The challenge to democracy VI. Toward a new rural statesmanship

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Iowa State College
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By E. D. Ross

GIVE US MEN

“The people of this nation have been doing more hard thinking in the past year than ever before in our history,” declared a radio commentator in reviewing the high lights of 1940. Whether or not this sweeping assertion, which defies conclusive verification, is literally true, we may be proud and grateful that ours is one of the few countries—tragically few—in which the citizens may still think for themselves and freely express their thoughts. The evidence of that freedom is in sharp differences of public opinion and heated controversies. But with all the disagreement, there is one proposition upon which every one is agreed—the necessity for leaders to formulate our opinions into programs and to point the way to their realization. Democracy can function effectively only through organized effort, and organizations assuredly must have spokesmen. In times of so great an extension of governmental powers there is the obligation, in accord with the American way, that such exercise be not only socially effective but subject as well, at all points, to popular control. The democratic system is thus on trial as never before, and as never before there are demanded leaders of the group, of the region and of the nation as a whole.

HOW DO WE GET OUR LEADERS?

How and where to get these leaders—there is the rub! Too many seem to feel that we must simply wait for them to appear—somehow or other and from somewhere or other—and show us the way out of our difficulties. And then if the man of the hour fails to show up it’s just too bad for us, but it can’t be helped. In short, according to this view, leaders just happen—or they don’t. Not so, at all! Social forces,

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1 This bulletin is sixth of a series on The Challenge to Democracy prepared by the members of the History and Government Department, Iowa State College.
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no less than natural, produce their appropriate results. Our
times, like all times, must make their own leaders. The con-
ditions of a period—the ideas, attitudes and standards—create
the dominant personalities and not the other way around as
has sometimes been represented. It has been said that society
at a given time has the criminals that it deserves, and with
equal logic it may be recognized that we have the type of
leadership that we have made and are making possible. Our
impatience with our representatives is often due not to their
failure to represent us, to act in accordance with our ideas
and standards, but rather to their tendency to reflect us too
truly. We see in them our negligence and shortcomings and
like to use them as social scapegoats.

Obviously the “great man,” in the sense that he does big
things, is not far in advance of and aloof from his age, but
rather he is the one who best comprehends, interprets and
formulates its spirit and promotes its prevailing interests.
He does not make the forces but he uses them; he determines,
more or less, the direction, manner and extent of their move-
ment. Get rid today of our particular charlatans, demagogues,
bosses, dictators; or, on the other hand, of our creative, con-
structive and socially-minded achievers, and, given the same
forces, others will appear, different in personality and technic
but with similar social and cultural reactions. In either case
the doers are men of their time. The visionary may be as
distracting as the standpatter is obstructing. The prophet
who is away ahead of his time not only gets no honor from
his contemporaries, but he gets nowhere with the tasks in
hand. There must somehow be found an adjustment between
the far-vision without which we ultimately perish and the
immediate view of the road without which we pile up in the
ditch.

When we consider the apparent supply of leadership at a
given time in relation to the demand for it, the outlook may
seem most unpromising. A quarter of a century ago a promi-
nent writer on agricultural economics pointed out that the
great need of the agricultural interest of the nation was an
organization that would develop a national occupational
leadership but that in turn effective organization could not
be built up without leaders.
The vicious circle can be broken only by recognizing potential leadership and utilizing to the full existing agencies for its development. Organizations—economic, social, political, educational—will have to become training fields for leaders and no less for intelligent followers who recognize, appreciate and support their leaders. Such provision is especially urgent for rural affairs where present issues are so pressing, potential values so determining and national traditions so enduring, in spite of the seeming dominance of modern industrialization and urbanization.

THE OLDER RURAL STATESMEN

In the "Agricultural Era" before the Civil War, leadership in statecraft, as in other realms, was of necessity of country origin and in most cases of a continuing rural base. From Benjamin Franklin to Theodore Roosevelt there was no outstanding city-born publicist. The country squire and the planter were the accepted types of statesmen, and the popular acclaim of "sage" bestowed in rural retirement was the ultimate award of public service—the democratic equivalent of a peerage and far more exclusive.

