For example, a Michigan resident telegrammed: "It appears that farmers are not given fair treatment, with your farm advisor coming from only the smallest farm organization . . . Farmers do not want controls." Most analysts, however, chalked up the lackluster results to Kennedy's Catholicism. Kennedy smarted with resentment and briefly considered abandoning the farm problem altogether. But he stayed the course. No doubt he felt reassured by a letter from Galbraith that compared him to Franklin D. Roosevelt. "Four years from now," Galbraith predicted, "if the farmers remember you are a friend, they will forget you are a Catholic. Then you can outdo 1936." And a month later: "The farm problem is solvable," Galbraith insisted, "the trouble is that no one for years has really tried to solve it—to use the firm controls."[43]

[40] Herschel D. Newsom oral history interview by Larry J. Hackman, Sept. 21, 1967, transcript (Kennedy Library).

[41] "The Benson Record," 1960, typescript, box 1028, Pre-Presidential Papers.

[42] The "treadmill" was Willard Cochrane's most influential and enduring idea. For its clearest exposition, see Willard W. Cochrane, *Farm Prices: Myth and Reality* (Minneapolis, 1958). "A Bill of Rights for Agriculture," June 18, 1960, box 1028, Pre-Presidential Papers.

[43] Edmon F. Miller to Kennedy, Aug. 30, 1960, box 198, Democratic National Committee Records. For the "The farm problem is solvable" quotation, see John Kenneth Galbraith to Kennedy, Nov. 17, Dec. 30, 1960, in *Letters to Kennedy,* by John Kenneth Galbraith, ed. James Goodman (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 33, 37.

Will Cochrane intended to use the firm controls. If the New Dealers had expected surpluses to be temporary, the Minnesota economist and his allies expected them to be permanent. Cochrane's professional and scholarly pursuits during the 1940s and 1950s led him to three overarching conclusions that structured his approach to farm policy. First, unrelenting technological advance would unleash torrents of new supply and a consistent future of low, unstable prices. Second, free markets would not solve this problem, at least not without shockingly high rates of farm abandonment and consolidation. And, finally, increasing the distribution of food to the poor at home and abroad was both necessary and just, but it would not fundamentally solve the underlying farm problem, either. Cochrane developed many of these concepts in explicit contrast to those of Theodore Schultz, with whom he had long carried on a friendly but sharp scholarly rivalry.[44]

Cochrane's ideas helped revive an ideological, liberal cause within a segment of the Democratic party and among farm leaders who supported new production controls. Without his home base of powerful Minnesota supporters, however, Cochrane would not have risen to become the liberals' leading farm adviser by the late 1950s. He earned this status from close connections with Minnesota senators Hubert Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy, and with Orville Freeman, the state's liberal governor, whom Kennedy tapped for secretary of agriculture. Because farmers would not readily relinquish their entrepreneurial independence, Cochrane understood than any politician taking up the cause would face tremendous hurdles. But he still hoped that "distributive justice" would prevail.[45]

Cochrane and Freeman realized that policies limiting the supply of food would strike many Americans as inhumane. When Kennedy's press secretary later asked Freeman for rhetorical guidance, Freeman explained that intense disagreements over new supply controls could not be prevented. But he also suggested that the administration "set the stage quickly" with the other aspects of the farm program, such as increased food aid, and it should justify the control programs "as only an unfortunate necessity." Religious leaders also fretted over the potential reduction of supplies in a hungry world. In a letter to Reverend Billy Graham, for example, Freeman responded with Cochrane's conceptual vocabulary:

> The farm problem presents us with a strange paradox of seeking to adjust to an economy of abundance . . . It is my judgment that the removal of support prices would result in a drop of farm prices which would wipe out the efficient family farm . . . Support prices will necessarily need to be tied to effective supply management methods. Otherwise, the resulting production will literally break the bank . . . I say this as one who has fought for, and will continue to fight for, effective use of American food abundance to meet human needs here and around the world.[46]

