

Staff Paper

**THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF U.S. RURAL POLICY:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE PAST WITH
STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE**

by

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ABSTRACT

A coherent, successful U.S. policy addressing modern rural problems has never been created. The agrarian policies that transformed the productivity of agriculture inevitably led to a relative decline of the agrarian sector. This transformation deinstitutionalized the rural sector and transferred much of its human and financial capability elsewhere. Current obstacles to rural development policy include distorted public beliefs about modern rural society, domination of rural policy turf by farmer interest groups, the great diversity of rural economic interests, lack of intense rural interest groups, growing interdependence of rural with urban and global economies, and the location specific nature of development combined with spillovers of benefits (costs) from one political jurisdiction to another in a federal system. Potential new allies and characteristics of potential strategies to achieve a rural sector policy are discussed.

The Political Economy of U.S. Rural Policy:

An Exploration of the Past with Strategies for the Future

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This paper will explore three large questions. Why has a coherent, successful policy addressing modern rural problems never been created in the U.S.? What are the current obstacles to rural policy? What possible strategies and coalitions might hold some future promise for developing a U.S. rural policy? All of this will be pursued in a political economy focus on interest group development, behavior and role in U.S. rural policy. My ultimate purpose is conceptual but broad, to develop a strategic sense of the terrain that lies ahead of us. My belief is that a strategic understanding is one of the most important missing ingredients in U.S. rural policy efforts. I will not be able to explore that terrain in any detail. This paper argues, contrary to Reagan era policies, that a national rural policy of some sort is needed today.

Understanding the Past

In the middle of the nineteenth century the U.S. made a public policy choice for rural America. As a matter of national policy we chose to invest major public resources in the development and welfare of the farming or agrarian sector. This effort was calculated to prevent market forces from pushing "independent" American farmers back into a rural peasant society. The 19th

* I am greatly indebted to William P. Browne for seminarizing this subject with me, suggesting ideas from his consummate knowledge of U.S. interest groups and finally for a critical review of an early draft of the paper. I am also in the substantial debt of Lynn Harvey and David Schweickhardt for critical reviews of a draft of this paper.

century U.S. was a rapidly growing industrial and increasingly urban nation. In the course of development the terms of trade between agriculture and the nonagricultural sector inevitably turn against agriculture, and the welfare of those in agriculture lags farther and farther behind the rest of society (Anderson). Nineteenth century urban industrial incomes and productivity were rising and with it came a middle class fear that the American farmer would be forced back into a low level of welfare, indeed, into a European style peasant class existence. Middle class professionals believed that this would undermine the Republic's democratic institutions, which in turn would threaten the growing middle class (Bonnen 1987, pp.268-271).

The Agrarian Transformation

Thus, we chose to invest in the improved productivity and welfare of farmers. To do this we created new institutions. A national system of state land grant colleges was founded by the Morrill Act of 1862 to educate farmers (the rural "working class") and mechanics (the urban working class). In the same year the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) was established and the original Homestead Act passed. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the Homestead Acts established a settlement pattern and distributed property rights in a manner to assure rapid settlement of the land with fee-simple titles in the hands of many "independent" farmers (Osbourn). Nation-wide agricultural research (1887) and extension (1914) institutions were eventually added to the Land Grant System. Land reclamation and drainage were encouraged by laws and new institutional arrangements. We invested in the basic infrastructure of agriculture developing institutions and programs for rural free delivery of mail, rural roads, common market standards for farm products, and later rural electrification, soil conservation, and long-term, intermediate and short-term farm credit--all through national policy (Bonnen 1987, p. 286). Public policy was used to create a successful rural elite, built around farming and related agricultural industries.

The fundamental force behind agrarian economic development is compelling. It accompanies successful industrial development in all industrial nations. Failure to improve the productivity of farming prevents the transfer of labor and capital from the agrarian sector, and eventually constrains, if not halts, industrialization. As the nonfarm sector grows, the demand for labor accelerates (outrunning population growth), labor and capital costs rise, the nation loses its competitive edge in trade and its economic growth slows -- if there is no movement of labor force and capital from farming to urban, industrial employment. Thus, not only is an agrarian transformation absolutely inevitable in a successfully developed nation, but so are the consequent problems of the transformed rural community left behind.

What are these problems? Continued improvement in the productivity of the farming sector, in the face of the low price and income elasticities and competitive markets that prevail for farm commodities, inevitably means that fewer and fewer farmers are needed to provide a growing supply of food. This creates the social dilemma and value conflicts that we have faced ever since in American agriculture. National policy has increased farm productivity but political rhetoric has also promised to save all family farms while (since World War II) assuring good incomes for all. Those farmers who have the least financial staying power, or are least efficient and unable to adapt to the new technologies and new institutions eventually leave agriculture for other employment. In effect, we have extruded the potential peasants to the city or at least to other employment. Most of these people (but not all) improved their level of welfare beyond that they experienced in farming. The next generation after migration usually had access to improved educational and employment opportunities. Despite agrarian rhetoric to the contrary, most of the migrants moved in response to greater opportunities elsewhere -- not because of farm foreclosures by evil bankers or loss of jobs to technology.

Note, however, what did not happen in rural America. What did not happen was the development of rural political institutions and economic structures independent of farming and agriculture. Forestry and mining should perhaps be included with farming in this generalization. But in any case, the political economy of rural America was institutionalized around agriculture, and to a lesser degree, forestry and mining. Only farming was controlled locally. These became the power centers of late 19th and early 20th century rural America. They are all industries, indeed, natural resource based industries. Most public policies created were not focused on rural communities or people but were industrial policies. Our concern in the nineteenth century was for conquering the continent and exploiting the great bounty of resources then unconquered and underdeveloped. We paid little or no public policy attention to rural communities, their institutions and people, or the environment. This is not what the agrarian's wanted. Indeed, up until the Great Depression they were in general reluctant and uncomprehending participants in most of the policies imposed on them by the larger society (Scott).

