The Idle Land Waits — For What

HERBERT Spencer, in *Man Versus the State,* pointed out that governmental intervention in economic affairs tends to produce results which are the direct opposition of the professed aims. One might search far to find a better illustration of this dictum than the history of American agriculture, especially since 1933. The market place as an impartial and effective indicator of who should be doing what, where and to what extent, has been virtually destroyed. Among the consequences has been the disappearance of the family farm although its preservation was the professed objective of the economic planners.

An Associated Press writer, Donald M. Rothberg, writing in the Birmingham News of November 24th showed that while the goal of the farm program is higher income for farmers, the big payments are going to the big landowners, many of whom use agriculture or cattle raising as tax benefits.

Cotton growers predominate on Capitol Hill and millions of dollars are paid to owners for taking land out of production. The government "rents" the land from year to year to keep it bare of crops. For this rental $1,114,617,466 went to 91,887 farms, but most of the country's 3 million farmers received an average of about $978. Payments of $100,000 or more were made to 83 Mississippi River landlords, including one prominent senator.

A farmer needs at least 100 acres in cotton, with expensive machinery, in order to operate. Even with 140 acres and $14,000 a year in payments, one experienced farmer found it a tight squeeze. Mechanization benefited the rich growers but drove small farmers off the land and sent thousands of unskilled Negroes to northern cities.

Cotton of a higher quality can be grown in California, but southeastern growers, fearful of competition, make the federal restrictive program mandatory. In California producers also find they could not survive without the subsidy because the cost of overhead has skyrocketed. A farm with only 5 to 50 acres would have to pay out 40.2 cents a pound more than the cotton would bring on the market. Wages are higher than in the Mississippi delta, and water costs about $100 an acre. In California the average investment per farm in 1950 was $49,000. By 1967 it had risen six times and by 1980 it could reach $580,000. The sharp rise in total investment reflects rising costs and a steady increase in the size of farms.

Many small farms through the Mid-West are deserted — the neighborly fences have disappeared — the houses have been moved or stand like forelorn scarecrows. The owner would prefer to farm his land if he could afford the high cost of seed, machinery and hired help. But the work is hard even though with a tractor it is possible to plow from morning till moonlight.

Such benefits as have been obtained from government "farm programs" have gone into increased land values for the benefit of a small number of large owners. The new corporate interest in farming is not accidental. Meantime, the opportunities for a young man to go into farming, except as a hired hand, have virtually disappeared. One speculates mentally—if land were free of purchase price; if machinery, livestock, crops, the surface of cultivated fields and buildings were free of taxation, and if the market place operated to tell us what the consumer wanted and what he was willing to pay —how large would farms be? How many young men would go into farming?