Education and Agricultural Policy

By Ervin L. Peterson

Education is a force with many facets. Applied, it may broaden man's vision or intensify his prejudices . . . it may feed his fears or his hopes . . . it may tickle his vanity or expand his cupidity . . . it may bring us to understanding or lead us to destruction.

If education is the disciplined cultivation of men's minds, it can produce either great creators or great destroyers. It has done both. Educators cannot predict or measure the ultimate morality of those to whom they supply knowledge.

Educators may themselves hold to a particular philosophy — a basic and elemental sense of order applicable to the physical, economic, social, and political forces constantly at work upon the society of which they are a part. They cannot predetermine the acceptance or rejection of that philosophy. Neither do we know the ultimate capacity of human mentality.

So, we come to a consideration of education as a force in the formulation of agricultural policy, recognizing our course cannot be charted with precision. We are compelled to work with the tools available and to apply them with an understanding of rural America as it is — not as it was or might be.

Economic considerations have been and will likely continue as the dominant force in agricultural policy. The relatively low level of economic literacy among the electorate is both an indictment of our educational efforts and an impediment to formulating agricultural policy which broadens opportunities for producers of agricultural products.

Yet, no greater contribution toward an intelligent, informed, and productive rural America has been made than by our land-grant college and university system. This system of education, research, and extension has charted a course for rural America which opened an unmapped new world — that of science and technology.

This world has vertical frontiers limited only by the capacity of man's mind. The findings of this system, peculiarly American in its concept, applied, have freed our people from bondage to the land, given our producers of food and fiber mechanical muscles, made our nation an industrial giant, and created an abundance heretofore unknown in the history of mankind.

The great services of teaching, research, and extension education, publicly supported as they are, must be constantly responsive to public need. They must be constantly creative. They must be continually subjected to self-appraisal and self-criticism. These services require for their greatest contribution to human welfare a constant evaluation by those responsible for their direction, of the social, economic, and political forces at work upon the society they serve. How shall these services best be organized to contribute most fully and constructively to the further development of this already complex society?

If the role of education is to provide the tools to evaluate the world we live in and our individual place in that world, how can education best accomplish that objective? What is today's setting — social, economic, political — in which that concept is to operate?

America is today one of the few countries in the world where the primary economic and social problem is how to live with abundance. As we struggle with the problems created by abundance, peoples in other lands are experiencing great unrest as they seek to overcome want.

Everywhere man seeks control of his environment. Before he can control it, he must understand it. Research, investigation, and experimentation, made understandable and usable by education, are needed to develop the capacity to understand and to control.

We have made great strides in understanding and applying the physical and biological disciplines. We have indeed created abundance for ourselves. That very abundance has brought with it problems — economic, social, political. These are the areas in which education has its greatest opportunity and its greatest challenge. Our very success with the application to human need of the physical sciences has intensified our need for understanding in the area of the social sciences.

Today, especially, all who participate in or are affected by agricultural policy need economic literacy. They also need understanding of the social changes occurring across the country. Rapid and easy transportation and communication are making a great impact on country living. The modern motor car with a good highway network, television and radio, the development of suburbia, coupled with the increasingly close business relations of town and country have wrought social changes too often ignored in our attempts to evaluate and understand rural America.

But in no area have events of the last quarter century been more

dramatic than that encompassed by government. Today government is a dominating force in all our lives. In the aggregate, government costs amount to one quarter of our gross national product. We have permitted ourselves to become ever more dependent upon it.

Particularly in agriculture is there a basic question: How far and by what methods shall government act to provide economic satisfaction to producers of farm commodities? What philosophy shall guide that action? Simply expressed, the great contest of our day is that of guaranteed security versus expanding opportunity.

What concept shall we as a people embrace? This question is dominant in agriculture. It is the basis for much of the political controversy which today surrounds the formulation of agricultural policy. Every proposal and every action is given political overtones in this political year. The objective of this administration is the widest attainable markets for farm products and the highest possible income for farm people. We believe a storehouse is not a substitute for a market. We believe the pattern of production in agriculture need not, and should not, be frozen. We believe that agriculture cannot prosper in a strait-jacket. We believe that production controls must ultimately be removed so that farm people may use their resources fully, effectively, profitably.

Some people believe, or at least allege, that an act of Congress can cure whatever ills may beset agriculture and whatever problems may confront farm people. The leadership of the Democratic Party, in and out of Congress, favors a program of government price support for the so-called basic commodities at 90 percent of parity.

This administration favors the use of the price-support mechanism as a market facilitating device with supports at the highest possible level which will allow the volume of commodities produced to clear through the marketing system into consumptive use. It may appropriately be said that the present administration believes in price supports . . . that the Democratic leadership in and out of Congress believes in price fixing.

Were the program of price fixing, as proposed by the Democratic Party, the answer to the farm problem, no farm problem would exist because this very program was in effect in 1942 through the 1954 crop year. The historical facts deny that a 90 percent rigid price-support program is the answer to agriculture's trouble. Agricultural prices started their upward movement in 1941. They started their downward trend in 1948, interrupted only temporarily by the Korean War. During the past two years the parity ratio has moved within a

very narrow range. Although prices for individual products have fluctuated, the general price movement has been relatively stable. Moreover, gross production expenses have likewise remained relatively stable.