Between 1920 and 1978, 41 million people migrated from US farms -- 31 million since 1940 (Historical Statistics, p. 457; Statistical Abstract, p. 649)! But this was not just a transfer of population. What happened in the agrarian transformation was a deinstitutionalization of rural America, an erosion of the base of the human and institutional resources of rural communities. It did not just undermine the population base for small town businesses and for schools. It first focused power in farmer organizations and interest groups and then, with the decline of the agrarian sector, left behind rural communities whose basic institutions were underdeveloped and weak. No empowered rural community political institutions or interest groups developed in the agrarian transformation.

One would think that such a radical transformation of the institutional structure of rural America would have created a clear-eyed understanding of the resulting rural community problems with some policy response by now. This, of course, has not happened. Partly, the failure is due to the lack of well-organized rural community institutions stretching from local communities to the state, region, and nation to provide a voice for rural society. It is also due to an agrarian fundamentalism, which; whatever its original validity, is today a myth promoted by cynical farm interests (including many advocates of alternative agriculture), and by the media (Montmarquet; Davis; Griswold). Even country music (especially singers such as Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson) promotes agrarian fundamentalism as the recent Farm Aid concerts demonstrate. These songs usually project a romanticized rural landscape inhabited only by farmers and their farms. Perhaps other things have obscured the reality of rural life from the society, but the fact is that the transformation of rural society has remained obscured and not understood by society.

It also should be noted that U.S. agrarian policy has gone through a major transformation over the period since the mid-nineteenth century. Up to the Great Depression, most of the legislation enacted in support of rural society (i.e., agriculture) was general social legislation. This legislation created primarily public goods that were made available to all members of rural society, often to members of the entire society. In the crisis of the Great Depression, however, general social legislation was pushed into the background as Congress created the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933 and other specialized pieces of farm legislation that provided many selective goods. Selective goods provide material benefits only to specific groups in society. This had a great impact.

Interest Group Formation and Public Policy

In the 19th century, farmer organizations were expressive, having only the common emotional or value ties of their vocation to hold them together. Such organizations tend to be unstable and short lived, even though some were quite influential for brief periods in the late nineteenth century when decades of depressed prices created a farm revolt in the form of the populist movement. This radical political movement led to the first anti-trust legislation and to the regulation of U.S. railroads (Hicks). When you create legislation that provides specific benefits to limited groups, such as farmers or only wheat farmers, and when those selective goods substantially affect the welfare of that group, you also have created a sufficient incentive for organizing permanent (i.e., stable) interest groups. This we did in the AAA Acts of 1933 and 1938. There were already organizations of wheat farmers or other farm commodity producers, but these were self-help organizations devoted mostly to communicating with other farmers and to improving farm productivity. They had little or no relationship to government or public policy. With the introduction of national commodity legislation these organizations quickly developed a new purpose and a national presence in Washington, D.C. That is, they began to participate in policy formation, since each commodity group's welfare was so directly and significantly affected by commodity policy decisions made in Congress and the USDA. Agrarian policy has not been the same since. Farm interest groups have become active policy participants and the expression of intense interest in agricultural policy has narrowed mostly to commodity policy since the farm legislation of the 1930s (Bonnen 1980).

From the mid 19th century on, farm policy has been equated with rural policy. That is, the political players at the national level have understood themselves to be improving rural life,

when they improved farm welfare. This was not unreasonable when farm people were 50 to 90% of the rural population and accounted for about as much of rural economic activity. But today farm residents account for less than 8% of the rural population and it is not a reasonable belief. This belief will continue to deflect concern for other dimensions of rural community welfare as long as the power structure of rural society is dominated by narrow agricultural interests and almost all national support for rural institutions is focused on agrarian interests. Commodity interest groups and their contentious partners in agribusiness and the general farm organizations have dominated what passes for rural policy since the Great Depression. Since agrarian interests dominate the existing institutional structure, rural communities have great difficulty in getting issues on the agenda and expressing effectively any other voice for rural policy. Periodically you will hear governors and various rural professional organizations express concerns about rural community welfare, but there has not been any effective organization of rural community interests. Agricultural interest groups have preempted the rural political domain and continue to dominate it. The executive branch and the Congress have joined in close partnership with these agricultural interests to manage the agrarian policies created since the 1930s (Bonnen and Browne). This has institutionalized an agrarian voice for rural America that effectively excludes rural community interests.

The Media's Role

Finally, in the period since World War II the media have become an important participant in the policy process affecting the outcomes of policy in the U.S. The Farm Crisis of the early eighties leading up to the passage of the 1985 Farm Security Act provided an insight into the role of the media. The media influenced the public perception of an economic and social crisis

of rural America in several ways. It focused almost exclusively on farms and on farm problems and it created a distorted image of rural life in turn distorting the problem that policy was expected to address. The ultimate media event was one in which several prominent actresses, who had recently starred in movies celebrating the agrarian myth, testified in Congress on farm policy. Jane Fonda told the Congress that farmers were in the worst shape in which they had been since her father starred in the *Grapes of Wrath*. Jessica Lange shed copious tears for the demise of the small farmers in Minnesota where she grew up, and Sissy Spacek added the credibility of a good East Texas country accent to an otherwise urban accented chorus. Subsequently CBS produced a series featuring the farm crisis that aired during their regular news cast. It projected the values of agrarian fundamentalism and focused entirely on agriculture and farmers ignoring the problems of the majority of people attempting to survive in a depressed rural America.

But the Media are more dupes than villains in this drama. The ideological roaring of factually self-confused but righteous agrarian advocacy groups and radical new farm organizations drew the attention of the media to the rural crisis. Since the rage of these groups took the classic agrarian fundamentalist form of "save the family farm" from being gobbled up by evil bankers and corporate America, the media, in producing their 30 second spots for television, became fixated on farm auctions, crying farm wives, beautiful sunsets and tranquil rural landscapes. The public was transfixed and despite the largest peace time federal budget deficit in history opinion polls surged with support for saving the family farm with more public dollars (CBS, Plissner).

Given this marvelous political opening, the traditional commodity and commercial agricultural interests (who had been very quiet to this point) proceeded to wrap themselves in these symbols

of the agrarian myth so conveniently provided by advocacy groups and the Media. Traditional farm interests cynically exploited this distorted public sense of crisis to extract more of the usual public subsidies for commercial agriculture from the 1985 farm legislation. Given their interests, they behaved in a perfectly rational manner (Browne, 1988, ch. 4 and 5).

