

The Farmers' Friend

A Portrait of Alex Legge

By RAY T. TUCKER

THE saga of "Alex Legge," as he signs himself, and the Federal Farm Board gives ground for the conclusion that President Hoover must be both a practical and philosophic joker, since any other deduction drawn from the contrast between the former's practices and the latter's preachments would constitute a strange indictment of both men. Ever an opponent of political panaceas advanced for the farmer on Capitol Hill, which he once denounced as "economically unsound" and "state socialism," the President summarized his attitude toward farm legislation in his message to the special session that convened in April, 1929.

"No government agency," wrote Mr. Hoover, "should engage in the buying and selling and price-fixing of products, for such courses lead only to bureaucracy and domination."

It may be that Mr. Hoover did not comprehend all the implications of the agricultural marketing act which the Congress proceeded to enact at his behest. This is no fantastic suggestion, inasmuch as Mr. Legge, although a keener student of farm problems than the Chief Executive, has admitted before a Senate committee that twenty readings of the bill have not enlightened him as to its meaning or mandate. The central fact, however, is that Mr. Hoover selected this bulky, lanky, sandy and bold Scot as the czar of America's agricultural empire, and entrusted to him, in addition to all the authority of the federal government, the amazing sum of \$500,000,000 for administration of an unknown act.

Thus was inaugurated, amid a great deal of fun and fuming, an economic experiment which rivals in importance any that this nation has undertaken. Should Mr. Legge succeed along the lines which he has envisaged, it will mean that almost eighty per cent of the marketing and distributing facilities for agricultural products will be transferred from established agencies to the farmers themselves through control of cooperatives engaged in regulating production, storage, transportation, selling and distribution.

It may be, as many predict, that Mr. Hoover does not intend the experiment shall be carried to such an extreme. In-

deed, Mr. Legge himself seems to hold such fears, for again and again he hints that "I may be kicked out and probably will." Perhaps Mr. Legge cannot achieve any real and radical success in the face of the combined and vicious opposition of bankers, grain exchanges, boards of trade, live stock associations, organized millers and all their auxiliaries. Already his enemies have howled against him in the upstairs study of the White House, where Julius Barnes, the world's largest exporter of grain and close friend of the President, is said to have protested against what he regards as the board's encroachments upon legitimate business. Likewise, conservative financial interests and their political allies have lodged complaints against the board's "bol-shevik and paternalistic" policy of pegging the price of wheat and making actual purchases of this basic and precious commodity.

So far, however, Mr. Legge has retorted with characteristic abruptness to these hostile moves. "Well, what of it?" has been his invariable answer to rumors that he was antagonizing individuals and interests who feel—and with some justice—that they have a claim upon the Administration. Nevertheless, what Mr. Hoover thinks of Mr. Legge's almost revolutionary program is a question that has puzzled the capital since the latest chapter of agricultural history was written. More important still, how far this provocative philosopher of the soil will be permitted to press his program for destroying the middle-man structure is of vast importance to producers and consumers alike. He may be, as some think, simply seeking to furnish temporary relief to farmers suffering from surpluses born of their patriotism during the War, or he may be inaugurating a new economic age that will bring the farm and the urban pantry closer together. There are moments when he appears as a sturdy sans-culotte destined to roll golden heads in the dust, but there are others when the harassed chairman, his impassive, weather-beaten countenance and bent shoulders reflecting the burdens he carries, seems uncertain concerning his own course. Regardless of the outcome of the conflict,

no man in Washington or in all public life has, for the moment, presented such a challenge to the existing order, or to those who, like Mr. Legge himself, specialize in the study of human relations.

It is characteristic of the man, however, that, despite the possible significance of his program, the capital is much more interested in him as a stimulating individual than in his job. Even those who bitterly oppose and condemn his theories find themselves admiring his personality and praising his imperviousness to the threats and thunderings of his exalted foes. Without a doubt, he is, with possibly two exceptions—Dwight W. Morrow and Associate Justice Owen J. Roberts—the most colorful, exceptional and commanding figure to come to Washington since the War. It was, for instance, a measure of the man to discover that he would willingly sacrifice his post as president of the International Harvester Company to accept what he himself has called a "thankless job." It was even more refreshing to hear him inform a cynical committee investigating his fitness that he had not approached the Executive Offices with his hat in his hand, requesting an appointment. This man, from the start, has done things differently, and therefore he aroused Senatorial suspicion.

