

The Great DIRT CONSPIRACY

by **WALTER B. PITKIN**

A VAST conspiracy is on foot to prevent the United States from progressing apace with the rest of the world. It is a reactionary movement of the first magnitude, backed by immense wealth and influence. Several of our mightiest multi-millionaires are enrolled under its banner. So are many owners of magazines and newspapers, hundreds of merchants, and millions of farmers. And, of course, away up in front march the army of thirty-cent statesmen, waving the Stars and Stripes and belching pæans in praise of the good old American Farm Home, its quarter-section, and its half-wits.

For this is a conspiracy to preserve the ancient American farm system against the ravages of the Industrial Revolution, which is just reaching the plowlands. The Industrial Revolution is symbolized by fifty-cent wheat. And the Old Order is perfectly represented by the thirty-cent statesmen who crave dollar wheat and its equivalent in all branches of agriculture. For dollar wheat means the protection of quarter-sections and half-wits. Quarter-sections and half-wits are the foundation stones of the Old Order. They must and shall be preserved, shout the thirty-cent statesmen.

Twenty-seven million farmers want to be saved. They dislike radical changes quite as keenly as you and I. They would like to save their homes and firesides—and who wouldn't? It's silly to berate them on that score. But



Drawings by Donald McKay

facts are facts; we must face them and adjust ourselves to them somehow. And the greatest of all facts which have boiled up to the surface since the World War are those which reveal the Old Order as hopelessly out of step in the world's mighty onward march toward civilization. They disclose the quarter-section as a slave pen, and the little farmer against society.

Hundreds of economists and agronomists now know, past all doubt, that mass production in farming must follow mass production in the city mills and factories. They know that, in most basic lines of agriculture, it is feasible now. They know that it will cut the cost of production far below the best figures obtainable on small farms, no matter how well equipped these may be. Hence, in open competition the super-farm will exterminate the Old Order. Here's how it works out in wheat.

The Tennessee hill-billy spends \$2.40 to grow a bushel of wheat, and his brother in other poor wheat regions spends \$2.00. The fairly skilled farmer on good wheat land spends between \$1.00 and \$1.10. He'll tell you, of course, that he doesn't; and he'll show you his cash records to prove it. But, like all quarter-section half-wits, he fails to count his own time on a fair wage basis, and usually he makes no normal allowance for overhead. So he kids himself into thinking that he grows wheat for from sixty-five cents to ninety cents. But he can't fool the Industrial Revolution!

In the Texas Panhandle, Hickman Price, the first industrialist to perfect super-farm methods, grows wheat at a true cost of forty cents and less, according to land and season. To do it he drives the largest tractors day and night, trains his crews precisely as the great factories do, and analyzes every step in all operations. Up in Kansas, the great chain of farms organized by J. S. Bird achieves like results. And anybody else who has the money and brains to handle tens of thousands of acres as a food factory can grow wheat around the same figure.

Now it costs between twenty cents and forty cents to haul wheat by train from various sections of the wheat regions to Chicago. So when wheat sells in Chicago at seventy-five cents, the small grower loses twenty-five cents on each bushel before he has put it on board the cars; and another twenty cents if that sum happens to be his freight bill on the bushel. So he is in the red to the tune of forty-five cents a bushel. On the same basis, though, the super-farmer of the New Order shows a net profit of fifteen cents a bushel.

Out in Montana, Professor M. L. Wilson has demonstrated that production costs drop as acreage units increase in size. The quarter-section half-wit simply isn't in the running. The man who tills eight hundred acres makes a fair showing; he can operate an acre of wheat for \$7.77. But he who operates 3,000 acres in a unit with the proper machinery cuts the cost to \$3.82 an acre. As Wilson analyzes his results, the cash operating cost of a bushel of wheat on an 800-acre tract is forty-three cents, and on a 3,000-acre tract it drops to twenty-one cents. This is not the true cost, but simply the cash outlay; yet it indicates clearly the trend.

Those of us who have been studying the matter for many years know that even the 3,000-acre unit cannot cut costs to the level of the 10,000-acre unit. How many farmers own 10,000-acre units? Or can buy the necessary machines to operate such units on lease? Very few. Even in the wheat belt, where farms run large, the average falls far below those dimensions: in Montana it is 698 acres, in South Dakota it is 403. So, you see, the farmer is clean out of the picture. He will never be able to supply us with wheat or any other staple at prices even approximately those reached by the

super-farm. Only large capital can get the results. And the farmer is, as the income tax statistics show, our lowest income class.