While an increasing number of highly leveraged farmers were in trouble, the facts are that the migration out of rural America looking for better economic opportunities had begun anew in the eighties (after temporarily reversing in the late 1970s) but the flow was primarily from rural communities and families who did not live on farms. The cause of 1980s rural distress is only partially due to the loss of economic welfare among farmers. The globalization of international commodity markets and the resulting competition is now affecting the employment potential of many firms in rural America. For a decade U.S. monetary policy and the slow economic growth of the nation have also had a serious impact on rural community employment. Except where buoyed by spillover of growth from adjacent metros or by recreation and retirement community growth, rural America is now in decline -- with little or no national policy response.

The Current Obstacles to Rural Policy

What is the nature of the rural policy problem and its political context today? What are the obstacles today to development of a U.S. rural policy (Swanson)? Agricultural institutions and power structure dominate the rural policy turf and the media consistently communicates to the American public an agrarian myth and an idealized rural society populated only by farm families, feed stores and implement dealers. Thus, as long as farmers are doing all right everything is fine in rural America. In other words, there is no need for a vision of rural

America; we have an agrarian vision. Never mind that it has little relationship to the reality of modern rural life or even the facts of today's agriculture. In such a context politicians in the Congress and, indeed, in state legislatures generally ignore rural society and want concrete prescriptions backed up by evidence of political support before addressing issues raised about rural communities. They want a clear definition of any non-farm rural problem and a persuasive prescription of what to do about it. This means that Congress does not have any vision with respect to rural society. After all, rural is just farm and Congress has and continues to do enough, indeed, many congressmen believe more than enough, for farmers. For similar reasons neither the USDA nor the President generally feel any need to have a policy position or to take action on rural policy. It's already taken care of.¹

The lesson here is that it makes a difference what the public believes, what its factual beliefs as well as value beliefs are. These become supports for or obstacles to specific policy goals. Thus, the images society holds about rural matters are important. It should be noted that besides the dominant image of rural as agricultural, urban people tend to value the rural landscape as an attractive place to visit and in which to recreate and relax. This image holds a positive potential for political support of rural community issues, but at present it is doubtful if urban people consciously associate an attractive rural landscape and its recreation potential with rural nonfarm people and their problems.

The thing that pours public misperceptions of rural society into political concrete is that there are no well-organized, national interest groups with significant influence focused around rural community issues. This is a by-product of the lack of a viable institutional structure for rural

¹William Nagle has recorded the few exceptions that prove this rule (Nagle).

society and the current concentration of rural power in farm interest groups and institutions. There are a few vocal rural (in contrast to agricultural) advocacy groups but they have never developed much real political clout. During the Reagan Administration most faded away, some completely. A select few have obtained some resources from foundation sources in recent years and are now more active and visible again. But so far this has had little apparent impact in the policy process.

A Multiplicity of Obstacles

Looking at the literature one finds the lack of a political base for modern rural policy attributed to a multiplicity of sources. One is the heterogeneity of economic and social conditions and value beliefs in rural America. Another is the basic weaknesses and lack of capacity of local units of government. Even though these units have grown substantially since World War II, demand for services has grown faster. This combines with the society's misconceptions about the nature and needs of rural society, confusing agrarian with rural, and romanticizing farm life. Of course, farm interest groups have preempted the rural political turf. Finally, in the post-World War II period the growing interdependence of nonmetropolitan with metropolitan markets and more recently global market interdependence have blurred the identity of what is rural and made more complex the construction of any rural policy vision. One could go on, but these are the major causes commonly described in the literature for the lack of a coherent political base for U.S. rural policy. As William Nagle puts it, rural policy is "a policy in search of a constituency" (p. 235).

American and Rural Values

Not often pointed to by social scientists, but not completely ignored, is the fact that U.S. and rural values do not support collective action even at local levels. Nowhere are the values of rugged individualism, as a basic American belief, stronger than in rural America. At its worst individualism leads to violence as a means for resolution of conflicts, which we have romanticized and made heroic in the western movie and on TV where, of course, the good guys always win. This interpretation is important since Americans now seem to acquire most of their understanding of history from the entertainment media. The real history of rural America and particularly the frontier demonstrates that the powerful usually win, and they are not always the good guys with the white hats. Rugged individualism is combined with the commitment to freedom and liberty (for those with power), both as values and as constitutional rights. All of this, in turn, supports the strong American belief in the economic value of free enterprise. Thus, this strong value set must be overcome in some degree to achieve collective action.

To this one must add the 19th century decisions of the Supreme Court establishing the practice in which property rights are assigned in fee simple. That is, when property is transferred few, if any, rights are reserved, by either the seller or the community, unless made explicit in the contract of transfer. The main exceptions involve local zoning ordinances, some government regulations, and the use of eminent domain to condemn property for public or quasi public purposes. Regulation and zoning constraints have expanded to become more onerous as population pressures have increased and as we have developed more complex technologies involving greater danger to people and to the food chain and the environment. Nevertheless, the allocation of property rights in the U.S. retains a strong form, which often creates other

obstacles to collective action. This is especially the case when one realizes that the expectations governing property rights for real property have been extended to public and private services and to government program benefits. There is a general presumption that anything that has been allocated by government has been allocated in perpetuity and is part of some social contract.

The irony in this is that collective action in the form of federal subsidies, public investments and programs were critical to the original development of the resources of the nation, for example, in the construction of highways, waterways and the railroads. It has been observed about the development of U.S. agriculture that "we socialized the costs and privatized the benefits." These public investments were complements to private sector investments. They made faster growth possible with higher rates of return on private investments that would otherwise have been very much lower or in some cases would have been so negative over such a sustained period that private investment would never have occurred. This is especially true of large scale infrastructure investments. U.S. laws and other institutions were tilted to favor exploitation of resources so that it became very difficult to deflect private sector investors (speculators) from their developmental purposes either through collective action or litigation. I would again point to the values of agrarian fundamentalism and the romantic image of rural as an ideal society as also standing in the way of collective action on rural policy for reasons already cited above.

