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THE FARM POLICY DEBATE OF 1949-50

PLAINS STATE REACTION TO THE BRANNAN PLAN

VIRGIL W. DEAN

A storm of controversy arose in April 1949 when Secretary of Agriculture Charles F. Brannan unveiled the Truman administration's postwar policy for agriculture. The most controversial aspect of the so-called Brannan plan was its production payments feature, a direct, undisguised farm subsidy designed to bring relief to producers and consumers alike. Other aspects of the complex plan also elicited both praise and blame, but disagreements during this fractious time were not limited to farm questions. In a year of apparent victories for the world's communist monolith, spy trials, and labor unrest, discussions of farm policy on the Great Plains and elsewhere were affected by the participants' general views of government in-

tervention in the economy and particularly by their view of commodity stabilization as a form of socialism.

Grassroots reaction to the Brannan plan varied widely: some of the farmers who wrote to Brannan praised him as a savior and the only man in Washington who cared about their problems; others were convinced that the villainous secretary and his contemptible plan threatened everything that was good about America. Theodore J. Regier, a Newton, Kansas, area farmer, encouraged the secretary to "Keep on working" and wrote: "We want security on the farm, even if we have to control production and have less freedom. A man in the middle of the ocean has a world of freedom but no security." J. J. Weber, an equally convinced north-central Kansas wheat farmer, wrote that as "a firm believer of supply and demand" he opposed the Brannan plan. "[M]y farm . . . is all paid for and I do not need . . . [or] want anyone to tell me how many acres I can plant. [T]his is suppose to be a free contry [sic] let us leave it that way."¹

In general, how did plains farmers react to this innovative policy proposal? And why did so many oppose what, on the surface at least,

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seemed like an extremely generous agricultural program? Using Kansas as its primary example and Brannan's correspondence as its primary source, this essay offers some tentative answers to these questions. Although scientific analysis of this opinion (if indeed it is even possible) is beyond the scope of this study, a sampling is instructive. Attitudes toward Brannan's proposal came in all shades and degrees of eloquence. A look at these divergent viewpoints can provide a window on the depth of disagreement on agricultural issues and, by implication, a glimpse at attitudes affecting broader social and economic issues confronting postwar Americans.

EXISTING FARM POLICY

Numerous domestic challenges confronted the United States in the wake of the Second World War as it sought to reconvert to a peace time economy. Agriculture was one of the many policy areas that demanded attention. Existing programs were based on New Deal legislation—most significantly, the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1938—and emergency wartime legislation designed to expire at the end of 1948. Although the AAA was an omnibus agricultural measure, its most important legacy to the Brannan plan was the price support system based on a certain percent of “parity” for specified farm commodities; wheat and corn were two of the so-called “basic commodities” on the original list, a list that grew in response to the United States' entry into the war.

In 1941 and 1942 Congress passed legislation to encourage production of crops deemed vital to the war effort and to guarantee farmers some benefit from increased demand and wartime spending by supporting numerous farm commodity prices at 90 percent of parity. By the end of 1942, supports were guaranteed for “basics” (wheat, corn, cotton, rice, tobacco, and peanuts) and “non-basics” (milk, butterfat, chickens, eggs, turkeys, hogs, dry peas, soybeans for oil, flaxseed for oil, peanuts for oil, American-Egyptian cotton, sweet potatoes, and Irish potatoes).²

If price supports were simply extended, many believed the cost of the system soon would become prohibitive, resulting in a consumer or taxpayer revolt against the entire farm program. Farmers' successes exacerbated the problem. In the 1940s the nation was in the midst of what Wayne Rasmussen calls the second agricultural revolution—“the change from animal power to mechanical power and the adaptation of chemistry to agricultural production.” Spectacular gains in farm productivity were already quite evident, and price-depressing farm surpluses loomed ever larger for the future.³ What was to be done? In essence, this was the core of the postwar debate.

At issue was the “parity” concept, an idea that gained currency in the 1920s, was codified in the Agricultural Adjustment Acts of the 1930s, and quickly became the cornerstone of the national farm program. The formula used to determine the level of support was a complex one, but, in its simplest terms, parity was the “ratio of equality” between the prices received by farmers for the commodities sold and the prices farmers paid for the goods and services they purchased. A base period, initially 1909-14, was selected so the ratio could be determined in light of the constant fluctuation of prices.⁴

Government price support programs based on a given percentage of parity were particularly important to farmers in the wheat producing states of the Great Plains where over-dependence on one-commodity agriculture made producers especially vulnerable to farm price fluctuations. Hard hit by depression and drought in the “Dirty Thirties,” plains farmers generally appreciated New Deal programs that alleviated their suffering; but only favorable weather and the wartime demand of the early forties would return good times to their region. This boom period also brought a rapid increase in the application of new technologies, a favorable economic climate for stock raising, a considerable expansion of wheat acreage, a concomitant increase in production, and an acceleration in the trend toward fewer but larger farms. The continuation of prosperity during the immediate

postwar years notwithstanding, farmers feared another depression. At the very least, they demanded a support system that would put a floor under certain commodity prices.⁵

Whether on or off the farm, virtually everyone agreed with Secretary Brannan that farmers confronted “disadvantaging economic circumstances” because of “the serious hazards resulting from unfavorable weather, floods,” and their inability to make quick production adjustments. Brannan, a forty-five year old attorney from Denver, Colorado, had spent thirteen years in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administering New Deal action programs before his appointment to the department’s top post in June 1948.⁶ Experience had taught him that peculiar circumstances entitled the farmer to special legislative consideration and, if necessary, assistance. In addition, like others of his generation, Brannan held to a concept of agrarianism that maintained “that the prosperity of our agricultural producers is closely tied up with the prosperity of our entire country.”⁷

Nevertheless, common ground on specific program choices was illusive. Congressional ineptitude in this area can be partially explained by the fact that the so-called “farm problem” was actually a myriad of different problems, all of which resisted comprehensive solution. As the former chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture, Clifford R. Hope (R., Kans.), observed in 1949, it was, more accurately, “thirty-five or forty farm problems.”⁸ Hope, a widely respected congressional farm spokesman from western Kansas, had been searching for answers in behalf of farmers since the 1920s, and he was well aware of the problem’s complexities. Not only did the problems differ for farmers from one commodity to another, but they also varied from region to region for producers of any given commodity. In addition, the often discordant interests and opinions of processors and consumers frequently compounded the problem and complicated the search for a solution.