The founding fathers were overwhelmingly agrarian and the great figures of the Middle Period were popularly associated with their landed estates and agricultural pursuits. At a county fair in western New York in 1871 in an "Agricultural Ode" dedicated to Horace Greeley, the dean of agricultural society speakers, a local poet gave expression to this sentiment in referring to great popular leaders of the past generation, including the godfather of Wright County, Iowa.

Far from the tumult of the town
Loved mighty Webster to retire,
And seek forgetful of renown,
Fields where he labored with his sire;
Or, freed from care, he loved to dwell
At Marshfield by the sounding main,
Where low of kine, and pastoral bell
Disposed to calm his troubled brain.

And Clay in country costume drest,
Sick of Corruption's wild misrule,
On his plantation in the West,
Felt like an urchin loose from school.
And Wright stern Cato of the State,
Whose honored grave is holy ground,
Towered in the hall of high debate,
With face and hands by toil embrowned.
Well were these famous men aware
That impulse Agriculture gave
To human progress everywhere,
On solid land and rolling wave.

All of the presidents of this period were of rural origin and most of them had landed investments. Josiah Quincy expressed the prevailing custom in 1845 in the whimsical observation that “though all the farmers can’t be president, all the presidents must be farmers.”

**BUT NO REAL AGRICULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

This prevalence of “rustic politics,” however, did not involve any reasoned agricultural program—deliberate planning as a part of a balanced national economy and society. The characteristic philosophy emphasized the limitation rather than the extension of governmental activity, and agriculture could still enjoy the luxury of freedom from aid or control. The very dominance and assumed permanence of the basic occupation postponed any such policy. Manufacturers had to be given special protection; shipping had to be subsidized; but farming was always with us. The only governmental attention was in the promotive influence of a lavish and careless disposal of the public lands.

The pioneers in agricultural improvement—journalists, scientists and social reformers—sought, as the extreme of public aid, small grants of land or money for education and experimentation. Direct economic support to the occupation was unthinkable in a regime of individualism with the most ruggedly independent on the farm. Policies of regulation and social welfare were far in advance of the philosophy of government to say nothing of popular thinking. Indeed, to the reformer of that day party politics, as experienced, was regarded as a distracting influence. Soon after the election of 1848 Solon Robinson, the prolific agricultural writer, offered this protest in a letter to the *American Agriculturist*:
How can the minds of a people be brought to think upon the importance of judicious cultivation of the earth, who never think or read of any other subject than party politics? The manufacturer of plows, to them is a far less important person than the manufacturer of political opinion.

**AGRICULTURE SPLIT OVER SLAVERY**

The appeal of the agricultural reformers—for long mere voices crying in the wilderness—gradually began to break through pioneer indifference. By the fifties, in the proposals for a federal department and for state and federal provision for agricultural education, an occupational jealousy of the professional groups and commercial interests was being voiced in agricultural journals and at gatherings of local, state and national societies. Unhappily, like other normal manifestations of progressing national interests—diversified industry, transportation, labor—the technical and institutional "agricultural transformation" became involved in "America's Tragedy." Ironically an open group consciousness came only with that division within agriculture in which free-soil farmers joined in an unequal union with the industrialists against the slavery interests.

**THE FARMER GETS THE SHORT END ON THE FREE-SOIL TEAM**

The free-soil allies had a common aim in limiting the extension of slavery; in most other respects their interests were opposed. The disparity between a rising confident industrialism and a disrupted and confused agrarianism was overwhelming. Consequently, in the free-soil economic program the farmer's position on the short end of the team was increasingly evident. He received no adequate equivalent for the new protective tariff, the national banking system and the monopolistic power of unregulated corporate business organization. The homestead act provided no safeguard against the speculator and the corporate promoter and exploiter and encouraged an extension of cultivation into subhumid and arid regions that resulted in problems both of surplus and of deficient production. The cumulating burden of debt aggravated by resumption and deflation was not miti-
gated by credit relief. Unprecedented "hard times" for the American farmer resulted for a quarter of a century, and, in desperation, a series of class-conscious farmers' organizations were undertaken, constituting an "agrarian crusade."

