



THE BERRY CENTER



Wendell and Tanya Berry working in their garden at Lanes Landing Farm, mid-1960s. Photo by James Baker Hall.

The Berry Center Journal

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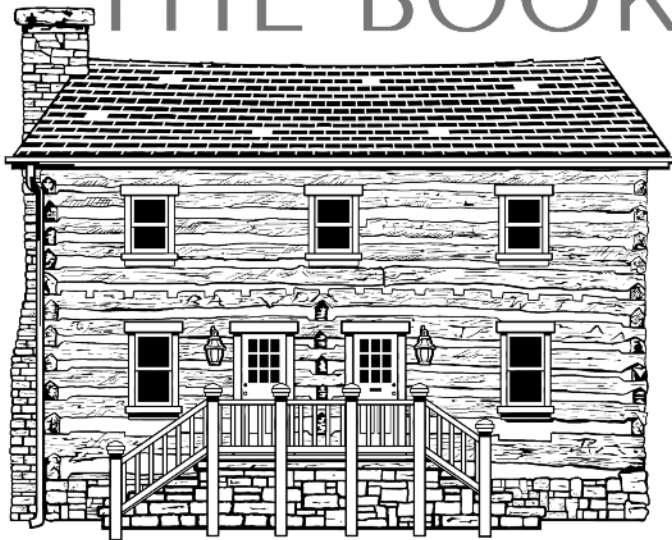
*[I]t is not too soon to provide by every possible means
that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land.
The small landholders are the most precious part of a state . . .*

—THOMAS JEFFERSON,
letter to Reverend James Madison, October 28, 1785

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Real Homeland Security

by MARY BERRY



Henry County has continued to decline as a farming county. We have gone from a community of people who lived by farming to a handful of people who farm full-time. Our place and people have been sacrificed for cheap food.

IN THE EARLY MORNING of September 11, 2001, I headed out to our market garden to pick tomatoes for a grocery store in New Castle, Kentucky. As was my custom then, I turned on the truck radio to listen to *Morning Edition* on NPR—and as usual half-listened. I became aware as I worked along that something had changed in the rhythm of the program, and I began to pay attention. I remember as if it were yesterday the shock of realizing what was being reported. This is a moment I have kept on my mind now for twenty-two years, and so it has stayed fresh in my memory. Is it possible to be shocked but not surprised? If so, that describes how I felt. I finished picking the tomatoes and took them less than half a mile to the store.

In 2019 I began to hear about a dangerous virus that was spreading quickly. People were worried and rightly so, because the information we were getting was contradictory and some of it seemed crazy (this remained true). I was exposed early and quarantined for two weeks but didn't get it. My family, coworkers, and my community were careful and took all the precautions that were recommended to protect the very young and the elderly. But as COVID-19 spread and became a global pandemic, I was horrified but not surprised. The staff at The Berry Center continued to work while dealing with children home from school and similar disruptions.

The Our Home Place Meat program responded quickly to get food to people forty miles away in Louisville who were in need because of supply chain issues.

Neither I nor my close family and friends were, or have been, badly affected long-term by the events of 9/11 or the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we *have* been badly affected by what amounts to war against rural America, and against our natural and cultural commonwealth. Rural communities live with losses every day, from the Appalachian coal fields to the toxic erosive farming of corn and soybeans. I am not trying to compare atrocities; I am pointing out what I believe to be the root cause of the many troubles that worry us today. A global pandemic, a terrorist attack, climate change, racial unrest, unending war to end war have all become part of an orthodoxy of thought that has become industrial, morally corrupt, and vengeful. My belief that this is true doesn't mean that I am not horrified when terrible things happen, but it does lessen my surprise.

For decades the land and the people of Eastern Kentucky have been virtually destroyed for cheap energy. My father wrote *The Unsettling of America*, published in 1977, to try to understand the changes in agriculture since World War II. Since then Henry County has continued to decline as a farming county. We have gone from a community of people



Ruth Monroe waters seedlings in the greenhouse at Valley Spirit farm near Campbellsburg, Kentucky.

Photo courtesy of Our Home Place Meat.

who lived by farming to a handful of people who farm full-time. Our place and people have been sacrificed for cheap food. These two stories are examples of national disasters, but have come on more slowly than attacks from enemies, pandemics, or weather emergencies. We have adapted to them as simply “just the way it is now.” My uncle John Berry, Jr. called this *destruction by design*, by which he meant it was not inevitable.

Ultimately, our hope for homeland security must be peace. If it is not, then there will be no lasting homeland security. If our hope, then, is peace, our question must be: how does a nation think honestly about homeland security, if the prevailing orthodoxy of thought is allowing it to wage war on its own land and its own people? This internal war is making our country less and less able to furnish our own needs. We are destroying what we must have to survive.

My hope has long been in the growing restlessness of people who see themselves as displaced and economically powerless. But we must not fool ourselves about how difficult a move toward local adaptation will be. This will be a change that necessarily will be led from the bottom. It will mean going to work right where we are and not falling for the false advertising of big solutions. It will require that we will confront leadership at the top—in government, in the industrial economy, and in the universities. We are being led by institutions utterly lacking in imagination, local loyalty, and local knowledge. This work must be led by people who are, or want to be, firmly placed at home. Who out there knows, for instance, what we have lost in particular places and what we still have to work with?

I have returned again and again to the thought of an inventory which requires us to know our places. What was once in Eastern Kentucky that is not

If our hope, then, is peace, our question must be: how does a nation think honestly about homeland security, if the prevailing orthodoxy of thought is allowing it to wage war on its own land and its own people? This internal war is making our country less and less able to furnish our own needs. We are destroying what we must have to survive.

there now? What was in farm country all over this nation that is not there now? This should lead us to thinking that is grounded in what is humanly possible and away from technological solutions that continue our fantasy that we can live without limits on this Earth.

