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*An
Interview
with
Willard
Cochrane*



This interview is condensed from two longer conversations between Levins and Cochrane, one at Cochrane's home in Stillwater, Minnesota, and a second in the office Cochrane continues to maintain at the University of Minnesota's Department of Applied Economics. Since moving to Minnesota in 1988, Levins has known Professor Cochrane as both a colleague and friend.

The words "For Dr. Willard Cochrane with esteem and very best wishes" preceded the president's signature on the picture of John Kennedy which hung above Professor Cochrane's desk. Below that was a picture of Kennedy and Cochrane together. The books and papers of a man who, at the age of eighty-two, remains active in his profession surrounded us.

I began our interview by asking how he had come to know Kennedy.

"In the late 1950s I was a member of the Democratic advisory committee on agriculture, and there I worked with many of the political activists in agriculture. During that time I was doing some staff work for Hubert Humphrey, who was also running for the presidency in 1960. Humphrey got beaten badly in the West Virginia primaries and decided that he would pull out.

"There were people on the advisory committee who remembered that I was working for Humphrey and, I guess, reached the conclusion that I was out of work. One of them asked me if I would be willing to work for Kennedy and be his agricultural advisor. Well, I thought about it for a little bit and said, yes, I'd be happy to, but only if Kennedy knew I was on his staff. I didn't want to be some staff person so far down the line that no one knew who I was or what I was doing.

"Negotiations dragged along, and they got a little warmer when Sargent Shriver invited my wife and me to dinner here at one of the hotels in the Twin Cities. It wasn't long after that when I happened to be home for lunch, and I got a phone call. Lo and behold, a voice said, 'This is Jack Kennedy speaking.' Well, I was a little flustered, as you might imagine, and before I knew it I had agreed to go to the Democratic convention in Los Angeles a week

by Richard
A. Levins

or so later and start work.

"That's how it all started. For the next six months, I worked in Kennedy's staff headquarters in Washington, D.C., and whenever Kennedy traveled anywhere that he was likely to meet some farmers I went along."

Anyone who knows Willard at all knows him to be a man who gives new meaning to the word *outspoken*. So here he was, an economist of considerable reputation rubbing shoulders with the leading politicians of his day. When I asked if this didn't cause a problem or two, he told a great story

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of how he was forced to choose between economics and politics in a most dramatic way.

He had worked overtime to take the lead in preparing Kennedy's most important speech on farm policy. It was to be given at the National Plowing March in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The speech went well, Cochran's ideas for using production controls to reduce government subsidies were now gospel, and everything was looking rosy. They left that afternoon to give another speech in Billings, Montana.

"One of the Kennedy lieutenants asked me to ride in the press plane and explain our farm programs to the press. I said that I'd be pleased to do that. They had it worked out so that I was in the back of the plane facing about thirty of the leading reporters from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and so on.

"They started asking questions and I could see right away they weren't interested at all in our marvelous farm program proposal. They had only one interest: What was this program going to do to food prices? It dawned on me that I was suddenly facing a major career choice. Was I going to be a politician, and tell them that it wouldn't do much of anything to food prices, or was I going to remain an economist and give them some realistic estimates?"

"I knew that being an economist would finish me as a politician and maybe Kennedy as a presidential candidate. I thought for a moment of a third option, jumping out of the airplane. Maybe I should have taken it, looking back, but instead I

tried to compromise and give them what I thought was a very conservative estimate of the food price effects. I said it would raise food prices by about 10 percent.

"The next day every major newspaper on the East Coast was carrying a story about how Kennedy's agricultural advisor has said his farm programs would raise food prices by 10 percent. Needless to say, Kennedy's public relations lieutenants called me in and chewed me out and generally raked me over the coals. Kennedy never chewed me out, but there were several anxious days before the story began to die down. I never got out of the doghouse as far as certain key Kennedy advisors were concerned. As chief economist in the USDA I had four exciting years still ahead of me, but the highpoint of my political career was now behind me."

Next I asked Willard what he remembered most about Kennedy. He talked of how much he liked Kennedy's sense of humor, and that he could laugh at himself from time to time. And, while his fellow Harvard graduate was a consummate politician, he was far from one-dimensional.

"Kennedy was very well read in the classics and literature and it was just a pleasure to talk with him about things other than politics. He even once told me he had read my book *Farm Prices: Myth and Reality* and that's why he chose me to work with him. I don't know if that was true or not, but it pleased me that he told it to me."