**AGRARIAN CRUSADE LACKS BREADTH AND BALANCE**

In their economic and social programs and even more in their appeals to public opinion, the new farmers' movements were handicapped seriously by the lack of trained and experienced leaders. With the overthrow of the planters there was no group of comparable influence; political control, like economic control, reflected the new industrialism. The agrarian organizations—the Grange, the Alliances and the People's Party—were lacking in broad vision and hence episodical in emphasis and opportunist in aims. Their spokesmen failed to face squarely the fundamental issue as to whether agriculture in the "Industrial Era" was to be in a position of relative parity and equality or to be definitely and permanently subordinated to other interests. They were, to be sure, no narrower and less ruthlessly self-seeking than the representatives of industry, but they were blunter and more elemental in their demands, and they lacked unity of purpose on essential measures of cooperative action and legislative programs. More recent ventures in farmer political organization, on a separate occupational basis or in combination with labor groups, have given further demonstration of the ineffectiveness of parties based on class interest.

**AGRICULTURAL DEPARTMENT AND THE COLLEGES GET OFF TO SLOW START—BUT GRADUALLY GET TOGETHER ON COMMON PROBLEMS**

The new department and the colleges organized under the act of 1862 started off modestly and haltingly as inexperienced departures lacking public and professional confidence. They did not immediately attract the best available talent, and, consequently, it was some years before they became effective in training a new leadership.
The six commissioners who headed the Department of Agriculture before cabinet status was secured in 1889 were gentlemen farmers with an active interest in agricultural organization and education and with fairly enlightened views of administrative functions and methods. But, with the exception of the last who served briefly as the first secretary, they were not of first-rate ability. They sought with varying degrees of success to gain the support of the societies, the agricultural press and the land-grant colleges. Their relations with organized farmers were generally far more harmonious than with the scientists. Three of the commissioners had been active in the promotion of the agricultural colleges in their states, and all, at least at the beginning of their terms, made special efforts to cultivate “the professors,” but real understanding and effective cooperation were only gradually established.

The agricultural colleges on their side had the difficult tasks of winning recognition from the world of science and of gaining the confidence of the tillers of the soil. Scientific experimentation and adapted and specialized organization and methods proved to be the approaches to both groups. Leadership, in part continuing from the pioneer movement and in part trained by the earlier of these colleges, was responsible for these achievements.

By the latter eighties commercial needs and opportunities in applied science, the growth of regulatory activities, and the increasing pressure of farmers’ organizations combined to secure provision for experiment stations, increased college support and the raising of the Department of Agriculture to cabinet rank. These acts inaugurated the modern governmental agricultural activities. The building up in the Department of a technical and administrative personnel recruited largely from the colleges, and the increasing federal-state cooperation in research and instruction, brought a unity of action to the great benefit of the agricultural interest and to the nation. A majority of the secretaries to date have been connected with the land-grant colleges as students, instructors or administrators, and several of the others have been agricultural journalists.
LAND-GRANT COLLEGES TRAIN TECHNICAL EXPERTS AND ADMINISTRATORS

With the establishment and growth of experimental work, specialized curricula, adapted methods, extension services and inter-collegiate and federal cooperation, the land-grant colleges have provided progressively more effective training of experts, administrators and professional practitioners in the various branches of agriculture, engineering, veterinary medicine and home economics.

WHY NOT TRAIN FOR POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AS WELL?

The question logically and inevitably arises why with this richness and breadth of training in science, technology and business there should not be a corresponding training in the principles and practices of citizenship—a training not only in evaluating and administering policies but in originating and determining the policies themselves. Should these institutions not be a main source of a rural political leadership, a rural statesmanship? Such a suggestion is by no means new; it was made by some of the most distinguished land-grant college officials in the formative years.

