

THE OBSERVATION POST

Philip H. Groggins



Baptized by Fire

ONE OF OUR TRACK TROPHIES has a seal on which is inscribed "Baptized by Fire." This tersely tells the story of one American regiment that was suddenly thrust into combat during World War I. Survival depended not so much on what was learned in the manual of arms as on the ability of individuals and groups to adjust themselves to battle conditions.

Industry vs. Government Experience

We now have a new administration in Washington. The new leaders have a fine record of successful achievements in nongovernmental activities. Unlike the legislative branch of government and unlike the rotating boards of directors of industrial firms and national societies, there is no appreciable nucleus of personnel having long experience in administrative government operations. As a consequence some of our cabinet officers are experiencing "baptism by fire." Some have only smelled the smoke of battle, others have felt the sting of shrapnel.

Some cabinet officers have relatively quiet battle fronts. Their main problem has been to map the terrain, reorganize forces, and revamp strategy. Others, particularly the Secretary of Agriculture, have been in the heat of battle on a wide front. Mr. Benson has to deal with the welfare of a large segment of our population, with a delicately balanced domestic economy and with acts of God, such as the drought in a number of states. Any action affecting farm income sets up a chain reaction which affects the chemical, farm machinery, and most other industries.

Campaign Promises And Implementation

Changes in government-farmer relations were promised during the 1952 campaign. Viewed objectively some changes need to be made. Assuming that worthy original objectives remain unaltered, the problem of strategy in achieving desired goals confronts the administration. Based on early utter-

ances, many people concluded that Secretary Benson chose a frontal attack on certain agricultural problems. In his General Statement on Agricultural Policy (Feb. 5, 1953) Secretary Benson stated:

"It is generally agreed that there is danger in the undue concentration of power in the Federal government. Too many Americans are calling on Washington to do for them what they should be willing to do for themselves.

"The principles of economic freedom are applicable to farm problems. We seek a minimum of restrictions on farm production and marketing to permit the maximum dependence on free market prices as the best guides to production and consumption. Farmers should not be placed in a position of working for government bounty rather than producing for a free market."

The above policy statement was issued a couple of weeks after the Secretary took office. Actually no action was taken by the department. Nevertheless, many farmers were apprehensive. They feared changes. Many of them had learned to like the tepid waters of governmental security. Government supports and subsidies were more alluring than "the principles of economic freedom." What bothered many folks was the fear—not fact—that major policy changes might be made without prior consultation with farmers and farm groups.

Thus, the stage for misunderstanding and possibly conflict was set. It was not long before the rumbling of protest guns was heard. To complicate matters, unexpected factors such as tumbling beef prices, the drought, and a drop in exports appeared. These perplexing elements, like the sudden appearance of Chinese troops in Korea changed the complexion of the situation. Good generalship suggested a change in strategy.

A Change in Strategy Indicated

Time and tribulations have apparently tempered the initial sureness of our agricultural leaders. They have learned that some controversial past practices

are deeply imprinted in the economic and political fabric of our nation. At the June 12 meeting of the American Plant Food Council, Assistant Secretary J. Earl Coke stated that: "...the major aim of the Department of Agriculture is to help develop a prosperous, stable, secure, and productive farm economy for the benefit of the entire nation." "Our sole desire is to be of service to the American people. We want to serve, not to dictate. We want to help, not take over. We want to give leadership where leadership is a proper function. But in all things we want to safeguard freedom and individual initiative."

At the same meeting, Congressman Clifford Hope, who for many years has been associated with legislation affecting agriculture, observed that the present laws were built up over a period of 20 years by the collaboration of both parties. Existing legislation and practices were not going to be scrapped until we had something better. Any proposed substantive changes in farm policy would need to obtain the blessing of the Congress before enactment into law.

On June 12 and again on June 27, Secretary Benson announced: "... farm programs based on suggestions of farmers themselves are the goal of the Department. We are seeking guidance and suggestions from all possible sources. We have no desire to dictate to anyone, but we have an urgent wish to help in any way within our power."

These recent utterances suggest that our administrative leaders have adopted a new strategy. They have been baptized by fire. They have made clear their desire to work with and to be responsive to the needs of our people. The results of early administrative experiments have pointed the way to more fruitful tactics. There is no evidence that the worthy and desirable objectives of the new administration have been or will be abandoned because of partisan or selfish pressures. There is, however, evidence of adjustment to battle conditions. That is progress. It augurs well for the future. Secretary Benson and his colleagues are to be commended for employing scientific technics in their endeavor to improve government-farmer relations.