This long-standing reality was exacerbated by the wartime legislation that had extended high, “rigid,” price support guarantees to a



FIG. 1. *Republican Congressman Clifford R. Hope, Sr., of Garden City, addressing a meeting of the Lane County Farm Bureau at Dighton in December of 1949. Photograph courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society.*

laundry list of previously uncovered commodities. The issue became the extent and level of commodity price supports, not the viability of the concept. A few farm advocates called for government support at 100 percent parity, but the most common point of contention in the postwar farm policy debate occurred between proponents of a fixed 90 percent of parity and those who favored a more flexible support system. The question was no longer whether or not government had a role in agriculture, but what that role would be; and “the principal question with most farmers,” wrote Congressman Hope, “is not whether they are entitled to 90% of parity, but the method to be used in giving it to them.”⁹

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that the Agricultural Act of 1948 (Hope-Aiken Act), the nation’s first shot at a long-range, postwar policy for agriculture, was at best a hybridized piece of farm legislation. Title I, the Hope portion of the new law, simply extended existing legislation through 1949, while Titles II and III, named for their principal sponsor, Senator George Aiken (R., Vt.), implemented a long-range price support program based on a new formula for computing parity and a plan for



FIG. 2. During the campaign of 1948, President Truman made an important farm speech and appearance at the National Plowing Contest at Dexter, Iowa, on 18 September 1948. Here the President shakes hands with farmers Ronald H. Orr, Beatrice, Nebraska, and Charles G. Long, Bethany, Missouri, the defending and current plow champions. Associated Press photograph courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library.

a flexible or sliding scale ranging from 60 to 90 percent of parity for most major crops. According to Representative Harold Cooley, the conference committee had labored for many long hours only to bring "forth a monstrosity." As Stephen Pace, another Democratic opponent, explained, "The House passed a bill, the Senate passed a bill, and the compromise is to enact both of them." Even Congressman Hope, who had come early to the position that more time was needed to study changing conditions before permanent legislation was passed, described the Aiken bill as "a hastily gotten up concoction, full of contradictions and weak spots."¹⁰

The failings of the Republican 80th Congress, the politicization of agricultural issues in the fall campaign, and the Democratic election successes in 1948 made a renewed long-range farm policy search inevitable. Not only had Democrats recaptured majority control of the Congress, they had reelected a president. Kan-

sas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas went Republican as they had in the previous election; but President Truman held many of the midwestern and western states that Franklin Roosevelt had carried and recaptured Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Wyoming, which had gone back to the Republicans in 1944. Truman's surprising November victory, due in part to an aggressive farm state campaign, left many, including the president and the secretary of agriculture, with the impression that the administration had received a mandate to change the country's farm policy.¹¹

THE BRANNAN PLAN

Secretary Brannan interpreted and gave life to that mandate—whether it was real or imagined. On 7 April 1949 he appeared before a joint session of the House and Senate agriculture committees to discuss some of the administration's "views and recommendations" with regard to price supports, "the heart of our farm policy."¹²

The essence of Brannan's proposal contained four basic elements: 1) a new standard of support based on income rather than price criteria, which represented "a realistic minimum below which it is not in the interest of farmers or consumers to allow farm prices to fall"; 2) a more recent, realistic, moving ten year base period (initially 1939 through 1948) for computing the new income support standard; 3) support accomplished through the use of loans, purchase agreements, production payments, and direct purchases; and 4) eligibility for price support limited to producers who practiced good soil conservation and did not exceed a predetermined level of production—"a volume high enough to benefit most farms but one which will not encourage the development of extremely large, industrialized farming."¹³

Brannan's proposal was complex and many faceted, but the new plan's most controversial component was the secretary's scheme for offering relief to both consumers and producers. "Non-perishable" or "storable" commodities

were to be supported in much the same way as they had been under existing legislation (loans, purchase agreements, and direct purchases), but “perishable” commodities would be supported under a new system of “production” or “income payments.” In practice, a support standard would be determined by the Secretary of Agriculture, and a direct payment would be made to the producer to make up the difference between the standard and the market price of that commodity. This was an undisguised government subsidy to the farmer, in itself a hard pill for many inside and outside farm circles to swallow, and a consumer subsidy, anathema to most conservatives.

A second provision, which also proved quite controversial, was designed to encourage the “family-sized farm” by denying government support beyond a certain level of production. In an effort to coopt those groups most likely to oppose this particular concept, Brannan wrapped his explanation in a cloak of American idealism and agrarian fundamentalism. “One bulwark of democracy,” Brannan proclaimed, “may be found in the prosperous rural community mainly composed of economically strong families farming in the traditional American pattern. It is an ever-present answer to communism.” By limiting “eligibility for price support to a defined volume of production on each farm,” Brannan believed the government could avoid encouraging “large, industrial farming” and still help most farmers who were relatively small scale producers.¹⁴

In principle there was little new in Brannan’s proposal, but in practice the plan’s emphasis and scope were significant departures from previous programs. The new support standard was to be used to support a much longer list of commodities at what amounted to 100 percent of parity. At minimum, Brannan believed his “first-priority, or group 1” commodities should include corn, wheat, cotton, tobacco, whole milk, eggs, farm chickens, hogs, beef cattle, and lambs. Other farm products would receive commensurate support if funds were available. The secretary hoped that his plan would be the

culmination of the lengthy and often politically explosive postwar search for a solution to the “farm problem.”¹⁵ Instead the “Brannan plan” touched off a political firestorm.