[44] Willard W. Cochrane to Orville Freeman, May 22, 1961, box 4, Orville Freeman Papers (Kennedy Library). See also Levins, *Willard Cochrane and the American Family Farm;* Cochrane, *Farm Prices;* Willard W. Cochrane, *The City Man's Guide to the Farm Problem* (Minneapolis, 1965); Willard W. Cochrane, *Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis* (Minneapolis, 1979); and Cochrane, *Curse of American Agricultural Abundance.*

[45] Willard Cochrane, "Beliefs and Values Underlying Agricultural Policies and Programs," in *Farm Goals in Conflict,* by Iowa State University, Center for Agricultural and Economic Development, 50–63.

[46] Freeman to Pierre Salinger, Jan. 2, 1962, box 1, Freeman Papers. Freeman to Billy Graham, March 19, 1962, *ibid.*

Cochrane's policy preferences—higher price supports and fewer products—indeed struck many as counterintuitive and wrongheaded, and not just because this path seemed both immoral and ungenerous. Then and since, scores of experts have also assumed that government price support policy *caused* surpluses by creating the sole incentive for farmers to overproduce—and that removing price supports represented the only sane way to reduce both supplies and public expenditures. But Cochrane, along with the others who accepted his reasoning, took the opposite position: price-support policy merely constituted a necessary *reaction* to surpluses, which were themselves inexorably caused by technological advance. Cochrane was also concerned that the country might allow an oligopolistic sector to control its future food supply and that Americans would miss their last opportunity to protect the independently operated farm. He warned: "If a way is not found, the money to finance [the family] farms of the year 2000 is likely to come from commercial nonfarm sources: insurance companies, feed companies, processors, and retail organizations. And operational control invariably follows financial control."[47]

Cochrane attempted to define the "family farm" in terms that were neither nostalgic nor indefensible. He conceded that any midcentury observer might see just two farming worlds: "the world of highly productive, commercial farmers, and the world of poor, low-production farmers." Neither of these worlds was in real trouble, he argued. The biggest players would survive and the poorest farmers should seek employment elsewhere. What demanded attention, however, was a significant but endangered "transition zone" between these two worlds. In this range, very efficient farms earned enough per year to deploy a modern line of machinery and to provide a decent living for a family. But without positive public policy they faced ruinous competition from larger operations. A "family farm" depended upon the family for at least half its labor and on family capital for at least part of its investment; had most of the management decisions made by the family; and was run by an operator who considered the farm to be his principal occupation.[48]

This definition, to be sure, included quite a few large units and quite a few citizens who appeared less deserving of public support than the tenants, sharecroppers, farm workers, and other rural residents who received no support at all. To these charges Cochrane and his allies developed a consistent suite of answers. First, they said, public policies must of course help the very poorest rural people find alternative employment, and Americans must do a much better job distributing food and other necessities to the needy. But second, Americans must also understand that the agricultural world was not simply divided into rich and poor farmers: there was a significant but dwindling "middle group" of owner-operators who represented a viable economic and democratic model. In a tart letter to the journalist Joe Alsop, for example, Freeman took issue with the "distorted figures" that erstwhile liberal allies often used to discount the entire farm program. For the "great group of farms" that made up the industry's middle, "we would see catastrophe if we did not have the farm program," he wrote. "Our overproduction will destroy our most efficient producers if we don't do something."[49]

[47] Cochrane would have preferred to restrict technology rather than to control supplies, but he could not think of a clean way to do it. See Levins, *Willard Cochrane and the American Family Farm.* Cochrane, *City Man's Guide to the Farm Problem,* 42.

[48] Cochrane, *City Man's Guide to the Farm Problem,* 18. Willard W. Cochrane, "Statement on Family Farm," April 24, 1961, box 4, Freeman Papers; Willard W. Cochrane, "Position of Family Farm in American Agriculture," May 19, 1961, *ibid.*

[49] Freeman to Joe Alsop, June 6, 1963, box 2, Freeman Papers.

