

OUR VIEW

Farming is
a complex
business

With all due respect to Sonny Perdue, there's more to farming than size.

The U.S. agriculture secretary last week told folks at the World Dairy Expo in Madison, Wisconsin, that some farms may have to get larger to survive.

"Now what we see, obviously, is economies of scale having happened in America — big get bigger and small go out," he said, according to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. "It's very difficult on economies of scale with the capital needs and all the environmental regulations and everything else today to survive milking 40, 50, 60 or even 100 cows, and that's what we've seen."

While that may be seen by many as a fact of agricultural life these days, we disagree.

Farms producing commodities such as milk must be efficient, no doubt about it. Most often, those efficiencies are to be found in larger operations.

That much is true.

However, there is much more to farming — or any other business, for that matter — than producing the maximum amount of a commodity at the minimum cost.

Much more.

Efficiency is important, but other factors also come into play.

For example, the market is critical. A farmer producing a commodity such as milk will receive a certain price. As a price taker, he or she makes money by being efficient, minimizing debt, keeping input costs down and hoping for the best.

Niche marketers, however, find a segment that they can target. For example, some dairies market organic milk. In addition to being efficient, minimizing debt, keeping input costs down and hoping for the best, farmers might be able to market their organic milk for a price premium. That could in turn increase the odds of a farmer clearing a profit.

Another consideration is value-added products. Suppose that organic dairy farmer makes artisan cheese, ice cream or yogurt with his milk. That would potentially open the door to more income. Assuming those products can be made efficiently — there's that word again — more income is possible.

Choosing the right crops to grow is also a major factor. For example, instead of growing forage for his cows, a farmer might be able to grow another crop such as hemp, which in many instances is bringing much higher prices. Yet there's a possibility that, at some point, the hemp market could become saturated, forcing those prices down.

It's a matter of putting the resources a farmer has at his, or her, disposal to the highest use.

Still other factors include side products. Some dairies make money turning cow manure into compost, electricity or natural gas and selling it. Others lease land for wind turbines that produce electricity. Others do custom field work on the side or grow feed instead of buying it.

Still others sell rights-of-way or development rights to help them pay down debt and increase cash flow.

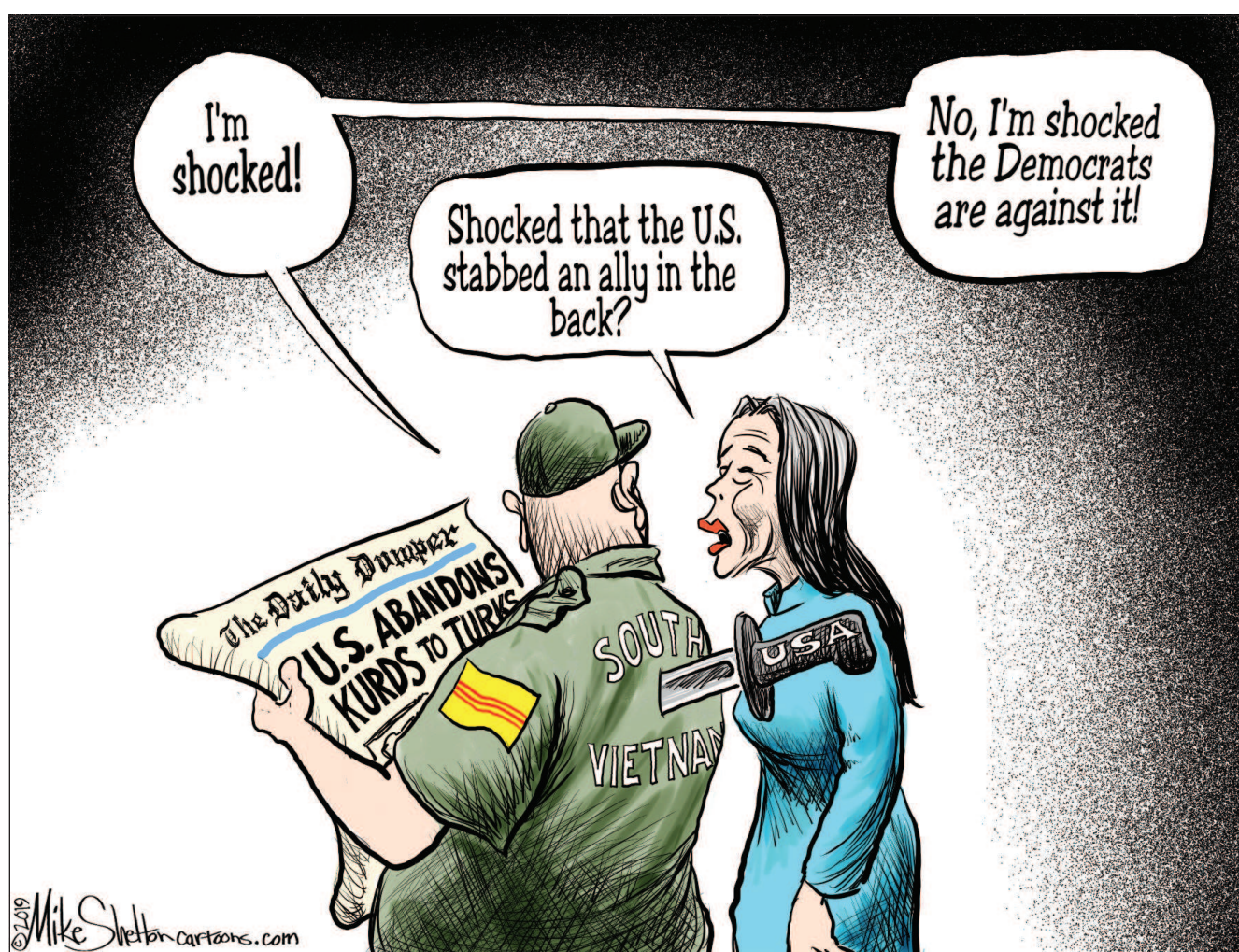
Farmers need to know how to raise livestock and grow crops, but they also need to be entrepreneurs, marketers and innovators.

