

# LABOR FOR OUR FARMS

*America has a manpower reserve to grow the food needed for victory. Some reasons why it is not being utilized effectively. Problems of small and big farms—and some proposals.*

**I**N FARMING, as in industry, manpower is the central problem. Upon its solution depends the achievement of the food-for-victory goals announced for 1943.

In 1940 this country had a farm manpower reserve of 5,000,000 workers — “unused or ineffectively used,” in the words of the Tolan committee. During that same year the increasing industrial employment resulted in a revival of rural-to-urban migration. This, together with Selective Service, drew 1,800,000 off the farms by Oct. 1, 1942. Approximately 1,000,000 more, while continuing to reside in rural areas, secured employment other than farm work.

This would still leave a manpower reserve of some 2,000,000. Why, then, are we faced with a shortage of farm labor?

First of all, it should be noted that the decrease in farm labor supply has not affected all areas of the country equally. It has been most keenly felt in the industrial northeast — particularly New York and New England—and some sections of the West Coast. Parts of the Midwest and Mountain States also have lost essential farm workers, especially by migration to West Coast industry. But in the South and Southwest, where most of the agricultural workers are Negroes and Mexicans, a surplus still exists although fewer are now available for farm work.

The farms primarily affected are the large commercial ones, which supply most of the marketed agricultural produce. The “family” farm large enough to require additional hired help is less affected. But the great majority of farmers — more than three-fifths of the total — hire no labor at all even at peak seasons. Many small units have retired from production, particularly in war boom areas.

Generally, however, the small producing unit has continued in operation and is absorbing the labor of most of those working on the land. The chief problem on these units is not labor shortage, but under-employment. The question is: how best to use the full capacities and skills of these workers in a way that will allow them to retain and improve their status as farm operators. As Secretary of Agriculture Wickard said in a recent address, “Our best reserves of manpower—both of managers and workers—are the people already on the land who are not making full use of their time and ability.” According to Department of Agriculture estimates, 2,000,000 or more of the total 6,000,000 farms in America could substantially increase their production if provided with government credit

and technical services. Many other farms on sub-marginal land could be closed down, and their operators shifted to industry or to farms in more productive areas.

Helping the small farmer increase production is considered an important objective of the official Department of Agriculture program, according to impressively worded releases. It has also been recognized under the provisions of the War Manpower Commission directive on employment stabilization for dairy, poultry, and livestock workers. Under this directive, eligibility for draft deferment extends only to workers on farms classified as essential—i.e., who attain a given productivity per worker employed. However, farmers on smaller units are entitled to deferment for a six-month period during which their production might be brought up to the required standard. Secretary Wickard has stated that “The Department of Agriculture is going to give farmers all the help it can in getting more livestock and equipment, and in generally building up production. If a man’s farm is not suited to larger operations, the Department will try to help him locate a better farm that can be qualified as essential.”

If these good intentions are not to degenerate into paper pledges, they must be fully implemented by practical aid to the farmers, and they must be part of crop production planning. So far, however, no steps have been taken to assure the necessary funds to make them effective. The “farm bloc” leaders continue to oppose expansion of small farm output. And apparently the Department of Agriculture has never had real confidence in its ability to carry through the program to which it is committed: the farm goals for 1943 have been set largely on the basis of productive plant existing in 1942.

**T**HIS is particularly striking in the dairy industry. Despite favorable weather, milk production for 1942 was only 120,000,000,000 pounds, 5,000,000,000 short of the goal for that year. For 1943 the goal has been set at 3,000,000,000 pounds less than the 1942 goal. The figure would have been much higher if it had been determined in conjunction with concrete plans for mobilizing the unused capacity available for dairy production on our small farms. For they are most capable of expansion in the fields of dairy, poultry, and livestock production, since a satisfactory level of efficiency in this type of farming can be reached with a relatively small productive plant. The point here is particularly important in the case of dairy

output because the difficulty of recruiting hired labor for the large dairy farms limits expansion of the big units. As more and more dairy products come under the “short-age” category, the critical need for helping the small farmer will increase.

Of course if the small or middle-sized farmers increase their production, more of them will need hired labor for full time or seasonal work. No doubt many of the smaller farmers cannot pay wages equal to those in industry, as the large producers easily could. What about wage subsidies? But it would be practically impossible to confine such subsidies to farmers actually needing them—it would mean another handout to the commercial farms. But assistance to small farms need not, and should not, be tied in too closely with particular items in the cost of production. Rather it should be on the basis of the producer’s total requirements, taking the form of liberal credit and, if necessary, outright grants in order to maintain operation.

