



## Decisive Years and the Long Term

**U**NLESS all is going particularly smoothly, we are inclined to consider any current period as one of crisis. Perhaps it is—we live in a state of varying degrees of crises. Every year is a decisive one.

Spring brings a new crop year and with it a decisive year for agriculture. There is fight and furor over the farm policy of the administration. That is very important but not unusual. There are dire comments that our economy generally is slipping and agriculture is in the forefront of the decline. How big or lasting that trend may be we can't tell. But we must do what we can to prevent a real skid.

Much less obviously and with less crying of havoc there is a longer term trend. It is not related to decisive years, but it is very important to agriculture. It springs from scientific research and technological development. New and more efficient techniques and new and better products are the results. The prizes go to those who grab the brass rings. Will traditional agriculture be researched out of some of its markets, or will it take advantage of the possibilities offered by research to make firmer its position?

The old drive for a better mousetrap must not be neglected. We can smell the rancid evidence that government support of prices is not enough to keep an industry healthy.

If economic conditions are getting harder, the result will be a stimulation of more aggressive efforts to find new products that may hold big basic markets. There are few markets surer than food and clothing. Traditionally our food and fiber come from the plants and animals grown on the farm. But the technical application of new knowledge already has shown that the "natural" products are not necessarily the best and most economical possible. It is safe to predict that further improvements are possible in our traditional foods and clothing through application of the knowledge gained from research.

Millions of dollars are being spent by government, universities, and industry on the uncovering of new knowledge. It is important that knowledge be made useful. Research must be put to work.

There is an evident possibility that a satisfactory product selling at a price lower than that now in use is a good target. The case of butter is a timely example. The cotton textile industry has recognized the competitive possibilities which lie in synthetic fibers and has stepped up its own research.

**WALTER J. MURPHY, Editor**

---

Existing products based on agricultural production have the advantage of established markets and preferences. But those can be changed, as oleomargarine has so amply demonstrated. And what about the future of products replaced? If butter continues to lose ground to oleomargarine, as may be expected if we do have an economic recession (pardon the word), what will happen? Will the voters continue to back government support at high prices of a food product of declining importance?

Better products at competitive prices is the answer. If the agricultural industry does not make them, someone else may. A great deal of research information already is available. In the matter of foods, those which hold the markets at present have the advantage. But they can hold it only by moving forward. A choice between fighting progress and leading it seems to have an obvious—but not easy—answer.

The answer lies not only in different products, but also in more efficient production of those we now have. The feature article of this issue (page 228) shows some of the things that already have been achieved by putting research to work. Much better tobacco is being grown and much more corn produced per acre at relatively little increased cost. Throughout the chain from seed to plate there are opportunities to do things in a better way. We have possibilities through fertilizers, crop protection, more efficient harvesting, handling, and storage, and improved food processing.

The support of prices through government edict is a temporary thing which can be changed from year to year. It is subject to the whim of politics and sometimes to uninformed public opinion. Basic improvements in the techniques of food and agriculture are solid permanent gains that can be built into a pyramid on which the farmer's economic situation can be raised and his future secured.

Through cooperation with other industries and aggressive use of research information, agriculture can make more effective its own efforts. If it fails to seize opportunities, others will take them. In the current struggle for temporary props, agriculture must not neglect its own vitality and development of its resources for taking care of itself.