

Report from the Department of Agriculture

John White,
Deputy Secretary for Agriculture

Dr. Jarrett

Mr. White was nominated as Deputy Secretary on March 9, 1977. He was confirmed on March 15 and he was sworn in on March 17. Coming from a farm background, he was born in Newport, Texas. His father was Mr. Ed H. White from Wichita County. He was extremely active in 4H Club and FFA work, graduating from high school in 1941. He attended Texas Tech, received a bachelor of science degree in agriculture in 1946. He then joined Midwest University at Wichita Falls as an instructor and served as a coordinator for the Vocational Ag Program of that institution. He was the organizer of one of the first artificial insemination programs for dairymen in the state of Texas. And then in 1946 was elected Commissioner of Agriculture for the state of Texas, being at that time one of the youngest elected state officials in history. To reward him, or to let you know that he did a good job in that office, he was then re-elected to this position some 13 times, serving until 1977. During this time he was responsible for many reforms in legislation, for farmers and consumers as well. He was responsible for one of the early and first efforts in international relationship dealing with Mexico, particularly, for example, in the area of cotton insect control. He was responsible for the creation of one of the first consumer protection divisions in our country. Again, in recognition of his leadership in this area, Mr. White has received numerous awards from various organizations around the world. Some of these being the French Order of Merit, The Federal Land Bank Award, and the 1976 Man of the Year Award by Progressive Farmer. He is married and has five children and it is my extreme pleasure to introduce to you, Mr. John White, the Deputy Secretary of Agriculture for the United States.

Thank you, sir. I appreciate that introduction. I am awfully glad to be here for several reasons, and other than the official reason, I'm finally glad just to get here. You know, Doctor, you sent a Texan out to pick me up. One from the high plains, David Bechtol. Well, I don't know how many people here are from the high plains region of Texas. How many folks are here from up around Amarillo and that part of the country? David, are you the only one? The only one that made enough money this year to get out of town?

My relationship to veterinary science is meager. I went to school at Texas Tech. We had one professor who had a veterinary science background. He taught a couple of courses in veterinary science. He was the most popular professor on the campus. Most of us in agriculture at school had to take at least one of the



courses. It was required. We all signed up for Doc Harbaugh, because Doc Harbaugh was the original radical, iconoclast at Texas Tech University, because he spent at least 3/4 of his class lecture time telling us how stupid the dean was and the president of the college. And we all agreed with him, of course! Well, we didn't learn much about veterinary science. But Doc Harbaugh was the original nonbeliever in organized activities. And I am sure that if he were here today and a member of this organization, he would be organizing some group at the back of the room against the administration of this organization. He was a natural for a college teacher. I would say that. We loved him very much. I appreciate you mentioning too in my background that I had worked my way through school. I did work my way through Texas Tech. And I think that's important. I think it gives us a feel for what life holds for us. But I want to tell you one thing. I was involved in Texas politics, have been all of my life. I ran for office, the first time when I was 25 years old. I announced against an incumbent state-wide official who had been in office for 20 years. I see some younger folks down here in the front section. And I am often asked how I got started. And so you will understand. I ran for office the first time on a platform that 20 years was too long for a man to stay in public office. And if our system of government was to operate we needed to turn these offices over frequently and have new blood and freshness and vitality and enthusiasm. And the people of Texas believed me. That ought to tell you something right there.

We have broadened the mission of the United States Department of Agriculture, but we have not forgotten who we are or where we came from. We stand to serve this vast and great agricultural industry of the United States of America. I do not have to go into the rhetoric of its being the envy of the world, you know that. But I want you to know that we

know it. We have not forgotten it, we will not forget it. Because that is the commitment that Bob Bergland and John White make to you. Your president did say a minute ago that he wished that he was out at the corral this morning. I'd rather be here in this warm-air-heated hotel with carpet on the floor. My wife and I have had some real battles lately about having to stop this growth of our cities. I am sure that in a lot of ways she is right. We have to stop that traffic from coming in front of our house and I am sure she is right. And we have to stop paving over the good earth, and I know that is right. But I tell you when I was 12 years old, I went to Henryetta, Texas, and I saw my first neon lights and I have not got over it since. I love going to town. When I was 14 we went to Wichita Falls and Kress's store there was air-conditioned. The first time I had ever been in air conditioning. And from then on I begged Daddy to take me to town and I would go down to Kress's and just stand inside the store in July. I could have stood outside in November and December and got the same effect, but it just didn't seem to feel the same. What I am saying is that I think that America has done a great job of blending ourselves from the past into the future and that we can come back and we can preserve the best of what we had and take advantage of the best of what we have and of the future.