When Cochrane joined the USDA as director of agricultural economics, he and his staff worked with Secretary Freeman to build a case for immediate two-pronged action: implementation of new supply controls and expansion of domestic and international food assistance. Freeman discussed policy and political strategy with President Kennedy and handled relations with key members of Congress. Unsurprisingly, the House and Senate agricultural committees proved intensely divided on the prospect of new supply controls. And no wonder: Why would any representative support less production for his farm constituents, if a way could be found to keep up unchecked production and price supports too? Simple obstructionism seemed the safest path for most rural representatives. But Freeman found strong support from the Democratic committee chairmen—Harold Cooley of North Carolina in the House, and especially Allen Ellender of Louisiana in the Senate.[50]

A senator from 1937 to 1972, Ellender chaired the Agriculture Committee when the Democrats held power, and he helped anchor the South's decades-long power both to thwart civil rights measures and to formulate racist public policy. He had also established a high profile in agricultural and food affairs. Ellender worked closely with the USDA and protected the sugar cane farmers of his home state and the cotton and tobacco interests of his southern colleagues' states. He not only protected high commodity price supports but he also quite vigorously supported the extension of certain kinds of food assistance under the direction of the USDA. He cosponsored the National School Lunch Act of 1946, which provided federal money and surplus foods to states for school lunches, and he supported pilot versions of the food stamp program, where participants could purchase food at a discount in retail groceries. But none of these programs were very large in the early 1960s, nor did any of them consistently reach the needy: administrative authority remained firmly in the hands of state and local offices; coverage was spotty; and southern congressional delegations defended and protected the segregated school systems and the racist local welfare officials who directed the flow of federal funds and surplus foods. Not until the 1970s would food stamps and school lunches be free, or would the federal government establish standard eligibility criteria—policy directions that Ellender vehemently opposed when they later reached his desk.[51]

In sum, Ellender was no agrarian liberal, no friend to the poor, and yet he eagerly played Senate point person for the Kennedy-Cochrane program and aligned himself against the Farm Bureau to do so. Unlike Cochrane and the agrarian liberals in the Kennedy administration, however, Ellender and other supportive southerners were not in the fight to protect family farms. Their goal was to stick it to corn and wheat producers. These southerners maintained that growers of cotton, tobacco, peanuts, rice, and sugar had responsibly stuck with firm marketing agreements (or quotas, in the case of sugar), and that corn and wheat carry-overs consistently made up the lion's share of the surplus problem. The outrageous storage costs for grain, in other words, now threatened the entire farm program.

The southerners sharpened their knives for the midwesterners. "The corn farmer," Ellender fumed, "has long been treated as the prodigal son of the American farm program."

[50] Cochrane to Freeman, June 23, 1961, box 4, *ibid.* Orville Freeman's weekly reports to the president are filed in his papers at the Kennedy Library.

[51] David Schoenbrun, "Casebook of a Southern Senator," *Esquire,* 60 (Sept. 1963), 105–8. Thomas A. Becnel, *Senator Allen Ellender of Louisiana: A Biography* (Baton Rouge, 1995). See also Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America's Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton, 2008).

When an angry constituent demanded to know why Ellender sought more government controls, the senator responded: "The fountainhead of opposition come from persons who have made a great deal of money from storing surplus grain . . . those persons do not want to see our gigantic surpluses brought under control . . . more opposition comes from corn and feed grain growers who, over the years, have been allowed to plant as much as they want with the assurance that the government will pick up the tab for their overproduction."[52]