**I**N THE case of the large commercial farms, the problem of assuring an adequate labor supply involves, first of all, the recruiting of hired workers. Labor is being drawn from these farms into industry primarily because the latter brings them better wages and better living and working conditions. From July 1940 to July 1942 average farm wages increased sixty-four percent, but weekly earnings in industry rose by fifty-three percent. The claim of big business farmers that to increase farm wages further would bankrupt the agricultural economy is contradicted by figures from the bureau of Agricultural Economics. Net farm income for 1942 (after deducting labor and other production costs) is estimated to be more than double the average annual income during 1936-40, and two-thirds higher than in 1941. In contrast, wage payments to farm workers (including value of board and payments in kind) are only fifty-three percent higher than in 1936-40 and twenty percent higher than in 1941.

The need for raising farm wages is recognized by the War Manpower Commission. On December 1 Commissioner McNutt advocated “adjustment of wages to bring the income of farm workers more nearly into line with that of industrial workers.” Extension of social security and minimum wage legislation to agricultural workers is also being more widely advocated.

Of course, organization of farm workers would be a most effective way of raising the wage level. However, the trade union

movement in agriculture has faced many difficulties in the past and has developed very slowly. Conditions in many parts of the country are now ripe for the development of a strong organized agricultural labor movement. To succeed, such a movement requires the active assistance and support of organized industrial unions.

Another measure to raise wages, now advocated by the CIO, is the establishment of agricultural wage boards similar in function to the British boards, which have been able to raise farm wages in that country to a standard comparable with that in industry. The wage boards, however, can succeed only with strong support from organized labor and with proper labor representation. Lacking that, the boards would actually become a farm bloc tool to prevent further wage increases.

**L**ACK of adequate housing for farm workers also adds to the difficulty of recruiting or retaining labor. Expansion of Farm Security Administration camps in all areas where migratory labor must be used, or where distances are too great to permit daily commuting from home to farm, is

the answer to the problem of housing seasonal workers. A tougher question is how to meet the equally urgent need for housing steadily employed farmhands who must live on the farm. Although married men with families are still available in many sections of the country, they frequently cannot be employed on farms because there aren't housing facilities for their families.

Much of the migration of farm workers before the war was unnecessary, in the sense that sufficient labor was available locally to do the job. There are some important agricultural areas, however, where outside workers are really needed at the peak seasons. Special steps will be necessary here. And it is no less important to assure facilities for transporting workers locally from home to farm and from one farm to another.

