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## Ezra Taft Benson's USDA Years— Out with the Old, In with the New

When Ezra Taft Benson, who died May 30, 1994, at age 94, was President Eisenhower's secretary of agriculture, he found himself in the uncomfortable position of having to administer programs of which he did not approve. He particularly disliked acreage reduction and price support.

His discomfort was offset by the opportunity he enjoyed to deplore—in fact, to preach against—the whole kit and kaboodle of government activities that had been inherited from New Deal years.

Deplore and preach he did. Although trained as an agricultural economist, Benson was more evangelist than economist. At this point this account becomes personal, as I knew Secretary Benson fairly well. I defended him as being faithful to his principles, and I reminded his critics that he was being consistent with the philosophy of the Eisenhower administration. I defended until, soon after he left office, he declared his former president to be “soft on communism.” I and thousands of his earlier defenders turned cold. (Press stories just after his death put it that Benson leveled the charge at the newly elected President Kennedy. Not so; Eisenhower was his target.)

For several years, Benson evangelized for the John Birch movement. In 1985 he was named president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, whereupon he dropped all political activity and confined himself to advancement of his seven-million-member church (now nine million).

In the kind of contradiction in which Fate seems to delight, Benson's eight years of foot-dragging as USDA secretary were notable for major changes in federal programs for agriculture. Tight acreage control and firm price supports began to give way. Timid, halting steps were taken toward more environmentalism in farm programs. Treasury payments were introduced (again) to supplement farmers' income.

In 1954, the long battle over fixed versus flexible commodity price supports (via loans) came to an end. The flexible forces won. But Benson had little chance to exult. He soon had to administer the massive Soil Bank program, which was turned to as a way to reduce surpluses. (Secretary Benson grieved over those surpluses at least three times daily, or so it seemed to us in the USDA.)

Change really was underway. The

Conservation Reserve portion of the Soil Bank, together with the newly legislated Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act, anticipated the conservation movement of later years. Treasury payments for wool producers, begun in 1954 (and only recently terminated), gave an inkling of the big deficiency payment outlays to come later. Very soon after Benson left office most commodity programs were made voluntary.

Ezra Benson had no idea at the time how much change he had helped set in motion—sometimes inadvertently.

But that's not all that happened during his secretaryship. The event that outranked all others was enactment of Public Law 480. The Agricultural Trade Development Act (“Food for Peace”) was signed by President Eisenhower on July 10, 1954.

Or perhaps first ranking should go to extending Social Security to farmers, also dated in the productive year 1954.

On the consumer front, poultry inspection was tightened sharply (poultry was a half-century behind beef, pork, and lamb). And a food stamp program was newly authorized.

There was also biomass. Although not yet called that, it got a push forward as a Commission on Increased Industrial Use of Farm Products was established.

Ezra Taft Benson did not frown on everything that happened during his eight years as secretary. He probably rejoiced in extending Social Security to farm families. But the record just cited may illustrate the anomalies that can result when a secretary of strong personality leans into the stiff political winds of his time. Sometimes the outcome surprises. ■

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