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POWERFUL CONSERVATIVE VOICES

By: David Harsanyi February 4, 2013

And on the ninth day, God created farm subsidies.

Reading reviews of Super Bowl XLVII, it seems there is a consensus that the standout commercial on Sunday was a Dodge Ram ad called “God Made a Farmer” (see video below). And it’s a beautiful ad, featuring still shots of hardscrabble life in the American Midwest and a speech by the late broadcaster Paul Harvey celebrating the noble farmer (first given to the Future Farmers of America back in 1978): “God said, ‘I need somebody willing to get up before dawn, milk cows, work all day in the fields, milk cows again, eat supper, then go to town and stay past midnight at a meeting of the school board.’”

I hate school board meetings as much as the next guy, but with the technological advances we’ve seen in agriculture and the remarkable boom in productivity, God probably doesn’t need the same level of commitment from the farmer anymore. It’s this kind of romanticizing of agriculture – in movies, literature, ads, and politics – that makes it nearly impossible to shoo the industry away from government trough. Farmers aren’t doing you a favor; they’re selling you something.

Actually, most of them are doing quite well. That’s great. So there is no reason that farmers – a minority to them to sure, but still – should be addicted to taxpayer funded corporate welfare. There are an array of jobs Americans undertake just as vital to the nation as farming, many of them in industries struggling to survive, many of them taking on far more risk, yet agriculture is the only vocation I can think of in the private sector that is treated as if it were a form of patriotism.

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“If you want to become rich,” Jim Rogers, the noted investor once said: “Become a farmer.”

Small farms are dying because they can't compete with the productivity of larger competitors, a reality that many other industries wrestle with — and from which many consumers inevitably benefit. But even if farm subsidies were intended to alleviate rural poverty and disparity within the industry, then why do most go to commercial farms with average incomes of \$200,000 to nearly \$2 million? As Robert Samuelson recently pointed out:

Symbolic of the debate we're not having about government's size and role — the essence of the deficit problem — is the future of farm subsidies. Running \$10 billion to \$15 billion annually, they don't do much good. For starters, they haven't saved small farms. Since the 1930s, when subsidies began, the number of farms is down 70 percent. Nor do farmers need subsidies to stay profitable. Farmers' income for 2011 and 2012 (\$135 billion and \$133 billion, respectively) were the highest and second-highest ever and would have been without subsidies.

Taxpayers spend about \$7 billion a year on crop insurance alone, the largest farm subsidy, as if the industry apparently has the God-given right to operate in certainty. The Department of Agriculture hands out from \$10 billion to \$30 billion in cash to farmers every year — depending on the vagaries of the world around them.

Only 10 percent of farmers collect 75 percent of all subsidies. More than 90 percent of agriculture subsidies go to farmers of just five crops — wheat, corn, soybeans, rice and cotton. Government does not subsidize almost any of the fruits and vegetables we eat (also grown under the threat of unpredictable weather) or flat screen TVs we watch (also produced in a highly competitive marketplace) yet you can find any of them without worrying too much about serious fluctuations in price.

Fact is, success itself has now become the argument to continue corporate welfare. Here is Senator Debbie Stabenow, chairwoman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, last year (via Cato institute):

“American agriculture represents a bright spot in our economy. Agricultural exports are reaching record highs and American farmers and ranchers are continuing to outpace the rest of the world in productivity and efficiency. Sixteen million American jobs are supported by American agriculture, so it's critical we pass the Farm Bill this year. We must provide farmers and small businesses the certainty they need to continue growing and helping the country's economy recover.”

I've got nothing against farmers, but when we implement price controls and impel Americans to buy things like ethanol, even though the policy does nothing for our energy needs or to curb pollution, we only distort the price of crops and increase food costs on consumers. Perhaps I'm overstating the influence of popular culture on the problem, but I can't help believe that our distorted agricultural policy has something to do with public perception.