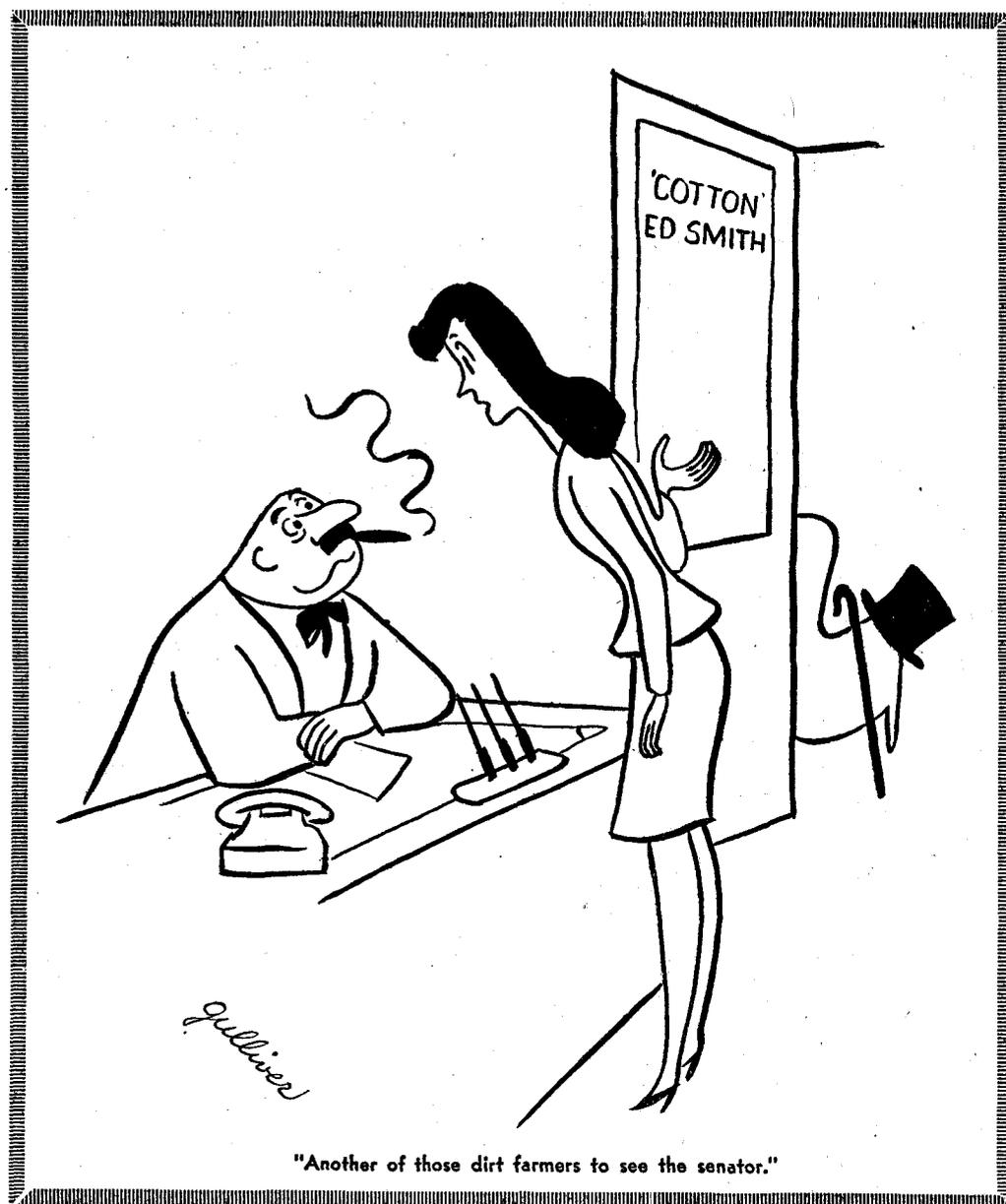
To date federal action on these problems has been limited to providing transportation fares for groups of workers who had to be moved 200 miles or more to the place of employment. This program, jointly administered by the FSA and the US Employment Service, was started in the fall of 1942—approximately 9,000 workers were

transported under safeguards established by the government. These safeguards are: (1) payment of a minimum wage of thirty cents an hour, or that prevailing in the locality, whichever is higher; (2) maintenance of minimum housing standards; (3) guarantee of employment for a specified proportion of the total period for which the workers were to be available. In periods of unemployment, maintenance in lieu of wages is supplied by the government. It is understood that workers are brought to farm areas under this arrangement only after all efforts to obtain labor within a 200-mile radius have failed.

**A** MORE ambitious plan for controlled migration was recently announced by the War Manpower Commission, involving "full time continuous employment of mobile groups of experienced farm workers, transported at government expense from one area to another as the crop matures." This would eliminate wasteful and unnecessary migration. It also suggests a permanent solution to the migratory labor problem in the postwar period.

Because farm work is highly seasonal, it is impossible to assure all farm workers year-round employment. At the same time it is neither desirable nor possible to keep a force of workers on relief in rural areas during the winter so that they can be employed for a few months in the summer. The answer to this problem is the employment of persons who do not ordinarily work either on farms or in essential war industry—housewives, students, and even workers in non-war industries. Outside workers should be brought into a locality for temporary farm work only in areas where such labor reserves are not readily available. Use of inexperienced labor of this type accounted in considerable measure for the successful harvesting of crops and the maintenance of farm employment at usual levels during 1942. However, many abuses in recruiting these workers have pointed to the necessity of adequate standards and safeguards during 1943. Too often mobilization of volunteer workers has taken place on a scale larger than necessary, in order to keep down the wage rates of regular agricultural workers. Workers have been induced on grounds of "patriotism" to accept wages far below the standard even for inexperienced labor. Young people in New York and New England were recruited at twenty-one dollars a month. High school boys in New York state were used to replace experienced workers who were demanding wage increases. In the South, in spite of an adequate supply of adult farm workers, primary schools were closed down or operated part time so that children could pick cotton.

