

P 215

AGRICULTURAL POLICIES

Statement of
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A Comment on
"AMERICA MUST CHOOSE"

by
Henry A. Wallace
Secretary of Agriculture

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UNDER the title "America Must Choose", Secretary of Agriculture Wallace has outlined the courses of action that are open to the American people in relation to their farming problem and their foreign trade. I have read his discussion with interest and with great admiration for its excellent temper, its clarity, the restraint with which facts are stated and the fearlessness with which the necessary conclusions are drawn. In putting it forth the Secretary has rendered a real public service, and I wish that every voter in the land might read and ponder what he has to say.

The choices which he offers are, in a nut-shell: (1) National isolation—raising under strict regimentation only so much as we can consume at home and withdrawing from production anywhere from 40,000,000 to 100,000,000 acres; (2) A revival of International Trade, accepting in payment for our goods the goods of foreign buyers and lowering our tariff wall to make this possible; (3) a middle ground, chosen as a matter of expediency, whereby only 25,000,000 acres of good land would be taken out of production and only one-half a billion dollars worth of foreign goods would be admitted. He leans, he says, to the international rather than the nationalistic policy. But he rightly urges that the whole problem, each course and its consequences, should be debated so fully and so generally that every citizen of the United States would be brought to understand just what is at stake. Surely this should be done, for a people that accepts without discussion whatever is proposed has no right to complain when the outcome is unfortunate.

What does the choice of National Isolation mean, as the Secretary outlines it? His logic is merciless. It would be necessary first to compulsorily retire from forty to one hundred million acres of crop land. In these days of juggling with billions these figures may seem unimpressive; but one hundred million acres laid down in a single sheet would cover the combined States of West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, with barely enough fringe for standing room. Quite a patch of land that, even in this big country. Of course, in actual operation, the doubtful blessing of idle land would be more widely distributed. But wherever the destroying rain might fall it would produce a destruction of land values and would compel a radical shifting of population. There would be needed, too, as the Secretary concedes, forcible control of both marketing and production even to the point where "Every plowed field would have its permit sticking up on its post."

Assuming that the Government may do anything it chooses—a concession I for one am quite unwilling to make—I wonder why some advocate of decreased production has not proposed an alternative but even more certain method of abolishing farm surpluses. Why not enact that no machinery whatever should be employed in agriculture except hand implements, a horse-drawn plow and a drag harrow? True that would put more corns, if possible, on the farmer's hands and would probably starve a large part of the urban population. But it would do away with surpluses all right and new occupation as farm laborers would be opened up to those of the unemployed who were not too much weakened by hunger to reach it.

Is it conceivable that American farmers or American citizens will submit to that sort of thing? Are they

ready to support the army of government agents, employees, inspectors, reporters and spies that would be used to carry it on? Have they not enough of these already? Are they willing to bow their necks to the flood of rules, regulations, proclamations, and edicts that would be issued in order to fit their daily lives and conduct to the prescribed system? If there are to be orders, somebody must give them. Without impugning the high purpose and integrity of the great majority of our public servants, are we so sure of their constant wisdom, their disinterestedness, their ability to resist temptation, their freedom from political influence, that we are willing to trust them with unlimited power? Every socialist, every advocate of Social Discipline, of a Planned Economy, of a Nationalist Regimentation—call it what you will—must answer in the end this question: Who is to sit in the Driver's Seat and hold the Reins and Whip? And the answer cannot be made in such vague collective terms as the State, the Government or Society, for these only move by human hands. Who are the *men*, gentlemen, that you would set to rule over us?

I pass the question of Constitutional Authority, since constitutional questions seem not to lie within the scope of the proposed debate. I say only that I am not aware of any provision in our fundamental laws that gives any power whatever to limit the right of any man to carry on the business of farming to any extent he chooses, unless indeed in time of actual war. But the thrust of this proposed regimentation goes even deeper than that. It threatens if it does not seek to destroy that freedom of thought and action which Americans of past and present days have been taught hitherto to hold as the most precious of earthly possessions.

The Secretary stresses the fact that the Administration is "conducting an orderly retreat from surplus acreage" by payments to cooperating farmers for the adjustment of their acreage farm by farm. The money, of course, comes from the taxpayer as the Government's only source of supply. One may approve or disapprove this program, but no one should have any doubt what it means. The farmer who raises more than he can sell suffers in not being fully paid for his efforts. That is unfortunate for him and bad for those whose prosperity is linked with his. To avoid this the Government steps in and pays him in advance to reduce his acreage and lessen his labor so that he may escape the danger of unrequited toil. But what it takes from the taxpayer to make payment to the farmer lessens so much of the taxpayer's return for his own effort. So that all that has happened in the end is that one man's burden has been shifted to another man's back. That may do for the moment, but as a permanent policy it is obviously unthinkable. For it is as true today as when Justice Miller wrote it, that for the Government to put its hand in one man's pocket and take money to be given to another is "none the less robbery because done under the forms of law and called taxation."

The second alternative presented by the Secretary offers a much fairer prospect. There is world trade to be had, he says, and by paying the price the United States may have its share. That price is simply that we must buy as well as sell, import as well as export. It subtracts nothing from the weight of the Secretary's words to call attention to the fact that the statement is not new. Every gathering of experts at home or abroad since the war ended has proclaimed the same thing.

Their advice has been coupled with warnings and the warnings have been in large measure fulfilled.

Who can doubt that there are natural laws in the social and economic as well as in the physical worlds, and that these cannot be over-ridden without courting disaster. The law of supply and demand, for example, cannot be thwarted by governmental price-fixing or even by experiments with the currency. Those who bite on that rock are sure to break their teeth. Just as incontrovertible is the axiomatic truth that men live in this world only by exchanging their labor or the fruits of it for the labor and the products of other men. The larger the circle of those with whom such an exchange is possible, the more surely it will occur and the greater will be the security of those dependent upon it. But for the pressure of special interests, no living man could be found to deny this axiom or the conclusions to which it inevitably points. No one could be found to argue for more rather than less restrictions upon industry, commerce and trade.

Wisdom in government, I submit, consists in discovering these natural laws and following them—not in devising hasty expedients whereby they may be circumvented. The coming of the depression itself should have taught us that lesson. It was not brought on by the observance of ancient rules and principles but, the effects of the world-war aside, by their deliberate disobedience. We ate, we drank and were merry, until inexorable laws claimed their penalty. Ever since the blow fell we have been looking for scapegoats and hoping for short-cuts to recovery. I much doubt that we shall find either the one or the other. I do not look for miracles to save us or hope for gold at the foot of the rainbow. I have more faith in the prosaic

process of following paths marked out by reason, common-sense, and the past experience of mankind. This translates in my opinion into terms, among others, of less restraint on human activity not more; a freer exchange of goods and services with other nations, not increased prohibitions; more economy in Government and lower taxes, not higher taxes and increased spending—and so on down the line.

When the wind has blown over the ant-heap, the ants will build it again, never fear, if they are given time. But they will not work if they are urged into blind paths or pushed in several divergent directions at one and the same time. By all means let us have the debate the Secretary suggests, so that we may chart our true course.