States of the Union

LIBERALS AND THE RURAL VOTE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

FORMER Senator George McGovern, who as chairman of the Select Committee on Nutrition and Poverty did more than most to reduce hunger in America, is telling friends these days that he knew in September he would probably lose in November. The insight came, he says, while he was campaigning in a small-town supermarket in South Dakota. Two women cornered him near the meat counter and proceeded in loud, angry voices to berate him for "giving away" the Panama Canal. "We'll never forgive you," one of them said. "We'll never vote for you again." Moments later McGovern saw the women at the checkout counter. They were paying for their groceries with food stamps.

The story is disturbing on a number of levels, the simplest of which relates to the ingratitude or ignorance (or both) of the two women; in the name of chauvinism they were biting the hand that had fed them. On a more complex level the story suggests, from a liberal standpoint at least, that rural populism may not be all it's cracked up to be. Perhaps it is too unreliable—too moralistic and trigger-happy—to provide the sort of steady ally liberalism so badly needs.

Rural populism's great curse, but also the reason it endures, is its geographical and spiritual distance from centers of power in the wicked East. Rural citizens send their native sons (rarely daughters) to Washington in the hope that they will slay a few dragons—the rich, the overbearing, the bureaucratic, the fancy—on behalf of "the plain people" back home. Yet it often seems to the home folk that their knights in Washington grow dragon's teeth of their own and begin to breathe urban soot, if not fire. In consequence, rural populism becomes rural paranoia.

Nevertheless, I am prepared to defend the proposition that on balance rural populism is liberalism's best bet today. In fact, the democratic Left has no political alternative: It must either include the rural voter in its plans or else give up the ghost. In my previous column, "Outline of a New Liberal Coalition" (NL, December 29, 1980), I argued for the possibility of forging a progressive partnership between central city residents and their populist counterparts in rural areas, an alliance that might conceivably redeem the social value of Presidential and Congressional elections. Let us now continue the argument; with luck we shall discover it is not so wild a dream.

To begin with, the dream appears to make arithmetical sense. In the 1970 Census rural voters controlled 151 Congressional districts and central city voters dominated another 112. The total of 263 represented 60 per cent of all House seats. (The remaining 40 per cent answered to suburban constituencies.) Not all the results of the 1980 Census have yet been published, but preliminary findings suggest that rural gains in population will more than offset urban losses. Indeed, the unprecedented pro-rural migration trend that began to develop in the late '60s was fully confirmed in the '70s. These new demographic patterns are part of, but not identical to, the current Sun Belt fever; they also include dramatic population increases in such wintry states as New Hampshire, Vermont, Oregon, and Washington.

If the rural momentum persists, it seems likely that within a decade or two nonmetropolitan citizens will replace suburbanites as the country's single largest voting component—which is another way of saying that both major political parties may soon be staking their lives and their fortunes on the rural sector. To schematize the political future, rural residents may be emerging as a decisive swing vote: They can cast their lot and their ballots either with suburbia (predominantly conservative) or with the central city (dwindling but still liberal). As the millennium closes, American politics may well be shaped by the rural choice.

Despite all the recent journalistic fuss about American populism and its electoral possibilities, liberal Democrats have been remarkably slow to grasp these demographic lessons. In the current issue of *Social Policy*, Harry C. Boyte devotes 3,000 words to "Building a Populist Politics" without analyzing the role of rural voters. Writing in the Boston *Globe*, Sidney Blumenthal, author of *The Permanent Campaign*, declares urban blue-collar workers to be "the presumed base of any populist movement." And in the *New Republic*, Michael Harrington has decided that "populist" is just another term for "so-

cialist," "economic democrat," "capitalist reformers, or what have you."

With rare exceptions, and with limited imaginations, liberals have interpreted the Sun Belt boom in strictly urban terms. Jimmy Carter's panel on national goals—officially known as the President's Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties—recently handed in a report that perfectly mirrored metropolitan myopia. Ignoring rural migration trends, the Commission associated the decline of Northern cities exclusively with the rise of cities in the South and West; and in a burst of self-fulfilling fatalism, it recommended that the Federal government go with the flow by encouraging still greater migration to Sun Belt cities.

