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Review of *Willard Cochrane and the American Family Farm* by Richard A. Levins

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Willard Cochrane and the American Family Farm. Richard A. Levins. Foreword by John Kenneth Galbraith. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. 96 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography. \$40.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

This slim volume combines two compelling stories: a personal and touching introduction to Willard Cochrane, the man and the professional agricultural economist; and a thoughtful analysis of the politics and industrial intrigue that shaped American farm policy during the past eight decades. The theme that ties them together is the independent family farm in America. This double-faceted story puts a human face on a critical dilemma that has confronted America since the time of Thomas Jefferson: Americans have always embraced the family farm, but conversely they have never been able to create an enduring environment in which family farmers could thrive.

Levins skillfully uncovers some of the reasons why we still face this dilemma today. And he succeeds in personalizing the issues by revealing some of the private travails of Willard Cochrane, both as someone closely attached to the family farm in his own life, and as an academic and politician who tried to make a difference during his long career.

Using Cochrane's own struggles to illuminate the story helps make this modest volume appeal to many different audiences—farmers, politicians, academics, and activists. It invites us in clear and compelling ways to reconsider some of the assumptions that have driven farm policy and divided politicians. Without accepting all of Cochrane's analyses, Levins uses Cochrane's insights to bring fresh clarity to many farm policy premises.

Why do new technologies that increase productivity fail to help farmers economically? Why do policies of expanding export markets seldom work? Why have farmers lost out in the industrialization of agriculture?

Levins also paints a clear picture of the process by which large agribusiness firms have taken control of production to improve their own profitability dramatically at the expense of the economic welfare of farmers. This process has now evolved to a point that places “both farm profits and farmer freedom at grave risk.” The story provides important insights for anyone (farmer and non-farmer alike) interested in helping to shape farm policy for the future.

Perhaps the most stirring part of Levins’s story describes the political wrangling that swirled around Cochrane’s proposals. When Orville Freeman was appointed Secretary of Agriculture under President John F. Kennedy, he invited Cochrane to serve with him. Cochrane attempted to bring sound economic discipline and appropriate government action to farm policy. But Cochrane’s liberal bent was unacceptable both to conservative political ideologues and to the emerging agribusiness industries. He was labeled a Communist and his ideas were publicly ridiculed and grossly misrepresented. The attacks on Cochrane didn’t stop even when he resigned from the USDA. His enemies followed him back to the University of Minnesota—where he had been promised one of the first prestigious Regents’ Professorships—and convinced the administration that appointing him to the position would have drastic consequences for university fundraising. Cochrane paid a high price for his attachment to the American family farm. **Frederick Kirschenmann**, *Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Iowa State University*.