

THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN AND OTHER LOBBIES

By WARREN PRITCHARD

The Poor People's Campaign came eventually to concentrate its demands and demonstrations at the Department of Agriculture and to seek its arrests on the issue of hunger. During its six weeks in Washington, there was continuous sparring with other departments and agencies, but the campaigners kept coming back to the seat of responsibility, if not primary enthusiasm, for eliminating hunger.

Shortly before the poor people arrived in Washington, a senator from Delaware, motivated less to reveal an injustice than to suggest means of saving money, called for a \$10,000 limitation on subsidy payments to individual landowners, compensating them for the food and fiber they agree not to grow and preventing "losses which would occur to our endowment of soil and water resources for future generations in the absence of needed conservation measures."

An indictment — listing the amounts paid and the names and addresses of subsidy recipients in every county in the country—filled more than 1,450 pages of a volume printed as part of the testimony given at hearings on the USDA 1969-70 budget conducted by the Agriculture Subcommittee of the omnipotent Senate Appropriations Committee. The Poor People's Campaign used this listing to point out that a landholder like Mississippi Senator James Eastland enjoys a federally guaranteed income of \$13,160 a month, while poor families—suffering, among other things, the effects of the

production cutback in the senator's Sunflower County—can never really depend on a monthly welfare payment that averages less than \$35.00. It also was noted that the Mississippi senator's membership on this subcommittee and the Senate Agriculture Committee gives him a strong voice in keeping himself, and thousands of others similarly blessed, on this golden dole.

(Actually there are only 92,720 of them on the list, but they divided more than a billion dollars in subsidy payments last year. The list excluded payments of less than \$5000 and payments of undetermined amounts. Taken all together payments for the year exceeded \$3 billion. By comparison OEO's budget has never topped \$2 billion. The poverty war's most recent appropriation, \$1.9 billion for fiscal year 1969, means in effect that there will be no new poverty programs and no expansion of existing programs. But agribusiness subsidy programs get bigger every year.)

It is the regular testimony of witnesses before the subcommittee—again filling a large volume—that is a measure of the place of the Poor People's Campaign among the scores of lobbies operating in Washington during this and other seasons.

The most fervid of them was the imported fire ant lobby, a delegation of southern agriculture officials that included the state commissioners from Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, the commissioner's proxy from Florida, and two

members of the Mississippi legislature. They brought the senators dire reports of spreading devastation in the South and warnings of an impending national calamity if funds were not made available to block a ravaging fire ant migration, threatening to swarm northward and westward, engulfing cities in its path.¹ The lobbyists saw their main task as one of convincing the lawmakers of the magnitude and severity of the threat, much as the Kerner Commission had attempted and the Poor People's Campaign would attempt to do in quite another vein.

If only the senators could be made to realize how awful it was. "Gentlemen," pleaded P. L. Hughes, chairman of the Mississippi House Agriculture Committee, who might have spent part of his \$8,700 federal subsidy for the trip to Washington, "I know from personal experience, and I hope none of you ever have to experience it, how bad this problem is." Not hungry children but fire ants. "Their painful and economic presence is felt in everything we do now," Hughes said, and added that Mississippians, "as evidence of their concern," had levied a special tax on all real estate in some counties for funds to contain the ants.

The ant lobbyists' solution might have been lifted from an OEO brochure. Lack of knowledge was not the stumbling block, nor were methods and materials unavailable. (There was, however, sharp controversy surrounding a study conducted by the National Academy of Sciences which had concluded that fire ant eradication was biologically and technically unfeasible and expressed doubts that the pest was of sufficient importance

to justify costly attempts to eradicate it.) It was a matter of commitment and money, especially federal money. The lobbyists called for appropriations "on a state and federal basis in an adequate amount to do the job." Halwin L. Jones, Florida's representative, sounded like poverty war proponents when he said, "The solution to this uncertain atmosphere prevailing around the imported fire ant program is for federal funds to be made available and irrevocably so."