With the southern Democratic committee leadership onboard, USDA officials presented a united front when laying out the basic problem. "The program," as Freeman repeatedly explained to the president and the press, "is based on our recognition that the revolutionary technological advance in agriculture will continue to so increase our productive potential that we cannot expand consumption enough to absorb all this capacity to produce." With the problem so defined, the administration sought simultaneously to increase food consumption and to seek more restrictive means for reducing farm output. Of the two, increased food aid was the easier sell. The social movements that later scolded the Freeman Department of Agriculture for its slow response to hunger and poverty had not yet materialized. In the early 1960s, Kennedy had sufficient executive maneuvering room to establish a pilot food stamp program in areas of high unemployment and to expand the overseas concessional commodity sales program Public Law 480, now renamed Food for Peace and outfitted with a larger humanitarian and developmental agenda. Increased food aid was so important to public relations that Freeman directly instructed his staff to "keep this theme alive . . . it automatically serves to soften the impact of supply management programs which otherwise run counter to deeply held feelings and philosophies."[53]

Indeed, the supply management programs proved a much tougher sell. Cochrane and Freeman first proposed an audacious bill that would have allowed the secretary of agriculture to write policies for every commodity and to submit them directly to the president. That the Kennedy administration agreed to such a brazen assault on congressional prerogative attests both to the depth of the storage cost problem and to the potential political reward from this risky but bold initiative. But the USDA was under strict White House orders: new policies could not raise consumer food prices or increase the cost of living. Therefore, this initial attempt to shift policy making into the executive branch, though summarily rejected by Congress, was meant to demonstrate the administration's resolve and Kennedy's alliance with the USDA. Farmers now had to understand that urban Americans would not tolerate such waste and expense much longer. Nor would consumers endure inflationary food costs. Kennedy, in other words, would stand behind the USDA but

[52] "Weekly Report from Congress, June 3, 1962," box 1490, Allen Ellender Papers (Nicholls State University, Thibodaux, La.). Allen Ellender to unknown, Aug. 2, 1962, box 797, *ibid.*

[53] For the Freeman quotation, see Freeman to Kennedy, April 17, 1961, box 9, Freeman Papers; Freeman to Cochrane, Oct. 3, 1961, box 1, *ibid.*; and Freeman to David Lawrence, Nov. 20, 1963, *ibid.* On the later social movements, see Nick Kotz, *Let Them Eat Promises: The Politics of Hunger in America* (Englewood Cliffs, 1969); Don F. Hadwiger, "The Freeman Administration and the Poor," *Agricultural History,* 45 (Jan. 1971), 21–32; and Norwood Allen Kerr, "Drafted into the War on Poverty: USDA Food and Nutrition Programs, 1961–1969," *ibid.*, 64 (Spring 1990), 154–66. On Food for Peace, see "Memorandum re Food Stamp Plan," 1961, box 4, Freeman Papers; "Draft Executive Order," 1961, *ibid.*; "Implementation of Food for Peace Program," 1961, box 1, *ibid.*; Freeman to Kennedy, Feb. 21, 1960, box 9, *ibid.*; Orville Freeman, "Food to Feed the Hungry," address before the Farmers Union Grain Terminal Association, Dec. 12, 1961, box 11, *ibid.*; and Kristin L. Ahlberg, *Transplanting the Great Society: Lyndon Johnson and Food for Peace* (Columbia, 2008). Orville Freeman, "Conference on Public Relations," Sept. 13, 1961, box 1, Freeman Papers.

only if it presented farmers with a hard choice: the continuation of supports combined with much stricter production controls, or no real program at all.

The president sent a new bill drawn up by the USDA to Congress at the start of 1962. This legislation proposed firm controls on the two most troublesome commodity areas, wheat and feed grains (corn made up the primary component of feed grains). Flattering the southern committee chairs, Kennedy's special message to Congress assured them that "rice, peanuts, and tobacco already enjoy well balanced programs whose principles can be extended to other crops." Both the corn and wheat programs would allot portions of a lowered minimum acreage among existing producers and would authorize a variety of payment methods to ensure the stability of farm incomes. Both programs also required a producer referendum, the standard procedure since the 1930s, in which at least two-thirds of participating farmers voted their approval before the program could go into effect. "We must learn to live with an agricultural economy of abundance," Kennedy warned Congress.[54]