The members of that Commission held all the usual liberal-establishment credentials. Its chairman was William J. McGill, former president of Columbia University—understandably no friend to Mark Rudd and the New Left, but a staunch ally of LBJ and the Great Society. Other members included the leaders of such moderate to Left-leaning organizations as the NAACP, the League of Women Voters, Common Cause, and the AFL-CIO.

The agenda those worthies proposed, moreover, reflected mainstream liberal doctrine. Among other things it called for national health insurance, fair housing legislation, the passage of ERA, and the strengthening of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. No doubt these were social blessings to which the good commissioners sincerely aspired; yet the effect of their major recommendation—the virtual abandonment of Northern cities in favor of the Atlantas and the Houstons—would surely doom all such reforms. For by undermining the progressives' traditional urban base and by neglecting their new rural prospects, the Commission's vision of Southern Rim skylines would guarantee a continuing liberal decline and the instant creation of a conservative dynasty, both in the White House and on Capitol Hill.

Liberal suicidal tendencies of this kind play into the hands of conservatives, some of whom are already claiming their victory was the result of a rural populist rebellion. Indeed, the neoconservatives have lately invented a kind of neopopulism for their own ideological convenience. In last October's *Commentary*, for instance, James Q. Wilson describes Ronald Reagan as the leader of a "social movement" and the Republicans as "the party of change." Reagan's natural constituency, says Wilson, can be found among "persons of Midwestern Protestant stock, vaguely populist in their outlook." The heart of Reagan's support, Wilson continues, is "not to be found in élite concerns with economic and foreign policy, but in mass concerns with social justice and moral issues." (Apparently Wilson was never in South Dakota.)

Whatever Wilson and his neoconservative brethren mean by all that, it seems clear that their intent is to Republicanize rural populism and thus to capture the loyalties of William Jennings Bryan's natural political heirs. And it must be admitted that Wilson has a point, for rural populism has never belonged solely to the Left or to the Right. It has carried ideology on both shoulders—reactionary as well as radical, jingoistic as well as pacifist, racist and intolerant as well as liberal and humane. Those two women who showed Senator McGovern both the flag and their food stamps were true populists—full of piety, protest and beans.

STILL, there is much in populist tradition that the Reaganites have studiously ignored. The most consistent theme running through populist history—from the founding of the Granger Movement in 1874 to the present-day Sagebrush Rebellion—is a commitment to local democracy, meaning an insistence that "the plain people" get a chance to manage their own affairs. Such disparate populist inventions as cooperatives, referendums and primaries all bear the mark of rural Americans' passion for a decentralized, democratically-structured way of life, and a deep distrust of absentee interference, be it corporate or governmental.

In recent elections Republicans have turned that distrust to their own advantage. Big government has become the all-purpose malady, like constipation, and less government is promoted as the cure—Laxalt's Laxative. Yet most rural voters are aware of the partnership that exists between big government and big business, and many are ready to embrace a truly liberal agenda that cuts both down to manageable—i.e., democratically controllable—size.

Urban liberals need not abandon New Deal reforms in order to bring out progressive tendencies among rural citizens. All they need do is demonstrate some understanding of rural problems and sensibilities. For instance, Vernon Jordan, of the Urban League, despite his organization's peculiar name, might stop pretending that all blacks are urban. In spreading that myth he writes off one-third of his constituency, and makes it all the harder for black and white populists in the South to work with each other.

Similarly, city-based Democrats should immediately withdraw their support from the proposed MX missile system, which even the Air Force, in its environmental impact statement, admits will destroy large sections of rural Utah and Nevada. Lest we forget, it was a Democratic President who finally yielded to the hawks and gave a green light to MX; and it was Ronald Reagan, that hawkier-than-thou candidate, who said he wanted to rethink the whole plan, maybe even scrap it. Can it be that Republicans know something about rural America that Democrats have yet to learn?

In sum, an urban political overture to rural Americans would not be amiss at this juncture in our history. Quite the contrary, it would be very much in the populist spirit. For as George McKenna has observed half a dozen years ago in his sympathetic book, *American Populism*: "The populist believes that the 'plain people' of America, which for him includes almost everyone, are in basic agreement with each other about what is right and wrong, fair and foul, legitimate and crooked. Fancy dialectics are unnecessary to discover these kinds of truths: we need only search our hearts."