Rural Development in a Federal System²

An additional barrier to an effective rural development policy is the lack of adequate vertical linkages among various levels of government. Rural economic problems are predominately location-specific, requiring any "national" policy to be tailored to local needs. At the same time, underdeveloped or lagging rural areas ultimately have an impact on the economic welfare of citizens beyond the boundaries of any local government. Rural education, for example, can impose a distorted distribution of costs when graduates of rural schools migrate to other states in search of better economic opportunities. If the rural school does provide an adequate education, it is exporting the community's human capital investment to the students' new home state. If the rural school underinvests in education, the recipient state may be forced to bear the cost of an inadequately educated work force (Tweeten, pp 103-111). Given the many jurisdictions of national, state, and local government that are affected by rural public services, the benefits of any rural development policy (or, conversely, the costs of continued rural underdevelopment) will be widely shared throughout American society. This multiplicity of jurisdictions has both political and economic consequences.

First, the need to coordinate national, state, and local organizing efforts in favor of a rural development policy provides farm commodity interest groups an immediate political advantage over broader rural interests. Farm interests are able to portray rural development as a one-dimensional issue (it will be solved by maximizing farm program spending) and can concentrate on one level of government (national) to promote their agenda, while broader rural issues can

²I am indebted to David Schweikhardt for reminding me that our work on fiscal federalism in another context is quite as relevant to the economic development of local communities and states. This section is constructed around his cogent comments.

only be addressed by multiple levels of government, thereby raising the transaction costs of developing a broad rural policy. As a result, farm interests are able to promote a narrow agenda and the wider rural agenda is neglected.

Second, this multiplicity of jurisdictions and consequent spillovers requires the various levels of government to develop a coordinated system for sharing the costs of a rural development policy. If there truly is a national interest in promoting the economic health of rural areas, then the costs of restoring such health must be shared in an equitable manner by national, state, and local governments. Ironically, a model of such a cost-sharing program is provided by the success of the land grant system.

In a federal system of government, the benefits generated by public services often accrue to persons outside the immediate jurisdiction in which the service is provided. Without a cost-sharing system that internalizes these benefits, local jurisdictions will have little incentive to provide a socially optimal level of investment in such public services. Part of the genius of the land grant system was that it was the prototype of subsequent cost-sharing systems. By matching federal dollars with each state dollar spent on agricultural research and extension, the national government internalized most of the spillover of benefits created by state-level research and promoted the development of a coherent national research policy -- one that addressed local research needs and provided an adequate level of research investment nationally. Without such a cost-sharing system, the establishment of a rural development policy that is both location-specific and national in scope is unlikely.

The clear implication of this economic reality of a federal system is that the eight years of the Reagan Administration's "new federalism" was intellectually confused and probably destructive of the society's larger interests. This "new federalism" held that there was no legitimate national role in rural policy, and that location specific economic development was a state and local responsibility as was provision of a "safety net" for the poor (e.g. AFDC and food stamps). There was a general devolution of federal roles to the states. But categorical grants to states and local government were consolidated into block grants and then block grants subsequently eliminated, forcing one to conclude that, despite the rhetoric, the Reagan "new federalism" was little more than an effort to dismantle the existing coordinated structure of fiscal federalism by eliminating the role of national government (Conlan). This runs completely counter to the current state of knowledge on fiscal federalism in the public finance literature. How responsibilities should be distributed and what the appropriate funding devices are is a reasonable question, which is in part a political and in part an empirical economic question about the existence and nature of spillovers from one jurisdiction to another.

Lack of Intense Rural Interests

Rural development lacks an effective political base, not only at the national, but at state and local levels. When you look around the political landscape of rural America you do not find many already organized intense interests. As a consequence, there are few if any effective and influential interest groups working in the interest of rural communities, even at local and state levels. The reason for this is found in the historical development of interest groups. Almost all interest groups are formed after the creation of an intense interest flowing from large scale private sector activity benefiting or injuring specific groups but more frequently following the

creation of federal or state programs that create major selective benefits for (or impose significant costs on) some small identifiable group. When that happens there is a strong incentive to organize; that is, the creation of the program providing significant selective benefits (or costs) creates an intense interest, which leads to organization. There have been so few public programs created for rural America that there are very few well organized interests that one can point to; even rarer are those organized at both the state and federal levels. Due to the diversity of rural society there is no closely related or coherent bundle of issues to which most rural people respond and around which they might be organized. Thus, there is no natural constituency around which to form a broad-based, rural interest group.

In addition, the behavior of local politicians today reflects the current diversity of rural and state interests. There exist few commonalities of interest among them, making it very difficult for them to organize around issues and all but impossible to organize around broader, more general subject matters. At the local level the politician typically faces conflicts between rural interests. At the state and national level politicians typically represent rural and urban interests. This creates very complex politics and makes it difficult to build the political base to represent rural interests either for a politician or interest group leaders.

In addition, even those interests that have successfully created national, state and/or local organizations usually face such diverse views internally as well as between organized interests that there are few issues that are relevant to two or more organizations. There are many organizations with relevance to rural society. There are for example the National Association of Towns and Townships, the National Association of Counties, the National Governors Association, the National Council of State Legislators plus many professional associations

organized around common local and state elected and appointed positions that are common to various units of government, i.e., sheriffs, mayors, police chiefs, planning officials, attorney generals, etc. Since these groups have diverse views internally and relatively limited overlap of interest between organizations, they also have great difficulty acting in concert. As a consequence, one must conclude that transaction costs (the costs of informing a decision, reaching an agreement and enforcing it) for organizing such interests are high and that there has been little to hold even narrow issue oriented coalitions together. This is to say nothing of the old style, broad coalitions, which have effectively disappeared from the national scene (Browne, 1990).

The only organizations with an intense and nearly exclusive interest in rural society, of which I am aware, are the National Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives (NAREC) and the National Rural Health Association (NRHA). The demand for electricity in rural areas is dependent on economic development, thus the rural electric cooperatives are dependent on that growth for their own growth and economic vitality. NAREC focuses its support on infrastructure and the recruiting of industry to rural areas. This is an example of a national program (REA) established by Congress to provide selective benefits not for just farmers but rural communities and people and around which there is now an interest group organization (NAREC) that is relatively strong. Their leadership's views have varied over the years and they have found very few allies with whom to fight the rural development wars. The other interest group with an exclusive rural constituency is the relatively new, and still developing, National Rural Health Association. Much of the impetus for NRHA comes from the long standing discrimination against rural people in payment schedules for medicare. There are, of course, many other rural interest groups (Fisher).