Kennedy's warning and the USDA's careful preparations alone could not assure unmolested passage of the bill. The administration counted on securing the vote of most every Democrat and a handful of rural Republicans. The bill's sponsors, however, knew that some southern Democrats, such as Senator James Eastland of Mississippi, had allied with the implacably oppositional Farm Bureau, and that many rural Republicans would follow the conservative party line. Indeed, the administration's proposals created sharp divisions within the Senate and House agricultural committees; Ellender twice had to send the bill for a floor vote over the objections of a majority of his committee members.[55]

While the bill eventually squeaked through, the administration and the agricultural committee chairs sacrificed a great deal to secure its final passage. Most importantly, they agreed to abandon the mandatory feed-grain controls, keeping only the restrictions on wheat. This was because new production controls would infuriate corn belt Republicans and their Farm Bureau spokesmen. The top tier of corn producers had been favored by Republican farm policy during the 1950s; a 1958 law, for example, had allowed unlimited production at 65 percent of parity. Many of the most successful corn farmers were willing to tolerate such low supports in return for the freedom to plant all they wanted.[56]

But resistance to feed-grain controls emerged from other quarters, too: each year Americans consumed more meat, milk, and cheese, and these farmers feared that supply controls on feed grains would mean higher prices to feed their cows, pigs, and poultry. They did not want to pay those costs—nor did they want to pass them on to supermarket shoppers. It is telling that liberal icon and dairy-state senator William Proxmire voted against the administration for just those reasons. But at the same time, meat and dairy producers in the South, who represented a new and rapidly growing sector, did not want to be locked into purchasing feed grain from the Midwest, a region that the new legislation would favor, given its long history of commercial corn production. Therefore, feed-grain controls proved a stumbling block for rural representatives from all over the country, but they caused the most damage to the legislation's fortune by fomenting dissent within southern and Democratic ranks. Votes also came down along party lines.

[54] "Proposed Agricultural Program—Message from the President," Jan. 31, 1962, *Congressional Record,* 108 (1962), 1335.

[55] Hadwiger and Talbot, *Pressures and Protests.*

[56] Freeman to Carl Albert, Oct. 4, 1962, box 1, Freeman Papers.

Very few Republicans supported the administration's bill, and many opponents peppered their rhetoric with dire warnings of socialism and regimentation. Cochrane's production-control proposals, they declared, threatened the free enterprise system: Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev need look no further for *his* next big idea.[57]

Inevitably, then, the commodity portions of the Food and Agriculture Act of 1962 represented a series of compromises. While Congress rejected mandatory controls on feed grains, it did pass a new wheat program. It established a lower national allotment for wheat and offered financial benefits to wheat farmers who agreed to further cuts, provided two-thirds of them voted for the program in a national wheat referendum. In the meantime, wheat production would be tamped down by a temporary program that offered farmers direct payments, compensatory payments, for restricting their output voluntarily. Corn farmers were offered a similar short-term deal. For restricting output voluntarily over the coming year, they would also receive compensatory payments. But they would be set loose if Congress failed to pass permanent feed-grain legislation for the years after 1963. Without new legislation, corn farmers could expect price supports at only 50 percent of parity. Wheat farmers could expect the same strong medicine if they voted down the plan in the referendum scheduled for May 1963.[58]

Freeman and other USDA officials remained determined to see the bright side—while they lost on feed grains, they had almost half a year to sell the wheat plan to voters. All evidence indicates that they thought it would succeed. The Farm Bureau, however, decided to bankroll a massive national campaign casting the referendum as a principled battle of foundational political beliefs—Did the American farmer want to be socialized and regimented, or did he prefer the "freedom to farm"? The Farm Bureau calculated that this approach could mobilize ideological voters who might not otherwise care about the technical details of a new wheat program.

