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In Short ■ by Gerald F. Vaughn

Leonard A. Salter, Jr.

Who cares whether America has a sound land policy?

As the Contract With America challenges citizens to rethink the meaning of democracy, land policy has become one of the nation's most contentious issues and some people may wonder: Who cares whether America has a sound land policy?

What does the Contract With America portend? In his recent guest editorial, "Vulgar Federalism" (*Choices* Second Quarter 1995), Daniel W. Bromley writes:

For instance, the "property rights" clause of the so-called "Contract With America" may well require federal, state, and local governments to compensate land owners when governmental actions "diminish property values." There will be no new appropriations for such compensation, and so limited government funds would be diverted from other activities. Or governments would necessarily stop doing those things that affect property values. Either way, those who find governments odious smell victory.

The United States contains about 2.3 billion acres of land. Arthur B. Daugherty reports that only 59 million acres are in urban areas as of 1992. One might say, therefore, that less than 3 percent of the nation's land use is cast in stone. Does it make any difference what happens to the other 97 percent?

Leonard A. Salter, Jr., accurately described the nexus of democracy and land policy a half-century ago. He observed: "...the land system of a country will constitute a large source of social conflicts and will be a vital element in programs designed to advance social justice and material progress." Salter viewed America's land policy from a global perspective,

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writing: "Even a cursory examination will show that among the real social issues around the globe few are more universal, more frequently strategic, more currently relevant, or more explosive than social relationships in land." In Salter's view, how a society addresses the land question has a bearing on many other issues: "In sum, our ability to contribute to the establishment of democratic procedures for solving social problems will, in many crucial instances, be tested on the rock of the land question, as far as the masses of humanity are concerned."

When we, as colonial Americans, rid ourselves of feudal bonds, we established a system of land ownership and rights quite different from that of our forebears. We gave to private individuals more freedom to use their land than has ever been granted elsewhere. Salter knew that this extreme in property rights, an overreaction to the terribly oppressive English feudal system that preceded it, could not be sustained. He warned,

...when the ownership of land is made a purely commercial transaction—when people, be they farmers, investors, or idle by-standers, have the right not just to put their land to such physical use as they please, but also have the right to encumber the title with debt, to split it up horizontally and vertically, to place whatever price on it they wish, in short to kick it around like any other scrap of commercial paper—when we interpret private landed property with this sort of thing in mind, then we learn that, far from being a self-perpetuating system, we have a self-destructive system...

The use of private land in the public interest remains one of our most important national problems. The question becomes how to legitimately assert society's rights in private property, when needed, without causing undue and uncompensated loss of

landowner equity and discouraging or destroying private initiative. This question never can be answered in a manner that will satisfy all peoples for all times. It will be answered by each society in its own era. Salter knew that the history of property rights is part of the history of law—and thus ever-changing.

Salter (1911–1946) was born and reared in Massachusetts. His bachelor's degree came from the University of Massachusetts in 1932 and his master's came from the University of Connecticut in 1934. He was subsequently employed by the University of Connecticut in research and teaching capacities and also worked for the federal government on land utilization studies and land use planning in the rapidly urbanizing Northeast. Invited to join the faculty of the University of Wisconsin in 1940 to work with George S. Wehrwein, Salter was "chosen among all others as best fitted to carry on after Wehrwein the development of the field of land economics at the University of Wisconsin in the Ely-Taylor-Wehrwein pattern," in the words of John D. Black.

Land economists have built on Richard T. Ely's concepts of land as property and of land tenure as the core of land economics. From Ely's two-volume foundation work *Property and Contract* (1914), the writings of Wehrwein, Salter, and other excellent economists such as Raleigh Barlowe, Ayers Brinser, Daniel W. Bromley, Emery N. Castle, Marion Clawson, Folke Doving, Lewis C. Gray, Conrad H. Hammar, Hugh A. Johnson, Roland R. Renne, A. Allan Schmid, Clarence A. Wiley, and Gene Wunderlich have increased our understanding of property rights, rent, transactions, conservation, externalities, and the quality of life as key elements in resource economics and policy.

Salter and Wehrwein jointly taught the Wisconsin graduate seminar in land problems and grew to be very close friends. In his dissertation acknowledgments, Salter thanked Wehrwein, "who impressed on me some of his boundless interest in those social problems which stem from the allocation of the earth's surface space among men."

While a faculty member at Wisconsin, Salter studied for his PhD in



agricultural economics at the University of Minnesota. Unfortunately, he died just days prior to commencement; his degree was conferred *post obitum*. Though not yet thirty-five years old, Salter was one of the rising giants in land economics when he tragically perished, along with his wife and only child, in a Chicago hotel fire in 1946.

Salter's famous book, *A Critical Re-*

view of Research in Land Economics, was his doctoral dissertation published two years after his death, a dissertation of such quality that Henry C. Taylor, the father of agricultural economics, wrote: "Not one Doctor's thesis in a hundred rises to the level of this one." Salter's dissertation evaluated more than 500 published land economics studies done between the late 1890s and 1943, with a substantial critique on each of 125 studies.

Deploring studies that were "merely counting or classification work rather than exploration of the sources of problems and possible mode of solution," Salter was disturbed that so many researchers did not ask themselves what real problem(s) of people their studies would help solve and what action could be taken as a result. Instead he found that the prevailing research question seemed to be: What is the quantitative relationship between numbers compiled in a set of data? This unsettled Salter because he knew that "various means of combining a given set of data gave wholly different results; and the crucial question was not the accuracy of the method in the conventional sense but the concept the researcher had of his problem."

Maurice M. Kelso observes that Salter "reiterated that social inquiry should focus on the social process rather than on statistical manipulation, that the analysis should be less elegant and more discerning." Or, as D. Gale Johnson stated Salter's position: "Research cannot be undertaken simply by piling statistics on top of statistics without rationale or reason." Salter was concerned that so many research projects were mere compilations of data that added little to cumulative knowledge; projects were nearly identical, rather than dynamic and sequential, where each

project reveals unanswered questions that the next project answers.

Publication of Salter's dissertation as a book in 1948 drew mixed praise and criticism. Some reviewers hailed it as the key to redirecting land economics research, and some even extended its relevance to other fields of economics or to the social sciences

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generally. A careful reading of Salter's book provides a valuable organizing view for the conduct of economic research on resource and environmental problems in any era. Critics faulted its incomplete development, a somewhat unfair criticism since it was written as a dissertation and not as a book. Salter had told friends such as Kenneth H. Parsons and John F. Timmons that he did not consider the dissertation ready for publication and that he planned to expand it into a substantial treatise. Had Salter lived, he undoubtedly would have further elaborated his approach to social inquiry. The opportunity for elaboration gone with his passing, the dissertation was edited by others and published posthumously.

Salter held: "Always the purpose of social science is to assist in the resolution of social conflicts and confusions." As advocated by Salter, the test of social science research remains: What does this research contribute to solving society's problems? In summary, Salter truly understood land economics as a social science, a broad field of interdisciplinary social research applying several social sciences, principally sociology, economics, and political science,

to help a democratic society think about and solve land problems. He lamented

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that "private ownership of the soil is interpreted to mean the right to use land titles as financial play-things... ." He counseled: "To attain the Jeffersonian ideal of rural democracy, we need not give up the whole idea of individual freedom, but we will have to keep individuality from running riot." That is why America always should have a sound land policy. ■

Gerald F. Vaughn is a retired economist who most recently served as extension specialist in resource economics and policy at the University of Delaware.