Senator Richard Russell of Georgia visited the hearing to lend his support to the southern agriculture men. He deplored what he called the Agriculture Department's lack of enthusiasm for fire ant eradication. "They still don't have the enthusiasm for this program that they do for a number of others that I don't think are as important," he said. Enthusiasm, Senator Russell noted, is crucial to the success of any Department of Agriculture program. It is unlikely that he was referring to the enthusiasm the USDA has failed to show in moving against Negro exclusion in its racist southern operations, a point ignored in the two months of hearings. Apparently the programs most worthy of enthusiasm are those that pay a few of his Georgia producers—six one-hundredths of one per cent of the population—over \$26 million in subsidy.²

(Congress made some \$6.4 million available in fiscal year 1968 for the fire ant program; about a million of it went to Georgia, supplementing the state legislature's \$1.5 million.)

The fire ant lobby was only one of many heard by the southern-oriented subcommittee. (Its chairman was Spessard Holland of Florida and members included

¹The imported fire ant (*Solenopsis saevissima*), believed to have slipped into Alabama through the federal quarantine facility at Mobile sometime after World War I, has been a point of periodic political controversy in some southern states since the early 1950's. While some agriculture officials have testified to its ruinous potential, their detractors have suggested that the fire ant threat is largely a hoax. Its sting is painful to humans and can be fatal to young animals, and the mounds it builds are said to be damaging to harvesting machinery in hay fields and meadows.

²Excludes individual 1967 subsidy payments of less than \$5000.

Allen J. Ellender of Louisiana, James O. Eastland of Mississippi—these first three also in the top rank of the Senate Agriculture Committee—Richard B. Russell of Georgia, John Stennis of Mississippi, Lister Hill of Alabama, and Ralph Yarborough of Texas.)³ In all, more than 50 “nondepartmental” witnesses brought their requests before the senators during the March and April hearings—everyone from the Farm Bureau to the Cranberry Institute, from the National Grange to the Federal Statistics Users’ Conference, and including such diverse bodies as the National Milk Producers Federation and the Wine Institute, the Pan American Tung Research and Development League and the Society of American Florists.

Some of the lobbyists spoke for a more equitable distribution of federal subsidies, a point that would be basic to the poor people’s demand for a guaranteed income. If the nation could subsidize its industries by more than \$5 billion yearly in research, development, test, and evaluation grants alone, how, argued the president of the National Limestone Institute, could it quibble over a couple of hundred million for water and soil conservation? “I would like to suggest,” he told the senators, “that if we can grant Lockheed Aircraft and General Dynamics about \$500 million each; American Telephone and Telegraph, \$393,842,000; and General Electric, \$356,079,000; then I don’t think we should create such a fuss over granting \$200 million to the one million farmers who are participating in this partnership program which will benefit all of our citizens.” How, the Poor People’s Campaign would ask, could the nation quibble over the lives of thirty million of its citizens, its congressmen argue whether people go hungry “by personal

choice,” or for “lack of education,” and whether there really are 10 million or, perhaps, only six or eight million ill-fed Americans?

Many of the lobbyists came seeking more money for research. The Institute of American Poultry Industries, claiming that its industry is unique among segments of the nation’s agricultural system in that it “operates under the full force of the law of supply and demand in our free enterprise system,” its producers not enjoying federal price supports, asked the senators for increased research to find, among other things, means of improving “employee satisfaction” and efficiency in poultry processing plants and to examine the problems of “poor hatchability” of chicken eggs, chicken house odor control and litter re-use, chicken diseases, and discoloration of chicken meat in cooking.

