For some years I have been making an annual swing through the midwest to see how public feeling is changing. On my last such trip I was impressed by how many farmers have decided that they have become the newest minority in the nation.

Repeatedly farmers I talked with complained, "we're less than ten percent of the population now" or "no one cares what we think. Business and labor run the country."

Some went further to say, "we farmers need a public relations man to tell our story." This comment on the need for better publicity was repeated in six different counties that I visited last spring.

Remarks like those are evidence, of course, of how deep runs the concern among rural people over agriculture's future standing.

I assume that similar fears inspired the choice of the subject assigned me for my talk tonight--"The Impact of Changing Public Opinion on Farm Policy."

Whoever picked that subject, I suspect, was wondering will rural people be able to protect their interests in a society that is growing steadily more urbanized? As farmers shrink in numbers, will the cities and suburbs continue to subsidize the production of surpluses? Or will a taxpayer revolt to kill all farm legislation?

And what will happen to rural interests as reapportionment changes the representation in the legislatures of state after state?

Those are some of the questions, I was asked to discuss tonight.

That's pretty tall corn to ask a fellow to pick.

I'm not sure I can give you the answers but I'll make a try.

\[1\text{Mr. Lubell is a public opinion analyst and writer.}\]
On the whole I am not overly pessimistic about farmers' political future. I appreciate that some observers feel that time has all but run out on the farmer. Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman, for one, has warned that farmers are too few in numbers to remain divided, that they must unite and speak with a single voice (I guess he means his own) on farm legislation.

The next session of Congress may prove him right. Still, I doubt that the farmers feeling in the rural midwest has so simple a choice. Also, up to now, at least, the division of the midwest has been a source of political strength to them. Farmer disunity has been one of agriculture's prime beef political assets. I doubt that it is likely to change abruptly.

In saying all this I am not belittling the significance of the decline in the political importance of the rural population. This loss seems to be quickening its pace. It comes at a critical time.

In the redistricting of Congress that followed the 1960 census, eleven predominantly rural districts were eliminated--six in the midwest and five in the south.

This is the sharpest redistricting loss that rural areas have suffered in any ten year period in this century.

More important perhaps than the extent of this loss is its timing. The Supreme Court's decision requiring the state of Tennessee to reapportion its legislature coincides with a crisis in state government in much of the nation.

In state after state expanding populations have had to be provided with schools, roads, hospitals and other services. In the face of these needs, bitter resistances have developed to paying higher taxes.

Nearly every taxpayer group is on the verge of revolt. Everyone is looking for a tax that someone else will pay. This tax struggle is bound to intensify the conflict over reapportionment.

Nationally, the loss of rural representation comes at a time when we are moving ever more deeply into a managed economy. Group interests are being elevated steadily higher at the expense of the individual. Economic decisions are being influenced ever more strongly by political considerations.

We should also bear in mind the fact that the loss in farm population is only one of the results of the astonishing revolution in farm technology that still tractors on. It is this technology that is forcing the really big changes in agriculture's place in our society.

Last year I did some interviewing down in a southern Iowa township that had lost a third of its population since the 1950 census. The farmers who were left had enlarged their land holdings and were much better off economically than they had been ten years earlier. But community life in this township was as dreary as a drought.
I remember asking one farmer how it felt to lose a third of your neighbors in ten years. He grinned and replied, "I like the weekdays but I can't stand Saturday night."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"On weekdays" he explained "I do the farming and it makes a man feel good to have all the land he needs. But on Saturday night we visit the neighbors. I'm just tired of seeing those same three faces every Saturday night."

The end of agricultural adjustment is nowhere in sight.

In the course of this conference you have heard a good deal about the importance of stepping up the rate of economic growth in the United States. I happen to be pretty skeptical about the statistics of economic growth that are being tossed around. I think we need a better diagnosis of our economic ills. In any case economic growth--which means technological advance--is a giant whose left hand often operates in conflict with his right hand. Economic growth makes new jobs but in the same process it renders obsolete old skills and old jobs.

It threatens constantly to push people and even whole communities out of the economy as factories move away or people desert the land.

In short, the point I am trying to register is that agriculture's main problems are not primarily political. Nor can one look to public opinion to solve these problems. The shrinking down of its political weight of rural America may sharpen agriculture's difficulties. But this political loss is not the real unsettler. Public opinion, at best, can exert only a moderate influence.

Still given all their troubles it is hardly surprising that farmers and townspeople should feel they are misunderstood and yearn for the services of Madison Avenue in telling their side of the story.

On this last point a word of warning might be sounded. Up to now, as I analyze the situation, support for farm legislation has rested largely on ignorance and confusion among urban dwellers as to what the farm problem is all about and on the fact that urban interests are divided on the issues involved. If clarity were suddenly introduced into this picture it's difficult to say what might happen. If I were a representative of a farm organization I know I would hesitate before deciding to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

II

Just what is the picture or pictures of the farm problem that city dwellers have in their minds?