CONGRESSMAN HOPE AND RESPONSE TO THE BRANNAN PLAN

National reaction registered quickly. A *New York Times* editorial called the administration plan a “political maneuver,” and other news agencies claimed that its real author was the “radical” National Farmers Union (NFU). In addition, a steady stream of letters and telegrams began arriving at the USDA and the White House on the day following Brannan’s committee appearance. Members of Congress were also understandably concerned. Congressman Hope commented on the production payment feature of the proposed plan in the first letter he wrote after Secretary Brannan’s presentation: “Farmers generally,” Hope believed, would “oppose the cash subsidy plan because they will feel there is no certainty of it being put in operation.” It would be wholly dependent on annual appropriations and farmers would have no way of knowing, at planting time, if payments actually would be forthcoming. “Furthermore, most farmers consider a payment of that kind a consumer subsidy rather than a farm subsidy.” Nevertheless, Hope assured his correspondent that the House Committee on Agriculture would give all the secretary’s recommendations careful consideration.¹⁶

Although he later became a staunch opponent of the secretary’s plan, Hope was undoubtedly sincere in his promise of objectivity. The congressman had been disquieted by the administration’s injection of partisanship into the farm policy debate during the previous campaign, but he was also “terribly disappointed in Allan Kline,” the conservative, “free trade” president of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF). Hope believed that Kline, who was philosophically opposed to all federal subsidies and accompanying regulations, was forcing his position on the entire organization. “It

isn't simply a question of what the support levels will be but it is a question of whether a little group of leaders who are entirely out of touch with the thinking of people on the farms are going to dictate farm legislation." Hope was not yet sure what should be done with regard to price policy, "but if we are going to have all the controls that are contained in the Aiken bill we might just as well have 90% of parity price supports and let the farmer be getting something out of it."¹⁷

These words, written in "confidence" less than two months before Brannan's policy announcement, reveal considerable common ground between the congressman and the secretary of agriculture. Hope had previously expressed support for production payments.¹⁸ By January 1949 he had come to the conclusion that farmers were willing to accept more controls, although his mail was running in all directions; he was upset with the AFBF's intransigence; and, he was definitely committed to changing the Aiken bill.¹⁹ Despite the partisanship of the past campaign, Hope respected Brannan and expressed considerable confidence in his efforts to find a solution for the price support problem. "I know that Secretary Brannan is giving a great deal of thought[t] and study to the matter," he wrote on 3 February, "and that he has the best brains in the Department working on it now. I am sure he wants to do everything possible to work out a solution to the question."²⁰

This conciliatory tone notwithstanding, within hours of the secretary's initial committee presentation two months later, the battle lines were drawn, and Hope was in opposition. Although the debate intensified as lawmakers and the general public began to focus on specific legislation, the pros and cons remained surprisingly constant. Truman and Brannan labored to convince the nation that the Brannan plan was not a new approach, but in many ways the administration's proposed program was in fact a sharp departure from previous policy.²¹ The controversial "production payments" were not new to the table, but in the Brannan plan they were a centerpiece.

The big differences were in emphasis, unprecedented high levels of support and mandatory supports for many perishable commodities. As Congressman Hope explained, "It is the slant which the Secretary has put on the matter that disturbs me."²² "[U]ntil Secretary Brannan came along with his proposal," Hope reasoned, "no one ever had any idea that payments would be used to the extent that he suggests."²³ It was this "slant" that disturbed many and excited others, and a number of interested Kansans took the time to express their considered opinions, both pro and con. These reactions ran the gamut of public opinion and, on the whole, fairly reflect the many different attitudes expressed throughout the region, as well as the nation.

RESPONSES FROM KANSANS

Taking a pro-administration line, J. A. Meyer of Riley informed the secretary that Allan Kline and the Farm Bureau were under the influence of the 2 percent of big farmers "that has least to benefit from the [new] program." Mrs. Thomas Williams, from western Kansas, agreed: "We have always paid Our Dues to the Farm Bureau but cant see any benefit in it for us: the way I see that other plan [Aiken Act?] is to help the rich wheat farmer while it makes it harder every day for the little man to have a Job or money to buy his groceries. . . . I know all the little people are left holding the bag again: the rich are always protected."²⁴

This hostility toward the Farm Bureau, the most influential farm organization in the state and the nation, was also reflected in a 6 May 1949 letter to Secretary Brannan from Hiawatha farmer Hugh Craig, who believed the Brannan plan had the support of most dirt farmers. "It is epochal and strikingly constructive and worthy of a place beside President Truman's declaration of intention to fight global poverty," he wrote. "P.S. As a member of the American Farm Bureau Federation, I resent Allan B. Kline's utterances." Three months later, in a letter to former Kansas Senator Arthur Capper, who was spending much of his first year of retirement



FIG. 3. A Nebraska native, Allan B. Kline graduated from Iowa State College and subsequently established himself as farmer/stockman in Benton County, Iowa. He became active in the local Farm Bureau, served as vice-president and president of the state federation, and was elected president of the AFBF in 1947. Photograph courtesy of Kansas Farm Bureau.

attacking the Brannan initiative, Craig asked why the farmer should not “have a fair share of the national income.” His homey, handwritten letter conveyed “liberal” views that nearly paralleled those of the Farmers Union. Craig insisted that the “principle of parity” represented a “price to the farmer that would give him approximately a fair share of the national income,” and therefore he should receive 100 percent of parity. He believed “subsidization” had become “a cardinal principle of the Republican party,” enjoyed by business through the protective tariff for many years.²⁵

“The real objection to [the] Brannan Plan among those who are fighting it for other than personal reasons,” wrote Craig,

is because of its implications. They fear a national policy that will adopt a broader conception of human rights and of greater

service by the state to the individual and that may entail compelling the wealthier of our citizens to bear a greater share of the national burden than they do now.

