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# THE FUTURE OF RURAL AMERICA

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It is obvious to any reasonably contemplative observer of the current American scene that the people of the United States are engaged in a vast geographical restructuring of the country, a vast reordering of their pattern of settlement on their land.

This restructuring is both concentration and dispersion, depending on the scale or the grain of one's inquiry. On the national scale, it is concentration. The larger part of the country is losing population, relatively small parts are gaining, as increasing proportions of the total population are concentrated in cities and city-like areas. In 1960, all urbanized areas as defined by the Bureau of the Census included less than 1 percent of the total land area but included 54 percent of the total population; and some of my research has shown clearly that there is a substantial further agglomeration within such urbanized areas. Since the war, the proportion in such areas has risen significantly. At the same time, the dispersion effect is evident within the urban complexes. The older city areas have grown little or not at all, or have lost population, while the suburbs have gained greatly.

What are the probable consequences of this concentration and dispersion, and how far, in what ways, can we or do we want to influence the trends which seem evident? This is obviously a big question with implications for many aspects of national life. Today, I look only at rural America, the open farm country, the other people living outside of towns, and the small towns which serve such open country population.

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Our nation began along the Atlantic Coast; westward movement of population has characterized our entire history, including our long colonial history. The center of population was 23 miles east of Baltimore in 1790. It has moved almost precisely westward at an average rate of 42 miles per decade and in 1960 was more than halfway across Illinois. In 1980 it will almost surely be west of the Mississippi River. The nineteenth century was dominated, economically, politically, and socially, by the westward tide of migration and the conquest of the frontier which it represented.

Americans have always been a mobile people, moving readily in large numbers in quest of opportunity, real or fancied. We lack the settled stability of very old cultures and societies, where son follows father in the same

occupation in the same place. Our dynamism has been a great asset, economically and culturally, but we need to recognize where it has led us and where it is leading us.

### STAGES AND STEPS

The process of decline in farm population goes through several stages and steps, not uniform everywhere, yet with a considerable degree of similarity in pattern.

First of all, migration of rural youth to cities is a very old phenomenon in the United States—without it, our cities would not have grown as they have. As long as farm people have reproductive rates which lead to a natural increase in population, and as long as the agricultural employment opportunities within the same locality do not increase proportionately, some farm-raised boys and girls will migrate elsewhere. Such migration is healthy, from my viewpoint. Without it, a surplus of labor would arise, incomes of agriculturally employed people would drop, and there would be many other undesirable economic and social consequences. But this type of migration from farms to cities or to new farming areas need not lead to a decrease in local farm population; it is merely a siphoning off of the natural increase. Migration from farms is one phenomenon at one scale, a very different one at a different scale.

The number of farmers reporting they live off farms has remained about constant since 1940, but the percentage of all farmers living off their farms has about doubled, and for some types of farms and in some areas, it is 20 percent or more, although it is only about 12 percent nationally for all farms. It appears that those living off farms are the operators of larger farms, who are increasing the size of their farms faster than average. It also appears that for these operators the social advantages of living in town overbalance the advantages of living closer to their work.

When migration off farms—and, usually, also from the small towns which service farming—reaches some level, total farm and rural population in a county or other area declines. Before a decline in total population is evident, however, the number of young adults is likely to decline. The age group 25 to 34 years will show a decline first, and a decline in this age group during one decade frequently portends a decline in total population in the ensuing decade. These young people are looking for jobs and a place to live. Not yet rooted in the community where they grew up, they can and will move in search of better jobs or what seems to them a better way of life. Older people, who have developed roots and who believe, often rightly, that they would have a hard time getting jobs in urban communities, do not move even though their outlook is no better than that for the young people.

In the decade of the 1950's more than half of all counties in the United States lost population. A substantial proportion of the remaining counties gained less in population than the natural increase of births over deaths; these counties suffered net outmigration. Some of the counties experiencing population declines in the 1950's also had declines in earlier decades, and many of them will report further declines in the 1960's. We may assume that much of the decline was in relatively younger people, hence that the average age of the population in most of these counties has been rising. It can well be argued that the economic and social situation in these counties would have been worse, had there been no net migration; that it was better to have fewer people, at higher average incomes, than to have more people at lower incomes. I would agree with this position, but it is also evident that if economic opportunities had not been severely limited in these counties, a net outward movement of people would not have occurred.

Often the largest town or towns in the county experienced a growth in population or an excess of births over deaths, sufficient to overbalance the opposite trend in most of the county. The truly rural areas would much more often show decreases in total population, or excesses of deaths over births, than do counties as a whole. The truly rural situation is obscured by the situation in the towns; these towns are still small, by national standards, yet they often represent superior opportunities on the local level.

The last stage—one not yet reached perhaps anywhere in the United States—is complete decay and disintegration of the rural and small town economy, society, and community structure. If an area drifts downhill in total population for several decades, due to a constant drain of its young people, so that everyone is relatively old (deaths far exceeding births), and the population is spread thinly over wide expanses, might the whole area literally fall apart? Could schools, hospitals, libraries, and many other social services, transportation, marketing, and other economic services, and local government generally, be maintained by a small population with a small proportion of productive workers and a large proportion of people in unproductive age groups? This question might have seemed absurd a generation, or even a decade ago. As we look at the rural scene in some of our least prosperous and economically least attractive rural areas today, we can no longer be confident that the answer will always be positive. Subsidies from state and federal governments would alleviate this situation, of course, but sheer sparsity of population will create major problems in the future.