I wish I could present you with some neat statistical tables showing what percentage of the urban population favor each of the more important features of the farm program and what proportion do not.
But interviewing urban people on the farm problem is a frustrating experience. Twice in the last two years I have tried it. Each time I found that well over a third of the persons interviewed had no real opinion on the subject. Some confessed, "I don't know anything about farming," or "I once tried to figure it out but gave up." Others hesitated and fumbled before giving vague replies.

For most of the urban population the farm problem just doesn't come into focus. It's just one blurred image after another.

Mainly, I believe this can be traced to two things--a general feeling of futility that anything effective can be done about the farm problem and second, that urban people find it extremely difficult to identify personally with the farm problem.

There are two direct interests in the farm problem that urban people share--the price of food and the cost in tax dollars of farm subsidies. Most city people would like both of these reduced--but this seems like a pretty futile hope. Food prices go their supermarket way regardless of what the government does. Both political parties have promised to cut farm subsidy costs and have wound up raising them.

Beyond these two interests--of food prices and taxes--most city people lack any real emotional link with agriculture. Two generations ago a considerable proportion of the urban population was either born on farms or had relatives who did some farming.

Today it is relatively rare to meet someone who even knows anyone who does any farming. Many agricultural phrases sound like a foreign language.

When asked questions about farmers, many city dwellers will fumble about and try to reshape the questions to fit concepts that they are familiar with in urban living.

Last summer, for example, I asked city people what they thought of the NFO--the National Farm Organization--trying to hold back production. Many persons replied, "why shouldn't farmers be able to go on strike if workers can?" To many city dwellers the NFO "strike" was just another labor dispute.

Another survey question that I have asked was--should less efficient farmers stay on farms or would it be better to get them to quit farming?

Most of the replies reflected how people saw the farmer in urban terms--whether they viewed him as a business man or a factory worker.

Those who thought of the farmer as a businessman tended to be harsh about helping the farmer. A life insurance salesman in Chicago voiced a wide-spread view when he said, "Farming is a business like anything else. Inefficient farmers should quit. Let them find their own level like other businesses. If they gain or lose that's their affair."
Those who thought of the farmer as a worker tended to equate the problem of the inefficient farmer with industrial unemployment.

Some typical replies ran:

"Inefficient farmers should not be forced out--there are lots of inefficient factory workers but they have unions to protect them."

"They deserve to live as much as a city worker."

Often, farmers would be described as "victims of automation."

A 42-year-old marine engineer on Staten Island said, "Inefficient farmers are the same as workers in the city. Automation is causing people to be squeezed out everywhere. The people being squeezed out should get help."

Generally people feel that farm surpluses have a value. A common remark runs, "It's better to have too much food than too little."

Quite strong support is also voiced for using our food surpluses to help needy and starving people abroad. Many persons urge "let's give people food instead of money as foreign aid."

Often they add, "that way we'll know it will get directly to the people."

Against this the strong resentments are voiced that farmers "are being paid to do nothing and to let land lie idle."

This aspect of the farm program seems to stir more resentment among city dwellers than any other feature.

The 29-year-old editor of a book publishing house asked, "why should farmers get so much for doing nothing?"

A teacher in Milford, Conn., protested "a farmer should not be paid for crops that he has not raised."

To many persons the farm program has the connotation of a welfare operation. They become even more resentful when this welfare "handout," as they see it, is linked to the waste of food.

In New Orleans one aged pensioner burst into profanity when he talked of "these Maine farmers sell potatoes to the government--what does the government do? It dyes them and throws them away."

To sum up all these fragments of feeling:

The net balance of public opinion in the country, I would say, favors some kind of farm program. Certainly it is disinclined to cut off the program abruptly.
But our farm policy is not popular.

While there is no evidence of a real taxpayers revolt against farm legislation, one does find a quite high potential for indignation. This indignation could build up into an explosion.

What could touch it off?

An abrupt increase in food prices might do it. During the 1958 recession food prices rocketed suddenly and I remember how bitter were the feelings of housewives and workers I talked with.

Currently price resentment is relatively low, although older persons on fixed incomes often complain of having to buy cheaper cuts of meat.

Incidentally, I might add that city dwellers generally do not accept the thesis that food is really a bargain because it has not gone up in price as much as other things. You may remember Secretary Freeman's publicity stunt in going to a supermarket and telling housewives how cheap groceries really were. I did some interviewing in several cities right after that. The general reaction to Freeman's stunt was summed up by one comment, "He should ask his wife what she pays for groceries."

The second thing that might cause an explosion of public indignation against farm legislation would be an all-out political battle aimed at reducing farm subsidy costs. The next session of congress could bring such a battle. The big issue next year seems likely to be the struggle of those who want to reduce taxes without a cut in government spending, against those who want government spending cut before there is a tax cut.