There were once many farmers with the skill it took to grow food for themselves and for their communities. This cultural knowledge was not valued, and we have lost those people and their knowledge. On the face of it, a woman picking tomatoes in a field for sale at a local grocery seems to be a simple story. But I know that I was out there because of the generations that went before me, and a handing down of love and of skill. (And, lest anyone wonder, not a handing down of land.) There was plenty of that when I was growing up because of the stability made possible by the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative. The same stability made it possible for many of us to buy our own farms. As I look back on my younger self, I know that the love of ten square miles between where I sit now to write this and my home on the Kentucky River was what kept me farming. That, and the Burley Co-op that we are trying so hard to replicate with cattle farmers at The Berry Center.

When the COVID-19 supply chain problems caused many existing food programs to stop, Our Home Place Meat, a program of the Center, could quickly move excellent beef to people who were in need of it in Louisville. Because of the work we have done to bring back to life the ideas of production controls in order to maintain fair (the term is “parity”) pricing for farmers, we had the only large amount of protein that could quickly and easily be moved 40 miles southwest of us to people who needed it. This event made the point that I have tried to get across to several mayors of Louisville: this broken

connection between the country that surrounds Louisville and the city itself is dangerous. I have said that the city will be healthier and safer if it can be fed to some extent by a stable farm community near it, but I have said this to little effect. Yet it happened that the culture of good farming that remains and that is being encouraged by our work made it possible for people in Louisville who needed help to get it.

If we pay farmers fairly in good times, the yield from their farms will be available in bad times. And if we take care to value good farmers and farming in good times and in bad, then we are beginning to concern ourselves with the health of everything. Then we can talk honestly about a secure homeland. Then we can hope for peace. But if we continue to wage war on the land and the people of our own country, we are bound to continue our animosity and exploitation of other countries, and there will be no security for anyone. We should be prepared for terrible events to happen; we should not be surprised.

Peace is not passivity. My father has said that peace is not more passive than war. Like an armed conflict, peace calls for discipline, intelligence, and strength of character. But it calls also for the higher ideals of love. If we are serious about peace, a good place to begin our work is our care and love for our own country: the ground under our own feet. ■

Mary Berry is executive director of The Berry Center.



Workers on the Flood farm near Turners Station, Kentucky in 1973 (from left: Greg Meyrovich, Loyce Flood, Owen Flood, Mary Berry, Den Berry, Melvin Ford, Marvin Ford, Ed Poe, and David Poe). Photo by James Baker Hall.

An Unseen Minority: The Fight to Include Agriculture in the 1992 Democratic Platform

by JOHN M. BERRY, JR.



This speech was given at the Indiana Farmers Union 39th Annual Convention in January 1993. Mr. Berry was an attorney in Henry County, served in the Kentucky State Senate from 1974-1981, and was president of the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association from 1987 to 1994. He died in 2016.

WE JUST WENT THROUGH a presidential campaign in which the debate supposedly was enhanced by the unusual presence of a third candidate. We talked about the condition of the American factory and the treatment of factory workers. We wrestled with the national debt, the trade deficit, and deficit spending. We lamented

the plight of senior citizens, single mothers, AIDS victims, and street people. We condemned discrimination against women, blacks, Hispanics, Latinos, and homosexuals. We agreed that urban and suburban America had been terribly neglected and, coupled with three years of economic recession, faced imminent peril. In other words, every major political constituency was addressed and appeased.

I followed that campaign with great interest. I read and listened to media news reports and commentary and was in the T.V. audience for each debate—presidential and vice-presidential. If the words “farmer” or “agriculture” were ever mentioned, I missed them. The fact that rural America has been in deep economic depression since 1980 was not

mentioned and probably not known. Not one farm problem or program was discussed or proposed. The word “rural” and the phrase “family farm” were occasionally mentioned by candidates in passing and in an obvious attempt to curry favor with or flatter everybody.

Why would a subject so important as agriculture and as basic as eating not deserve attention in a campaign for the presidency of the United States of America? Is it because everyone involved, from candidates to commentators, takes food for granted? Is it because farmers only constitute two percent of our population and are, therefore, politically of no account? Is it because the candidates knew that the interests of farmers and the interests of agribusiness corporations are inherently in conflict, and agribusiness contributions are more important than farmers’ votes? Have we decided as a nation that a durable and healthy agriculture is not essential to our health and our political and economic strength? Or, is it something we just never thought about at all? In varying degrees the answer is probably “yes” to all of those questions. But it is certain that the subject of agriculture and the economic health of rural America were either carelessly forgotten or intentionally avoided by all three candidates.

In preparation for the 1992 National Democratic Convention I was asked to serve on the national platform committee from Kentucky. Thinking that I might have some impact upon the formulation for our party’s, and thereby our nation’s, agricultural policies—and with the naivete of a schoolboy—I undertook to write a policy statement. At the risk of offending those of you who are Republicans but to make a point that is essential here, I will read portions of that statement:

“Our policy as Democrats should be to prevent any further deterioration of our nation’s agriculture and the rural communities and economies that depend upon it. Nothing is more essential to any nation than to have in place sufficient and sustainable agriculture. As Democrats we have always believed that wealth and power should be widely dispersed and not be concentrated in the hands of a few. My father once said, ‘If you want people to



John M. Berry Jr. speaking to a colleague in the Kentucky State House of Representatives circa 1980. Photo courtesy of the Louisville Courier-Journal.

love this country, give them a chance to own a piece of it.’