The 1942 experiment also shows that inexperienced labor was used most efficiently in those areas offering adequate pay and decent working conditions. Farmers in



substandard wage areas often failed at the same time to provide adequate transportation, training, and supervision. This year the following standards should be maintained: (1) Recruitment of workers only through the US Employment Service after careful determination of the need for such labor in a particular locality; (2) adequate wages and working conditions; (3) satisfactory transportation, supervision, and training. Finally, while it is necessary in some farm areas to employ children of high school age, it is also important to guard against relaxation of child labor standards. Most state laws offer no protection against the exploitation of young children in agriculture, and the incentive to use such labor will increase. The recent amendment to the Sugar Act eliminating restrictions on the employment of children under fourteen in the sugar beet fields is a danger signal.

**F**ARM employers look upon foreign labor as an easy resource when the supply of workers at home begins to dwindle. There is no intrinsic reason why American agriculture should not employ workers from other Allied nations near our borders if they can be spared from their own country and if suitable standards of employment are maintained. However, the chief impetus for the employment of these people at present comes from the growers who hope to obtain a supply of cheap and docile labor.

The Mexican and United States governments are determined not to allow a repetition of the World War experience, when floods of Mexican immigrants came over the border, with disastrous results for the Mexicans concerned and for the American farm workers. An agreement made in the summer of 1942 between the Mexican and United States governments laid down specific pre-conditions for such importation—substantially they were the same as those for the transportation of American farm workers.

During the fall of 1942, 3,000 Mexican workers were brought into California to work in the sugar beet harvest. Agitation in Texas for Mexican importation subsided with suspicious suddenness after the announcement that the terms included a thirty-cent-an-hour minimum wage. While minimum rates in the California beet fields far exceeded thirty cents an hour under the terms of the Sugar Act, they were still below the rate offered for work in other California crops. Poor housing conditions contributed to the difficulty of getting local labor. (The housing standards set up by the FSA as a condition for importation of Mexicans are so low that it is doubtful whether California workers could be obtained under such circumstances.) An ample supply of American Mexicans from Texas would have been willing to come into California for this work, since wages were much above the Texas level. But the Texas

growers blocked active federal recruiting of Texas workers for California, and eventually the authorities in Washington became convinced that Mexican nationals were the only resource.

Pressure will increase this year both for greater importation of Mexicans and other aliens and for relaxation of employment and housing standards. The conflict has already come to a head in California. Last December a conference of farm workers, employers, and government representatives was held on the issue of Mexican importation; it ended in Associated Farmers' rejection of the Mexican government's demand that workers receive hourly rather than piece rates and that housing conditions be fully equal to those acceptable to American workers. Since it is probable that there will be a genuine need for Mexican labor in California next summer, the attitude of the Associated Farmers constitutes a serious threat to the food production program. Florida growers also want cheap alien labor—at present they are agitating for the importation of Negro workers from the Bahamas. This in face of the fact that the peak season in Florida agriculture occurs during the winter months at a time when thousands of workers in other parts of the South would be available if offered decent wages and working conditions.

**A**NOTHER step is being taken to maintain labor supply on the farms—the deferment from military duty of all farm workers considered “essential.” While deferment when properly used is a justifiable and necessary measure to retain irreplaceable skilled labor on farms and in industry, the Bankhead-Johnson bill is an attempt to distort this policy by “freezing” farm workers, including many employed at producing commodities which can hardly be considered essential. Under the directives issued to date, workers are forbidden to leave employment on an essential farm for another type of work without explicit permission of the US Employment Service. Employers under Army and Navy contracts are forbidden to hire such workers unless certified by the Employment Service. Behind the attempt to “freeze” labor is an attempt to keep wages from rising.

Sound policies on farm labor issues will be established only at the cost of a severe struggle with the reactionary leaders of industrialized agriculture. Their attitude was neatly summed up at a conference held during the first week in January by leaders of the four most important farm organizations, who speak for the big business farmers.