Strategies for the Future

Having delineated the many obstacles that lie in the way of effective rural policy, let us speculate on the question of what possible strategies and coalition tactics hold some promise.

Some Conceptual Notions

First, let me describe the logical content of a successful policy action. Second, when you look at the movement of a policy issue from problem definition to examination of possible options for action, to the act of selecting and setting in place a specific policy, one sees a historical pattern. I believe these two matters identify the prerequisites for all major, successful policy innovations.

Any recommendation for action and any decision to act is prescriptive. Prescriptive statements are "ought" or "should" statements that have very specific logical content. Any claim about what we should do contains some set of persuasive beliefs about values (value knowledge) that is supportive of the prescribed end being addressed. In addition, all such statements contain some set of persuasive beliefs about factual knowledge, or if you will "relatively value-free knowledge," that is also supportive of the prescribed end in view. These two general types of knowledge are processed through the decision rules that govern the policy making process to produce a prescriptive statement. Decision rules in turn depend on and arise out of the distribution of power that currently dominates the relevant decision making process. All too frequently we identify only part of this paradigm as a prerequisite for policy action (Johnson, pp. 54-63, 94-103).

Historical patterns of major (not minor or incremental) policy innovations, demonstrate three distinct stages. For example, at the start of the nearly two-decade long debate preceding the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) as well as at the beginning of the long effort leading to the Soil Conservation Act, and other major innovations in policy, you find there was not an adequate base of support from which so large a policy change could be mounted. The prerequisites were not in place. That is the situation today in rural policy. If there is to be a future rural policy that is not confused with agriculture, we must go through the three stages for establishing an effective policy innovation. The first of these stages is that in which a problem is broadly defined and an ideology or the value system that supports the general goal of creating some kind of rural policy or policies is developed. One has to persuade the public and/or the power holders (an elite) that there is a problem and that we ought to do something about it -- indeed, that we have a moral obligation to act. This involves both kinds of knowledge; value knowledge, and relatively value-free knowledge in a strong prescriptive and ideological form. One may describe this stage as involving a growing public profession of faith in the moral necessity of a rural policy. One has to go forth to convert the heathen -- the unbelievers. Thus, most major changes in societal commitments are preceded by a recognizable social movement. Many academics, especially those inclined toward logical positivism, do not recognize the necessity for the first stage since it is value dominated.

After sufficient commitment has been mobilized, one enters a second stage in which the believers say to each other "OK, we agree on the necessity for rural policy and we have mobilized enough societal support to get moving. What are the realistic alternatives for action? What are the alternative policy actions that might be followed to achieve our agreed-on but still broadly defined goal?" This is primarily an analytic and educational stage although it, like the

first, can also be one of great conflict. The second stage involves ordering the expected distribution of and total costs and benefits of alternative paths for action. After sufficient time has been spent examining options, one option or, more commonly, some combination of several options will evolve as the most desirable and/or broadly supported and a choice among the options will be made.

At this point you have reached the third stage in which specific legislation is designed, lobbied through the Congress or state legislature and implemented. In other words, you begin to ask, "what details do we put into the legislation? What rules and organizations (i.e., institutions) as well as resources do we create to implement our choice?"

What one has done over this entire period is steadily narrow the scope of the debate, increasing the odds of coming to some successful conclusion, even though that conclusion typically is some kind of compromise. In some instances the population that one addresses and must convert and educate is very large, as in the case of soil conservation where most farmers and landlords had to be persuaded in some substantial degree. Once laws are passed the average person will tend to accept them, although you will often have some people who continue to behave otherwise, just as we did not fully persuade everyone that soil conservation was a good idea before that legislation was enacted. So the stages often overlap, interact and are to some extent pursued simultaneously.

Thus, it is absolutely necessary to develop both a morally persuasive value belief base and a factually persuasive base for policy action. Also in designing strategies one must tailor it to existing decision rules (and the distribution of power that lies behind them), if you are to get

beyond good intentions in developing a successful prescription for a major policy innovation. This involves a degree of pragmatism that many "true believers" find hard to accept.

Possible New Actors

The conventional wisdom on how to achieve a goal in the policy process is to form a winning coalition. We have seen that so far this has not been possible for rural policy, but before discarding it entirely let us explore the possibilities of coalitions with new actors. Who are the potential new actors? Under what conditions can coalitions with such new actors be formed? What kind of coalitions? It is quite clear at this point that the only kind of coalitions with other actors that are possible today are narrow, often single issue coalitions (Browne, 1990). Broad classic coalitions of yesteryear are no longer possible, given the decision rules and distribution (diffusion) of power in the Congress, Executive Branch, political parties, etc. The only possibility for coalition now lies in organizing around specific, narrow issues. Thus, it is not possible to form a broad coalition behind rural policy as a whole.

There are two sets of potential new actors that one might consider in strategies to achieve specific new rural policies; the environment movement and central cities. The environmental movement is made up of many different organizations of increasing influence (Morrison). These advocacy groups are now consolidating the first stage (and entering the second stage) of convincing people of the need for action to protect the environment. In the process, the environmental movement is stripping from farmers the public's belief that farmers are the stewards of the land. Increasingly environmentalists are viewed as the real stewards of the land today and not farmers. Unless farm organizations join issue coalitions with the environmental

movement (rather than stonewalling), public support for agrarian policies must eventually be undermined. Public support for the environmental movement is growing. The question is what issues do rural community and environmental interests have in common? What values support these interests? What interests are already organized? I do not know the answers. The environmental movement is a diverse, often conflicting, set of organizations. It takes greater knowledge of the advocacy groups in the environmental movement than I currently have, and also some real thought as to what rural policy issues it is possible jointly to organize around.