“The free market farm policy of the industrial economy has been a disaster for the nation’s farmers and for the nation’s economy in general. Democrats must do more than simply criticize Republican policy—we must offer an alternative. To do this does not require that we re-invent the wheel.

“In the 1930’s, to address the problems that brought about the Great Depression, Democrats put in place, over the strenuous resistance of corporate America, a number of farm programs. First, they established a price for U.S. farm commodities at a level which allowed farmers to make a reasonable profit. Second, they created the Commodity Credit Corporation to make loans to farmers whose commodities fell below the support price or loan rate. Third, they regulated farm production to keep it in line with demand and, finally, they created the national grain reserve to give the government the ability to release commodities into the market at times when for one reason or another supplies dropped dramatically, causing an undue increase in consumer prices. From 1933 to 1953 those programs were extremely successful. Farmers received fair prices in relation to their costs. Costly surpluses were prevented. Consumer prices were low and

stable. Farm debt declined. The rural economy of this nation was stabilized and people generally prospered. The Commodity Credit Corporation—in other words, the federal government—made a net profit of 13 million dollars from loans that it had made to farmers.”

I went on to point out that the current market-oriented farm policy and programs had brought economic depression to rural America and a back-breaking burden to America’s taxpayers while enabling agribusiness corporations to experience record profits. I asked them to re-examine the philosophy and policies behind the programs that were so successful from 1933 to 1953. I suggested that they address the national economic recession by first addressing the rural economic depression. I pleaded with them to revitalize the rural economy, not by trying to change it to an urban economy, but by revitalizing agriculture through supply management and fair prices for farmers.

* * *

Needless to say, none of the policy recommendations were adopted nor any of the advice taken. Three days prior to convening the final meeting of the platform committee, a draft of the platform was submitted for our review. I read and re-read it with disbelief. There was no plank on agriculture. I won’t bore you with the details of the ordeal that we went through to finally get a plank on agriculture. What we got, while relatively worthless, was better than nothing.

In the week prior to the platform committee meeting we had learned that party chairman Ron Brown had formed an agricultural task force and had sold seats to its members for contributions of \$15,000 to the Democratic National Committee. These seats went to the agribusiness community and other interests that have written the farm policies that have been so disastrous for farmers.

These developments were disturbing and of great concern to farmers and farm organizations throughout the country. On the day preceding the start of the National Democratic Convention, delegates from a number of states and leaders of the several

national farm organizations met in New York. It was agreed that an effort should be made to discuss farm issues with Governor Clinton himself. Later, after a number of those farm leaders had discussions with Clinton staff members and heard his statements of support for tobacco’s supply management and price support program, it was decided that he was a supporter of the kind of agriculture that we felt was best for the country. Efforts to meet with Governor Clinton were abandoned and most of those involved endorsed the Clinton-Gore ticket.

It was not until the last week in October that Governor Clinton’s actual position on agriculture was made known. Although Governor Clinton promised more emphasis on solving farm and rural problems and kinder and gentler bureaucrats to administer the farm programs, his positions were basically the same as those of Presidents Reagan and Bush. Special attention should be given to his statement that “I support the market-oriented 1990-1994 Farm Bill.” In other words, while Governor Clinton was talking about the virtues of family farming and rural communities and campaigning for change, he really meant that his farm policy would be the same as President Bush’s.

Governor Clinton saw “trickle down” economics for what it was and rightly condemned it. What a shame that he cannot see in agriculture the best example of the consequences of “trickle down” economics! What a shame that he has not looked! After all, the “free market” is one of the most essential ingredients of “trickle down” economics. The jury is still out and our hopes are still alive, but today there is no evidence that President Clinton intends to do anything other than continue the Reagan-Bush farm policy.

“Market-oriented” agriculture is another way of saying “free market.” Both mean that all programs that in any way support price or limit production be phased out and replaced by the simple laws of supply and demand and worldwide producer competition. Worldwide competition will put our producers into competition with the cheap labor of undeveloped countries and draw the food produced in those countries to the tables of our consumers.



Wendell Berry harvesting tobacco on the Flood farm near Turners Station, Kentucky in 1973.

Photo by James Baker Hall.

There are those who argue that our farmers are the most efficient in the world and stand to gain the most from free trade. In this context, being the most efficient means that our farmers have the lowest production costs per commodity unit of all our world competition. This just is not the case. Cost of production should include the cost of so-called “inputs” such as labor, fertilizer, machinery, fuel, etc. plus a “reasonable profit.” Our competitiveness with respect to certain “inputs” varies from country to country, but our labor costs are not competitive anywhere in the world. A “reasonable profit” means an amount sufficient to maintain a reasonable United States standard of living. When a reasonable profit to the farmer is factored in and governmental subsidies are eliminated, our commodities cease to be competitive.

If we are competitive in the world market today, it is only because of costly subsidies and because farm prices are less than the cost of production. Anyone who doubts this needs only to look at the billions of taxpayer dollars spent on farm programs and export enhancements, together with the record number of rural bankruptcies.

Let me give you an example of this absolute absurdity. The Indiana five-month average market price of wheat is \$3.19 per bushel. The “target” price established by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is \$4.00 per bushel. The difference between the market price and the target price is \$0.81 and is called a “deficiency payment.” If Cargill purchases 100 bushels of wheat from a farmer, it pays him \$319. Then taxpayers pay him \$81 so that he will get the target price of \$400. But USDA says it costs the farmer \$491 to produce the wheat. So even with a subsidy the farmer has a substantial loss. Since the target price is less than is necessary to allow the farmer to pay his overhead and make a living, the program obviously has failed and so the taxpayers also have a substantial loss. But there’s more.