RUSSIAN COMPETITION

ENTER RUSSIA. The drama cannot proceed further without its favorite villain.

Russia must work along for three or four more years before the twenty-five million acres managed by the Grain Trust are thoroughly modernized. Already she has cut wheat-growing costs to seventy-five cents a bushel. (The claim that in 1930 the Giant Farm near Salsk produced 3,300,000 bushels at a true cost of fifty cents per bushel needs to be scrutinized with care.) Nobody who understands the situation doubts that, before 1936, the Soviet experts will be exporting at least two hundred million bushels of wheat whose cost at the railway siding will be under fifty cents. And that will fix the world market price.

Thoughtful farmers, and business men who deal with farmers, begin to see that America can hold its own in the great to-morrow only by matching Russia's fifty-cent wheat with Kansas fifty-cent wheat. Prices of everything that can be produced with tractors far more powerful than the largest now in service, and through organization methods analagous to those of the finest factories, will decline during the next generation. Along with wheat we shall behold all field crops become cheaper year after year, until a level is reached which, in the eyes of the quarter-section half-wit, will spell ruin and chaos.

In all these field crops, the average American yield can easily be doubled while the cost per unit produced declines. For the larger the corporation farm, the cheaper become fertilizers, cultivation, and harvesting. About 80 per cent of the gross bulk and value of farm crops may be thus handled. Thus with all grains save rice in Russia and Siberia, where *five times* as many first-grade acres as we Americans possess await the Soviet plows. Thus with cotton in the Sudan, where the British already grow the fiber far below American production costs. Thus with sugar beets, which even now can be raised in a glut at bankruptcy prices.

In the face of such a situation, the American farmer has only two courses open, as a matter of straightforward economic practice. He may go the way of the coolie, or the way of the

corporation. By the first route he competes against fifty-cent wheat by drudging fourteen hours a day, eating boiled potatoes and cold beans, driving his family into his fields along with his mules, and dying of overwork at forty. By the second route he exchanges his farm for stock and bonds issued by the Consolidated Golden Acres, Inc., which concern rips out all his fences, burns his old sheds, sells his tiny tractor and implements as junk, and at one bold sweep tills ten townships.

Everybody opposes the first course. But only the small farmer and his political and business parasites oppose the second. Scientists, economists, and financiers alike now agree that the way of the corporation is our only road to prosperity. They see that, in the long run, whatever cheapens food and reduces human toil serves to elevate the living standard. Hardship arises only in the transition from the Old Order to the new.

Now just who are the reactionaries? And why? By direct inquiry all over the country, I find the Dirt Conspiracy draws heavily on the following classes: the marginal farmers, the half-successful tillers of good soil, large farmland owners (especially the owners of marginal land), country merchants and bankers, rural politicians and lawyers, county-seat newspapers circulating heavily up the back roads, state and federal farm bureaus, nearly all county agents, fully two-thirds of the faculties in state agricultural colleges, and a sizable majority of the owners and editors of the periodicals read by "dirt farmers." With this horde to sway them with its clamor, is it to be wondered at that state legislatures and the

United States Congress are to be found at the head of the Great Dirt Conspiracy, commanding the economic tide to turn back?

TOO MANY FARMERS

AT BOTTOM, we have to do here with another evil of overpopulation. As Wheeler McMillen has shown, we have far too many farmers and a dangerously inflated agriculture. The surplus farmers till millions of acres of inferior land which might better revert to forest and prairie. The first move toward a finer rural civilization must be to abandon about 70,000,000 of the 390,000,000 or more acres tilled last year. For on that immense area nobody can make a dollar, while those who try to do so only glut the market with underpriced commodities, thereby robbing everybody else of fair profits. At least five million farmers — men, women, and children — must be forced out of their futile occupation; and the faster the better for all concerned, in spite of the quick pangs of change. As super-farming spreads, another five million must slowly shift to other work. For the super-farm can feed a man with the yield of three acres, whereas our noble quarter-section grubber must work nearly five acres to accomplish the same result.

Naturally everybody out in the country who earns a living by serving these ten million mortals in jeopardy will join the Great Dirt Conspiracy, for few can see beyond their own noses when looking at matters touching self-interest. Depopulate a farming county, and the little banker there loses depositors and borrowers; the little lawyer gets no boundary fence disputes or tax-dodging clients; the corner grocer sees his salt mackerel wither in its keg; the landlord beholds his stony, steep hillsides abandoned to crows and rabbits and the persistent sumach; the local editor notes with a sigh that subscribers drop off, while advertising shrinks; and the great Friend of the People, the politician, driving his car up the back roads just before election, learns with dismay that the hill-billies who always voted for him have fled their ancient haunts. So the whole countryside



arises to save the superfluous farmer, the stupid farmer, the bankrupt farmer, and the rest of the doomed ten million.

