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The Politics of Food, by Joel Solkoff

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BOOK REVIEW

THE POLITICS OF FOOD. By Joel Solkoff. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books. 1985. Pp. xii, 238. \$17.95.

One usually associates the Sierra Club and this organization's books with a liberal-conservationist treatment of environmental topics, especially in those areas where free market failures or governmental inefficiencies have contributed to resource degradation. *The Politics of Food* continues in this tradition but with two sharp departures. The most obvious is the topic of this book—the American agricultural system. While agriculture is clearly a resource issue and thus a legitimate concern of the Sierra Club, it is a topic which environmentalists as well as the rest of the American public have treated with apathy and disregard.

Second, the political orientation of this book is clearly balanced, discomfiting to liberals and conservatives alike. In some sections commodity speculators and international grain traders are bashed for their capitalistic manipulations of the agricultural production system, while in other parts traditional liberal agricultural policies, farm labor unions, and the myth of the populist small farmer are debunked and ridiculed. The author is clearly more concerned with documenting the problems and failures of America's agricultural system than with winning friends.

While *The Politics of Food* is written in a breezy style for the lay audience, the book is a welcome contribution to understanding the antiquated labyrinth that is U.S. agricultural policy and the attendant production and marketing system which it has fostered. Solkoff skillfully introduces his neophyte readers to the actors and events that have shaped the American farm scene since 1933. Critical changes in American agricultural demographics, technology, and marketing over the past half century are laid out. America's place in global food production is discussed and pondered. The role of traders, speculators, and labor unions in agricultural production and policy is revealed. Finally, agricultural policy making "Washington-style" is exposed. Along the way one is introduced to some of the most important figures in recent farm policy history, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Earl Butz, Caesar Chavez, and Jimmy Carter. The assessment of these and other individuals is candid and often less than favorable.

The result is a book which, on the surface, is a testimony to the resiliency of our agricultural system. The fact that it has continued to thrive in an environment of often feeble policy guidance, damaging interference from politicians, and mixed and confusing signals from the

market place is impressive. However, this impression is somewhat skewed as the book fails to give credit to, or even mention, those innovative and successful agricultural policies that have helped shape the farm scene. Even the critics of farm policies recognize the important role played by soil conservation programs and agricultural extension services in enhancing American farm productivity. Solkoff's failure to note these positive aspects of recent farm policy making is disconcerting.

For the reader concerned with the future of American agriculture, this work provides little comfort. The prognostication is that farm policy will continue to drift without firm direction from either the executive branch or congressional leaders. In his concluding paragraph, Solkoff gloomily notes, "[b]y 1985 the governmental institutions responsible for making agricultural decisions were in disarray, and Washington experts had difficulty identifying the officials who really controlled America's food policy" (p. 225). Viewed from the perspective of record low commodity prices and farm income and record high farm foreclosures, these remarks are sadly prophetic.

Even more importantly, the recently concluded year-long battle over the new farm bill, the Food Security Act of 1985, and the form that the final legislation took clearly follows the scenario of the 1977 and 1981 agricultural bills. Loaded with a potpourri of minimum prices, subsidy payments, and increases in food stamps, the only difference in the latest farm bill and earlier versions is the cost. Preliminary estimates suggest \$52 billion for the first three years, with a total cost of \$165 billion over the next five years.¹ Even its supporters warn that the latest farm bill may not diminish the current agricultural troubles.

While this book will not make the required reading list for university classrooms and may be dismissed by critics as polemical, it is nonetheless a valuable contribution. The current farm policy is a relic which no longer fosters efficient agricultural production, nor does it provide answers to the current social and economic problems affecting agriculture. America's farmers and farm policies will continue to muddle along until federal decisionmakers are forced to respond in a reasonable fashion to agricultural issues. In the meantime, the social and economic costs of agriculture policy continue to escalate.

In order for serious change to occur the public, especially the urban public, must be made aware of agriculture and the effects that the current agricultural policy framework has upon them. Only if they are sensitized to these issues will they demand that the current policy arrangement be changed. Education through books such as *The Politics of Food* represents

1. *Farm bill awaiting Reagan signature an expensive gamble, officials say*, Raleigh News and Observer, Dec. 23, 1985, at A1, col. 3.

the best approach for accomplishing this ambitious goal. Whether this book alone can serve as the catalyst to educate and involve is doubtful, but at least it is a first step in that direction.

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