Cargill then exports the 100 bushels of wheat. But because the \$319 cost is too high for Cargill to be competitive in the world market, Cargill receives from the taxpayers \$100 for “export enhancement” so that it can sell the wheat for less than it cost.

In summary, we have no mandatory supply management program for wheat, and we know that our

farmers will overproduce and thereby depress the market price. Then we pay our farmers a subsidy that is less than enough to keep them financially afloat. Then we pay Cargill a subsidy so that the cheap grain will be cheap enough to export and also provide Cargill with a sizable profit. Taxpayers get soaked, farmers go broke and Cargill laughs all of the way to the bank. Who do you think wrote this farm policy?

Some people say the solution is simple: put the free market firmly in place and eliminate all subsidies. But if our government's figures are correct, the farm price of wheat would have to be \$2.19 per bushel to be competitive in the world market, and so, in the free market, it would be \$2.19 per bushel. On the other hand, assuming our government's figures to be correct, the cost of producing that same wheat is \$4.91 per bushel. Even allowing for substantial error in the government's figures, our farmers would soon be broke and we would be purchasing all of our wheat from our foreign competitors.

In our determination to become an exporter of large volumes of cheap commodities, we would find ourselves food-dependent and the world's largest importer. In the process, our farmers, as they have invariably done, would address their plight by overproduction and abandon every good conservation and environmental practice. From that experience we would find that there are certain economic principles that derive, not from textbooks, but from common sense and that those principles cannot be ignored. The first principle is that for any nation to survive and prosper it must jealously guard and preserve its ability to feed itself. The second is that the price we pay as a nation for economic policies that emanate from the greed of a particular constituency is one that we are without the means to pay.

* * *

But history provides us another choice.

While it is clear that the farm programs of the last 40 years represent some of our nation's worst failures, we must remember that those 40 years followed 20 years of farm programs that were some

of our greatest successes. Two such programs have survived: the programs for tobacco and peanuts. Both programs represent the antithesis of the "free market." Although both have been tried and been proven by over 60 years of success, they are ignored by our policy-makers in their search for solutions to farm problems.

Every commodity has its own unique characteristics and problems. Each commodity must have a program especially tailored to its needs. But all such programs can be based upon the broad concept of supply management and price supports designed to keep supply in line with demand and to maintain reasonable reserves, with price supports based upon a reasonable parity formula. Let me describe the tobacco program to you as an example.

Every three years, by referendum, farmers in tobacco producing states vote on the question of whether or not to have a tobacco program. If 66 2/3 percent vote "yes" then the USDA establishes the tobacco quota for each farm and a support price or "loan rate" for each grade of tobacco. Community Credit Corporation, by contract, agrees to lend each tobacco farmer an amount equal to the loan rate on any tobacco that fails to bring at least one dollar per hundred pounds over the loan rate, and to take the tobacco as collateral. The program is administered by a farmer cooperative commonly known as "the pool." The loans are advanced to farmers by the pool, and the tobacco taken as collateral is processed and stored by the pool until it can be sold. The sale price includes the cost of transportation, processing, storage, and interest on the Commodity Credit loans.

Both the loan rate and quota are set annually by the USDA and are based upon statutory formulas. The loan rate or support price is adjusted each year on the basis of changes in the average market price for the preceding five years and the increase or decrease in the cost of production in the previous years.

Quotas are established by the use of three factors: buyers' intended purchases, the level of pool stocks, and the prior year's exports. In January of each year

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the major buyers (cigarette manufacturers) submit to the USDA confidentially and with the right to privacy the number of pounds of tobacco they intend to purchase from the next crop. The total is added to the total amount of exports and then adjusted up or down by the number of pounds of pool stocks either over or under fifty million pounds.

Each pound of tobacco sold is assessed a rather nominal sum to cover the cost to the government of marketing and to establish a reserve account or “no net cost fund” to cover potential losses if tobacco that is held as collateral fails to bring enough to pay the loan. Today burley farmers have about 60 million dollars in that account.

Since 1941 burley farmers have borrowed from and repaid the Commodity Credit Corporation over 2.7 billion dollars together with nearly 300 million dollars in interest. As a result of this program, tobacco farmers have been able to maintain a decent standard of living with a dependable source of income, raise and educate their children, and sustain the economies of hundreds of rural communities in 22 of these United States for over a half-century with only a nominal cost to taxpayers. I know of no other government program, either in or out of agriculture, that can claim such success.

By way of comparison, the price of corn in 1960 was \$1.00 per bushel and tobacco sold for \$64.00 per 100 pounds. Today corn is selling for \$2.00 per bushel and tobacco for \$182.00 for 100 pounds. The price of corn today is 200% of what it was in 1960 and tobacco is 284%.

But the significant difference between corn and tobacco lies in their relative stability. From 1941 to the present tobacco prices have remained steady,

fluctuating slightly up or down from year to year but with an overall gradual increase from \$29.33 per 100 pounds to \$182.00 per 100 pounds. On the other hand corn, along with most other commodities, has experienced wide swings, varying in the decade of the 70's from \$1.08 to \$3.02 per bushel and in the 80's from \$1.50 to \$3.21 per bushel.

This, of course, demonstrates why farmers historically have had to endure the grievous consequences of a “boom or bust” economy. The two decades from 1933 to 1953 and the tobacco and peanut programs prove that such economic instability is unnecessary.