Craig believed the opposition’s cry about “sacred property rights” was a position “worthy of the Dark Ages” and insisted that “free lunch for school children” carried with it just as many “dangers of state socialism” as the farm plan under consideration. He closed this Populistic epistle as follows:

If our wealthier people would be willing to remedy injustice against human rights at some expense to themselves, they would not need to fear radical socialism or communism, it seems to me. By opposing doing the above, they are inviting everything they fear.

The Republican Party is too much under the influence of reactionary wealth and selfish commercialism. It was founded as a liberal party and its great leader Abraham Lincoln typified that spirit. Unless it returns to its early principles, its days of glory are gone and its expectancy is short.²⁶

Capper’s rebuttal was based primarily on his belief that it was not “healthy for the farmer, or for the consumer, or for the country, to have the farmer dependent upon the Federal Treasury for his income, and the consumer dependent upon the Federal Treasury for part of his grocery bill.” He believed “it a dangerous philosophy that Government owes you or me a living” and that

the Federal Treasury could [not] long stand the load of supporting any considerable group of people in this country. In times of distress, we may yield to necessity. But to draw upon the Treasury to sustain the artificially high income levels of the war and postwar years—it just can’t [and “won’t”] work.²⁷

Unfortunately for the administration, Capper’s judgment mirrored more public opinion than did Craig’s. Across the Plains (and nation) many people found considerable

relevance in the opinions expressed by the former senator. A Chase County, Kansas, farmer informed the secretary that everyone he talked to opposed the Brannan plan and, although he had voted Democratic all his life, he was making the switch. "If you want to make regimented peasants out of the farmer," he wrote, "every man with a backbone will be your foe." Mrs. Morris Campbell of Larned insisted that "no one, but a complete moron could believe you can have cheap food for consumers and high prices for producers. . . . You men in Washington yap about the Reds & are getting our country the same way."²⁸

Many other observers and participants in the farm debate echoed similar attitudes. One western Kansas newspaper editorialized that the government had a role in agriculture, but "Aid and assistance can't . . . long be given without dictation of what to do and . . . when to do it. If the administration's program gets through Congress," editor Victor C. Leiker insisted, "the farmer of America will be the most regimented group our country has ever seen. . . . If the plan goes through it will be just another step toward socialization."²⁹

THE KANSAS CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION

The entire Kansas congressional delegation also espoused this attitude, opposing, without exception, the Brannan plan. Sixth District Representative Wint Smith of Mankato was obsessed with "creeping socialism" and the domestic Communist threat. He disputed virtually all of the administration's foreign policy initiatives and was "unalterably opposed to any of the so-called Fair Deal ideas about social legislation." The Brannan plan was just another of these "socialistic scheme[s]," endorsed first by organized labor "simply to get cheaper food" at taxpayer expense.³⁰

Representative Hope thought "the matter should be carefully studied in Congress" but was "dubious about any farm plan which has to be carried out by means of payments to producers." The congressman was apprehensive about a

proposal that so closely resembled the British system. "It is in effect a subsidy to the consumer," he reasoned,

and apparently in England the consumers have gotten so fond of the subsidy that any talk about raising prices brings a threat of a political revolt. . . . The thing that bothers me is that if we start such a program here and consumers adjust themselves to the subsidized prices, the chances are we will never get rid of them.

A week later Hope wrote "the Brannan plan . . . would, in my opinion, bring about a situation very much the same as the farmers in England are confronted with at the present time, which is total control of their farming operations."³¹

INFORMING THE FARMERS

Throughout the farm policy debate of 1949 and early 1950, Secretary Brannan repeatedly expressed the belief that the public, especially the farmers, would support his program if they better understood the issue. This was an overly optimistic assessment, but some of the secretary's mail did reflect a degree of understandable confusion, and there were some instances of "conversion" that undoubtedly reinforced the department's belief that education was the key to success. One such "convert," D. H. Richert of North Newton, Kansas, wrote the secretary expressing the commonly held concern that the new plan would lead to excessive regimentation or government control of America's farms. In his reply Brannan thanked Richert for this "opportunity to discuss . . . the bogey of regimentation." The secretary assured his correspondent that he "did not propose to the Congress that farmers should be pushed around and regimented a lot," and made some general remarks about his recommended program. Richert was convinced; a few days later he wrote that this was "a fine program" and only wished "there would be some way of bringing the truth to the farmers."³²

Whether or not USDA officials were correct in assuming that the more people knew the

more likely they were to support the Brannan plan, polls seemed to indicate a definite need for more information. In late May national polls revealed that farmers still did not fully understand the program and were not convinced of its viability. Data also indicated that farmers were evenly split; they were not for the sliding scale of the Aiken Act but did not yet understand the Brannan plan. Lester F. Kimmel, a special correspondent for the *Wichita Eagle*, reported:

Surveys being made by agrarian observers indicate that the farmer, as of now, is open-minded. He is sitting back to see which party develops the program that seems most advantageous to him. . . . In poker parlance the Brannan plan sees the Republicans and raises them in almost every particular.