EARLY VISION OF TRAINING FOR PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

Back in 1858 in support of the bill for the original “Iowa State Agricultural College and Farm,” Benjamin F. Gue, often termed the “father” of the college, put the aim of public leadership along with that of technical skill: “We want the young men so trained and educated, that it will not be necessary for them to forsake their chosen avocation, to become qualified to occupy any station, or hold any office in the country. We want them to be able to stand on this floor, and in our national councils on terms of equality with the best legal men of the times, and there be able with equal talent, education, ability and eloquence, to urge there our claims, advocate our principles, and defend our interests.” At the inauguration of the college on March 17, 1869, Gue
made the confident prediction that the day would "surely come" in which graduates of the college would be numbered "among the most eminent men and women that our state or the country will produce . . . they cannot fail to attain the highest positions of honor and trust among their fellow men, and by their lives honor the institution to whose fostering care they are so largely indebted." In his inaugural address President A. S. Welch recommended that as a means to a balanced training the student should add to his technical specialties "those sciences which embrace his duties to society and to his country. Political economy, social science, commercial and constitutional law, and moral philosophy are a harmonious and beautiful group . . ."

The previous month, in an address before the New York State Agricultural Society, Andrew D. White, the president of the Cornell venture in the "new education," deplored "the want of a due representation of the agriculturists and mechanics among the men of power and influence. It is a want which every thinking man recognizes. It is one great cause why ambitious and energetic young men are constantly deserting the farmers' profession. They constantly see 'tonguey' men taking positions of influence over substantial working men." His chief recommendation to overcome this disparity in influence was the combination with the technical studies of courses in history, public law and public speaking. Such an education would create "not only trained workers but leaders who will have a due proportion of representation in the politics of the country."

At his inauguration as president of the new University of California in 1872, Daniel Coit Gilman emphasized the major responsibility of training public leaders not only for their own state but for the entire region. General and technical students alike should be prepared for such responsibilities: "It is important, for their own culture and for the public good, that they should have a clear notion of what constitutes the state in its best form. Whether merchants, manufacturers, farmers or miners, they are quite as likely as lawyers and much more likely than physicians and clergymen, to be called to the councils of legislation, and to pronounce opinions there on difficult questions pertaining to human society, law, finance,
property, education, crime, pauperism and the policy of the national, state, and local governments."

In his arguments in the seventies and eighties for supplemental aid to the colleges formed under the act bearing his name, Senator Morrill gave a major emphasis to the influence of these “national colleges” in promoting a spirit of unity by training for a national citizenship.

In a paper on the content and objectives of agricultural education read at the convention of land-grant delegates called by the Department of Agriculture in 1885, Seaman A. Knapp of the Iowa Agricultural College listed citizenship training as one of the definite objectives. This training, in line with his view of the practical function of such education, he would make most specific: “Every student should acquire a good knowledge of the civil and political history of this country. He should understand the principles of municipal, township, county, state and federal organization; the laws relating to highways, fences, schools, taxation, and elections. This knowledge is necessary to intelligent citizenship.”

During the debate in the House of Representatives on the bill of 1890 providing grants for aid in instruction in certain specified subjects, a member offered an amendment to add political science in order to insure instruction in the Constitution. The proposal was passed over with the assurance by sponsors of the bill that the authorized economic science could not be studied without an understanding of the principles of government—in other words, that study was to be implied.

**THIS AIM SLOW TO GET RECOGNITION**

This avowed interest in citizenship training was late in receiving adequate provision; the appeal of technical studies was too absorbing and insistent. By the turn of the century the Department of Agriculture found that such obvious applications as agricultural economics and agricultural history were given merely incidental attention by instructors whose main interests were in other, more technical lines of work. But by the next decade the changing emphasis was reflected in new departments of agricultural economics and, following the report of the Country Life Commission, in rural sociology.
The governmental relations and implications of these problems became increasingly apparent—if not generally given adequate study. Still more tardily, but inevitably, there came a recognition of the essential contribution for all of these social relations of industrial, agricultural, social and constitutional history.