Today there are only about two million farmers left in this country. The average age of those farmers is over 60 years. A healthy and durable agriculture is impossible without farmers who love their land and know how to farm it. That knowledge in large part is handed down from one generation to the next. It appears that the unspoken purpose of this nation's farm policies for the last 40 years might have been to guarantee that there would be no next generation of farmers.

It's time we stopped the economic and political exploitation of our family farmers and started to treat them as if they are as important to the nation as our politicians like to say they are.

Williams Jennings Bryan said: “Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms, and grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.” That sentence is as true now as it was when he spoke it, and we had better listen. ■

A Proper Valuing

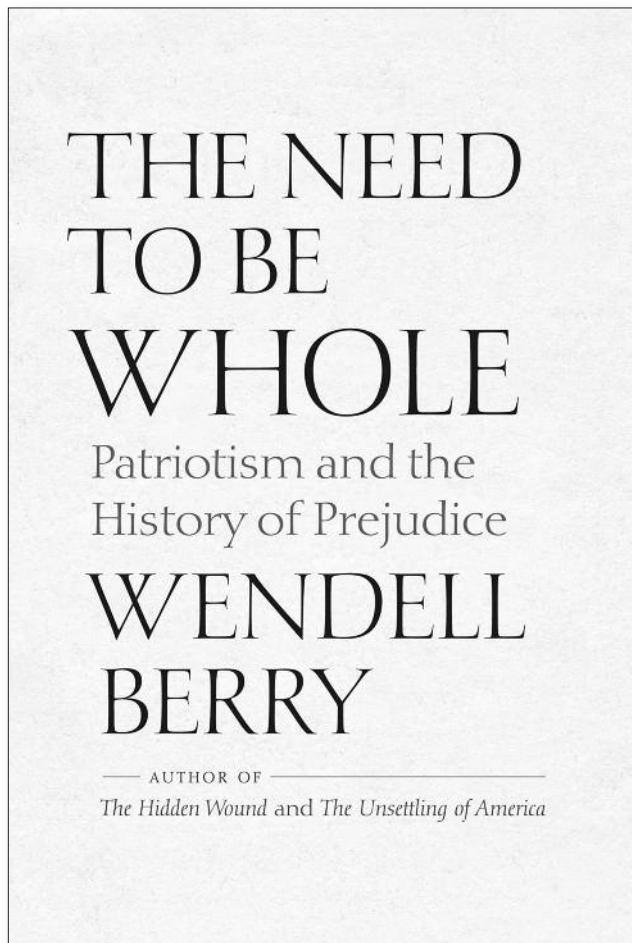
by WENDELL BERRY



But all our military strength, all our police, all our technologies and strategies of suspicion and surveillance cannot make us secure if we lose our ability to farm, or if we squander our forests, or if we exhaust or poison our water sources.

—WENDELL BERRY, *Citizenship Papers*

This is an excerpt from The Need to Be Whole: Patriotism and the History of Prejudice (2022).



IN MARK TWAIN'S TIME the great public enterprises were the westward movement and territorial wars under the doctrines of Manifest Destiny, sectional division and civil war, the establishment and growth of industrialism, industrial corporations, and industrial fortunes.

Mark Twain died in 1910. In the following eleven decades, that we can with reason think of as “our time,” the great public enterprises have been, above all, a succession of foreign wars demanding and justifying a permanent industry of national defense (so called), which, in addition to their immeasurable toll in human lives and dwellings, has been limitlessly expensive to some and limitlessly profitable to some others, and which in turn has urged and justified the invention, manufacture, and accumulation of weapons able to destroy entirely everything they supposedly are meant to defend.

But also the industrialization of agriculture and forestry—virtually the whole countryside—which has completed the industrialization and commercialization of virtually all of human life.

Also the cheapening of food, always at the expense of land and people, leading to the ruin of both.

Also the construction of the interstate highways for the sake, as advertised, of national defense, but

at an extreme cost to local life, local communities, and local economies.

Also the introduction and normalization of television as the solution, as advertised, to a number of problems.

Also the introduction and normalization of computer technology as the solution perhaps of all problems.

Also the opening, by extravagant public spending, of the new frontier of “space” as the solution of the problem of public boredom.

All of these and other such projects, when not directly opposed to the possibility of settled communities, nevertheless distract from and obscure that possibility. People who have tried to defend their communities against such “developments,” now and again succeeding, have been dismissed as “sentimental” defenders of small old-fashioned things against great new things. How could such people be taken seriously?

Well, let us see. At present two large public problems have attained the distinction of public notice: the impoverishment and oppression of many black people in the cities, and the emergence of pandemic as a possibly normal inconvenience. If the forces of public improvement deal with these things as they habitually do and are doing, they will identify and hate some enemies, protest with signs and slogans, enact some laws, and spend a great deal of money.

But suppose they should see what is plainly visible: that people could deal better with such problems if they were living in communities that were reasonably self-sufficient and economically intact. Are there things that could be done to foster such a possibility? I believe so, and I will suggest the following:

1. Build regional food economies around the larger cities to remove from food as much as possible of the cost and the risk of long-distance transportation, to reduce the consumption and waste of energy, to reduce air pollution and the threat of climate change, to encourage local food production, to improve the quality of food, to diversify

and stabilize local employment, to conserve local farmland and farm communities.

2. Sharply curb the use of volume discounts by the likes of chain stores and restaurants. This could be accomplished by requiring fair, or parity, prices, to be paid to primary producers such as farmers, and this obviously would depend on production controls. The discounts then would have to be given by manufacturers and others in “the middle,” who would not find them much to their taste.
3. Ration the use of energy, including energy that is “clean” or “green,” to conserve resources, to promote the good health of what Aldo Leopold called the “land-communities,” and to foster local economies.
4. After those measures were in place, then it would make good sense for government to sponsor cheap loans and other incentives to small businesses and small farmers.
5. So that the land can be owned by the people who use it and depend upon it, and who therefore are most qualified and motivated to use it well, every possible step should be taken to keep speculators, investors, and rich hobbyists out of the land market.