Now, I know that we meet here today in some pretty tough times for agriculture. We talk about research and some of these other things and the office did prepare some stuff for me here but I know how you guys are. In my autobiography they said something about artificial insemination, you all ought to know about that. It's very efficient, but it doesn't have much emotion connected with it. And I am a more of an emotional type of speaker than I am an efficient type of speaker so I am not too good at getting in here and digging out the research information even though I know it is important to you. I can remember that Ed Minster tells me over in ARS that we are going to have a 400% increase on brucellosis spending this year and that our overall research funds for livestock are going to be higher. I do know that despite what the Office of Management and Budget tells us and projects in figures from time to time, that the President consistently has said, and he has said it as late as two weeks ago, that he stood for a good, strong research program for America and for increasing it. And he has told us time and time again that he stood for a strong agricultural research program. And Secretary Bergland is going to build on that. And we are going to continue to do the things that we have done and we are going to do more. And I would say that you would find a friendly ear in our offices. His and mine. I'd say too that we see people when they come to Washington. Do not hesitate to come and see us. You do not have to have somebody to get you an appointment. Just call us. The Secretary and I see people. We may not be able to see them at the exact hour that they want, but we will not have a single

American citizen come to that city that wishes to see us and be turned away.

I answer every phone call. I see every person that asks to see me. And so does the Secretary. So I say to you, you are welcome! Your representatives are welcome. Come and share with us your thoughts, your problems. We may not be able to solve them. We have a lot of things that we have not been able to solve lately. We live in a period of adverse opinions. Even in the USDA it is very difficult to get the scientific communities all going the same direction on a certain question. So it finally comes down to the Secretary's office making a decision. We want help in making those decisions. Now, I know I cannot come here today and not talk to you about the overall agricultural situation. I will tell you about livestock. The next speaker is going to talk about problems and opportunities in the cattle business. I tell you, I wouldn't mind taking on part of that subject, the problem part. I can get into that pretty good. Because I have always been in the cattle business. I was raised on a cattle and livestock farm and even though I was in elective office, I had to have a few cows just to feel good. I got to feeling so good in the '60s. When the market dropped out in 1966 I decided I had better get out of it because I could not take care of them and I could not get the help I needed. So I sold out. And something was missing from my life. So in 1973 I got back in. And then something really was missing from my life. Money. When I had the opportunity to take this appointment, one of the things they said, "Do you have any agricultural interests that might be of conflict with any of the decisions that you have to make?" And I said, "Well, I have got a bunch of old cows over at Rosebud, Texas." And they said, "Well, you will have to get rid of them." And I said, "Hallelujah." So I know something about the problems, I do not know too much about the opportunities, but I am sure that now that I am out of the cattle business there will be some opportunities. Because I have managed to guess wrong all of my life about that kind of a business.

It reminds me of the time I went to school at Willow Springs Community. Willow Springs is the most rural of all rural communities in Texas. One year they could not get a teacher out to our little school and so they sent us into Henryetta. We country kids had never gone to school with town kids, but they would pick us up and take us in there and us country kids were poor. We were dirt poor. We did not have a hot lunch program for poor kids then. So we just had to take what we had. And we would take our lunch in an old syrup bucket with holes punched in the lid so the bread would not sweat. How many syrup bucket folks do we have in here? I know we have a bunch of syrup bucket folks. Those of you non-syrup bucket folks listen because I am going to give you a lesson in economics. In that syrup bucket all we would have to eat for lunch was what we had, what Mother could put in there. You know it would vary from time to time. During the fall and winter months we would

have maybe a couple of sausage and biscuit sandwiches. Or maybe a slab of fried ham, with homemade biscuits. And then a fried pie of whatever dried fruit we would have. And that is all we would have. Those town kids would come out there and they did not have syrup buckets. They had bought from the hardware store or somewhere a store-bought lunch pail. The girls would have one that was pink with a movie star on it. And the boys would have a red one with an Indian or cowboy on it. And in that lunch pail, that store-bought lunch pail, they would have all pretty, wrapped up in cellophane, a sandwich, with store-bought light bread and a little old skinny piece of balony you could see all the way through. And they would wrap it up in that wax cellophane paper and throw a toothpick in it and for dessert a couple of cookies. We envied those town kids and their store-bought things. They would trade us that skinny old balony sandwich for our sausage or ham and biscuit sandwiches and half the time make us throw in the fried pie, too. When I look at the farm income figures in 1976 and 1977 I want you to know those town kids are still doing it to us! Because we have a valuable product, but we do not know what it is worth. We have been a victim of over-production. Producing for markets that were not there. Mythical markets, promised but not real. For the major commodities that come from the farms and ranches of this United States of America. Low prices and over-production are twin brothers. It is not any different than the same comments that Dr. Vernon Tharp made just a few minutes ago about the possible number of graduating students from veterinary schools. If you get too many and more than the market needs, then you have created a problem. And that is what has happened in American agriculture. Production with no place to go brings us to the point where we are now. This administration, Bob Bergland, President Carter, are committed to maintaining a market-oriented system of American agriculture. We do not intend to nationalize American agriculture regardless of the pressures that are upon us at this time.