The farmer was listening but had not yet reacted.³³

FARMERS' ORGANIZATIONS AND THE BRANNAN PLAN

On the Great Plains, as elsewhere in the country, the Farm Bureau, National Grange, and conservative cooperatives were inclined toward the Republican view. Since the Farm Bureau was the most influential agricultural organization in the central Plains and the corn belt, the Republicans were in the strongest position. Most livestock producers, fearing an increase in feed-grain prices, also opposed the Brannan plan.³⁴ But farmers and stock growers were not known for their group loyalty, and organizational influences also pulled them in the other direction.

Most significant nationally, and especially on the northern Plains, was the Farmers Union, which gave the secretary's plan its most enthusiastic support. Brannan received many hearty letters of endorsement from state and local Farmers Unions throughout the country, but they were numerous from the northern Plains and upper Midwest—most notably the Dakotas, Montana, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. A St. Paul union official, for example,

decried his state's Farm Bureau for "tagging all of us as Anglophiles, [and] calling your [Brannan's] plan the 'British' Farm Program. We're steeping a cup of hot water in case there's another tea party."³⁵

Republicans, Congressman Hope included, were understandably concerned about these various alignments and the plan's political implications. They were especially troubled by the active involvement of organized labor, which was second only to the NFU in its efforts for the Brannan proposal. "Most of the support," Hope wrote on 4 June, "is coming from the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] and there is no doubt but what it is a CIO bill from start to finish. This very fact I am sure is going to make most farmers suspicious." Two weeks later he called the administration's proposal the "CIO Plan" and criticized the "so-called Farm Conference" held by the Democrats in Des Moines the previous week. It was "mostly a rally by the Democrats and Labor leaders trying to get farmers to support the repeal of the Taft-Hartley bill, and incidentally to support the Brannan Farm Plan." Hope believed the Brannan plan, because of labor's substantial influence, gave more to consumers than to farmers. "I don't think," he wrote on 25 June, the new farm bill "should be the Brannan bill which is a CIO program or the Aiken bill which is too much of a United States Chamber of Commerce program."³⁶

DEFEAT OF THE BRANNAN PLAN

Momentarily, in late June and early July, it appeared as if "a rather pale version of the Brannan plan" had a real chance. The so-called Pace-Brannan bill (H.R. 5345) provided for Brannan's income support standard and 100 percent supports for Group 1 commodities but limited the application of production payments to no more than three commodities.³⁷ Even this was more than most Brannan opponents could tolerate, and they got behind Albert A. Gore, Sr.'s (D., Tenn) one year extension of the existing program, which passed overwhelmingly. All upper plains state congressmen, except Minnesota's, supported the Gore bill,



FIG. 4. President Harry S. Truman signing the rural telephone bill, 28 October 1949. Secretary of Agriculture Charles F. Brannan (third from left) looks on; as do other government officials (former secretary of agriculture and REA Administrator Claude R. Wickard, third from right) and representatives of interested farm organizations. USDA photograph courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library.

which was, in essence, a vote to kill the Brannan plan.³⁸

The administration's proposal was indeed dead for 1949, as it had even less support in the Senate. But with the secretary and his supporters looking toward 1950, the fight was still important. Proponents and opponents expected the plan to be a major issue in the next congressional campaign. In August Hope thought the Brannan plan was "dead for the time being," but, he cautioned, the GOP must be ready to "meet it as an issue in 1950."³⁹

Republicans had no intentions of allowing themselves to be bushwhacked in farm states again and launched their drive for a 1950 farm program at a Sioux City, Iowa, farm conference in late September 1949. Although billed as a non-partisan conference that did include repre-

sentatives from the opposition camp, the political implications of the conference were clear. Participants sought a GOP alternative to the "Brannan or Bust" farm plan, but the party's National Committee chairman insisted that the farm problem "should not become the football of partisan politics." Conference keynoter Clifford Hope repeated the charge that the Brannan program was actually the plan of organized labor; that being the case, he asked, why was it not tried on labor first? "If high incomes and low prices are a good thing for the farmer, why aren't high incomes and low wages a good thing for working people?" The consumer would benefit in many ways if government were to adopt a "low wage policy," and "if the Brannan plan advocates are right, workers wouldn't lose because the Government would give them a

check every so often to make up the difference between actual wages and a fair wage rate to be determined by the Government."⁴⁰

Back on Capitol Hill, a bill (S. 2522) introduced by former secretary of agriculture, now senator, Clinton P. Anderson (D., N.M.) was gaining momentum. The AFBF had lent its strong support to the Anderson bill largely because it managed to incorporate the principle of flexible supports, and Senator Aiken defended it as a strengthening of the Agricultural Act of 1948. For the most part Congressman Hope agreed: "It is not too different from the Hope-Aiken bill and I think it is an improvement in some ways."⁴¹ As predicted, the Anderson bill finally passed the Senate in mid-October but the conference committee, in a manner reminiscent of the previous year, reported a compromise package—the Gore-Anderson bill, which became the Agricultural Act of 1949. The Brannan plan was dead, but high price supports lived on, as the Gore portion of the compromise again postponed the implementation of the sliding scale. It was, in essence, a victory for advocates of high mandatory price supports, southern Democrats and midwestern and western Republicans.⁴²