That is what I think it would take to place a proper value upon communities both human and natural, and so to make us at last a society of responsible grown people. ■

The Weakness of American Agriculture: A Military Perspective

by COL. CHARLES LUKE



*It seems preposterous to me that we should maintain an enormously expensive armory of weapons . . .
ready to defend a country in which most people live far from sources of their food.*

—WENDELL BERRY, from an interview with the author

FOOD SECURITY is a primary base requirement for government order in unstable or war-torn regions. As a result, the United States and the United Nations spend billions of dollars providing food to the developing world. In contrast, Western governments do not prioritize or fund efforts to improve food security for themselves. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed an ignored truth of the American agriculture system: while the U.S. is able to produce more than enough calories for all its citizens, the system may be less resilient in delivering those calories than those of third-world countries receiving aid.

During the pandemic, grocery stores in the U.S. ran out of toilet paper, bacon, and many other basic foods and commodities. Toilet paper is not a national security issue, but the ability to grow, process, and distribute food is. The lesson we need to learn from the pandemic is that the U.S. food system is fragile. This is a social and political challenge, and it should also be a military concern.

The inflexibility of our food system is evident in many ways, among them:

FEWER FARMS. According to the 2017 U.S. Agriculture Census released in 2019, the total number of farms and ranches in the United States—already at a historic low—has dropped another 3% since 2012. There were about 273,000 small

farms (1-9 acres) in 2017, representing just 0.1% of all farmland in the U.S. The report added that 85,127 large farms (2,000 or more acres) made up nearly 60% of total farmland.

Since World War II, the general trend in farming has been toward fewer but bigger. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) seems to advocate for larger and less diversified farmers, at the expense of smaller farmers. For example, to offset possible damage from the Trump administration's trade war with China, the USDA created the Market Facilitation Program (MFP). A September 2020 report by the Environmental Working Group determined that "the top 1 percent of farms, the largest agribusinesses in the country, received 16 percent of MFP payments, or more than \$3.8 billion. The average total payment for a farm in the top 1 percent was \$524,689." Furthermore, the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) for farmers hurt by the pandemic-induced economic downturn meant that "the top 1 percent of farms got 22 percent of CFAP payments, for an average payment of \$352,432."

These top-heavy reimbursement percentages reflect a system which is dispersed over long distances and which relies on a small number of individuals to provide an essential need. This can only result in a lack of resilience in any emergency.



Farmer Caleb Fiechter hauls hog feed and daughter, Bekah, near Campbellsburg Kentucky.

Photo courtesy of Our Home Place Meat.

The problem of farm consolidation and loss of the next generation of farmers has many causes, but there have been farm programs—such as the burley tobacco program and the peanut program—that offered low-cost structural support for farmers, particularly small farmers, without subsidies. As Wendell Berry wrote in his 2017 book *The Art of Loading Brush*, “The principles of the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-op—production control, price supports, service to small as to large producers—are not associated with tobacco necessarily, but are in themselves ethical, reputable, economically sound, and applicable to any agricultural commodity.”

LABOR. In the United States, there is an extreme shortage of domestic farm workers, and farmers rely on immigrant workers to do the majority of the hands-on field harvesting. Even during the last recession farmers’ efforts to recruit domestic labor failed, as (according to a 2011 *New York Times* article) “the work was too hard.” The result is that most of the domestically-grown food Americans consume is not planted or harvested by Americans. Some of these workers have temporary immigration

status under the H-2A visa program, but according to the USDA, roughly half of hired crop farmworkers are illegal (and the USDA acknowledges this number is hard to measure and may be greatly undercounted). What this means is that the majority of the food produced in the U.S. relies on an insecure foreign source of labor that is precarious and vulnerable.

LONG-DISTANCE TRANSPORTATION.

The U.S. is highly reliant on an intricate transportation and distribution system. From seed distribution, pollination, field workers, and delivery to supermarkets, every aspect of our food is dependent on unhampered cross-country movement. To give one example: whole crop species would be affected if a small corps of beekeepers could not truck their hives around the country for pollination.

Our packaging and distribution system is not just complex but siloed. Food prepared for restaurants is not transferable to grocery store shelves. During the pandemic, food meant for restaurants was rotting in warehouses while grocery store shelves were empty. As a July 2020 McKinsey & Company

report described it, “Companies that produce, convert, and deliver food to consumers and businesses face a web of interrelated risks and uncertainties across all steps in the value chain—from farmers to end-customer channels. Food-service suppliers, for example, faced abrupt order cancellations across their entire customer bases. That left many of them with excess stock that they couldn’t easily redirect to consumers because of packaging-size mismatches.”

PROPRIETARY SEEDS. Most commercial seeds are proprietarily owned, which means farmers cannot save seeds from year to year. In a March 2023 report, the USDA found that the top four seed corporations own 97% of canola, 95% of corn, 84% of soybean, 51% of wheat, and 74% of cotton intellectual property rights. Any disruption to the centralized production and distribution of seeds would be catastrophic to the entire industry and mean worldwide starvation.

MONOCULTURE. As agriculture has become industrialized, this has led to increases in monoculture of both plants and animals. Beyond the well-documented environmental problems this brings—pesticide toxicity, water pollution, erosion, and soil depletion—monoculture is fragile in its lack of biodiversity.

