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Review of *An Opportunity Lost: The Truman Administration and the Farm Policy Debate* By Virgil W. Dean

Kristin L. Ahlberg
U.S. Department of State

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An Opportunity Lost: The Truman Administration and the Farm Policy Debate. By Virgil W. Dean. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006. xv + 275 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95.

America's second "agricultural revolution" had unintended consequences as a result of postwar prosperity. Virgil Dean offers a clear and straightforward examination of the Truman administration's attempts to devise a new farm policy and situate it within the larger context of the Fair Deal, analyzing the extent to which these attempts often complemented and challenged solutions proposed by Congress and agricultural organizations. Federal officials possessed a limited time frame during the postwar era within which to institute an agricultural program that secured fairer prices for producers, protected natural resources, minimized rural and urban conflict, and avoided the scourge of surpluses. Partisan politics, especially the 1948 presidential campaign, turned a limited opportunity into a "lost opportunity" for agriculture.

The issues informing the debate, Dean asserts, were rooted in the agricultural climate of the 1920s and 1930s. Persistent inelastic demand caused commodity prices to plummet and American farmers to suffer until the Roosevelt administration's New Deal programs

offered relief. Bipartisan acceptance of New Deal farm programs indicated a willingness to support, and sometimes demand, federal intervention in agricultural matters. Few politicians questioned the desirability of intervention, or a “federal support system,” Dean opines; rather, they framed the debate according to the type of governmental action required.

The author supports his thesis by delineating how positions correlated along regional and partisan lines. Nowhere was this trend more apparent than in the choice between flexible and high price supports. Truman’s adoption of a “no compromises” stance with regard to congressional initiatives during the 1948 campaign brought these differences into sharp relief. The president’s campaign strategy depicted congressional Republicans as unsympathetic to farm concerns and the administration as the protector of agrarian interests. Secretary of Agriculture Charles Brannan further widened the chasm by advocating compensatory payments and direct purchases of agricultural goods. Fears of runaway spending and increased governmental control only alienated the Republican congressional farm bloc, and in 1949, as Dean asserts, “all sides had too much at stake politically for a compromise to be consummated.”

Dean offers a solid and engaging appraisal of problems associated with farm policy at mid-century and emphasizes the importance of agriculture within the larger economic, political, and social debates of the era. He incorporates a variety of sources in his narrative, including pertinent collections from the National Archives, the Truman Presidential Library, and the Kansas Historical Society, in addition to federal reports, documentary collections, personal correspondence, and the relevant secondary literature. Dean succeeds in untangling the variegated skeins of agricultural policy and, in doing so, provides the necessary context for additional studies of cold war agriculture.

KRISTIN L. AHLBERG
Office of the Historian
U.S. Department of State