Unbeknownst to the administration and its Republican-Dixiecrat opposition, 1949 had been the first and last chance for the Brannan plan. Truman and Brannan geared up for a renewed battle for the secretary's proposal in 1950, but other events—McCarthyism at home and the Korean War abroad—were to attract far more public attention and make another change in farm policy appear unwise. Brannan carried on the fight, but by midyear President Truman was fully occupied in other areas. The Brannan plan was an issue in some congressional campaigns that fall, but it was generally of secondary importance. Even in Iowa, where the administration sponsored the senatorial candidacy of its under secretary of agriculture, Albert J. Loveland, the conservative Republican incumbent, Bourke B. Hickenlooper, won handily.⁴³ In Kansas, early speculation notwithstanding, the Brannan plan had no perceptible impact, and the Repub-

lican delegation to Congress was reelected. All were Brannan plan antagonists.⁴⁴

SIGNIFICANCE OF FARM POLICY DEBATE, 1949-50

The farm policy debate of 1949 and 1950 did not result in the enactment of an effective long-range program, but it is of historical significance. Certainly one cannot begin to comprehend the subsequent dialectic on farm issues without first looking at this episode. The arguments that would dominate agricultural debate for years to come crystalized in 1949 and 1950. Plains state farmers who expressed support for the Brannan plan did so because they considered the old approach wholly inadequate and saw the administration's plan as a step toward greater social and economic equity. Those who opposed it did so because they feared excessive government spending, "creeping socialism," and the "regimentation" of the nation's agricultural industry. Most opposed the Truman administration's initiatives in other domestic areas like federal housing, national health care, and aid to education for the same reasons.

The result was a permanently refocused debate: not on whether the federal government had a role in agriculture, but on what its role should be. The "old liberalism," which included New Deal farm policy, had become the "new conservatism."⁴⁵ A few, like the old anti-New Deal curmudgeon Dan D. Casement of Manhattan, Kansas, were consistent in their opposition to all government largess and saw no fundamental difference between the old parity system and the Brannan plan. To this Great Plains farmer-stockman, efforts to "walk a middle course between statism and freedom" were "damned unrighteous."⁴⁶ Most Kansans, however, had reconciled their basically conservative political ideology to the old methods of supporting farm prices—government loans, direct purchases, acreage allotments, and marketing agreements. They were suspicious of the Brannan plan, which meant "junking the deeply imbedded system" that had "met with general

favor among farmers" for "an untried one."⁴⁷ They could not handle this next logical step, which included direct payments, more limits on production, and consumer subsidies.

Congressman Hope, for one, recognized the inherent contradictions and, like many other farm legislators and their constituents, remained in a quandary with regard to the "farm problem." Hope was relatively conservative on most issues but had supported the principles of New Deal farm legislation. Although philosophically opposed to government interference in the marketplace, he came to accept the necessity of government price supports for agricultural commodities. In this respect, Hope reflected a general GOP dilemma. His was a pragmatic position dictated by the realization that farmers had been unable to solve the "farm problem" on their own. Some type of federal support system seemed the only way to compensate for agriculture's inherently unequal competitive position in relationship to the nonfarm sector of the economy.⁴⁸

One can at least speculate that the majority of Hope's constituents, like people throughout the region, found themselves in a very similar political and philosophical quandary. Their opposition to the Brannan plan was an expression of their philosophy; their continued acceptance of the established farm support program was an exercise in pragmatism. Not surprisingly, the search for an effective long-range policy for agriculture, like the nation's struggle to come to grips with many of its social ills, has been continually frustrated.

NOTES

1. Theodore J. Regier to Charles F. Brannan, 16 June 1949; J. J. Weber to Brannan, 12 June 1949, General Correspondence 1949, Farm Program 6, Record Group 16, National Archives and Records Center (FP6, RG16, NA), Washington, D.C.

2. Wayne D. Rasmussen, Gladys L. Baker, and James G. Ward, *A Short History of Agricultural Adjustment, 1933-1975* (Washington: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Information Bulletin, no. 391, March 1976), pp. 7-8; Edward L. and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, "Farm Policy from FDR to Eisen-

hower," *Agricultural History* 53 (January 1979): 361-62.

3. Wayne D. Rasmussen, "The Impact of Technological Change on American Agriculture, 1862-1962," *Journal of Economic History* 22 (December 1962): 578.

4. Edward L. and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Encyclopedia of American Agricultural History* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975), p. 261; *Congressional Digest* 29 (March 1950): 73; Lauren Soth, *Farm Troubles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 29.

5. Theodore Saloutos, "The New Deal and Farm Policy in the Great Plains," *Agricultural History* 43 (July 1969): 346; Michael W. Schuyler, *The Dread of Plenty: Agricultural Relief Activities of the Federal Government in the Middle West, 1933-1939* (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1989); Tom G. Hall, "The Aiken Bill, Price Supports and the Wheat Farmer in 1948," *North Dakota History* 39 (Winter 1972): 14; Harold G. Halcrow and Roy E. Huffman, "Great Plains Agriculture and Brannan's Farm Plan," *Journal of Farm Economics* 31 (August 1949): 497; John T. Schlebecker, *Cattle Raising on the Plains, 1900-1961* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), p. 207.

6. Unattributed two-page biographical sketch, filed "by Mr. Dawson" 2 June 1948, Official File, Papers of Harry S. Truman, Harry S. Truman Library (OF, TP), Independence, Missouri; Eleanora W. Schoenebaum, ed., *Political Profiles: The Truman Years* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1978), p. 51; *Current Biography, 1948* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1949), p. 57.

7. Brannan to Rev. Raymond Ryan, 17 August 1949; Ryan to Brannan, 8 August 1949, FP6, RG16, NA. See also: *Memoirs of Harry S. Truman: Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956) 2:262-63; *Public Papers of the Presidents, Harry S. Truman, 1947* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1963), p. 8.

8. Hope to John Davenport, 3 June 1949, Finder File, Clifford R. Hope Papers, Collection 50, Manuscripts Department, Kansas State Historical Society (FF, HP, KSHS), Topeka, Kansas.

9. Hope to Don L. Berry, 12 February 1949, FF, HP, KSHS; see also Virgil W. Dean, "America's Search for a Long-Range Policy for Agriculture: The Truman-Brannan Price Support Plan, Innovative New Approach or 'Political Football'?" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1991), pp. 53-55; Allen J. Matusow, *Farm Policy and Politics in the Truman Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 120; Hall, "The Aiken Bill" (note 5 above), p. 14.

