



A Call to Action in Rural America

PAUL SIMON

*Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, Illinois*

I AM FROM RURAL AMERICA. ALTHOUGH OUR 911 ADDRESS NOW MAKES OURS indistinguishable from an address in a central city, that address used to be called Route 1, Makanda, Illinois. Makanda has 402 people. That's rural. About half of my relatives were farmers. Every farm had a few cows, a few hogs, a few chickens. I can remember churning butter as a boy. So I have an appreciation from personal experience of the significance of the theme of this issue. Where are we? Farms are getting larger, and there are fewer farmers. At one point, the majority of people who earned their living in our country did it on farms. Now it's less than two percent. Unfortunately, no magic and no legislation will dramatically change these trends. We can't go back to yesterday.

I. SMALL-TOWN VALUES

Frequently I hear people say that there are "midwest values" to rural America. While there may be some regional differences, I tend to think they are small-town values rather than midwest values. I don't know that the values in a small town in Illinois or Iowa are different than the values of a small town in Maine or Oregon. In

PAUL SIMON, retired U.S. Senator from Illinois, now teaches political science and journalism at Southern Illinois University. He also heads a public policy institute founded by him.

Christian people and Christian churches can best contribute to the future of rural America by providing leadership in their own communities. Reaching out to one another across boundaries is a Christian imperative.

a small town you get to know the people, and there is a sense of community. You know the fellow who drinks too much and sometimes doesn't take care of his wife and his children and you know when you should help. You remember the person who was probably not developmentally disabled, but very close to that; sometimes he would show up for work on farms, and sometimes he wouldn't; but he had five children and would occasionally stop and knock at your door and say, "We need food." And you helped the person.

As a candidate, I would approach a person and introduce myself, "Hello, I am Paul Simon. What's your name?" In urban settings the response frequently is a fearful, "Why do you want to know?" In small towns people automatically respond with their name. Their openness and lack of fear reflect the best aspects of small-town values.

Of course not everything about small towns is automatically good. There can be deep-seated prejudices against people who are different. A town of 1200, where we lived for a long time, was very conscious of being all white. I remember when the manager of the local small store called and said, "We had an African American family here twice in two days. We figure they are either here casing the store or they are guests of yours, and we're just curious." I visited one small town in Illinois with a population of approximately 700 people that had 21 empty houses. Among other things the people asked, "What can we do?" They could have advertised in the Chicago papers. Here's a small town, a great retirement place, 125 miles from Chicago, where one can rent inexpensively. I think they could have filled those 21 homes, but there was obvious concern about who might move in.

While small towns have little ethnic diversity, they do have economic diversity—in contrast to the rest of the country. We are more segregated economically than at any time in our nation's history. Almost the only exceptions to that are rural communities—where there remains a good economic mix.

What can we do, not only to preserve the positive small-town values, but also to use those values to address nationwide challenges? As an overarching theme, let me cite an article about inner-city churches. The author concluded that inner-city churches that strived to survive, rarely survived; but inner-city churches that strived to serve, survived. Now I am sure that this conclusion is not universally true, and it is complicated in rural areas by the decline in rural population, but I think that we have to look at service rather than survival.

II. LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS

In the legislative arena, I have for a long time favored target prices that limit what any one farmer receives while helping family farmers. At present we have limits in a variety of ways, but the target price concept is one that benefits consumers *and* farmers. Take an area where there has not been much governmental involvement—soybeans. Let's say we think that a sensible market price is \$7 per bushel. In this program the government would tell soybean producers to produce as much as

they want, thus helping people be fed. If the price for soybeans is \$6.50, the government would pay the producer 50 cents a bushel for every bushel produced up to x number of dollars. Beyond x, there is no subsidy, thus encouraging the small producer rather than the large producer. This program makes sense to me, though it is not a new idea. It was first suggested by Charles Brannon, the Secretary of Agriculture under Harry Truman.

In Abraham Lincoln's time the great military and economic power was Great Britain, and among the modern nations, the one with the worst slums was also Great Britain. We look back and ask how this wealthy nation could have tolerated that. But today the great military and economic power is the United States, and the western industrial nation that has the highest percentage of its children living in poverty is also the United States. What shall we do for the least of these our brothers and sisters (Matthew 25)? Now we have passed a welfare bill—not with my vote—that in a couple of years is going to cause real problems. Although the primary harm will come to urban America, we as a nation have to be looking for alternatives, and we shouldn't wait until a crisis is upon us.

I think we ought to say to all Americans, "We're going to guarantee you a job opportunity, in the private sector if possible, but if you can't get anything in the private sector, we're going to provide you a job in your community." That's what happened during the depression with the Works Progress Administration. We took the liability of unemployment and turned it into a great national asset. Under the WPA a person worked 32 hours a week at what today we would call a minimum wage—4 days a week. The fifth day the person had to be out trying to find a job in the private sector. Four days a week today at minimum wage would total \$928 per month. That is not a huge amount of money, but it is more than almost any state pays in welfare benefits, and people would have pride in themselves for working. I find that I can talk to the most conservative chamber of commerce and sell this idea. There is something that appeals to our instincts in encouraging people to be productive and paying them for it. It would help rural areas, decrease unemployment, and build up the country all the way around. But having suggested government programs, I also believe we can't wait for such programs to do something in rural communities.