A spokesman for the United States Wholesale Grocers Association thanked the senators for their support of research in the area of employee inefficiency, findings of which had already enabled food distributors to “absorb all increased wage costs up to now.” He asked them to renew their support for research in food wholesaling, retailing, and food service—currently costing about \$225,000. The few large enterprises in the industry capable of conducting their own research, he explained, are rarely willing to share the knowledge gained in matters such as labor productivity. The spokesman joined the National Restaurant Association in asking that the research program be continued and its appropriation be increased to \$500,000. No one suggested an up-by-the-bootstraps approach for the less affluent members of the food service industry, claiming to be the fourth largest

³The six Deep South senators on the subcommittee combined a total of 162 years seniority, three of them having been first elected to the Senate in the 1930’s and the rest more than 20 years ago. Average seniority was 27 years each. By comparison, the eleven senators who supported the Poor People’s Campaign as members of an “Ad Hoc Committee on Poverty” combined only 91 years seniority, none having been in the Senate before 1955. Their average seniority was just over eight years per man.

in the country and to comprise more than 12 per cent of all U. S. retail business.

The Wine Institute (the California grape and wine lobby) spokesman, extolling for the senators the nutritious value of wine as a "food product"—so that it might be placed on a par with other "wholesome food products" for purposes of USDA research—asked the subcommittee to appropriate \$1.5 million for a pilot wine research facility in California. A proposed \$500,000-a-year program would search for means of producing high-quality wine from grapes of varieties now in "chronic surplus." The proposal outlined for the senators included investigation into such matters as the instability of wine flavor and color and development of better methods of marketing wine—including advertising. Where the California grape strikers' interests fit or did not fit into this scheme was not mentioned, although the national boycott obviously stood to lose if more table and raisin grapes were converted into wine. And as the poor people would soon learn in Washington, advertising poverty on the green lawn of Congress draws 20 days in the D. C. jail.

Chairman Holland, who found the *Hunger, USA* report intemperate, heard a number of lobbyists, particularly dairy associations, call for increased research aimed at improving the quality of food for livestock. The Holstein-Friesian Association of America asked \$2 million for development of more nutritious cow feed; a spokesman for the National Dairy Herd Improvement Association supported this request and told the senators of the great loss of nutrients and palatability incurred in present methods of harvesting forages—pasture grass, hay, and silage. "In my own experience," he explained, "I consider that at best an average of only about 50 to 70 per cent of the protein and feed energy that is in the standing crop ever gets to my cows." "In closing," he told the senators—as the poor people would repeat again and again—"I would like to have you note that at no time have we

requested actual handouts. Rather, we are asking more or less of a helping hand for people."

George S. Buck, Jr., representing the National Cotton Council, headquartered in Memphis, might well have been arguing for reform of the nation's welfare system when he came to ask the senators for more research money, the net effect of which, in his words, "would be to reduce federal expenditures very substantially, to increase our ability to earn dollars abroad, and to lessen the dependence of the cotton industry on various forms of federal support and assistance." He requested full implementation of a \$10 million research program for cost cutting in the production of cotton, begun by the USDA in 1964 and now about two-thirds completed. This and other research was urgently needed, he said, "to check the onrushing tide of synthetic fiber competition." One recalled the Mississippi mother's remark that the best suit of clothes ever owned by many a Delta youth was the uniform the Army sent his body back from Vietnam to be buried in.

(The 1968 estimated outlay for USDA research, more than \$150 million, included only \$4.2 million under the categories of human nutrition, consumer and food economics.)

At least one measure of USDA priorities was apparent in the allocations outlined by the department's head of research, Dr. G. W. Irving, Jr., when he asked the senators for \$1.2 million specifically for initiating or expanding research in existing facilities. Of the 17 areas selected for this initiation or expansion, only four bore even a remote relation to the interests of poor people. Two of these, totaling \$168,700, were aimed at improving plant sources of protein in grains and improving production of protein-rich lentils and dry peas. The third was a \$69,000 project to study the effect of processing, storing, and preparation on the vitamins and nutrients in various foods. The fourth asked \$103,000 for research aimed at more extensive use by

humans of dried whey, a high-protein by-product of the manufacture of cheese, usually disposed of in fluid form as waste. (Increasingly stringent controls on stream pollution and the fact that dry whey for human consumption is worth four cents more per pound than it is for animal feed were also cited to justify the proposed study.)