#### WHAT ARE THE POSSIBILITIES?

I start this concluding—and, I hope, more optimistic—section with the assumption that the rural America we knew before World War II is

doomed. It is fast declining, and I think could not be preserved even if we tried—and I, for one, do not know why we should try. The agricultural revolution is destroying the old rural community. The same technological, economic, and other changes that have transformed agriculture are transforming the rural community. Many farmers have been totally illogical. They, by their adoption of the new agricultural technologies, did more to undercut the old rural and small town community than did anyone else. Yet they have been unhappy to see the old community structure destroyed and have, at least until recently, been unwilling to accept any basic changes or conscious efforts to change that rural community.

The wide range of agricultural technologies of the past generation have been both output-increasing and labor-decreasing. Time and again, a new machine or a new technique enabled a farmer to operate more land and to produce more output. With his own family living expenses as a major fixed cost, and with other fixed costs, his marginal costs were often lower than his average costs, and there was severe internal pressure within the farm firm to increase the scale of operations.

Something of the same thing was happening in the small rural service towns. Farmers were no longer tied to the nearest town, but rather could travel to the next town, or the next one, or to a still more distant one, to buy production and consumption goods and services which they wanted or to market their output. The advantages of scale in towns have perhaps been less in cost and price than in variety and quality of services. Possibly the supermarket can sell groceries no more cheaply than the poorly paid family grocer can, but it can provide a range of products and a freshness that no small store can match. Or the central farm machinery firm can maintain a stock of spare parts that the local repair shop cannot. And the situation is similar for a wide range of social and governmental services.

But I think the old rural communities have suffered severe blows from another direction—namely, from the changes that have been taking place in the cities. It is customary among agricultural people to make critical remarks about cities, especially about city slums. I grant they are undesirable in many ways, and I would greatly dislike to live in certain parts of most cities. But I think we must also recognize that the cities have offered superior economic and social opportunities—and sometimes for the inhabitants of the slums as well as for the inhabitants of the plush suburbs. We often overlook the fact that rural slums were—and are—pretty unattractive too. As a nation, we have ignored our rural slums, and the people who live in them, and one way for those people to get a larger measure of help is to move to the cities. As I said a couple of years ago, if we are realistic, we should advise the rural poor to move to the cities and learn to riot.

I assume moreover that agricultural technology will continue to develop, to make the small rural town and small rural social community even less useful and attractive in the future. I assume further that real income per capita will continue to rise, and that rural people will insist on sharing in these gains, or they will cease to live in rural areas. There are considerable time lags in these adjustments, and some rural towns and communities will hang on for some years or decades even though they are dying.

While I think the old rural community we once knew is fast disappearing, and has little hope, I do think there are some values worth saving. One does not have to be a rural fundamentalist, extolling the glories of the bucolic life, to hold this view. After all, there are some 25 million farm and rural small town people, mostly outside the orbit of the larger cities; their numbers alone deserve thoughtful consideration. In spite of many probable changes, some millions of people will continue to live outside of cities on farms and in towns no larger than 25,000.

The impersonality and alienation of the large city and the isolation of the rural area and small town should not be the only settlement choices open to our people. I do not believe that large cities, or even moderate and large cities, can or should hold all the people. I think we should make some effort to plan a rural America that will be economically, socially, and politically viable; but I do not underestimate the difficulty of the job. I think a policy of drift is a sure way to disaster. Surgery may be less painful and more effective in the long run than sedatives and Band-Aids. I do not know whether those who want to patch up the old rural society, with the least change, or those who wish to abandon it to any fate, are the more serious threats to a sound future rural society.

This paper would not be the place to set forth a comprehensive program for building the rural community of the future—even if I had such a program, and I do not. The first job, as I see it, is to look at the situation squarely, to see where we are and where we are going, and to resolve to try to do something about it. Unless or until we do that, specific programs are useless or worse. If or when we resolve to try consciously to build a better rural America than seems likely to evolve in the absence of such effort, then we probably shall find there are many ways to achieve our ends.

Though I cannot—and would not, if I could—outline a specific program for building a better rural America for the future, I think there are at least three broad groups of questions that must be asked and answered:

1. In what settlement pattern should rural people live? Do we any longer need a road on every section line, with widely scattered farmsteads, with farmers living on farms? Might not most farmers live in town, and commute to work? Might not farmsteads for the larger farms of the future

be grouped along fewer but better roads? Is there any excuse at all for rural towns within ten miles of each other, or for any rural town of less than 1,000? Would not farm and small town people alike be better off if we consolidated small towns to eliminate three-fourths or more of them, and put such population as remained in much larger centers?

2. What population groupings and what organization of the business community or of the government can best provide the social, economic, and political services which will bring rural living more or less on a par with city living? Is the rural county with less than 6,000 people any more useful than the full-time dairy farm with six cows? Can the small grocery or general store, doing no more than \$50,000 or \$100,000 business annually survive and provide services people really want? Do we really want hospitals and other health services for all rural people, on a competent if not superior level? Is there any hope they can be provided in towns of less than 5,000—or even much larger ones?

3. How can we, as a nation, best achieve change in the direction of a better rural America, however one defines it? I assume compulsion is ruled out, but how can we persuade? Can the federal government and the states continue to pretend that they are not vitally affecting rural communities, by programs often with very different purposes? Can the USDA, the agricultural colleges, the farm organizations, and farmers continue to pursue efficiency and improved technology, without accepting more responsibility for its fallout? Should we, as professional workers, continue to speak with muted voices, sometimes even denying our responsibility, for research and planning for rural living?

These questions are but a sample of those which must be asked in each group, and doubtless other groupings will arise also. I do not attempt their answer. I think no one can do so properly, without a good bit more research, thought, and discussion than we have had. If I have posed some of the problems, and stimulated you to react, then my participation in this session has been a success for me.