

The Farm Bill, As Metaphor!

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It has been a month since my Fourth of July column, in which I joined nearly every interest group with a stake in the Farm Bill, and most constituents affected by it, in urging that the food and nutrition programs not be jettisoned from the House proposal. The outcome was not in our favor. The ensuing political and institutional kerfuffle would be laughable, actually, were it not so potentially tragic. Others will further noodle options, moving forward. But we should all be pondering the price which will eventually be extracted for this failure to govern, by whom, and when.

Each day, the ag media dutifully reports constituent meetings in which House and Senate Ag Committee Members try to explain what happened, and discuss recess efforts to find the interim fix. These Members, and the media and producers, are all adjusting the deck chairs well, but the iceberg has already taken its deadly toll, and the ship lists in the darkness! I fear these two words: “Farm Bill,” run the risk of becoming a verb in the American political lexicon.

Was Speaker Boehner “Farm Billed”? Why yes, he was. Were the House and Senate Ag Committees “Farm Billed”? Yes, also. Deeper questions are yet to be answered: Will the Tea Party, and/or the House Republican Caucus, eventually be ‘Farm Billed,’ for their actions? But the deepest, and most troubling question remains: Has Agriculture been “Farm Billed”?

Policies and budgets are ultimately about visions and values. The House Farm Bill action highlighted vast disagreements about both. Deep chasms need traversed, and bridges built, which are not currently evident. What is clear is that an historic food and agriculture coalition, which served our nation well for nearly half a century, has been intentionally severed. Understanding and thoughtfully processing the import of this action is now the obligation of the American people. That cannot be questioned. But might this Farm Bill best be understood as an American metaphor, writ large?

Over the past two weeks, three respected public intellectuals, whose views traverse the political spectrum, penned very thoughtful pieces regarding the current state of “the American Dream.” All three are well worthy of your attention.

In the August 4th Sunday *New York Times*, Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, reflects upon the life and times of the small Ohio town where he grew up, Port Clinton:

“My hometown — Port Clinton, Ohio, population 6,050 — was in the 1950s a passable embodiment of the American dream, a place that offered decent opportunity for the children of bankers and factory workers alike.

“But a half-century later, wealthy kids park BMW convertibles in the Port Clinton High School lot next to decrepit ‘junkers’ in which homeless classmates live. The American dream has morphed into a split-screen American nightmare. And the story of this small town, and the divergent destinies of its children, turns out to be sadly representative of America.”ⁱ

In this weekend’s *Wall Street Journal*, Peggy Noonan, speechwriter and special assistant to President Reagan, discusses Dan Balz’s new book on the last presidential campaign, *Collision 2012*, and offers this observation on exactly the same troubling challenge:

“Here a departure from the book: There is pervasive confusion about what the American dream is. We seem to have redefined it to mean the acquisition of material things—a car, a house and a pool. That was not the meaning of the American dream a few generations ago. The definition was then that in this wonderful place called America, you can start out from nothing and become anything. It was aspirational. The limits of class and background wouldn’t and couldn’t keep you from becoming a person worthy of respect, even renown. If you wanted to turn that into house and a pool, fine. But you didn’t have to. You could have a modest job like teacher and be the most respected woman in town. When we turned the American dream into a dream about materialism, we disheartened our young, who now are forced to achieve what we’ve defined as success in a straitened economy.”ⁱⁱ

Noonan and Putnam arrive at the same point, from vastly different vision and value bases. But arrive together they do! Finally, in the July 26th *New York Times*, Warren Buffett’s son Peter offers a scathing indictment of American philanthropy, and the destructive structural dynamics at work in this sector:

“Inside any important philanthropy meeting, you witness heads of state meeting with investment managers and corporate leaders. All are searching for answers with their right hand to problems that others in the room have created with their left. There are plenty of statistics that tell us that inequality is continually rising. [...] As more lives and communities are destroyed by the system that creates vast amounts of wealth for the few, the more heroic it sounds to ‘give back.’ It’s what I would call ‘conscience laundering’ — feeling better about accumulating more than any one person could possibly need to live on by sprinkling a little around as an act of charity. But this just keeps the existing structure of inequality in place. The rich sleep better at night, while others get just enough to keep the

pot from boiling over. Nearly every time someone feels better by doing good, on the other side of the world (or street), someone else is further locked into a system that will not allow the true flourishing of his or her nature or the opportunity to live a joyful and fulfilled life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These are fascinating opinion convergences, across the political spectrum. Yet America’s penchant for avoidance of income inequality, middle class disillusionment, and monetization of almost everything unfolds before our eyes.

Here are two realities which trouble me most about this Farm Bill process. The average farm household income in 2012 was \$89,099^{iv}—\$20,000 more than the average U.S. household income. Conversely, SNAP households which include a child, an elderly person or a disabled person account for 76% of all SNAP households, and they receive 83% of all SNAP benefits.^v 83% of SNAP households have gross incomes of \$19,530 for a family of three, and 61% of SNAP households average \$14,648 for a family of three.^{vi} And the “Farm, Farm Bill,” as it is touted, does much to ensure that large producers are held whole, and eviscerates other important programs across a range of titles that support all the rest of the Farm Bill constituencies, whom together comprise the broad fabric of rural American life.

If this stands, the optics are most unpleasant. Has there been fraud and abuse in the food and nutrition programs? Of course; it is a Federal program. Has there been fraud and abuse in the Commodity programs? Of course; it is a Federal program. Can and should more be done to attack these failures? Of course. However, the obvious House Farm Bill winners and losers are looking more and more like Port Clinton these days. This wider American metaphor is troubling. Replicating it in a Farm Bill framework further divides us and reinforces public perceptions which harm us all: Republicans, the Ag Committees, all of us who love agriculture. These optics are very bad, as is the metaphor. Let us hope neither survives.

ⁱ Robert D. Putnam, “Crumbling American Dreams.” *The New York Times*, Sunday, August 4, 2013: 9. Online at <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/03/crumbling-american-dreams/>

ⁱⁱ Peggy Noonan, “How Obama Wooed the Middle Class.” *The Wall Street Journal*, Saturday/Sunday, August 10-11, 2013: A13. Online at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323477604579001123464683330.html> (subscription required).

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Buffett, “The Charitable Industrial Complex.” *The New York Times*, July 26, 2013. Online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/opinion/the-charitable-industrial-complex.html>

^{iv} U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, online at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-household-well-being/farm-household-income.aspx#.UggEbT-4XpA>

^v U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2011*. Table A.14. November 2012. Online at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/Published/snap/SNAPPartHH.htm>. As cited by http://feedingamerica.org/how-we-fight-hunger/advocacy-public-policy/policy-center/federal-anti-hunger-programs-and-policies/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program.aspx#_ednref13

^{vi} Department of Health and Human Services, *2012 Poverty Guidelines*. Online at <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2013/01/24/2013-01422/annual-update-of-the-hhs-poverty-guidelines>. As cited by http://feedingamerica.org/how-we-fight-hunger/advocacy-public-policy/policy-center/federal-anti-hunger-programs-and-policies/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program.aspx#_ednref7