This Old Order cannot be saved. But its passing can all too easily be delayed by chicanery and the indifference of city dwellers to the gravity of the farm crisis. Our thirty-cent statesmen are busy. They thunder for farm relief, for higher tariffs on farm products, for subsidies to farmers, for farm loans, for government purchase of crop surpluses, and so on. Most of the orators are, in all probability, hypocrites — like the eminent middle-western Congressman who savagely denounced to Wheeler McNary-Haugen bill and, just ten days later, delivered a gush of words in its favor on the floor of the House. But some champions of the downtrodden are honest

enough in their fuzzy convictions, just as the farmers themselves are. And they may work much harm, unless city voters arouse themselves.

Already the Kansas legislature has enacted a law aiming to suppress corporation farming. Thirty-cent statesmen have tried to dissolve Bird's super-farm on the ground that it was insolvent; but in court they were routed by evidence showing its prosperity even in a low-price era. Texas Solons are also scheming against the industrialized farm. Suppose all of our major farming states succeed in such a movement? They will force the farmers to become coolies in so far as they compete for world markets, or else to become pensioners of the government in so far as they maintain the old price levels on farm products by subsidies, valorizations, and like paternalisms. In either event, the country as a whole suffers to no good end. Let me point out two major evils.

In spite of reactionaries, America is becoming a super-city whose suburbs will be what men once called farms. The county will be the municipal unit, as a rule. Out of every 100 citizens, at least 95 will live in the urban centers of the county; and farming will be carried on along industrial lines so that only a handful of

watchmen and garage mechanics will have to stay out in the sticks. The farm managers will motor and fly to their farm work every morning from the towns. Thus the cost of living for the city dweller will be lowered so tremendously that, in the face of steadily rising living standards, our factory workers will be able to produce goods that will sell at or below European prices. Study the food costs in typical

family budgets and see for yourself what would occur if only 30 per cent were lopped off. I believe that 40 per cent can be lopped off within twenty-five years.

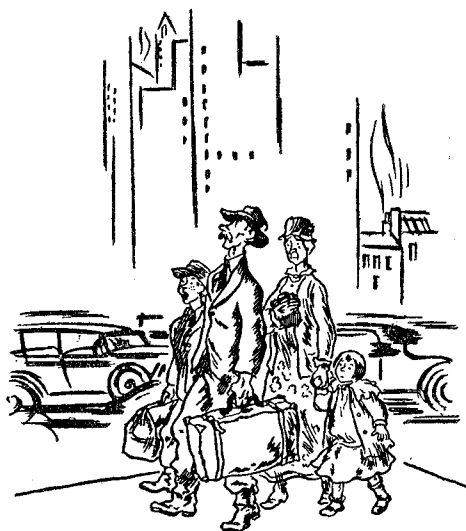
But what if the old prices are maintained by legislation? Then all other industrial countries will outstrip us in short order. For they will buy from Russia, from Sudan, from Argentina; and not wheat alone, but cotton, flax, rice, and many other commodities on which the

prosperity of great sections of the United States now depends.

"All right!" retort the Dirt Conspirators. "If that's the outcome, then let's drop all foreign trade! We've business enough at home anyhow." This is a tenable position, if held with skill and reason, as W. B. Donham does in *Business Adrift*. America can thrive without a huge export trade. But to do so we must enlarge our own powers as consumers; and one step in that direction is to release as large a fraction of incomes as possible for the purchase of things other than bare necessities. The current trend to eat less food and to pay less for it must persist. But the Great Dirt Conspiracy will thwart that, thereby paralyzing every industry which looks to growing domestic sales for its prosperity. In effect, our city workers will be carrying the burden of ten million useless farmers. Not even our overrated efficiency can offset such a handicap.

NEW JOBS FOR FARMERS

THE STRONGEST argument of the reactionaries depicts the horrors of uprooting ten million people without first finding new jobs for them and otherwise protecting them against heavy losses and misery. Wherever I



discuss this subject, men always fling back: "Corporation farms will make confusion worse confounded. Bigger and better machines will throw millions out of work. The cities cannot care for them. There are millions idle in their streets now. Swell those ranks, and you are merely inciting to revolution."