A proposal to spend \$50,700 for the "development of physiological and psychological measures of well-being of dogs and cats" could be viewed in light of the work of Humane Society lobbyists who had told the senators of malnutrition and other "grossly cruel and brutal conditions" under which laboratory animals live and whose photographs moved Senator Holland to remark it was "a rather pitiful situation." (A year and a half before, the lawmakers had been moved to pass the Laboratory Animal Welfare Act. Some \$400,000 was made available for the initial enforcement of its guidelines—an amount that seemed exorbitant in comparison with the grudging congressional allocations to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare for enforcement of school desegregation guidelines.)

Three of Dr. Irving's proposals were clearly in the interest of large landowners and industries. One of these sought \$198,000 (\$147,000 was available the year before) for study to improve the quality, transportation, and handling of American agricultural products exported to foreign markets. Another proposed spending \$42,900 for research that would help citrus processors comply with Florida's air pollution regulations by finding new ways for them to dispose of waste. Without this research, the proposal warned, processing plants faced "complete shut-down" and losses estimated at more than \$25 million. Vegetable growers would be assisted in another proposal calling for \$25,800 (\$94,000 available the year before) for research in mechanizing the harvesting and handling of vegetables. This research, it was explained, would help

growers offset labor costs estimated at \$800 million over the next two years and increasing due to "minimum wage laws, shortage of labor, etc." The "etc." may or may not have included strikes by farm workers represented in the Poor People's Campaign.

Senator Holland took strong exception to Dr. Irving's proposal to discontinue research in wholesaling and retailing, the \$225,000 in projects which, according to testimony, had helped grocers and restaurateurs overcome increased labor costs and losses due to poor administration. (USDA labor efficiency studies had "completely offset the rise in hourly wages" and had meant "billions of dollars" in savings to—it was said—consumers, since 1954.) The projects Dr. Irving sought to discontinue ranged from studies of office procedures, centralization of packaging and price marking of meat and produce, and wholesale ordering techniques to finding ways of lowering operating costs of small independent food stores in low-income areas and developing electronic scanning equipment for supermarket checkout operations. For Senator Holland, these were important projects which warranted continuation. He entered into the record five letters opposing the cut-back—examples, he said, of many others the subcommittee had received. The letters came from the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, three wholesale grocery and restaurant lobbies, and the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration.

The subcommittee devoted considerable attention—almost as much as it had given to the fire ant question—to examining USDA programs for feeding poor people. A major source of funds that the department uses to buy food for distribution to the needy and to school lunchrooms is not general taxes, but customs duties paid on imported goods, currently accumulated in the amount of \$600 million. A set portion of Section 32 funds, as the accumulated tariff receipts are called, is used by the Consumer and Mar-

keting Service (the division of USDA with administrative responsibility for feeding the hungry) to purchase agricultural products which, because they have been overproduced, are jeopardizing open market prices. The commodities thus removed from the market are distributed to schools and poor people.

(Few observers deny that without such manipulative arrangements, America's agriculture would be subjected either to the scandalous storage costs of the 1950's or to the cyclical booms and depressions of the pre-1930's. Secretary Orville Freeman, testifying before the subcommittee, credited "Agriculture's progress in the 1960's"—rising output, rising income per farm, and disappearing surpluses—to a policy of "balanced abundance" and said, "Where we have allowed prices to seek market levels for competitive purposes, we have protected farm income by direct payments." The Poor People's Campaign would use such accepted concepts to build its case for a guaranteed income for poor people. The system, however, continued to be sold as an exemplary model of American free enterprise. An official of USDA's International Agricultural Development Service told the senators that his training programs were concerned not only with imparting new skills and technology to the 4,000 agriculturalists brought to the United States every year from underdeveloped nations but "equally concerned that they get a clearer concept of how agriculture works in a free enterprise system.")