In the course of this battle every major federal spending program is likely to come under attack. Certainly farm subsidies whose costs are estimated from four to six billions--depending on how the figures are juggled--will be in the thick of it.

Since I am not a war correspondent I won't venture any prediction how this battle will come out. Still we might ask why have previous efforts to reduce farm subsidies failed.

Two points stick out from my own efforts to answer that question.

First, the writing of farm legislation has become a conspiracy against public understanding.

The closest equivalent that I can think of is the way the tariff legislation used to be written back in the 1890's and 1900's. In fact I am tempted to say that drafting farm legislation is the old tariff log-rolling resurrected.
In the writing of tariffs a great many speeches would be made on the principles of free trade versus protectionism. But the changes in the legislation that really mattered were always changes in the technical formulas by which import duties were lifted, a phrase about sanitary regulations for this commodity, a shift to ad valorem rates for another commodity and so on.

Similarly with the writing of farm legislation, Congress, as you know, does not set any dollar ceiling on the cost of the farm program. Instead the agriculture committees juggle these complicated formulas of support prices, acreage bases and more or less controls. These maneuvers can't be followed by the public--often the press doesn't even report them. Sometimes even members of Congress are fooled by the country slickers on the agriculture committees.

In recent years many Congressmen have voted for farm legislation which they thought would reduce the total cost of farm subsidies. Only after the accounting was in did they realize that they had actually voted for higher subsidy costs.

This, you will recall, happened in the old tariff days, as well. Congress would be called into session to lower tariff rates and would wind up increasing them.

The second main reason why subsidy costs have not reduced has been ideological. As you know the raging conflict has pitted on one side those who want to move agriculture back to a free market against those who want to bring agriculture under full supply management.

Up to now at least this ideological battling has produced compromises which have been both curious and expensive.

The free market boys start out wanting lower price supports and loose or no controls. The supply managers start out demanding higher price supports and tighter controls. Congress, in its own many billion wisdom, takes something from each side. It takes the higher price supports that the supply managers want and the looser controls that the free marketers want--with the treasury paying for the compromise.

This process may be hard on the nerves of individual Congressmen, but from the farmers' point of view the results have been pretty good. In interviews with farmers during the recent election campaign, I found that the vast majority of farmers were satisfied with the present feed grain program. They feel the present support prices are quite generous. Some farmers admit the supports are so high "how can a fellow turn them down." Farmers also like the voluntary feature of the program, that they are able to go in and stay out depending on which they calculate is their best interest.

In the feed grain program you might say midwestern farmers manage to have their cake of subsidy and eat it without too much control.
I'm not sure that Bismarck could have done much better for the farmers. If some rural Machiavelli had planned it that way, he could not have contrived more skillfully to have the farmers play both sides of the political street.

Of course, this was not done deliberately. The effect was achieved by a bitter clash of economic interests among different farmer groups. But the net effect of the farmers' disunity was to yield a better program from the farmer's point of view than if all the farmers had been represented in Washington by a single voice.

I should stress though that this divide and subsidy strategy is made possible by the fact that it is the urban majority of the population that is also divided by its own ideological differences. This, I suspect, is the real key to the prevailing deadlock over agricultural legislation—that the urban interests are so fiercely divided, with both sides seeking political allies in the rural countryside.

With their loss of representation the rural areas have less political bargaining power today than before. But this loss is offset somewhat by the fact that the political divisions in the urban part of the population seem to be intensifying.

That at any rate seems to be the picture of the prevailing balance. An attempt may be made to upset this balance in the next session of Congress. Cotton and tobacco are already under strict production control and the rural Congressmen from the South, who dominate the agriculture committee, may try to impose compulsory production controls on wheat and corn. Such a move might pick up enough support among urban congressmen to go through Congress.

The members of Congress who are at this conference can give you a better judgment than I can as to whether such a move is likely to succeed. I do not sense any determination on the part of the White House to push such a strategy. I also expect some strange bargains and compromises will be made in Congress to gain support for an opposition to President Kennedy's proposal for a general reduction in federal taxes.

Finally before I expose myself to your questions, let me turn briefly to the reapportionment struggle going on in the different states.

Here I expect rural areas will suffer sizable losses in representation. Partly this is because in many states equitable representation has been ignored for so long that much catching up politically is needed. The crucial question, in fact, may become how far will the swing go in the other direction? Will urban interests dominate everything?

Many city dwellers I have interviewed want both houses of the state legislatures to be set up on a population basis. The slogan "every man one vote" has a strong appeal.
However, there are other interests besides the farmers who would oppose a complete upheaval in the representation formulas.

As in Congress, the rural interests will have allies and bargains will be struck.

I might end by leaving you with this cartoon image.

Perhaps it is true that the farmer is in danger of becoming a political old maid and maybe he had better hitch up with that fellow who has a key to the Treasury while there still is a chance.

But I'm inclined to think the rural population has more political sex appeal than that. There still seems enough of a swing and twitch to those rural hips to draw whistles from both political parties.