To the committee he said in a tone that was neither condescending nor consciously antagonistic:

"In the first place, gentlemen, I am not a seeker for this job. I am not even a volunteer. I am simply a drafted man. You can't hurt my feelings by sending me back home."

To a friend commissioned by the Senators to obtain some personal information he replied:

"Just tell 'em that I started out in life with the James boys and worked east until I got in with Al Capone and his Cicero gang."

The Senate showed its good sense by confirming him without objection, but there are many groups which, as he continues to upset their calculations and crops, are inclined to regard his reference to the "James boys" and "Al Capone" as something more than a figure of speech.

This first favorable impression of him was strengthened by his subsequent

treatment of haughty dowagers who sought to learn where he thought he should rank in the social scheme.

Inasmuch as he arrived at the capital when its households were torn by the Gann-Longworth feud, one hostess decided to take no chances, and appealed directly to him. She got little satisfaction, however, for he sent back word that "I will eat in the kitchen, if that will help." When invitations to this strange and self-effacing fellow grew too numerous, he dismissed them all with the unsocial announcement that "I cannot accept because I have to work nights." This message, as he anticipated, solved his and their social worries.

He even carried this unconventional attitude to the White House, much to the delight and amusement of President Hoover. Though the latter toils long hours at his desk and goes to bed early, it is doubtful if he rivals his farming friend in either respect, and Legge's eyes began to blink in the midst of the first reception which the President gave to members of the Board. To blink—or to think—with him is to act, and, stretching his arms, he suggested to an associate that they pull out.

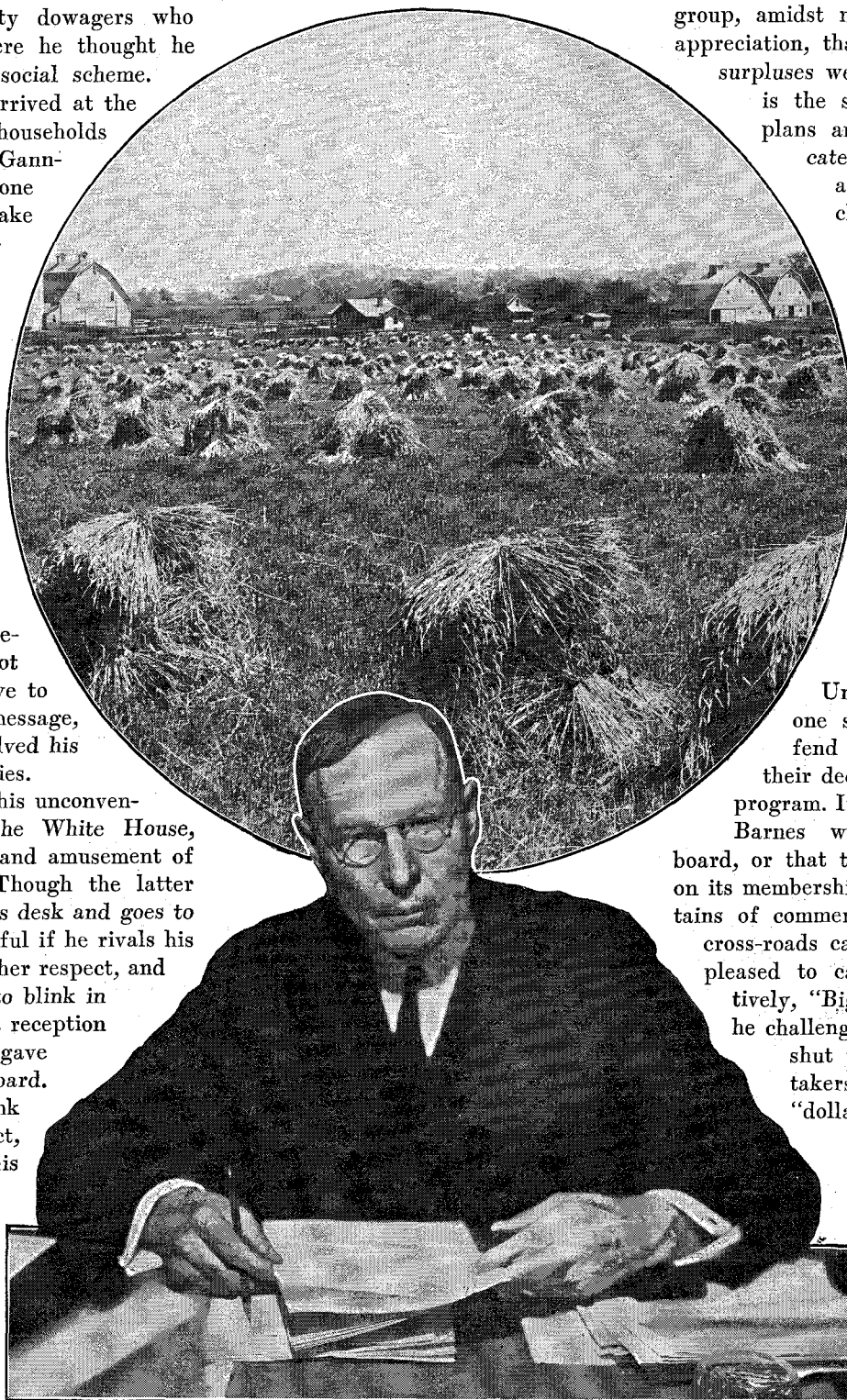
"But you can't do that," he was informed. "It isn't etiquette. You must wait until the President says, 'Good night.'"