The mention of his book led me to remind him of what he had written forty years ago, how farmers faced an "inescapable choice" between production controls and the ravages of a free market, approach—unless, of course, society would choose to continue to subsidize agriculture indefinitely. I asked him how those words sounded today.

"Well, they sound a little obsolete, to tell you the truth. We now view the whole world as our market. Supply is still increasing, but not rapidly enough to cause continuous downward pressure on prices as it was doing in the 1950s when I wrote *Myth and Reality*. I think that agriculture will continue to be a feast or famine industry. We will move back and forth from surplus to shortage conditions and there will always be need for some kind of a safety net for farmers in agricultural policy.

"I have been vigorously opposed to our present programs for some time, because the benefits go largely to the biggest operators. Designing a safety net without turning it into a bonanza for very large farms will always be a challenge.

"One other thing comes to mind which would have truly surprised me had I known it when I was writing in the 1950s. I never thought the American people would stand so long for such huge program

costs in agriculture. In my day in Washington we got beat over the head by the White House for spending three billion a year on commodity programs. In the 1980s that number went as high as 26 billion, and even now our budget-cutting Congress seems reluctant to cut deeply into the farm programs."

Herman Melville wrote in *Moby Dick* that "to produce a mighty book you must choose a mighty theme." Cochrane and I traced the progression of themes in his books from the extreme price and income gyrations in American agriculture to development problems abroad, and then to the historical development of American agriculture. I asked him what he was writing about most recently.

"I've been trying to get a handle on what I consider to be the long, slow slide of the whole American economy. I think I may be getting somewhere, finally, and have been struggling with a paper I now entitle 'The Troubled American Economy as Viewed by an Unreconstructed Liberal.' I'm almost beginning to be proud of it, but I still haven't got all the bugs out of it."

He mentioned places he was thinking of publishing his latest work, and the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* was not on the list. This struck me as odd, and even sad, for Dr. Cochrane's impressive vita lists several publications, some prize winning, in the *AJAE*. He is also a Fellow and past president of the American Agricultural Economics Association. I asked why he wasn't considering the *AJAE*.

"Well, I don't think the stuff I am doing could get published in the *Journal* anymore. Our discipline is shying away from the larger issues and critical problems and heading off toward whatever area offers data that the researcher can manipulate with some wondrous econometric procedure. Many of my earlier articles, if they weren't econometric, at least used statistical methods which were then fairly sophisticated. I'm not doing that kind of work these days.

"That's one reason I argued for the creation of *Choices* as an outlet for issue-oriented pieces. I'm a little disappointed, though, that it has become closer to *Time* or *Newsweek* than I thought it would be. It seems to be limiting itself to brief peeks at issues. Maybe you can look at a serious issue in five type-written pages, but most of the time thirty or forty pages will be required. What I think is needed is a journal that we might call *Agricultural Issues* that would allow such discussion.

"That's the kind of journal I would be writing for if there were one, but with our current emphasis on quantitative methods and peer review, I don't have much hope for *AJAE*."

Later in our interview, Cochrane also expressed his misgivings about the way younger professionals are being educated.

"The way we train new graduates has forced them to cease being problem oriented and driven them in a direction of locating areas of research where there is sufficient data to carry on their particular specialty. I don't think this should be the driving force in research. I think in an applied field such as ours the driving force should be problem solving. It may be laughable now, but I can remember a time when agricultural economists were expected to deal with the important problems at hand with whatever tools were available. They weren't expected to sit around waiting for and developing new tools.

"I would like to see our graduate students get more training in history; it gives needed perspective. And I would like to see our students spend more time studying institutions and institutional change. That is where the important problems are. I wish that our whole profession would come to understand that research does not have to be econometric research to be publishable research."

We ended with some advice for those who would like to live a long and productive life such as his. He said that, for starters, you have to be born with the right genes—both his mother and grandmother had lived to see ninety-six. He recommended a diet low in animal fats, high in fruits and vegetables, and featuring a nightly shot of Johnny Walker Black. And, after making it clear that he "was not one of these aerobic nuts," he told me that he still walks his dog, Candy, four times a day, even in the coldest weather, and visits his twenty-two-year-old stallion, Jason, almost every day "to help with the old boy's exercise program."

There were, as always when we get together, some jokes to tell, and he talked of how nice it would be to once again walk on a California beach. But then he had second thoughts. There were just too many people out there now. Better to stay here and face the Minnesota winters. He does, however, have a ridge picked out in the High Sierra where he wants his ashes scattered. ☐

Richard A. Levins is a professor of applied economics at the University of Minnesota.