In this calculation the Farm Bureau proved astute. It showered the country with pamphlets declaring that a "yes" vote gave license to the administration to micromanage every farm decision. Bureau-printed pamphlets featured Cochrane quotations on the need for supply management and the desirability of regulating agriculture like a public utility. If Cochrane's philosophy prevailed in this one referendum, a pamphlet warned, a national computer database would soon oversee every production decision on every farm. "Approval of a long-range supply-management program will allow the setup of such automation," it declared, "so that EVERY RANCH and EVERY FARM in America can be placed under MANAGEMENT INSTRUCTION from Washington, D.C." The looming question, as the North Dakota Farm Bureau put it, was "Freeman or FREE MEN?"[59]

Stunned by the savvy opposition, the administration hurriedly put together an educational campaign. Here it faced two obstacles. First, it could not count on particularly robust support from allied farm groups other than the Farmers Union. This is not surprising given that what the administration was asking from wheat farmers was not particularly appealing: to plant a lot less and to receive a little less, on the understanding that they should take what they could get now, before a hostile and completely urban-dominated Congress stripped away farm support entirely. Nor could the USDA fully

[57] Giglio, "New Frontier Agricultural Policy," 63.

[58] Hadwiger and Talbot, *Pressures and Protests.* Food and Agriculture Act of 1962, 76 Stat. 605 (1962).

[59] Farm Bureau, "Punch Card Control," 1963, box 9, Freeman Papers; Farm Bureau, "Farm Bureau Leaders Kit," 1963, *ibid.*

deploy its extension and county-committee system in the education campaign. It feared a potential backlash if farmers believed that the government agency was participating in too partisan a fashion.

But the USDA did not give up without a fight. Freeman took to the stump, and he sent recorded speeches to radio stations across the country. "This referendum," he pleaded with the governor of North Dakota, "will be the single most critical event of the Kennedy Administration Farm Program." Staff economist and Cochrane ally John Schnittker, who headed the information campaign, commissioned an independent analysis of the economic effects of a "yes" vote (the proposed wheat plan) as compared with the effects of a "no" vote (price supports at only 50 percent of parity). The dramatic results suggested that the USDA should frame the question as a contest between $1 wheat and $2 wheat, and it did so, simplifying the issue while attempting to fight back against the Farm Bureau. It was not enough, however. On referendum day, a little over half the nation's wheat farmers rejected the plan. Only in the South and in the heavy wheat-growing areas did "yes" votes predominate; two-thirds of voters opposed it in the wheat-thin Northeast and Midwest.[60]

The administration was genuinely surprised at the magnitude of the "no" vote. Three days after the referendum, a weary Freeman wrote to the former New Deal secretary of agriculture Henry Wallace: "Farmers just don't want controls . . . I can't help but feel let down." Surveys of wheat referendum participants suggested that the Farm Bureau's most influential tactic was not its red baiting, but its practical point that Congress would simply offer farmers a better deal if they rejected this one.[61]

The political prospects of an agricultural economy in distress during an election year did not sit well with the president, or with the many Democratic members of Congress who had trusted the administration and the agricultural committees to deliver the goods for their constituents. Pressure to offer a better deal mounted quickly. Democratic senator George McGovern of South Dakota took the lead after the referendum's defeat. McGovern had offered lusty support for the administration's proposals; he had urged the wheat farmers of South Dakota to vote yes in May 1963 and was deeply disappointed by the outcome. After the referendum, however, McGovern deftly brokered a wheat measure that placated farm voters. Coupled with a cotton bill, the 1964 wheat legislation removed the threat of coercion and made participation voluntary. Well versed in the political impossibility of production restrictions, McGovern became instead the iconic champion for the liberal distribution of American agricultural abundance.[62]

[60] "Script for Radio Tape on Wheat Referendum," [date?], *ibid.*; "The Farmer's Stake in the Wheat Referendum," [date?], box 13, *ibid.* For the referendum quotation, see Freeman to William L. Guy, Dec. 14, 1962, box 1, *ibid.*

[61] For the "Farmers just don't want controls" quotation, see Freeman to Kennedy, May 25, 1963, box 2, *ibid.*; Freeman to Henry Wallace, May 25, 1963, *ibid.* Hadwiger and Talbot, *Pressures and Protests;* Freeman to Kennedy, April 5, 1963, box 2, Freeman Papers.