"Humph," grunted Legge, and straightway he approached the host.

"Mister President," he began. "I'm tired and sleepy. Don't you think you ought to go to bed and get a little rest?"

Mr. Hoover soon took the hint, and was undoubtedly grateful for it.

In his contacts with the press and politicians and "Big Business," Legge exhibits the same frankness, fearlessness and allied characteristics. If anything, his plain-spokenness, though re-



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The Atlas of American farming

freshing in the midst of reticence, misrepresentation and downright hypocrisy, may sometimes be both a fault and a failure. When the editors of a Kansas newspaper ridiculed his original plea for reduction of acreage, and made the mistake of leaping into the headlines, he placed them in an even more ridiculous plight with his reply of "Give them my compliments and tell them to go to hell." When certain professional farm spokesmen took issue with him, he told a rival

group, amidst nationwide chuckles of appreciation, that "one of the biggest surpluses we have to contend with is the surplus of farm relief plans and farm leaders dedicated to leading them." He always alludes to exchange traders as "the pink slip boys" because dealings in futures are recorded on pink slips, and he does not hesitate to characterize as "gamblers" certain agencies which he holds to be non-essential and parasitic.

To the house of his greatest enemies—the imposing structure of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States—he strode one spring morning to defend himself and denounce their declaration of war on his program. It mattered not that Mr. Barnes was chairman of the board, or that this organization listed on its membership rolls gilt-edged captains of commerce as well as all the cross-roads camp followers who are pleased to call themselves, collectively, "Big Business." In effect, he challenged them "to put up or shut up," but he found no takers for his offer to match "dollar for dollar" any fund they might raise on behalf of the American farmer. In lieu thereof, he got only more resolutions which urged farm relief but assailed his practical program. Whereupon, he compared the Chamber's conduct to the mother's ad-

vice to a daughter who had begged that she be permitted to go swimming: "Hang your clothes on a hickory limb, my daughter, but don't go near the water."

This homely response, so typical of Legge, set both farmers and "city fellers" to roaring at the discomfiture of "the Chamber," and it endeared the chairman to agriculturists who had hitherto been suspicious of his own good intentions. Many a time has Legge

beaten off strongly intrenched critics with a phrase that was all the more devastating because it had its origin, like himself, right behind the red-painted barn. In action and appearance as well as in habit of thought and speech he is bumptiously bucolic, and, on occasions, quite profane. His profanity, however, is that of a universal Piers Plowman in that it is washable and usually printable.

A friendly and congenial fellow, he is seen to best advantage in his conferences with the press, which likes him if only for his bluntness and the open-door policy that he has practised ever since he rose out of the ranks of the International Harvester Company. Lumbering in like a great giant, he drops his six-foot-three and 300 pounds of athletic avoirdupois into a chair, balancing himself by placing his feet on a desk high above his head. He is a massive figure, with a large, pear-shaped head, farm-boy hands, sloping brow and shoulders bent as if to brace himself rather than bow before the storm he has raised. Although he is Lincolnesque in his homeliness, kindness shows in his narrow grey eyes—some one has likened their penetrating quality to an X-ray—his drooping mouth, his ruddy, clean-shaven face and his firm-set but almost feminine lips. A twinkle leaps into his keen eyes as he explains a complicated market policy to metropolitan reporters unacquainted with a flower garden, much less with vast acres of moving wheat. His stoicism is the wonder of those who have observed him in days crowded with drama, and, for him, with some tragedy. Though wheat may be tumbling to new lows, though he may be setting up overnight a \$90,000,000-corporation, though he may be absorbing punishment even he never anticipated, his host of troubles seem not to disturb him. There is, perhaps, as much of the fatalism of the man with the hoe as the faith of the business man behind his imperturbability. It is not improbable that he gets some relaxation from these conferences with youthful and excitable correspondents, who come seeking no favors or uttering no threats.