III. PROVIDING LEADERSHIP

The greatest shortage that I see in small towns is the shortage of leadership, and that is precisely where a church or a group of churches could fill this gap. I always recommend to communities seeking my counsel that they get a dozen creative people together in a brain-storming session at someone's house—not in an office. When they do, things happen—at least if there is follow-through. Let me give you a very practical example. When Dixon, Illinois, invited me to come, I met, as I had requested, with a dozen people. One of them ran a men's store, another a department store. The fellow who ran the men's store said, "I can't buy simple,

white T-shirts.” And the fellow at the department store said, “That’s a strange thing, I’m having the same problem.” In Dixon there was a group of Hmong refugees, often people with very limited educational background, many of them on welfare. The business people encouraged the Hmong to begin making T-shirts. Pretty soon I got a call from the Dixon Chamber of Commerce asking if I would contact one of the Chicago banks, because they needed a larger loan to buy sewing equipment than their local banks could provide. The last I heard, 28 people were making and sewing T-shirts in Dixon. While not a huge thing, it brought significant help to a community.

This method is not guaranteed, of course. I also remember a county in Illinois that asked for my help. So I got three Illinois business executives to spend part of a day in that county and then come together at a meeting to tell the local group what they might be able to do. As the business executives brain-stormed about each idea, someone from the community would stand up and say, “That won’t work here, because....” Every idea got shot down.

Sometimes things can happen without direct action by a community. The *Wall Street Journal* edition for much of the midwest is published in Highland, Illinois. Why there? Some Dow Jones officers visited a number of rural communities, and in Highland they found a community that made a good impression. People mowed their lawns and took care of their homes. The officers visited the library and liked it. They went to the local school and walked through the hallway and saw a school that had discipline. They went back to New York City, called the mayor of Highland, and said, “Would you like to have a plant there that prints the *Wall Street Journal*?” Basic community pride had a positive economic impact.

Let me give you another example. Bloomington, Illinois (though not exactly rural), got a new Chrysler/Mitsubishi plant. There was a little federal involvement, and when the Chrysler/Mitsubishi executives came to Washington to sign papers, I invited them all to my office afterwards. I asked the Mitsubishi executive, “Now that it is all signed, sealed, and delivered, why did you come to Bloomington/Normal?” He said, “It is a beautiful community and your state made a generous offer.”

“But there are a lot of beautiful communities,” I said, “and a lot of states made generous offers. Wasn’t there something else?” He said, “There were two things. For 26 years the Bloomington Chamber of Commerce has had a sister-city relationship with a city in Japan, and two years ago one of the schools in Bloomington started teaching Japanese. So we felt we would be welcomed there.” People thought they were broadening their culture and enriching their children in school, which they were, but they ended up bringing thousands of jobs to their community.

IV. THREE THINGS NECESSARY

I tell every chamber of commerce that three things are essential for a community or an individual to move ahead: hard work, creativity, and a willingness to risk.

Waymond Presley was a rural mail carrier in my home town. After he retired, he decided to start a travel business. That travel business at Route 1, Makanda, became the fourth largest travel agency in the United States. Waymond told me that he had 13 people on his payroll making over \$100,000 a year. He and those thirteen employees worked hard.

Haron, Illinois, didn't have a railroad, and it wasn't on a main highway. But a fellow who ran the Chevrolet agency and a men's store and one other man decided they would put up a building and then advertise. It became a Nordic plant. There was a willingness to risk.

Think of the possibilities of empty houses. A great many people who are of retirement age would love to move to a small community, but we do very little to accommodate them. Thinking creatively to accommodate retirees could enrich your community economically.

Beyond legislative changes, which may or may not come, each of us can provide leadership where we are right now. We need to be reaching out in this way. I have been involved in a small way in Special Olympics. The day after we held the Special Olympics in Carbondale, Illinois, and many other communities, NPR told about nine developmentally disabled people in a 50-yard race. When one of them stumbled, the other eight stopped; a girl went over and kissed the boy who had stumbled and said, "I hope you are all right." And then the nine of them locked arms and walked together the rest of the 50 yards.

We in America have to follow this example and reach out to one another. People in urban and suburban areas have to understand that rural America has problems and needs to be helped. People in rural areas have to understand that there are problems in nonrural areas. We need to reach across the boundaries of geography, race, creed, ethnic background, sexual orientation, disability, and all the other things that divide us, and move ahead. For those who have the temerity to call themselves Christians, I think this is an imperative. I hope we can do a better job of it. ⊕