I admit that this argument calls for serious inquiry; it cannot be dismissed as ill-founded. Nor is any ready-made answer at hand. Unemployment is a problem still too vast and snarled for us. Nevertheless we can say several things about the matter.

First of all, most of the families driven from marginal farms would not be a shade worse off in town. Their present misery is a hideous thing, whether you see it in the famine regions of Arkansas or in the drought zone of old Virginia or in the stricken black lands east of Dallas, or in Montana's lovely but now worthless valleys. Having seen thousands of such wretches in fifteen states during the past winter, I cannot feel that they would go from bad to worse even if they ended up in municipal lodging houses, most of which are more luxurious than shacks on marginal farms.

Secondly, these people, being as yet unaccustomed to the easy-going ways of the mechanized city worker, would be ideally suited to displace the low-grade unskilled laborers from Latin and Slavonic lands now in our midst; and it is agreed that everybody would benefit by the return of such workers to their native lands. I am not qualified to estimate the present number of aliens who, without injustice, might be returned to Mexico and Mediterranean areas in the course of the next five years; but I should be surprised if there were fewer than four million. We have about five million aliens over and above the foreign-born who have become citizens; so it seems reasonable that we might refuse to naturalize any more and require the entire alien group to leave our shores within a reasonable period. A realignment of population might take care of all marginal farm workers for another five years. Of the five million individuals who ought to shift cityward, not more than two million are adult workers; the others are children.

Thirdly, immense programs of road building, waterway construction, drainage, reforestation, and the erection of millions of small homes to replace the jerry-built structures foisted on

our sucker public during and after the World War will, in the near future, provide work for millions; and the rudest toil should be turned over to these horny-handed rustics. Fully fifty million acres ought to be planted to trees; and who could do that better than men of the soil? At least ten million acres in the South ought to be drained, not for farming but as a matter of public health.

Fourthly, shorten all workdays considerably, reduce wages very little, if at all, and employment will be spread over most of the idle classes with scarcely any shock. Consider, please, that a 5 per cent levy on all incomes would suffice to employ eight million workers at an average annual wage of \$560 — a sum far above anything ever received by the marginal farmers we are evicting.

Finally, taking the bull by the horns, we might accelerate corporation farming on an immense scale by loans or guarantees of some kind to farmers of proved skill who undertake to work in units of a million dollars and upward. This would immediately bring to pass what Richard Whitney, president of the New York Stock Exchange, foresees as the next move in agriculture, namely the underwriting of huge agricultural corporations by Wall Street, which hitherto has shunned all such as the plague.

MR. HOOVER'S VIEWS

AT THE VERY least, there are about 200,000,000 acres of high-grade plowland adapted to giant farming in blocks of 20,000 to 250,000 acres. Not one square inch of this empire should be bought but all of it must be operated under lease or on some partnership basis. A safe average sum for such operating is around twenty-five dollars an acre; this would carry the company over two years in any grain crop; and the new business ought to stick to grain until it feels at ease, after which it may tackle costly crops such as potatoes. Were our states and the federal authorities to protect and foster in every legitimate manner the rise of this super-farming, Wall Street would, within a few years, be called upon to invest five billion dollars in basic agrarian industries which would show profits fully as sure and sizable as the oils, the rails, and the utilities.

But the Great Dirt Conspiracy will never permit this. It will fight to the last ditch —

which happens to be the White House, in this instance. If ever it reaches that spot, it will probably find fresh defenses and ammunition. For Mr. Hoover has always championed expensive wheat and the quarter-section philosophy of life. Just ten years ago he declared: "Wheat must hold at least 50 index points advance of comparative commodity prices, if we are to assure supplies for our increasing population. That is, if other commodities should return to 100, wheat must hold 150, or some considerable excess."

His attitude toward farm relief shows no significant deviation from this point of view, although it is now antiquated. True, he has opposed the gross Treasury raids proposed by the quarter-section half-wits — and let him receive due applause for that. But he seems never to have glimpsed the deeper trends of agrarian economics. If he does see these, he must be ignoring them for some political reason. Is it because the quarter-section half-wits can turn the next election?

But the Dirt Conspirators will not have to appeal to the White House. They will win, hands down, without that gesture. Several of our billionaires and near-billionaires devoutly worship the Old American Farm Home; witness Henry Ford's mania for collecting the junk of that sorry institution, from churn to wall paper, with the dirty old backyard pump thrown in for good measure. Some of them, too, are like the famous Henry in that much of their fortune is invested in making things for small farmers. Wipe out the latter, and where would Henry sell his cunning little tractors? No wonder he is a reactionary in matters agricultural! (City folks think him a creative radical because he talks about industrializing the farm; but he means by that the widespread use of twenty thirty-horse-power tractors on individually owned and operated farms of 500 or 600 acres. All of which is already antiquated.)