A 2019 United Nations report noted that of the 6,000 plant species cultivated for food, just nine account for 66% of total crop production. Fewer varieties mean greater vulnerability to disease and climate change. American farms used to raise hundreds of different types of chickens, but not anymore. The very few genetic lines of broilers and layers (and their housing conditions) left these birds vulnerable to this year’s avian flu outbreak.

Agricultural monocultures could be prime targets for either natural or manufactured diseases. The Chinese military is gaining headlines for using gene editing on its own troops, and the gene editing of viruses, targeting specific seeds and animals raised largely in the United States or by specific companies, is a possible long-term threat to American industry and agriculture.



Chris Wright, left, and John Edwards, co-owners (with Jason Wright) of Trakside Butcher Shoppe in Campbellsburg, Kentucky. Photo courtesy of Our Home Place Meat.

This monoculture extends to the farms themselves. No longer can an average commercial farmer feed a family from his or her own land. Many large farms grow single commodity crops, and most farm regions, in a crisis, could not feed themselves. The combination of crop specialization, fewer farmers, and a decline in grocery stores has created food deserts right in the middle of farm country.

PARTICULAR PROBLEMS WITH MEAT. Consolidation of the meat industry makes the production and distribution of meat particularly fragile—as became clear during the first few months of COVID-19 when many states put lockdowns in place for manufacturing and production. *The New York Times* reported in April 2020 that “meat plants, honed over decades for maximum efficiency and profit, have become major ‘hot spots’ for the coronavirus pandemic, with some reporting widespread illnesses among their workers. The health crisis has revealed how these plants are becoming the weakest link in the nation’s food supply chain, posing a serious challenge to meat production.”

Meat processing has consolidated over time. As of March 2020, just four companies in the United States controlled over 80% of beef production. These meat factories, while well-regulated by the USDA, are crowded, loud, and cold, making virus prevention very difficult. While there is little chance of transferring viruses via the meat in the factories, employees are vulnerable. Many of the meat pro-



A young woman from the “tractorettes,” a program implemented by International Harvester in the 1940’s to train women in equipment operation to make up for the suddenly enlisted agricultural labor force. She is mowing a hillside or culvert at Camp Pendleton, the main training base for the United States Marine Corps. Photo courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

cessing plants are staffed by immigrants who do not speak English or have access to healthcare, which compounds the challenge.

The answer is to have more smaller-scale processing plants serving local areas, but current USDA regulations and many state health laws make it difficult and costly to process and sell meat and make very little accommodation for local butchers. In order to butcher and sell locally raised meat to nearby grocery stores and restaurants, a facility must pay to have a USDA inspector on site and give this person a dedicated office and restroom—among many other requirements. The current system is not tiered, which means the regulations are the same for the large-scale producers (40,000+ chickens a day) as for the small local processors. The provisions for cured meats (which are more profitable

for butchers) are even more restrictive, requiring equipment and plans that have little to do with actual food safety.

Increasing the numbers of local producers will not replace the large industrial meat factories, but will increase variety and quality, and will offer a local meat source in times of food shortages or transportation issues.

FOOD AND MILITARY PLANNING.

“Defending the homeland” is a central theme of recent annual Defense Strategy reports from the U.S. Department of Defense, and securing America’s infrastructure is a stated critical responsibility. Yet few military plans incorporate a full breakdown of the U.S. transportation and agriculture system, even though the pandemic gave the United States a clear warning of what could happen. Should an even stricter

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—WENDELL BERRY, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 2017

national lockdown or disruption occur, resulting in widespread food shortages, civil unrest is likely.

Italy's experience with food during the pandemic taught a different lesson. While the coronavirus hit Italy the hardest of any country in Europe, Italy's hybrid system of both large-scale agriculture and locally-sourced products kept it from experiencing the empty shelves or supply disruptions seen in the U.S. This is largely due to town markets and locally-sourced butcher shops remaining stocked and open. Italy's regulations favor the smaller producer and local butcher. This combination of protectionism and support could be re-created here in the United States.

The Army's military preparation plans worldwide anticipate disruptions to energy and water, and domestically have a goal for installations of a minimum 14-day independence from local sources, to reduce risk to critical missions. There should be a similar requirement for food, and the solutions should go beyond merely stockpiling and include deliberate plans to build resiliency into garrison food supplies through increased sourcing from the local economy. At the very least, there should be planning exercises between the Department of Defense and the Department of Agriculture, and a program that enables military installations and state agriculture agencies to work together to increase local food access and supply. What good are secure military bases if service members can't feed their families?

The COVID-19 pandemic was a warning and wake-up call to address the fragility of the American agriculture system. It will require a combined, inter-agency approach with Congressional assis-

tance. At a minimum, the military should start deliberate planning for redundancies similar to other installation resources. For the basic security of the United States, our fragile agriculture system cannot continue to be ignored. ■

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Warehouse of food in Kvitneve village, Kyiv Oblast, Ukraine after a Russian rocket strike on the night of March 12, 2022. About 50,000 tons of products were destroyed. Photo by Oleksii Samsonov. Photo licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license by <https://kyivcity.gov.ua/>

Food and the Profits of War

by ALAN GUEBERT



WHEN ASKED TO DESCRIBE war, Union General William T. Sherman noted that “War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it.” In a later speech, Sherman did refine his dictum to the much shorter and impossible-to-forget, “War is hell.”

Others thought war to be “politics by other means” (Clausewitz), or “a wanton waste of projectiles” (Twain).