Those groups are the National Grange, the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives, and the National Cooperative Milk Producers' Federation. Their leaders at the conference demanded (1) revision of the parity formula to permit a general upward

swing of farm prices; (2) an increase in the industrial work week to fifty-four hours or more, with all overtime pay eliminated (an attempt to wipe out the differences between farm and industrial labor by lowering the standards of the latter); (3) dissolution of trade unions in industry, and abandonment of attempts to organize farm workers; (4) importation of Mexican and West Indian labor under “practical” procurement and distribution conditions (presumably the elimination of safeguards on wages, housing, and working conditions); (5) elimination of all “impractical” restrictions on the placement of American farm labor (this is an attack on the FSA standards); (6) the freezing of seasonal as well as year-round workers to agricultural employment, which means perpetuation of underemployment on the farms; (7) elimination of any attempted regulations or activities by the US Employment Service, Federal Security Administration, or any governmental agencies which “seek to impose union conditions in the employment of farm labor.”

**T**HE powerful pressure behind these proposals must be countered by still greater pressure, especially from organized labor, the progressive farmers' organizations, and dissenting groups within the Farm Bureau and the Grange.

Careful planning and control of farm production as part of our whole war economy are needed in order to make the most of our available manpower. The Department of Agriculture and the WMC have already announced that emphasis will be placed on essential crops and that growers of non-essential crops will risk obtaining no government assistance in recruiting the labor they need.

Finally, it must be recognized that industrial labor policies have a direct effect on the supply of rural manpower. We are still far from having absorbed all the manpower and womanpower available in our urban communities. Applicants for jobs are still discriminated against on the basis of sex, color, religion. There are pools of unemployed labor still untapped in several of the great metropolitan areas. Employers with discriminatory hiring policies have at the same time recruited workers in large numbers from the farms and villages—workers of the “right” color and background and, perhaps most important, workers who are inexperienced in matters of union organization and grateful for wages that seem high by rural standards. In the last analysis, the problem of farm manpower is only one phase of the total manpower problem. And manpower is itself part of a larger problem which requires some such solution as that proposed in the Tolan-Kilgore-Pepper bill for a centrally planned and administered national war economy.

MARIAN JAMES.

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# For Our Publishers

To you who live west of the Hudson, our sympathy. We know there are certain compensations in residence distant from Manhattan, but we know, too, there is one drawback: you cannot attend the affairs sponsored by New Masses. You would have profited considerably by coming to the Earl Browder-George E. Sokolsky debate last Sunday. It was one of New Masses' big days. The hall, holding well over 4,000, was jammed; people had to be turned away. What was said will be published in New Masses next week. Look for it.

We were gratified with the turnout. We expect to repeat these important events regularly, knowing that our audience and its friends want the crucial issues of these times clarified, and as quickly as possible. We try to do that every week within these thirty-two pages.

We are able to do that because of our readers—the same folk who came to the debate. They want that hardy American institution—the New Masses. They are truly the publishers of the magazine. You—NM's publishers—are now being asked to guarantee its continuance through 1943. That is the meaning of our current drive for \$40,000. Last year you understood it so well that you actually went over the top by several hundred dollars.

Unfortunately, we cannot register the same success this year. Certainly not at the present writing. Last year at this time we received \$12,517. This year, for the same period, \$8,974. We are falling behind, and most dangerously. We are obliged to warn you that the magazine will be in a crisis shortly, unless the drive steps up to meet last year's figures. We don't want to sound shrill, but we will talk out with all our might and main. We know you would never forgive us if we didn't, and the magazine died.

It will never die if you heed our warning. You always have. But time is pressing.

## A BRIDGE IN SPAIN

**Y**OU will, I am certain, understand those of us who continuously hark back to Spain and those ancient—yet so contemporaneous days—of five years ago. After all, Spain was an international Aberdeen proving ground: tactics and strategies, military, ideological, diplomatic, were tested there. Goering's Luftwaffe learned a lot south of the Pyrenees; so did Guderian's panzer divisions. So did Goebbels' foxy propagandists: they offered the world the gargantuan lie that the Spanish war was between Communism and fascism. They sat mealy-mouthed in the Non-Intervention Committee, gambling upon disharmony in the chancellories of the non-fascist world. Their chips were stacked high by 1938 when Madrid fell, prey more to fifth column division than to Franco's might. How much Spain has to teach us! And have we really learned the lesson? Have we, Ambassador Hayes?