What causes these up and down movements in income costs and the relative position of agriculture? Was it in fact government price-support programs which sustained income, or was it consumptive demand? If government programs did sustain prices and incomes, why then did income and prices decline during the very time when these programs were being vigorously used? The plain fact is that the demands of war and postwar reconstruction created a market sufficient to take the entire output of our agricultural plant at reasonably satisfactory prices. With peace and reconstruction this market disappeared, and no comparable replacement market developed.

The attempt to sustain farm prices and income with rigid government supports has not only failed but also resulted in the greatest surplus of farm commodities ever accumulated. The borrowing authority of the Commodity Credit Corporation at 500 million dollars in 1938 is now 14.5 billion dollars. With a multiplicity of federal aids, exports of farm commodities are at a thirty-year high. Even in the face of the greatest acquisition and disposal program for farm commodities in the history of our country, it has been necessary to impose upon farm producers the most rigorous production controls ever known. The imposition of acreage allotments has diverted nearly 40 million acres from the production of basic crops to the production of other crops already in adequate supply — largely feed grains. Last year with a record volume of production for feed grains, prices for those commodities were pushed downward . . . feeding to livestock was stimulated . . . prices for meat, eggs, milk were immediately affected . . . problems for producers of these commodities were created.

Thus, price fixing at limited points creates problems at all points. It denies to producers the full, effective, and efficient use of their productive resources. It shrinks markets, lowers prices, induces synthetic competition in the fiber field, invites foreign competition, leads to even more government regulation, reduces opportunity, and lowers income.

Obviously price alone is not a guarantee of economic satisfaction to farm producers. Price times volume less expenses equals income. Maintain the price, maintain the expense, but shrink the volume, and income can only go down. But how thoroughly and how widely are these things understood, particularly by the farm people in whose behalf these programs are allegedly proposed?

How well does the private marketing system understand the impact upon its functioning of the tremendous accumulation of commodities in the hands of the government? Is it not the task of education, yes and its responsibility too, to participate vigorously in the agricultural policy arena? I believe it should do so. I believe it can do so and still retain the objectivity which is a prerequisite to education as we understand it.

Extension workers in this field, for example, should not act as protagonists nor as antagonists but as providers of information. They should provide sufficient information to enable our farm people to evaluate the alternatives contained in proposals which, if activated, will have far-reaching effects upon their farming business and, yes, upon their very lives.

What is our responsibility to those people on the 60 percent of our farms which produce approximately 10 percent of the total farm output? A million and a half of them had incomes of less than $1,000 in 1950. Here is an area that the high price-support programs never touched. Wherein lies opportunity for the people on these farms? How may they most effectively be helped to appraise the resources that they possess and make the best use of those resources?

This administration has proposed a rural development program — a program which will include all of the people in the communities where the operators of these small farms and rural dwellers live, which will help them appraise their resources and how to use them to attain a more acceptable standard of living for themselves and their families. For the first time in the history of increasing government participation in the affairs of agriculture and rural people, a program has been activated to give encouragement and help to a segment of rural America which perhaps needs it the most.

Here, too, education has an important role to play. It will largely be the catalyst that brings together the public and private resources necessary to community understanding of the problem being attacked.

Ours is a growing country. It is big. It is rich in resources, both material and spiritual, but big as it is, its storehouse of resources is not inexhaustible. Substantially all of our cropland is in use. Substantially all of our grazing land is in use. Heavy demands are being made upon our forests. From these lands must come the food, fiber, and other materials necessary for an expanding economy and a growing population. The wise and intelligent use of this great heritage of natural resources is a responsibility which all of us must accept in

order to assure a continuous flow of food, fiber, and other materials necessary to make life comfortable and satisfying not only for ourselves but for those who come after us.

We are proud of our accomplishments in the areas of scientific discovery and in the application of science and technology to the production of food, fiber, and other materials, but we cannot relax our efforts to use our resources ever more intelligently and more efficiently to provide a more satisfying and rewarding living to people on the land and to all of us.

Here, too, education has a responsibility to assess accurately the relationship of our resource base to the fulfillment of our total needs. Here, too, government, both as a landowner and land manager and as an instrument of its citizenry, is playing an ever-increasing role. In flood control, in flood prevention, in water developments, in research and education, in credit, in cost-sharing, in technical assistance, the force of government is having an impact upon the physical landscape of this our country.

I repeat, government is a dominating force in the lives of all of us in this modern age. Good government is, therefore, the business of all of us. Government is deeply enmeshed in the affairs of agriculture, and the future of agriculture will continue to be closely entwined with government. No longer may the educator, the scientist, the agricultural leader concern himself solely with his profession. He must also concern himself with the impact of government on the society of which he is a part and on the sector of society which he serves.

Our republic, our representative form of government, can function well and effectively only to the degree that it has an informed, intelligent, alert, and responsible citizenry. If we believe in this system, under which free men have created more goods and distributed them more widely to the benefit of themselves and their fellows than has ever before occurred in the history of man, then we will accept the challenge of providing the facts, the information, sufficient to enable our farm people and all America to choose intelligently the programs and policies proposed for application to agriculture. The place of education in the formulation of agricultural policy is to equip rural America to choose its course with full knowledge of the results which stem from whatever choice may be made. And, finally, the task of all of us is to see that government remains the servant of the people — all the people.