A USDA request for increased spending authority to procure nutritious—but not necessarily surplus — foods for school lunch programs out of Section 32 funds met with Senator Holland's strong disapproval:

Senator Holland [to Rodney E. Leonard, head of the Consumer and Marketing Service]: If you have any justification for that increase, I hope you will present it for the record. If you haven't, as far as the chairman of the committee is concerned, he

would advise against meeting that request. . . . I think we have been rather tolerant and rather generous in this matter by agreeing to the \$45 million, and by agreeing to the \$104 million [ceilings set by the Congress on the use of Section 32 funds for Leonard's purposes] . . . and agreeing to some other diversions, as, for instance, the urgent new research objectives, and market development projects.

We know that the tariff rates are going down and we know that we will be having greater instead of less troubles [i.e., surpluses] with such things as poultry, beef, and pork. I do not think it is at all sensible to dip into Section 32 funds this heavily.

Leonard presented his justification, citing great increases in the number of children participating in the school lunch program (six million more children and 10,000 more schools participating than in 1961, with an increasing recognition of the need to help schools provide for students who cannot afford lunches) and offering Treasury Department estimates that customs receipts will continue to rise, although at a rate lower than in the past. "Factors associated with the rise," said Leonard, "are the high level of copper imports, the buildup of steel stocks due to the possibility of a steel strike on August 1, and the continuing rise in the importation of foreign made automobiles." What effect, one wondered, could a marching group of poor people have on a system in which the availability of food is bound in some way to the possibility of a steel strike?

Senator Holland [continuing]: All right, I want that [Leonard's request for additional funds to supplement school lunch menus with other than surpluses] to be clear in the record, because the committee certainly has no objections, in fact, has every expectation that when you use Section 32 funds properly in the reduction of

surpluses that are hurting various industries; particularly those which produce fruits, vegetables, and other perishable crops, we expect the school lunch program to be enlarged from that. But now here you propose to go further into Section 32 funds for your regular budget for purchase on the market. That is a very different situation.

What is good for children's diets, in this view, depends not on what foods are necessarily the most nutritious or even tasty, but on what foods farmers have produced more of than they can sell to anyone but the government. For poor people lined up at the warehouses for whatever is currently glutting the market, the senator's implication is clear: Let them eat cake—but only if it is surplus cake!

Leonard and other Agriculture Department officials were called before the subcommittee to discuss food programs only a few days before the Rev. Ralph Abernathy led the delegation of 100 leaders to present the Poor People's Campaign demands to the federal government and a few days after the release of the *Hunger USA* report. Senator Holland asked Leonard to comment on what he said was "quite an attack leveled against this program, just a couple of days ago by some group, as I recall it." Leonard repeated Secretary Freeman's reaction—welcoming the new attention "tardily" brought to the problem of hunger, but fearful that "the attacks were so sharp that it may dissuade the enthusiasm" state and local officials have for the programs. The senator's comment on the report suggested that it is somehow proper for public officials

to lobby about fire ants, but improper for them to publicize the national failure to feed hungry people.

Sen. Holland: What was the name of the attacking group?

Mr. Leonard: Citizens' Crusade Against Poverty. It is a private group.

Sen. Holland: Who are they? Who are the individuals?

Mr. Leonard: I can submit a list of them for you.

Sen. Holland: I wish you would submit a list. They don't have any public representatives on that Citizens' Crusade, do they?

Mr. Leonard: No officials of government or elected officials; no sir.

Sen. Holland: I read the report printed in the press. It seemed to me it is very intemperate and they had very little understanding of what was being attempted under the food stamp program.

Leonard submitted the list of names—including Walter Reuther, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Ralph McGill, A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young—which was duly entered in the record.

In the senator's subsequent questioning about food commodity and food stamp programs, it was apparent that his own familiarity with them was less than his knowledge of such things as crop insurance or the various species of foreign fruit flies. But it is unlikely that he would disagree with those on both sides of the hunger question who believe that the nation's agricultural administration (and the lawmakers who control it) is not the one best suited for guaranteeing every American a steady nourishing diet.