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Grist for the mill

I recently came across the text of a speech given in April of this year in Washington, D.C. by John W. Gardner, distinguished public servant and political observer. In what he terms "a war of the parts against the whole," Gardner describes the potentially destructive impact on our pluralistic society of the numerous internal conflicts taking place between various interest groups. That is certainly what seems to be under way in agriculture today. These internal struggles portend disaster for American agriculture if they continue on their present course.

Battle lines are drawn between advocates of small family farms and large commercial farms, of organic farming and conventional farming, of pesticide use and natural control of pests, of labor-saving mechanical aids and manual labor in agricultural operations, of farming as a socially desirable way of life and farming as solely an economic enterprise, of tax-subsidized agriculture and nonsubsidized agriculture, and so on. Each of these conflicts has its constituencies who engage each other in verbal battle and political structuring of contests over public policy. Each group seeks to gain advantage and, for the most part, shows little concern about the consequences of its actions on other issues. Much of the rhetoric, unfortunately, obscures the facts and further polarizes already divergent views. Each side in these controversies feels threatened by the other and often senses a danger to its well-being and way of life if it loses an encounter.

As Gardner points out, these battles, far from remaining isolated conflicts, ultimately will affect an entire system. Agriculture is a system critically dependent on a smoothly flowing series of events from sowing seeds and breeding animals to marketing finished products. A single adverse occurrence can disrupt the flow of goods to the consumer's table.

The time has come for all of us to lower the volume of discourse and to start listening carefully to each other. Scientific and economic studies and analyses can help sort out the validity of claims concerning important issues.

A clear statement of a national goal for American agriculture and for rural America would go a long way toward defining what is meant as the common good for U.S. agriculture. It would permit us to measure the consequences of special interest advocacies in relation to the common good for all Americans.

Defining a common good for agriculture and a consuming public should not be as difficult as one might imagine. Most people would agree that we should strive for a highly productive agriculture which yields a healthful and wholesome product for consumers at a reasonable cost and with a reasonable return to producers. They would also agree that this should be accomplished without degrading our environment or depleting the resources so necessary to sustain agriculture. Most would agree that improving the economic and cultural climates of our rural areas is a highly desirable goal.

The rub comes in determining how best to achieve these common goals. What tradeoffs are required to reach an optimum state? Are there winners and losers, and if so, how do we accommodate the aspirations of the losers?

More emphasis needs to be given to the role of agricultural scientists in developing objective information and understanding. We need this as a basis for resolving divergent views concerning the many mysteries in the growing of plants and animals for use by mankind. We have an expanding set of standards by which to measure beneficial and detrimental consequences of applying new information, but we shouldn't let them detract from the progress toward our goal of a common good.

A strength of America is grounded in our pluralistic society, and American agriculture is similarly strengthened by its pluralistic nature. I agree with John Gardner, who warns that long-term enjoyment of pluralism will be enhanced by a commitment to the common good. He sums it up neatly by stating: "At least for now, a little less *pluribus*, a lot more *unum*."