10. *Congressional Record*, vol. 94, pt. 7, 80th Cong., 2nd Sess., House (Washington: Government

Printing Office, 1948), 9339-44; *U.S. Statutes At Large*, Agricultural Act of 1948, vol. 62, pt. 1, P.L.897 (H.R.6248), 3 July 1948, 80th Cong., 2nd Sess., Ch.827; Harold D. Cooley (D., N.C.), Stephen Pace (D., Ga.), *Congressional Record* 19 June 1948, p. 9346; Hope to Berry, 12 February 1949, FF, HP, KSHS. See also James L. Forsythe, "Postmortem on the Election of 1948: An Evaluation of Congressman Clifford R. Hope's Views," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 38 (Autumn 1972): 341.

11. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Abstracts of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Bicentennial Edition, Part 2* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 1075; Virgil W. Dean, "Farm Policy and Truman's Campaign of 1948," *The Historian*, 55 (Spring 1993), forthcoming; Theodore Saloutos, "Agricultural Organizations and Farm Policy in the South After World War II," *Agricultural History* 53 (January 1979): 390; Thomas G. Ryan, "Farm Prices and the Farm Vote in 1948," *Agricultural History* 54 (July 1980): 387; "Why Farmers Swung to Truman," *U.S. News and World Report* 25 (19 November 1948): 23-24; Harold F. Gosnell, *Truman's Crises: A Political Biography of Harry S. Truman* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), p. 410; Alonzo L. Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 303; Clarence Cannon to Truman, 7 January 1949, OF, TP.

12. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Joint Hearings Before the Committee on Agriculture and the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *General Farm Program*, 81st Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1949), pp. 138, 145; Brannan to Truman, 6 April 1949, President's Secretary's File (PSF), TP; *Congressional Digest* 29 (March 1950): 79.

13. *General Farm Program* (note 12 above) pp. 138, 145.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 143, 145.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 147; Brannan to Truman, 6 April 1949, PSF, TP.

16. *New York Times*, 8 April 1949; B. S. Bercovici to Brannan, 10 April 1949, FP6, RG16, NA; Hope to C. N. Hiebert, 8 April 1949; and Hope to John D. Murray, 13 April 1949, FF, HP, KSHS.

17. Hope to Don L. Berry, 12 February 1949; see also, Hope to Roy Schrock, 15 February 1949, and Hope to Herb W. Hoover, 16 February 1949, FF, HP, KSHS. For an example of Hope's attitude toward the "Aiken Act," see: "Long-Range Program for Agriculture," 21 March 1949, Columbus, Ohio, Speech File, HP, KSHS; for his comments on partisanship in the 1948 campaign see, among others: Hope to George Carmichael, 12 January 1949, FF, HP, KSHS. For more on the AFBF and Kline see,

Christiana McFadyen Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal: A Study of the Making of National Farm Policy, 1933-40* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1962); Samuel R. Berger, *Dollar Harvest: The Story of the Farm Bureau* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Co., 1971).

18. Hope to Frank Blecha, 25 January 1947, FF, HP, KSHS. Here, Hope was in good company; see: Willard W. Cochrane, "Income Payments as a Substitute for Support Prices," *Journal of Farm Economics* 28 (November 1946): 1029; T. W. Schultz, *Agriculture in an Unstable Economy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1945); Condensed Committee Report of the American Farm Economics Association, "Toward a Better Parity," *Farm Policy Forum* 1 (January 1948): 42.

19. Hope to Merle E. Lambert, president of the Pratt County (Kansas) Farm Bureau, 4 January 1949; Hope to J. W. Morgan, 21 January 1949; Hope to John M. Browne, 4 February 1949; Hope to J. N. Tinch, Sr., 7 February 1949, FF, HP, KSHS; and Hope to M. W. Thatcher, 5 February 1949, Legislative Correspondence, HP, KSHS.

20. Hope to Ed T. Hackney, 3 February 1949, FF, HP, KSHS. See: Reo Christenson, *The Brannan Plan: Farm Politics and Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), pp. 158-59.

21. *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman* (note 7 above), 2: 264; *General Farm Program* (note 12 above), p. 139.

22. Hope to John I. Taylor, 16 April 1949; Hope to Russell Wilkins, 14 April 1949; Hope to H. K. Thatcher, 20 May 1949, FF, HP, KSHS.

23. Hope to Samuel Guard, 14 May 1949; Hope to Robert I. Lupfer, 21 April 1949; Hope to Guard, 20 May 1949, FF, HP, KSHS.

24. J. A. Meyer to Brannan, 4 May 1949; Mrs. Thomas Williams to Brannan, 28 July 1949, FP6, RG16, NA.

25. Hugh Craig to Brannan, 6 May 1949, FP6, RG16, NA; Craig to Capper, 7 August 1949, Agricultural Correspondence, 1947-51, Arthur Capper Papers (CP), Collection 12, Manuscripts Department, KSHS; see also: F. D. Munsell to Brannan, 18 August 1949, FP6, RG16, NA.

26. Craig to Capper, note 25 above.

27. Capper to Craig, 11 August 1949, CP, KSHS.

28. Unknown to Brannan, 17 May; Mrs. Morris Campbell to Brannan, 7 July 1949, FP6, RG16, NA.

29. *Ellis County News* (Hays, Kansas), 14 April 1949.

30. Wint Smith to Dallas W. Davis, 18 July 1949, General Correspondence, Legislation (Various Subjects); Smith to Carroll Newcomer, 28 June 1950, General Correspondence, Agriculture, Wint Smith Papers (SP), Collection 41, Manuscripts Department, KSHS.