WORLD WAR AND DEPRESSION GIVE EMPHASIS TO CITIZENSHIP TRAINING

As in the case of all other colleges, the problems of the first World War and of reconstruction following brought a consciousness of social issues and demands, from various sources and with varied degrees of reasoned purpose, for training in citizenship. Even more is this the case today. The challenge to democracy in the present world struggle is bringing a truer and more fundamental realization of the values and determining influences of civic training.

The unprecedented governmental activity for agriculture in the Great Depression and the consequent interrelation of agricultural organizations with public agencies have called for new types of leadership. On the one hand the various programs have brought unexampled demands for experts in public administration (who can appropriately and effectively be trained in these technical institutions) and, on the other hand, they have led to an exercise of self-determination by local farmer groups that has necessitated the selection and support of accredited local leaders.

EVIDENCES OF INCREASING RURAL PARTICIPATION

Whatever the economic consequences, the procedure has been a remarkable demonstration of democratic processes in action and unquestionably has called forth latent talent that may well be utilized in other and wider relations. For the rural constituency as a whole this training and experience in policy determination is not likely to stop with quota allotments, crop adjustments and the providing of credit.

Planning committees and boards which combine expert talent with representatives of the various interests involved
have great possibilities in the formulation of sound policies and the promotion of efficient administration. A current study of the administration of the Department of Agriculture concludes that in spite of the inadequacy of many of our traditional governmental agencies “a good deal could be done through better administrative organization, through the development of policy-forming agencies, such as legislative and other planning councils, and a more conscious effort to enlist, by educational programs, local civic leadership.”

Grass-root expressions of opinion may well become a regular, ordered procedure. The strength and stability, the determining force of such activities will depend upon the selection and support of rural leaders—local, state, regional and national—recruited naturally from the councils of farmers’ organizations, the graduates of 4-H clubs, Smith-Hughes schools and the agricultural colleges. The increasing selection for state and national legislatures and for high executive positions of men who have been trained in agricultural colleges or who have worked with them in farmers’ organizations is an encouraging evidence of discriminating judgment by the electorate.

POSSIBILITY OF A REAL NATIONAL LEADERSHIP

In such a rural leadership there is more at stake than an occupational guidance, essential as that is. It offers the hope and possibility of attaining to a truly national statesmanship that seeks not merely the special advantage of a given interest but a balanced adjustment of all interests. There is a danger in the modern age of replacing the old individual self-interest with a doctrine and practice of group self-interest which is only a degree less short-sighted. The plea here is not for the dominance of either rustic or urbane politics, but rather for their reconciliation in organizations and programs that combine the values of both. There is an urgent need of looking above and beyond special class interests—important as they all are—to the larger whole, the national interest of which they are all a part. In such a policy is the true unity so much emphasized in these times of trial and test. With their expansive background and the wholesome traditions of the open
country, rural leaders may well have a breadth of view, a judicious balance and a tolerant understanding that the urban mind often lacks. As the ancient Cincinnatus was called from his plow to direct his country in time of peril, may not the modern Cincinnatus be summoned from his tractor to serve the nation in the crisis of democracy?
The Challenge to Democracy

The democratic way of life is being challenged today all over the world. Its superiority is widely denied and its security is seriously imperiled. The American people consequently are interested in understanding the dangers that confront them and in guarding against them. Democracy needs strengthening both internally and externally, and farm people can and must and will help do the job, both because of their numbers and because they know perhaps better than any other group the meaning of the democratic way of life.

It is the purpose of this bulletin and others in its series to show what produced the present situation and suggest some of the things that need to be done about it—not by farm people alone but by rural America and urban America working together. This is the sixth of eight bulletins on the subject. They deal with the following topics:

- Democracy on trial.
- How much centralization in government?
- The place of the family farm.
- The test of citizenship.
- Democracy and nationalism.
- Toward a new rural statesmanship.
- Improving public administration.
- The machine and democracy.