[62] John Schnittker, "Political Implications of the Wheat Vote," memo to the secretary, May 24, 1963, box 2, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture. Folder "Wheat Referendum—Correspondence," box 1238, George S. McGovern Papers (Seeley Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.). George S. McGovern, *Agricultural Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis, 1967); George S. McGovern, *Grassroots: The Autobiography of George McGovern* (New York, 1977); George S. McGovern, *The Third Freedom: Ending Hunger in Our Time* (New York, 2001).

After 1964, commodity support policies generally relied on deficiency payments for income support rather than on fixed prices, and they asked for voluntary participation in reducing the surplus. The price tag remained high for quite some time, but program opponents had decisively forced the market into farmers' calculations. Parity ended in 1973, followed by two decades of target-price support, and then, after 1996, Congress responded with a shifting array of direct and emergency payments. The loan rates never again reached the levels of the 1940s and 1950s, despite some dramatic spikes in program outlays. While commodities are stockpiled occasionally, the goal is mainly to price goods so they move out and away. The CCC is no longer the single, centralized storehouse provoking political demands for more generous public distribution or swifter market clearance.[63]

Also starting in 1964, urban liberals forced the House to pass a national food stamp program before voting on the wheat and cotton bill—initiating the "log roll" that has linked food assistance with commodity policy ever since. Liberal politicians in 1964 were not yet responding to popular pressures for expanded food aid, but this changed rapidly during the late 1960s as activists and the media exposed the nation's poverty and malnutrition, especially among African Americans. Although the southern Democratic leadership resisted the food stamp program, alternative political maneuvering and activist pressure secured modest expansions. By 1973, nutritional assistance was tied to the commodity programs in an omnibus agricultural act—what every four years we now call the Farm Bill. Congressional reform, which removed the southern Democratic committee chairs in the mid 1970s, facilitated the further expansion of the food stamp program. A new budgetary bargain took shape in Congress: the agricultural committees rolled all the crop programs into a single bill, added money for food assistance, and patched together enough urban and rural votes on the floor. While many social justice advocates would have preferred a food assistance network untethered to agricultural legislation, the bipartisan foundation of each Farm Bill has provided a remarkably enduring framework for a distinctly American version of the welfare state. Only a small portion of Farm Bill spending still bankrolls the crop safety net; nearly 80 percent of current legislation funds food stamps (renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in 2008) and other forms of nutritional assistance.[64]

The opposition aroused by the Kennedy-era fight to shore up the New Deal order pointed to a different future. An older and more insular style of farm policy discussion was giving way to perspectives less concerned with whether national prosperity required the maintenance of farm incomes and farm populations, and more concerned with how a dynamic, internationally competitive agricultural sector should serve the industrial and consumer economy. Meat and dairy interests, and consumers, felt few affinities for high

[63] Wayne D. Rasmussen, Gladys L. Baker, Marion M. Montague, Jane M. Porter, and Vivian Wiser, "The Department of Agriculture during the Administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, November 1963–January 1969," 1969, Economic Research Service, Department of Agriculture, unpublished manuscript, box 8, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture.

[64] On the 1973 omnibus bill, see Weldon V. Barton, "Coalition-Building in the United States House of Representatives: Agricultural Legislation in 1973," in *Cases in Public Policy-Making,* ed. James E. Anderson (New York, 1976); Jeffrey M. Berry, *Feeding Hungry People: Rulemaking in the Food Stamp Program* (New Brunswick, 1984); John Ferejohn, "Logrolling in an Institutional Context: A Case Study of Food Stamp Legislation," in *Congress and Policy Change,* ed. Gerald C. Wright Jr., Leroy N. Rieselbach, and Lawrence C. Dodd (New York, 1986), 223–55; Ardith L. Maney, *Still Hungry after All These Years: Food Assistance Policy from Kennedy to Reagan* (New York, 1989); and Janet Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (Berkeley, 2014). On the expansion of the food stamp program, see Sam Rosenfeld, "Fed by Reform: Congressional Politics, Partisan Change, and the Food Stamp Program, 1961–1981," *Journal of Policy History,* 22 (Oct. 2010), 474–507.

