



Trying to Reason with History and Policy in a Time of Crisis

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We are a nation convulsed by great pain. Out of the coronavirus pandemic more than 40 million Americans have lost jobs and, as of June 4, 2020, a devastating 107,171 Americans were reported to have died from the disease it causes, Covid-19 (*The New York Times*, [updated June 4, 2020](#)). The brutal killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers has ignited protests across the country in an outpouring of vast, deep pain and frustration, of anguish unabated by progress. Words inadequate to the realities of the moment are at least an opportunity for reflection.

History tempts the search for analogues to make sense of tumultuous times. Many look to, for example, 1918 (flu pandemic), 1968 (assassinations and civil unrest), or 1932 (Great Depression), maybe even 1860 (prelude to Civil War). None provide a proper fit, however, because history doesn't repeat so much as it recycles. The convulsions of today are pulling from each of those times and more to conjure an unpredictable present threaded through with the familiar. The lessons we learn and, more likely, the lessons we fail to learn from our past may well be the guiding forces for what gets recycled, how and when. It can be disturbing and troubling but also an opportunity to think anew, to better learn and understand; new views on old pains can be the building blocks of progress.

Policy represents a collective choice that speaks volumes, each a statement of priorities and a demonstration of values and principles. Policy decisions also impact the lives of real people and can produce far-reaching reverberations across society, throughout time. History therefore provides important perspectives on policy and these perspectives inform strong concerns with decisions currently being made. For one, reactionary partisan opposition to efforts that would extend economic lifelines to our fellow citizens, helping them cope with crisis, is dangerously mistaken. Misguided priorities in assistance present significant risk.

There exists a difficult, troubled legacy in the disparate treatment given to food assistance for struggling Americans compared to that given to assistance for farmers. It is a legacy that justifies concern in this perilous time and ample historical baggage from which to glean lessons. This may be an uncomfortable conversation for those in agriculture, but it is not one to be ignored (Abbott, [June 3, 2020](#); NFU, Press

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Release [May 29, 2020](#); @NFUDC, [June 2, 2020](#)). Agriculture bears great responsibility not only in the production of food but also because of the benefits granted to those in farming. In the wrong hands, this troubled history risks becoming farce and tragedy.

The Trump Administration has provided more than \$23 billion in payments to farmers over the last two years and has recently created a \$19 billion Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, \$16 billion (84%) of which has been promised as payments to farmers. This same food assistance program promises to purchase just \$3 billion in food but only \$1.2 billion (over 6% of the total) of that has actually been contracted and the remaining purchases, \$1.8 billion (just over 9% of the total funds) are optional “dependent upon program success and available remaining funds” (USDA, [Farmers to Families Food Box](#)). It is no small concern, then, that some of it has been contracted to questionable companies (Bottemiller Evich and McCrimmon, [May 13, 2020](#)).

The topline numbers represent only the first level of concern. The Trump Administration has inexplicably increased the total amounts that can be received, including a new method for corporations and other entities to simply multiply their payments. While most farmers will not come close to the limits (which total half a million dollars for MFP2019 and CFAP combined), more than a few will manage to take advantage of the rules and get far more (Stahl [May 3, 2020](#)). At the same time the Administration has advocated for and advanced partisan efforts to cut food assistance even as the pandemic decimates the economy. These are policy priorities that seem oblivious to the problems of the moment. Too many are out of work and turning to food aid while milk and vegetables are wasted for lack of an effort to get them where needed. These are decisions oblivious even to the struggle of some farmers for whom payments will provide little help (Corkery and Yaffe-Bellany, [May 14, 2020](#)).

It is the history here that magnifies concern. We need not dig so deep as to mine antebellum America for lessons. We can start with 1933—the Great Depression, the New Deal and the Agricultural Adjustment Acts—and extract valuable lessons from a limited set of examples.

In 1934, Henry Wallace as Secretary of Agriculture to President Franklin Roosevelt wrote of implementing the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933. He wrote that to “destroy a growing crop is a shocking commentary on civilization” because the “plowing under of ten million acres of cotton in August, 1933, and the slaughter of six million little pigs in September, 1933, were not acts of idealism in any sane society” but were “emergency acts made necessary by the almost insane lack of world statesmanship” prior to 1932 (Lord 1947, at 366). Left out of Wallace’s lament were aspects of the 1933 Act more disturbing and problematic; the ways in which emergencies can permit the implementation of misguided priorities and establish a long-running course of conduct.

The 1933 Act paid millions of dollars to farmers, providing real relief in a time of deep economic crisis. The relief, however, did not reach all those suffering in agriculture. Federal assistance was often not shared with the tenants and sharecroppers struggling under destitution and paternalism in the cotton sector. Worse yet, it was often used to drive them off the land and into further misery during the Great Depression in the Jim Crow South (Alston and Ferrie 1993; Alston and Ferrie 1989; Burford 1966; Conrad 1965; Coppess 2018a; Coppess 2018b; Daniel 2007; Daniel 1985; Daniel 1984; Day 1967; Fite 2015; Hoffsommer 1934; Johnson 2011; Kirby 1983; Mann 1984; Vance 1934; Whatley 1983; Winders 2009; Woodman 1979). Among these tenants and sharecroppers were many descended from those who had been enslaved and many of them joined the more than six million black southerners that left that region for northern cities in what is known as the Great Migration (Wilkerson 2010).