"Mr. Chairman," one begins, "we understand the Progressives are talking of you for President."

"The hell you say!" he grins.

"Mr. Chairman, the grain dealers and the millers are protesting that you are going to put them out of business."

"Well"—and his square jaws clamp shut—"isn't that just too bad?"

Or there may be a reference to the fact that Mr. Barnes has seen the President and is again on the warpath.

"Well," counters Legge, "what of it?"

When representatives of conservative journals try to force an admission that the board's pegging and purchasing have failed, inasmuch as the market has continued to fall, he replies:

"Stocks haven't come back all the way, have they? Do you expect them to reach 1929 levels right away?"

One evening, when it appeared that the market would sink so low as to carry agriculture and countless associated activities to disaster, the correspondents insisted that he lay his cards on the table. The board, they pointed out, had already lost millions, and might lose many more. What could he—what would he—do now? It was then that, in calm and ordinary voice, he gave a fleeting glimpse of the scale and stage on which he operates.

"The Board," he said, "still has sufficient credit balance to buy every bushel of wheat on the American market. That would do it, wouldn't it?"

It is mere recognition of the facts to suggest that few men in Washington would make such a statement while walking the political tight-rope that Legge is treading. He knows, of course, that Barnes and the grain trade were among the first to sponsor Mr. Hoover's campaign for the presidential nomination, and that many of them put up their own money to finance the fight. He knows, too, that the conservative man in the White House must suffer some qualms at the thought that Legge's program, if carried to its logical extreme, will sound a death knell to the Chicago wheat pit, to the Minneapolis Board of Trade, to the Omaha stock yards, to the cotton brokers, tobacco merchants, the millers and numerous strata of middle men. He has read in such journals as *The New York Herald-Tribune* references to his departure from "sound concepts," and he has seen his demand for regulation of the exchanges pilloried in print from Boston to Brownsville.

What, then, does he think of it all? In the first place, as an erstwhile corporation president frequently described as "hard-boiled," he does not concede that it is socialistic or directed against legitimate business. He maintains that he strives to apply to agriculture the same principles of management which have enriched business and industry. Agriculture, he insists, cannot drag

itself from the doldrums unless it restricts production to domestic demand, and exercises firm control over the system of marketing and distributing its products. Both ends, in his opinion, can be attained only by organization of individual and far-flung farmers into cooperatives that will enjoy the control and the cohesiveness of a board of directors of a single concern. Pending realization of that difficult program, he thinks it as proper for the government to extend funds and facilities to agriculture as it is for Uncle Sam to give a helping hand to industry through the tariff, to shipping through mail subsidies and construction loans, to banking through the Federal Reserve Act and to railroads through land grants and loans. Lastly, with an implied criticism of a complaining Congress and a silent President, he suggests that if his program be socialistic, the responsibility rests on the legislators who framed the agricultural marketing act and the President who signed it as a magna charta for the farmer.

Nevertheless, it throws some light on this warfare to learn that Legge has always been the natural enemy of those who oppose him now. As president of the farm machinery corporation, his interest was aligned with that of the farmer. Unless they were profitable, he could not sell them reapers, tractors and other implements. It was then, perhaps, that he first pored over the prospect that a large share of their labor was absorbed by the commission men and the traders on 'change. Though the International Harvester was frequently assailed as a "trust," it never failed to find friends among the farmers. Once, when it was sued in the Missouri courts, thousands of planters left their homes to appear and give testimony that they had long done business with it, and had found it helpful, honest and reasonable. In another year when there was a tremendous surplus of corn, Legge's company agreed to purchase the corn at a price well above the market figure as payment for past indebtedness and future obligations. It was, of course, excellent business for President Legge, but it saved many a farmer from immediate suffering and eventual ruin. Contrariwise, this transaction obviously worked to the detriment of the interests which had counted on taking advantage of the farmers' plight.

Subsequently, as vice-chairman of the War Industries Board, it was Legge

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