Other rich men mix sentiment with self-interest as J. C. Penney does; they would perpetuate the small rustic because he buys from them — and they are duly grateful for his patronage. These infantilisms still sway Wall Street more or less. They keep alive the idea that our nation will dissolve in ruin if our sturdy rustic stock dwindles to a handful of tractor mechanics and county managers. They assure you that city dwellers are weaklings and cannot perpetuate themselves; the great towns must have a peasantry to breed for them a horde of future taxpayers and white-collar clerks.

Within the past year I have heard that alleged argument a hundred times, if once. And I shall probably go on hearing it as long as my ears function. For — I grieve to say — this favorite theme of the city man who left the farm because he couldn't stand it receives lip service from numberless farm experts, who know they are lying but go right on repeating their lies simply because they draw a salary from public funds which are largely contributed by overtaxed farmers. They dare not tell the truth about the fellows who support them.

Here we reach the heart of the Great Dirt Conspiracy. And such a heart disease we find there! I accuse at least half of our agricultural college scientists of supporting the most unscientific, inhuman, wasteful, and generally dirty phase of American life, the small farmer; not always by open speech but rather by keeping silent or hinting at dark doubts when somebody suggests that corporation methods might solve all our agrarian problems. From a cosmic point of view, this is preposterous.

Another decade of the Great Dirt Conspiracy, and all the evils of the past will be overshadowed by fresh disasters. Will the city voter open his eyes and act? If so, America will advance into a new and better era.



The Lion and the Lamb

Can Science and Religion Lie Down Together?

by C. E. AYRES

IN THE Biblical prophecy of the lion and the lamb doubtless the reference is to creditors and debtors, but the same figure applies with some aptness to science and religion. I am not only thinking of the Lamb of God as the symbol of religion: science also could hardly find a better symbol than the lion, which is the incarnation of brute force. Moreover, the issue between the lion and the lamb is not one of animosity. The lion, at all events, has no hard feelings. He may roar you as gently as any sucking dove. If he could, he would probably protest that he feels no antagonism to the fundamental truth of lambs, and that they are an embodiment of the same laws of nature which have also produced him. Nevertheless the fact remains that a lion may purr and purr and be a lion still; and this, I believe, is also true of science. The alarming thing about it is not its intentions but its nature. Is science by nature compatible with religion? Is it a civilizing agency at all?

The facts would appear to be a quite sufficient answer. Ours is the greatest civilization the world has seen, and science has produced it. Therefore science is the greatest civilizing agency the world has ever known. This belief — for I am sure that a moment's sober thought will convince anyone that it is only a belief — is one of tremendous potency in the world of men and events, since it is nothing less than the basic faith of our civilization.

History records the appearance in various parts of the world of many empires which built themselves great cities and extended their influence far beyond the borders of their ancestors, but none of them was so great, so pervasive, or so sudden as our own triumph. None was so irresistible. In all the civilizations of the past there came a time when development and expansion could go no farther: the material and spiritual expedients of culture had

been carried to their point of highest conceivable development and spread abroad until they commenced to crack under the strain. But what limit can there be to our development? Our expedients are not accidental finds, they are derived from research and are therefore capable of indefinite elaboration; and our expansion has already, for the first time in human history, embraced the entire earth without encountering any obstacle of transportation or penetration, any resistance of nature or of hostile peoples which has not already been overcome.

Our triumph is complete; and yet, regarded from another point of view, its precariousness and possible transience are just as obvious and undeniable as its present magnitude. Our ability to overcome the resistance of nature and of other peoples to our spread is wholly due to the superiority of our mechanical arts. These may indeed derive from the potency of scientific truth; but it is not by knowledge alone that we have spanned the seas, and when we have arrived in our iron ships off the coast of foreign peoples it is not by syllogisms or scientific demonstrations that we have overcome their recalcitrancy. Our God has spoken to subdue the heathen through the mouths of bigger guns.

The one fatal defect of our position is that eventually even the heathens can build ships and guns — can and do. So potent is our technology that it not only carries us to the four corners of the earth but it carries itself there, takes root and grows, and may eventually dispense with us in favor of the heathen. Because the white peoples of the Occident have been first in the field with their industrial revolution, it does not at all follow that they will always be supreme. On the contrary, the priority which gave them so tremendous an advantage when they alone had become industrialized may be their fatal handicap when