I think of Spain today, think of it often when I consider the issue of the second front, for example. Analogies are risky, I know, yet I keep thinking of those days just before the Ebro River was stormed by the republican armies. It couldn't be done, many learned men said. The republic didn't have men enough, didn't have material enough, didn't have generals smart enough. The enemy had overwhelming strength on the other bank. The heights were on the wrong side of the Ebro; the enemy had had plenty of time to build unassailable defenses. And I remember lying on the roof of a building this side of the Ebro one day and looking through a spyglass at the fascists across the river at Asco. I did see cement blockhouses and barricades down every street. Sure, it looked pretty formidable and that Ebro was a wide, wide river to cross. Where would our side get the boats to take thousands of men across; and what did the republicans have, besides rifles and hand grenades and machine guns once they did get over? It looked like a pretty hopeless proposition to the foreign military scholars in Barcelona.

But the men of the Popular Front thought otherwise. Morale was at its apex then, because unity, under Premier Negrin, was at its apex. The two great trade union setups, the UGT and the CNT, had achieved a relatively close working relationship through the *Comites de enlace*—the committees of liaison." These political factors were bound to evidence themselves on the front lines.

**I** REMEMBER one day about the middle of July 1938 encountering a caravan of trucks heading down the Reus road toward the Ebro, bearing rowboats. I learned later that all the fishermen along the Catalan coast had offered up their skiffs to the army. As soon as I saw that, I knew what was up. Anyway I made it my business to get down to the Ebro as fast as I could and happened to be at the waterfront the morning the men went over. I crossed a little while after them, on the footbridge the engineers had strung across. By that time the republicans had stormed the heights, stunning the defenders, and had advanced some miles into enemy territory. They captured a number of towns and some eight, ten thousand hard-boiled Falangists, Moors, and some German

and Italian officers. A roaring success indeed: what couldn't be done was done. Yes, there were some fainthearts and worse—fifth columnists—who had argued against it, but there it was. But the latter didn't surrender so easily. . . .

The republicans swept to the plain about the key town of Gandesa, some dozen miles from the riverside. Gandesa was heavily fortified, and it could well defy men with rifles and hand grenades. The loyalists had to deploy and wait on heavy reinforcements. Republican tanks were waiting on the other side of the river, trucks with heavier stuff. There were cannon. The loyalists had brought up a wealth of material—big amounts in terms of what they customarily used. Runners kept arriving from the front lines with the message, "For God's sake, bring up the heavy stuff." That stuff was waiting, bough-covered, along a camouflaged road. I had returned from the opposite side, had dispatched my account by runner, and was sitting in the third truck of the caravan waiting to cross again. We waited for the completion of a bridge strong enough to bear the freight. It was scheduled for completion shortly after dark. Dark came, and the bridge was not quite finished. The runners kept piling in from the front. "The Italians are bringing up their mountain artillery to Gandesa. . . ." Nine, ten, eleven o'clock—the drivers in the tanks were gritting their teeth, the truck drivers were in and out of their seats. Shortly before midnight the bridge was finished. Suddenly you heard the gears shifting all along the line. All ready. . . .

The first truck inched its way forward: the bridge held. The truck reached land. Then the second truck edged forward. I happened to be in Truck No. 3, at the waterside, and watched the second truck breathlessly. There was damn little space on either side of its wheels. The truck inched on, got to the halfway mark, and then—the front wheels swerved, struck a stanchion, went overboard. The bridge broke in half. I never want to hear a groan again like that which went up from the waiting men.

The bridge couldn't be repaired immediately. Naked men toiled in the water, above it, below it, sweating, straining, but the bridge was broken. Dawn came and with it the Messerschmitts and Capronis roaring down from the horizon. They came every hour on the hour like a commuter's train. They bombed, bombed, bombed, trying to smash the bridge, and searched for the concentrations of men and material. They ceased at nightfall and the bridge was repaired that night. The heavy stuff did get across, but by that time Mussolini's men had brought up enough artillery.

**T**RUE, other bridges had been thrown across the Ebro above and below this spot. Heavy material did get over elsewhere, but evidently not enough. The stuff at this bridgehead might have turned the tide. The enemy had won enough precious time to strengthen Gandesa. Had that mountain city fallen, the invaders could have fanned out, and far more than a foothold across the Ebro would have been won. The breaking of this single bridge proved pretty disastrous.

Later, I learned that the driver of Truck No. 2, which cracked the bridge in two, was a fanatical Falangist, who had bided his time for just such a moment. I always see him when I hear the words "fifth column."

Yes, Spain has many lessons to teach us. It was, after all, the place where the term fifth column was coined. That perhaps, is the most important lesson. That, and the corollary fact, that you can move mountains, cross rivers—and a channel—if you have unity—and if you have the will.