If coalitions are to be formed with the environmental movement, and if the opening that the environmental movement seems to be creating for replacing the agrarian power structure with rural community institutions is to be exploited, one must begin to organize the rural environmental interests into something more coherent. Many environmental issues involve rural areas, but they are primarily driven by middle-class, urban and suburban values and concerns. Urbanites are not generally concerned about the people who live in the rural areas that would be affected by many proposed environmental policies. Indeed, there are direct conflicts of interest between rural jobs and environmental, especially preservationist, goals. Only some rural and environmental issues are compatible and some issues will have to be reformulated to make coalitions feasible. Even temporary rural coalitions with environmental interests will not be possible otherwise.

The other general set of possible new actors are those of the central cities where, as with rural, there is yet no identifiable social movement. There are many local level organizations and a few national groups. However, except for racial and civil rights issues I do not believe that intense interests have yet formed at the national level. The reason to believe that central city interests

hold rural coalition possibilities is that the central cities face many of the same social pathologies and problems that the rural areas do. Some central city members of the state legislature have periodically formed coalitions with rural legislators around specific issues in order to achieve shared legislative goals. These have been temporary issue coalitions.

Strategically many issues will have to be framed to appeal to an urban and suburban middle class in order to organize effectively the interests of the central city or rural society. By 1992 a majority of the U.S. voters will live in suburban areas. This demographic shift combined with the decline of big city political machine influence will push central city politicians toward coalition formation in state legislatures. The tendency of many advocacy groups to focus solely on the poor and on the poverty issue is self-defeating. The middle class is not much affected by appeals to do something about poverty. Some issues will have to be framed so that the suburbanite can identify with them and so it is clear that middle class interests are affected.

Prerequisites for Success

The development of rural societal interests is clearly in the earliest stage. With the potential decline of the agricultural or agrarian dominance of rural society's turf, one sees some glimmerings of opportunity, but a foundation must be developed first. This begins with investments in advocacy professing the moral necessity for doing something about the central issues of relevance to rural society. Thus, private foundations and other non-public sources of funding and entrepreneuring must invest in advocacy groups to explore and promote beliefs about the need for specific rural policies to improve the welfare not just of rural people but of society. The Aspen Institute and the Ford Foundation have started down this road. There are

a few others. Selling the values of and need for rural policy to the broader public must focus on empowered components of the broader public, which is predominantly middle class and urban or suburban. If we do not create a believable problem definition and frame it within some ideal value set, action is not possible. Eventually this involves the development of media campaigns and efforts to persuade intellectuals and other opinion-making elites. Issues must be constructed around persuasive problems embedded in supporting values that have broad appeal. The media have a role in this and must be drawn away from their policy-disordering, romantic agrarian views of rural. They must be led to focus on other values/symbols that are more relevant to the rural society of today. Advocacy groups must explore the potentials for local, state and national issue coalitions for political action. We must understand and explore possible lines of action. I do not believe we yet understand this opportunity set.

Advocacy also requires that we improve our factual knowledge about the issues that impact rural America. Indeed, the facts about rural America and their implication for society as a whole are needed to attract the attention of the media and society to rural issues. This necessitates improvement in the rural data base which, as it stands, is quite inadequate. Without past USDA research on rural society and its limited data collection we would know even less. However, there needs to be a USDA-university research and policy analysis coalition to broaden this factual knowledge base. Researchers and statisticians need to develop and campaign for new concepts of rural and urban to be used in data collection and analysis. We need to identify a multi-variable continuum or set of categories that is more realistic than the naive definitions now in use -- i.e., "urban" (places of 2,500+), all else being "rural", or "metropolitan statistical areas" with all else being "non metro". These current concepts hide so much heterogeneity that for many analytical purposes and for understanding most rural (or urban) problems they are

next to useless (Butler; Bender et. al.). Only broad brush generalizations are possible and they are often suspect. Next in importance is the need for better integration of data bases for rural decision making. We need to make it possible for rural decision makers to understand their problems better. This means that data bases relevant to rural decision needs, which are now scattered across two-thirds of the cabinet agencies in Washington, need to be better integrated. This is no small task, since many are not built around the same set of concepts or definitions and are collected and maintained for different purposes through different institutional systems often using different collection methods. Thus, the data that result are not very compatible and cannot presently be combined to provide accurate, stable data sets. Many other improvements are needed in the rural data base (Rural America; Deavers).

There are only a handful of land grant colleges where rural development has been kept alive as an area of research. The Economic Research Service (ERS) of the USDA has been the primary keeper of the flame. ERS together with the National Agricultural Statistics Service have the potential for making major contributions to a rural data base.

Advocacy groups also need better data and analysis on relevant rural issues, if they are to be successful. Indeed, many young advocacy groups have yet to appreciate their need for accuracy in problem definition and in the prescriptions they profess. They need the help of good analysts and researchers. Needless to say the bridge of cooperation between advocacy and science is difficult to construct and maintain. But it is necessary.

When one gets beyond the point of problem definition and the necessity for advocacy of rural policies, one faces a strategic question. Do you organize a broad coalition around all issues ---

i.e., a rural development coalition? Or do you organize and selectively attack individual issues? Clearly the latter is the only option open today. Since stable, intense interests generally form only after you have put a program in place, we need to identify, develop and get enactment of statewide and nationwide programs focused on specific issues that deliver selective goods to a significant number of rural and other people affected by the problem or issue. Then and only then will it be possible to organize intense political interest groups around those issues and programs. Programs creating an intense interest are unfortunately a prerequisite in most cases to the effective, long term organization of politically influential interests. Strategically, one must look around the rural landscape for those issues or problems that are most urgent, potentially organizable, and easiest understood by the public. It may help if they are issues that are already partly organized.

Within this identified universe of potential issue targets, what strategy should one follow in trying to develop a narrow, interest-based foci for legislation? It seems to me that strategically you start with a focus on existing, organized interests and institutions of rural society. As weak as many are, some are growing in strength and many already know and dominate their issue turf. Let me point to a few.