grain prices, or with middling grain producers. Professional economists called for market thinking and uniform pricing. The Farm Bureau allied itself with business and finance, and shamelessly inflamed fears of a communist take-over of the USDA. And agribusiness leaders, with a vested interest in the sale of fertilizers, machinery, and other farm inputs, and in the processing and distribution of farm products, well understood the financial threat of enforced production controls.[65]

Would Willard Cochrane's scheme to save the midsized farm have worked? Likely not. The postwar technological revolution and farmers' indebtedness meant that higher prices alone could not have saved them. By the 1980s, in fact, Cochrane had become a more trenchant critic of farm support. But he never abandoned his fundamental theoretical presupposition of farmer powerlessness in the face of relentless technological advance. In fact, he adapted his framework to a new concern: the environment. Before his death in 2012, Cochrane had joined a cohort of younger scholars based in land-grant colleges who had decisively shifted the terms of the farm debate: perhaps farm size and scale still mattered, because the biggest producers were not poised to become the most sustainable ones. Cochrane spent much of his late career considering how the federal government could encourage environmental responsibility and food safety.[66]

It was easy for historians to lose interest in agricultural policy as postwar subsidies mounted. Agriculture was just a business like any other, and no number of successful farm operations could correct for the shameful persistence of rural inequality, rural underdevelopment, and rural conservatism. Most historians nodded knowingly along with Richard Hofstadter, when in 1955 he tore populist rhetoric to shreds and declared that the countryside no longer supported the city. It was "industrial America," he wrote, that "goes on producing the social surpluses out of which the commercial farmers are subsidized." Yes, indeed, farms *are* businesses and especially so following the policy shifts of the 1960s and 1970s, which required them to act like it. Despite significant cash assistance, farmers who vote conservative today are not casting ballots for Republicans with one hand while depositing New Deal checks with the other. They are operating within a changed policy regime and a new political dispensation.[67]

[65] Cochrane and Ryan, *American Farm Policy;* John A. Schnittker, "Stumbling into Deficiency Payments," *Agro Washington,* 7 (Winter 2007), 6; Jimmye S. Hillman, "Whatever Happened to the Farm Problem?," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture,* 11 (Winter 2011), 86–90.

[66] Willard W. Cochrane, "The Need to Rethink Agricultural Policy in General and to Perform Some Radical Surgery on Commodity Programs in Particular," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics,* 67 (Dec. 1985), 1002–9; Willard W. Cochrane, "A New Sheet of Music: How Kennedy's Farm Adviser Has Changed His Tune about Commodity Policy and Why," *Choices,* 1 (no. 1, 1986), 11–15; Willard W. Cochrane and C. Ford Runge, "Farm Policy's Problem Is Subsidies for Few," letter to the editor, *New York Times,* Aug. 4, 1990, p. 22. On the importance of maintaining scale diversities in agriculture, see Daryll E. Ray, Daniel G. De La Torre Ugarte, and Kelly J. Tiller, "Rethinking U.S. Agricultural Policy: Changing Course to Secure Farmer Livelihoods Worldwide," 2003, https://inmotionmagazine.com/ra03/APAC.pdf; Marty Strange, *Family Farming: A New Economic Vision* (Lincoln, 1988); John E. Ikerd, *Crisis & Opportunity: Sustainability in American Agriculture* (Lincoln, 2008); and Thomas A. Lyson, G. W. Stevenson, and Rick Welsh, eds., *Food and the Mid-Level Farm: Renewing an Agriculture of the Middle* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008).

[67] Hofstadter, *Age of Reform,* 120.