However you describe it, war is expensive. World War II, in 2020 dollars, cost \$4 trillion and devoured 40 percent of U.S. GDP in 1945. To date, estimates of the total U.S. military, financial, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine since its February

2022 invasion by Russia range from \$75 to \$110 billion.

It’s extremely profitable, too. In 2023, Brown University estimated that the almost generation-long war in Afghanistan cost U.S. taxpayers \$14 trillion, “with one-third to one-half of that total going to military contractors.”

Shooting wars aren’t the only type of warfare that’s costly, deadly, and often without a winner. In January 2022, the International Monetary Fund estimated the total cost of the COVID-19 pandemic would be at least \$12.5 trillion. The human side of that coin is just as large. On August 2, the United Nations

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World Health Organization estimated total COVID-19 deaths worldwide now stand at 7 million. And COVID has other, less visible victims. In 2021 alone, the U.N. calculated the pandemic more than doubled the number of “people experiencing acute food insecurity” around the world from 135 million to 345 million.

Then, with global food aid programs already reeling under the pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine struck another blow. U.S. wheat futures prices rocketed nearly 50 percent higher, from \$7.50 per bushel to \$11 per bushel, as shipping and boycott threats ricocheted through global markets.

Even after the invasion-shaken markets settled into a less volatile, more predictable pattern, the number of food-threatened nations remained high and access to supplies continued to be in jeopardy.

Throughout the pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war, there is one area of the global food system that remained—and remains—well-fed and fat. According to a February 2023 Greenpeace International report, “The world’s biggest agri-business corporations made more in billion-dollar profits since 2020 than the amount that the U.N. estimates could cover the basic needs of the world’s most vulnerable.”

That math, Greenpeace explains, shows that “20 corporations—the biggest in the sectors of grain, fertilizer, meat and dairy—delivered \$53.5 billion to shareholders in the financial years 2020 and 2021, while the U.N. estimates a smaller figure, \$51.5 billion, would be enough to provide food, shelter and lifesaving support for the world’s 230 million most vulnerable people.”

Recent financial reports from three of the biggest of the big—Cargill, Bunge, and Archer-Daniels-Midland (ADM)—show the trend not only continues, but is getting even more profitable.

For example, on August 3, Reuters noted, “Global commodities trader Cargill Inc. reported . . . its fiscal year 2023 revenue increased 7% from a year earlier to \$177 billion, the highest ever for the 158-year-old company.”

Since Cargill is a privately-held company, it doesn’t share all its financial data, such as quarterly or annual profit. Competitors like ADM and Bunge, however, are publicly held so they must post their financial results. “Both,” says Reuters, have “reported solid earnings” and have “raised their profit outlooks for 2023.”

The key reason for the increased profits is as old as war itself: “Global supply disruptions, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine . . . have generated increased profit margins for grain merchants” and, no surprise, “concurrently opened up opportunities for firms like Cargill to step in” explained BNN, an online global news service, on August 3.

Equally unsurprising, prices for ag imports and services have also soared during the COVID/Ukrainian war years. According to a November 2022 report by the Institute of Agriculture & Trade Policy, the world’s twenty most industrialized nations “paid almost twice as much for key fertilizer imports in 2021 compared to 2020 and [were] on course to spend three times as much in 2022.”

So, yes, war is cruel. ■

Alan Guebert was raised on a southern Illinois dairy farm. His syndicated column, “The Farm and Food File,” appears weekly in more than 60 newspapers in the United States and Canada. With his daughter, Mary Grace Foxwell, he is the author of The Land of Milk and Uncle Honey: Memories from the Farm of My Youth. (c) 2023 ag comm; all rights reserved.

June 24, 2023 by JAMES MATTHEW WILSON

My eyes return upon their native scene
And find the sky an opalescent sheen
Of smoke that drifts down from the northern lands.
Black willows drop their cottony seed in strands.
There is no rain. The creek begins to dry,
And somewhere in the boughs the owls cry.
Meanwhile, a world away, with lumbering tread
Tanks pass a field rank with unburied dead,
And force their way into the country's heart,
Where by the onion domes goldfinches dart.
Old women come to watch the soldiers pass,
A splotch of tea stirred in their metaled glass,
And, in the fiery distance, the first sound
Of passing jets thrums through the cratered ground.
Entire cities now lie broken stone,
Their blocks inhabited by rats alone,
Who creep between the tents of leaning walls
To nest among discarded clothes and dolls.
And, at this hour, beside the sunken ship,
Crushed down within the sea's indifferent grip,
Lie five dead men enclosed in twisted steel.
The brine devours engine, hull, and wheel.

And I, who wander toward old age unscarred,
Who draw the garden hose to spray the yard,
Am taken with the thought of those who drowned
Because of an old dream: there I was bound
And dragged behind a ship, as water coursed
Above my head, and all my body, forced
Down and beneath the white of churning waves.
How many nights I found how many graves,
Only to wake and in the darkness meet
My breath again beneath a sweating sheet.

Seven years ago, I feared what was to come:
That life, grown settled, safe, a little numb
Would show itself a fragile peace and silence
And break before a riot of mob violence;
That streets would burn and blind and zealous crowds
Raise up their fists within the smoldering clouds;
That every small good thing would be derided
By people tyrannized but long unguided;
That men would thirst again for the occasion
To spark an age where nation conquers nation;
That we who thought our days already full
Would feel at last the dark sea's mortal pull.

James Matthew Wilson is the Cullen Foundation Chair in English Literature and the founding director of the MFA program in Creative Writing at the University of Saint Thomas. The author of 11 books, his most recent collection of poems, "The Strangeness of the Good" (2020), won the poetry book of the year award from the Catholic Media Awards.

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