Perhaps the most rapidly growing potential lies in rural medical and hospital service systems, where we have had major problems over several decades. Discrimination in federal medical program payments has given the National Rural Health Association an organizing boost. As small rural hospitals have closed, some urban hospitals have developed various kinds of responses that range from helicopter emergency medivac services to the development of branch clinics in rural areas. Metropolitan hospitals are trying to stabilize the demand for services in

the face of the overexpansion of hospitals and the growth of substantial excess capacity of hospital services (for those who can afford them) in some metropolitan areas. These hospitals have developed a vested economic interest in the success of feeder clinics, air ambulances and other services in suburban and rural areas. They need public financial support and have been getting it from some state and local units of government. We need to build on this to develop political pressures for national level support. Similarly, one can turn to the existing rural public housing organizations, some of which go back to Sam Rayburn's original legislation providing rural retirement housing, and in which many rural communities now have a substantial interest. An advocacy group, the National Rural Housing Coalition, is already operating in this area.

Rural school systems (including community colleges) also present a potential for organizing. They offer a broad base and if organized from the grass roots to the national level they would have a substantial potential. Some rural transportation systems are being developed. Some are purely public in nature others are mixed public/private, but they represent a growing response to the deregulation that has left many rural communities isolated from the national network of bus, rail and air transportation. Transportation is a significant need in many remote urban and rural areas, but it is generally an unorganized interest with no clear focus. Rural tourist and recreation interests have various associations that might be developed into a more coherent voice. These organizations are strategic components in the rural areas of the nation (about 500 counties) that are dependent on recreation and tourism for growth. Finally, the state associations of manufacturing in many states have substantial links to small manufacturers many of whom are located in rural areas. All of these interests should be explored for their potential.

Characteristics of an Institutional System for Rural Development

As one begins to put in place the policies and institutions for improving rural welfare, what characteristics should be pursued to assure success? Like agricultural development, rural development is predominantly location specific. Similarly the diversity of rural community culture, resource endowment, human capital and institutions randomizes (to all appearances) the sources of successful development. This suggests that rural development and agricultural development share some common characteristics. Indeed, it is my hypothesis that all development processes may share many of the same characteristics, which I have deduced from studies of agricultural development (Bonnen 1986, 1987). This section is developed from these studies.

1. A Decentralized System of Institutions: When much of development is location specific and the environments (opportunities, constraints) within which it occurs are diverse, successful development can be seen, ex post, as the product of a decentralized system of separate institutions with a high level of adaptive capability. While a system implies a common purpose, if separate institutions are to constitute a system with a shared purpose, their behavior must be coordinated. The market provides information necessary to coordinate private sector purchasing, production and marketing. The political process (executive and legislative) constitute national, state and local political markets that coordinate public institutions and regulate private and public sector roles and relations. Over time these two quite different coordination processes tend to behave as one interactive, tension-ridden communication and coordination system. Over time the public and private sector institutions of the system become increasingly interactive until their embrace is in some cases so intimate that distinguishing

between public-private institutions and behaviors becomes quite difficult. This has been described in many developmental contexts as a public and private partnership. In part this interlinked dependence is a function of the fact that as economic and political power are created in the development process, society instinctively tries to limit and constrain such power--not always successfully. In the long run society will not tolerate significant concentrations of unaccountable power.

2. A System with Interactive Linkages: The performance of a successful system comes to more than the sum of its parts. To say that a set of institutions is a system is to say that its individual parts are interlinked or articulated, that the separate institutions and functions are connected, that they communicate and cooperate in action to achieve some common goal. This does not mean that these institutions pursue totally compatible or solely common goals. They are not mechanical but human social systems, after all.

Successful systems evolve in an iterative and interactive manner. They are not conceived or planned as a whole and then put into place. No one knows enough to do that successfully. Policy and institution building decisions are made under great uncertainty, with imperfect knowledge. As a consequence, many mistakes are made, so successful institutional systems must be iterative and interactive in their mode of both inquiry and action to maintain an adaptive capability.

Successful systems of institutions must have substantial adaptive capacity not only to deal with uncertainty and mistakes but also with the great tension and conflict between institutions and multiple goals within the system. Conflicting institutions have ultimately compromised and

cooperated because of the interdependence designed into a system and the diffusion of power in the U.S. political system. Much of this tension is constructive. Indeed it is through such continuing tension and associated communication between institutions that the commonality of goals is repeatedly rediscovered, adapted to change and revalidated. The same constructive tension and interactive linkage allows the system to adapt to mistakes in policy and changes in the economic and political environment.

3. Decentralization of Decision Making: Another necessary characteristic of any system of successful rural development institutions is decentralization. Although a national system and supporting policy is necessary, authority is not concentrated at the national level. This constitutes an important strength of the system, not because decentralization is inherently superior organizationally to centralization, but because decentralization is responsive to the diverse nature of the problem the system addresses. To manage development or almost anything else over a continental land mass requires some decentralization of decision making for the sake of both efficiency and effectiveness. However, there is another more important reason.

While articulation of the system of developmental institutions is necessary to keep so many diverse functions coordinated, decentralization is necessary for successful adaptation of knowledge and technology to the highly varied, local environments that characterize rural society. There are all sorts of political, cultural and social variations that make it necessary to accommodate the institutional structure to local polities and resources to ensure a politically inclusive, legitimized and coordinated system.

4. Consensual Decision Making: A less obvious characteristic of such a developmental system of institutions is that decisions affecting all or large parts of the system must be developed by consensus, if they are to be accepted as legitimate and implemented effectively. Unilateral power plays to achieve something that substantially affects the whole system generally create excessive conflict, reduce cooperation and end in failure.

5. Replication of Successful Innovation: Successful and tested innovations developed within the system will tend to be replicated throughout the system. Emulation of successful institutional forms, programs and policies is a common trait of effective developmental systems.

6. Societal Problem Solving and Knowledge Generation: Another characteristic of a developmental system of institutions is the combination and management in a single system of societal problem solving and the pursuit of the agenda of science. The pragmatism and political expediency necessary to sustain effective societal problem solving involves organization, values and expectations that are inconsistent and, in the same system, in perpetual tension with those of science and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Yet the productivity achieved in the case of agriculture and medicine in the U.S. has arisen out of the sustained interlinkage of these functions and the management of the resulting tensions to maintain a working balance.

In my judgment, these characteristics I have discussed above -- interactive linkage of functions and institutional components, decentralization of decision making, consensual decision making, replication of innovation, and a balanced and coordinated pursuit of basic and applied science, technology development and transfer are fundamental to the success of any science or knowledge based development system.