Adding insult to injury, USDA reported that payments under the 1933 Act included one of the largest cotton plantations in the country which was managed by a high-level political appointee at USDA (Nelson 1999; Nelson 1974). In 1933, USDA provided assistance to that plantation in an amount that is equal to more than \$2.8 million in today’s dollars (adjusted for inflation using Bureau of Labor Statistics, [CPI Inflation calculator](#)). Those controversies did not bring down the 1933 Act, however. A conservative majority on the Supreme Court struck it down early in 1936 based on a misreading of the statute and questionable constitutional theories about the Tenth Amendment and the powers of Congress (*U.S. v. Butler*, 297 U.S. 1 (1936); Goldstein 2013; Metzger 2017). Farm assistance had to be rescued under the guise of conservation and the dust storms ravaging the Great Plains.

Barely a quarter century would pass before it had to be rescued again, this time because farm policy had become consumed by controversy and internecine political fighting. At the turbulent center were the

efforts to protect policy that harmed others. Acreage reductions were often used in the South to keep available a pool of cheap labor until cotton production could be fully mechanized, while also supporting land consolidation. Federal power pushed diversion of excess cotton acres into feed grains production, underwriting competition with corn for the domestic feed market. The result was an unprecedented defeat in 1962 when farm policy collided with Southern efforts to protect segregation and had to be rescued by food stamps in 1964 (Ferejohn 1986; Rosenfeld 2010).

Misguided opposition to food assistance is another painful, recycled thread in this history. In 1963, for example, Representative E.C. Gathings (D-AR) stated his opposition to food aid because he believed it would hurt farmers who “need these people so badly on farms to cultivate and harvest our crops” (House Committee on Agriculture 1963; Rosenfeld 2010). His was an echo of the opposition to earlier relief by cotton planters who felt that helping poor sharecroppers and laborers with food would be a disincentive for them to work in the fields (Daniel 1985). It would be heard again in 1973 when efforts to add food stamps to the farm bill were nearly derailed by those opposed to the program largely because it might allow the families of striking workers to receive assistance. Heard yet again in the false narrative spun by Ronald Reagan about welfare queens that has been carried into the present by partisans arguing that assistance will be a disincentive for low income Americans to work; quick to claim massive fraud and abuse in food assistance but reluctant to see the same concerns in farm assistance. It amounts to an ideological playbook that generally results in protecting farm payments but not food assistance, notably used in 1981 and recycled in 1995, 2013 and 2018.

Consider alternate views. In 1995, Senate Patrick Leahy (D-VT) warned that “[b]ecause some farm groups have proposed taking food from the needy to subsidize wealthy farmers,” if “farm programs become the enemy of the hungry and the environment, I will not support them. Indeed, I will join those on the floor who want to dismantle them” (quoted in Coppess 2018a, at 187). His words were an echo of those who fought to create and then protect food assistance in the 1960s, such as Representative Leonor Sullivan (D-MO). In 1968, she told the House Agriculture Committee that if “we have to have another fight, let’s have it . . . many from urban areas are simply going to withhold our votes on farm legislation until we again make another ‘deal’ as we had to do in 1964” (Ferejohn at 233, quoting from House Committee on Agriculture hearing). One wonders what the next echoes will sound like.

Concluding Thoughts

There are more than 40 million Americans who have lost their jobs and more than 100,000 Americans have died in just a few months. The brutal killing of George Floyd adds another tragedy to a list already too extensive. With so much pain ripping through America today, the policy decisions by the Trump Administration in the food and agriculture sector are concerning. Too little has been done to assist those who need food in a pandemic and too much on trying to curtail access to food aid. These are decisions likely to produce long-lasting, deep reverberations in the body politic with consequences difficult to foresee. Farmers *are* struggling and payments can provide some help but the decision to prioritize payments over food is not likely to be well-received by the many waiting in long lines at food banks, struggling just to feed their families. Worse still the obvious greed of the few pushing to capture ever larger payments, especially when considered with the historical examples reviewed herein. This difficult legacy haunts every discussion about farm policy, never more so than now.

Concerns are not the equivalent of criticism for its own sake but rather a call for policies and decisions that better reflect needs and values. The failure to make real, incremental progress too often builds to a breaking point, causing vast harm and greater costs. Few words in American history are more haunting on this point than those of President Abraham Lincoln in his second inaugural address. Among them his warning to a war-weary citizenry that the fighting could continue “until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword” (Lincoln, [April 10, 1865](#)). For those willing to learn, the brief record highlighted here provides a starting point from which to draw important lessons.

We have to do better than this.

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