We know and you know that there is no possible way to have a free system of agriculture in this country and take all the risk out. We do intend to minimize the risk as much as humanly possible and still let farmers and ranchers have freedom of choice. The two things that are the most difficult to deal with on a national basis of our food supply system are market risks and weather risks. I want to tell you that there is so much that the government can do about either one of them and no more, if we are to maintain a free country. We can minimize market risk; we can encourage production when we have a real market or when we do not have a real market we can say we do not have a real market and ask farmers not to produce quite so much. We cannot do anything about the weather, except this administration is for the first time going to have significant research programs on weather so that we can learn more about it. Learn

more about weather cycles and provide that information. My goodness, how in the world can we talk about what we can predict on crops and this, that and the other. We are under some criticism now because we have underestimated the final, or almost the final results of the Russia wheat crop. We missed the one in the United States and we built in a 3% error, recognizing we could be 3% wrong when we have reporters in every community. Thousands upon thousands of people helping us determine those crops. We do not have that for Russia. We have to depend on basically what we can see from the sky and we have to depend on what we know is happening in weather. We cannot predict weather in St. Louis more than two days in advance and we miss that half the time. How in the world could we predict the Russian wheat crop? They say we have missed it badly. Well, I want to tell you, the Canadians missed theirs badly, too, and they have a very sophisticated crop reporting system. They've missed theirs 20%. The Australians have missed theirs 30%. So when somebody can tell me what the weather is going to do for the next month, then we will tell you a little bit better what is going to happen in commodities and what is going to be harvested. I think any thinking, intelligent person can figure that out. I know you can.

We got on the train on January the 20th and that train was already half way down the hill. We have been trying to turn it around. I am talking about prices, the downward spiral on prices. I think we have. We have taken 15 separate administrative actions to have market impact and this year, in the face of the biggest harvest of corn we have ever had, we have turned that market around and it has gone up right in the middle of harvest. Because cash price corn is 38 cents higher now than it was at the beginning of the harvest time. Wheat is up 58 cents a bushel cash price, in the face of the third largest crop of wheat that we have had, and the carryover big enough to last a whole year to meet our known domestic needs at this time. People say what can we do? Well, this administration is going to spend about 7 billion dollars trying to help. We will mail out this month 200 million dollars on wheat in order to help the farm income. Our credit programs are the most liberal in the world for the American farmer. I'll say what farmers, particularly in the wheat region, can do. They can participate in a wheat set-aside and then in the reduction in planting and getting some realistic management supply system in effect where the free market can operate. Then all will share and share equally. To those who would say, "Let's not plant a thing," I would say, "What's your neighbor going to do?" If we are going to reduce production in this country, then we ought to share in it equally. Because under a situation of high emotional charge, then you reduce yours and you suffer and you increase yours and take advantage. And we do not want to see that happen. We do not want to see American agriculture split and divided. We do not want to see those antagonisms occur. And we hope that they do

not.

In closing, let me say that I believe that these policies are beginning to work. I think most people know that government cannot solve all the problems. I have been in government a long time. I have been in agriculture a long time. I never will forget a story that an old Mississippi commissioner told me when I was first in office. He asked me one day, "White, what are you going to do as Texas Commissioner of Agriculture?" Man, I started ticking it off, 1, 2 and 3. I had all these things I was going to do. He nodded, and very affirmatively and gently told me, "Well, I hope you are successful. Sounds like the things you are talking about need to be done. All I would caution you about is that I have been in office down in Mississippi an awful long time, 20 years in fact." (That is not the one I ran against, by the way.) "The first 10 years I tried to change everything

and the last 10 years I have been trying to get them back where they were." That is a pretty smart fellow. I have thought about it a lot. I would suggest before we change the market system of the food machine that we have built—it is the greatest in the world—before we change it, let us make sure that we are making it better and not worse. Because there are a lot of people that really are in desperate situations in agriculture now. They need help. But I want to make sure we are helping, not hurting.

Dr. Jarrett:

Thank you, Mr. White. Again we appreciate your taking time from an extremely busy schedule to be with us. A mutual friend of ours, Phil Campbell, said that you were one of the best qualified men to fill this position, and I can now well understand what he was talking about. Thank you so much.

President Robert Harris presenting a copy of the 1977 Bovine Practitioner to Mr. White.