It is worth reflecting, in conclusion, on the nature of the environment within which developmental institutions must function. What demands are made on these institutions by the policy process and environment in which national development must occur?

Bruce Johnston and William Clark describe this environment vividly. They observe that the development policy problem is not a well structured, easily defined problem. Rather it is complex, messy and uncertain, involves conflicting interests and values, plus an existing distribution of power and a configuration of actors and institutions about which one can do little. It is an ill-structured "mess", not a single well defined problem or set of problems. In addition each actor has his own perspective and pursues his own interests. Thus, development policy does not address one problem but numerous overlapping and often conflicting problems from which policy must extract a few problems on which some constructive action can be taken.

This requires for success a pragmatic process of problem definition, policy formation and action involving the capacity for mutual adjustment of means and ends. This is a learning process out of which the participating institutions and actors develop a social consensus. Social action to implement policy is not possible without consensus.

Action to implement policy under imperfect or uncertain knowledge requires combining interactively the "thinking through" of problem solutions while simultaneously "acting out" policy solutions without certainty, learning from mistakes, modifying beliefs and changing policy. By "thinking through", Johnston and Clark mean analysis (e.g., systems modeling, B/C analysis, comprehensive economic planning) that attempts to anticipate all possible policy options and outcomes to find an optimum. By "acting out" they mean directly seeking to adjust present

difficulties rather than anticipating future ones. This, I submit, is a specification of the development problem to which the characteristics of a successful system of developmental institutions described above is meant to address.

Some Specific Imperatives

Finally, there are a number of fairly specific imperatives that should be followed, if rural development or policy is to succeed. First, we must learn to accept limited successes. We must learn to work issue by issue. We have to take small steps before we can take large ones. This is an iterative, interactive learning process and there is a long road ahead. So the people who are willing to commit only to marvelous broad national visions and expect big successes quickly are not going to be of very much help. Universities, government, foundations and advocacy groups must recognize that this will be a long, slow collaborative process and commit to the long haul or stay out of the game.

Secondly, we will not succeed unless we are willing to set up our longer-run, developmental objectives on a targeted basis. This is the case in the distribution of dollars for infrastructure as well as the investment in the human capital that rural communities need (and are so short of) both for primary leadership and for the educated manpower necessary for rural institutions to succeed. We cannot continue to follow the typical congressional and state legislative strategy of spreading program dollars thinly over the many electoral districts of influential politicians. The Economic Development Administration experience (failure) does not need to be replicated. There is not, and never will be, enough money available to save all rural communities. Far too many rural communities will not survive, no matter how much money is put into them. For

example, one wonders if some areas in the Northern High Plains will have more than a handful of effective communities left in another two or three decades at the rate at which they are now losing population. Some highly rural plains states are declining in total population. There are other rural areas of the nation in which decline is probably inevitable. Appropriate targeting of development investment focuses a significant portion of public resources on those communities where success is not just possible but is probable at some minimum acceptable level. We need to start with the rural communities/areas where the odds of success are highest and work down. This runs counter to current political instincts and practice but issue-related interests must be able to organize around some degree of targeting as an accepted principle or face general failure. Some strategy of triage is necessary. Rural society receives very little development investment as it is. Policy cannot provide equal opportunity for all communities. We must have a strategy with some reasonable potential for success. This probably requires a nested set of area and regional development strategies and institutions within which these difficult long-run investment choices are made and legitimized. Needless to say, such a strategic approach would be controversial and complex.

That said, equity requires some equalization of essential services. Especially those investments that improve mobility and employability of the human factor need to meet some minimum standards (e.g., in education, health) in the interests of the larger society as well as the rural community. In addition, those who choose to or are fated to remain in a declining community should be assured access to some minimum level of essential services both to maintain wellbeing and to avoid the social costs otherwise imposed on the larger society by poverty, poor health, homelessness and other social pathologies. Strategically, we need to distinguish between policies

for developmental investments and policy for minimum maintenance requirements involving essential services critical to human welfare.

Third, Congress and most politicians tend to believe they have fixed a problem when they have responded to the most obvious symptom with which they are willing or able to deal. Politicians operate in a milieu in which the long run is the week after next, the end of the legislative session or the next election -- at best. Working in the same environment interest groups tend to develop a similarly nearsighted view of the world. If a national policy for rural economic development is ever to exist, we will have to be willing work on the complex, multiple dimensions of rural society over a generation or two, and probably much longer.

Finally, rural development, like all development, is the product of the four general sources of change in societal capacity to achieve its goals. These are improvements or modifications in technologies, human capabilities, institutions and the physical and biological (man-made and natural) resource base and infrastructure of society (Bonnen, 1987). All four are complements in use -- i.e., all are necessary and no one is sufficient to develop greater capacity. In designing a development strategy for a rural community, a region, a state or the nation all of these four prime movers must be examined for their roles and included in some balanced mix in the policies that constitute the development plan and strategy.

Leadership is one aspect of the human capability needed. When we deinstitutionalized the rural community in transforming the agrarian sector, we often created a void in community leadership. The difference between successful community development and the failure to survive as a community is frequently the presence or absence of leadership. Many more things

are possible with good leadership. The land grant colleges have demonstrated that leadership can be trained. Here is part of the land grant idea that is clearly valid and vital in today's society, especially for rural communities and the central cities.

Conclusion

Ironically the successful effort to avoid an agrarian peasantry involved a transformation of rural society that is now creating another, different kind of rural peasantry. Most states of the U.S. have counties now plagued by significant low-income retired, working poor and welfare populations scattered through rural areas or concentrated in isolated rural communities. Their education, work experience, health, age, family size and job opportunities condemn them to a marginal existence. The incidence of poverty is as high in nonmetropolitan areas today as in the central cities, and it is rising. These are truly the "people left behind" by the great increases in productivity that transformed farming and ultimately deinstitutionalized rural community life (Porter, O'Hare). The critical questions are: Can a democracy afford the degree of inequality in opportunity and human welfare that is being created? What kind of rural landscape/amenities will a middle class, urban America support?

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