31. Hope to Samuel R. Guard, 14 May 1949; Hope to Mrs. Hermie Kastens, 23 May 1949, FF, HP, KSHS.

32. Richert to Brannan, 18 April 1949, Brannan to Richert, 28 April 1949, and Richert to Brannan, 2 May 1949, FP6, RG16, NA.

33. Will Lissner, "Survey Shows Both Parties Fail to Clinch Farm Vote," *New York Times*, 22 May 1949; George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971* (New York: American Institute of Public Opinion, 1972), 2:837; *Wichita Eagle*, 29 May 1949.

34. Spencer A. Rich, *U. S. Agricultural Policy in the Postwar Years, 1865-1963: The Development of U.S. Farm Problems; an 18 Year Legislative Review* (Washington, D. C.: Congressional Quarterly Service, 1963).

35. Gordon Roth, Farmers Union Grain Terminal Association, St. Paul, Minn., to Brannan, 7 June 1949; Roberts County South Dakota Farmers Union (FU) to Brannan, 8 July 1949; Ray Antonen, South Dakota Wheat Growers' Association to Brannan, 4 June 1949; and many others from individuals and local unions of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, the Dakotas, and Montana; and C. E. Perkins, editor, *Kansas Union Farmer*, to Brannan, 28 April 1949; Joy Hammett, Elbow Local, FU, Manhattan, Kansas, to Brannan, 29 August 1949, FP6, RG16, NA. See also Dean, "America's Search" (note 9 above) pp. 253, 261-63.

36. Hope to Mrs. Kastens, 4 June 1949, Hope to A. H. Couch, 18 June 1949, Hope to Dale Richardson, 25 June 1949, FF, HP, KSHS; see Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal* (note 11 above), p. 306; Christenson, *The Brannan Plan* (note 20 above), p. 119.

37. Murray R. Benedict, *Farm Policies of the United States, 1790-1950: A Study of Their Origins and Development* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1953), p. 480; Brannan to Frank Pace, 21 June 1949, Legislation 2, RG16, NA.

38. Hope to Herb Hoover, 28 June 1949, FF, HP, KSHS; *Congressional Record*, vol. 95, pt. 7, House, 20 July 1949, 9838-70; and, vol. 95, pt. 8, House, 21 July 1949, Monroney, 9930, and Gore, 9934. For the "yeas and nays" on the Gore bill see vol. 95, pt. 8, 9962-63. I include Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Iowa, the Dakotas, Montana, and Wyoming; Minnesota's delegation split five to four in favor of Gore.

39. Hope to Dale Richardson, and Hope to Herman W. Cramer, 5 August 1949, FF, HP, KSHS; and Hubert H. Humphrey to Brannan, 28 July 1949; Brannan to Harold Cooley, and Brannan to Stephen Pace, 22 July 1949; Brannan to Leonard Denholm, South Dakota Farmers Union, 22 July 1949, FP6, RG16, NA; and, *Kansas Union Farmer* (St. Marys, Kansas), December 1949.

40. Sioux City Republican Farm Conference, 23

September 1949, Speech File, HP, KSHS; Chairman Guy Gabrielson's remarks quoted in *New York Times*, 24 September 1949, p. 8; Hope to Benton J. Stong, 29 September 1949, and Hope to Richard P. White, 21 October 1949, FF, HP, KSHS; *Topeka Journal*, 23, 24 September 1949.

41. Hope to Steffens, 17 September 1949, FF, HP, KSHS. For Aiken's position see *Congressional Record*, vol. 95, pt. 10, Senate, 13 September 1949, pp. 12775-76.

42. Benedict, *Farm Policies of the United States* (note 36 above), 481-83; Schapsmeiers, "Farm Policy" (note 2 above) p. 367; Wayne D. Rasmussen, ed., *Agriculture in the United States: A Documentary History* (New York: Random House, 1975) 4: 2960; *U.S. Statutes At Large*, P.L. 439, Ch. 792, "An Act to Stabilize Prices of Agricultural Commodities," 31 October 1949, p. 1051.

43. "Test for Brannan Plan," *Newsweek* 35 (20 March 1950): 26; Loveland to Truman, 27 March 1950, OF, TP; *New York Times*, 1 November, p. 32, and 9 November, p. 37, 1950; Norman MacKenzie, "After the U. S. Polls," *The New Statesman and Nation* (18 November 1950): 450; Joseph G. LaPalombara, "Pressure, Propaganda, and Political Action in the Election of 1950," *Journal of Politics* 14 (March 1952): 323. Loveland formally resigned his position at USDA on 27 March 1950 and won the Democratic primary while strongly endorsing the Brannan plan. But, like many Democratic candidates in 1950, he shied away from many of the more controversial Truman programs, including its farm plan, during the fall campaign.

44. June G. Cabe and Charles A. Sullivant, *Kansas Votes: National Elections, 1859-1956* (Lawrence: Government Research Center, University of Kansas, 1957), pp. 198-203; *Wichita Eagle*, 29 May 1949; *Topeka Journal*, 24 September 1949; *New York Times*, 3 August, 8, 9 November 1950. If election results are an indicator, the Brannan plan had no electoral impact on the other states of the upper Plains. *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1961* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1961).

45. Matusow, *Farm Policies and Politics* (note 8 above), pp. 115-16.

46. *Topeka Journal*, 24 September 1949; and Richard W. Robbins to Wint Smith, 11 April 1950, "Stetson Hat Speech" folder, General Correspondence, SP, KSHS.

47. *Wichita Beacon*, 8 April 1949.

48. See James L. Forsythe, "Clifford Hope of Kansas: Practical Congressman and Agrarian Idealist," *Agricultural History* 51 (April 1977): 407; and letter from Clifford R. Hope, Jr., to author, 5 February 1990.