Yes, Mr. Secretary, there's more to farming profitably than size in the 21st century. A lot more.

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Mail: To the Editor, Baker City Herald,
P.O. Box 807, Baker City, OR 97814
Email: news@bakercityherald.com



Trump seeks an escape route

Yet again, President Donald Trump must have felt he had somehow painted himself into a corner of his Oval Office. This time, Trump trapped himself by creating new impeachable offenses that seem far worse than anything Robert Mueller probed. Such as publicly pressuring foreign countries to dig up dirt on a political opponent.

But then, as the oval walls were closing in, Trump saw what seemed like an escape route — and so he took it. And so our column opens with a new specter: Trump is riding down a virtual version of his famous personal gold-glittering escalator; it's just like the one he rode to start his 2016 presidential campaign.

We see Trump forcing a smile, waving, talking and tweeting at all hours, as his virtual gold escalator carries him down, down, down. Down toward his increasingly inevitable impeachment.

The reason he's feeling so trapped is that he really is trapped — and everything he has tried has only made his problems worse. First he denied pressuring Ukraine's president to dig up dirt he can use against Joe Biden. But then the world saw his actual words, so Trump switched to explain why it wasn't a crime (never mind that the experts all say it is). Then he doubled down, publicly asking China to do what he's gotten Ukraine to do.

Trump has now discovered the real problem with being trapped on a virtual down escalator — there is no up escalator. So Trump realized he was in an ever-worsening mess. Then his cell phone rang. Turkey's strongman and Trump's old pal, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was calling. Erdogan was at the 2012 dedication of Istanbul's two Trump Towers; Trump has extensive investments in Turkey. Now Erdogan was again pressing Trump to withdraw (or

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at least relocate) all U.S. military forces in Syria — so Turkey can invade and wipe out the Kurdish militia that was the Obama administration's surrogate ground force in the war that drove ISIS from Syria. The Kurdish People's Protection Unit (known by the acronym, YPG) suffered many thousands killed in driving ISIS from Syria.

But Erdogan wanted Trump to desert America's ally so Turkey could slaughter thousands more Kurds, if necessary, to set up a Kurd-free buffer zone along the Syrian side of the border.

But Trump probably wasn't thinking "desertion" — just "diversion," and he liked that. Trump saw a chance to divert attention from impeachment by spotlighting that Trump was fulfilling a campaign pledge to reduce America's role as the world's policemen. Trump expected Republican isolationists' cheers — plus even the antiwar liberals who've been urging just that ever since the Vietnam War.

So when Erdogan pressed on the phone, Trump just gave an un-thinking yes. He didn't consult his government experts; they'd just say "NO!" and maybe resign like Defense Secretary Jim Mattis did when Trump last tried to do it in December. It didn't occur to trump that his experts would also say he was just helping Russia and Iran gain leverage in the region. (Or Trump just didn't care.)

Trump, forever his own Monty Python-like parody of himself, actually tweeted: "if Turkey does anything that I, in my great and unmatched wisdom, consider to be off limits, I will totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of

Turkey (I've done before!)."

Then of course, Turkey invaded and a stunned world watched in disbelief as America's 45th president suddenly shattered that reality of global trust that has been America's truest bond no matter who was president, ever since the darkest early days of World War II.

But Trump was stunned by the harsh reaction from his loyal Republican claque that had just sucked up and accepted all his other outrageous acts.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Monday: "A precipitous withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria would only benefit Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime. And it would increase the risk that ISIS and other terrorist groups regroup."

And Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., called Trump's desertion of the Kurds "a disaster in the making," tweeting: "Pray for our Kurdish allies who have been shamelessly abandoned by the Trump administration. This move assures the reemergence of ISIS."

McConnell and Graham, being smart men, surely cannot like the way they have been selling out their country to please Trump. This week, they proved they actually do know better than they'd been performing.

There is only one way this can and must end. It is with McConnell and Graham coming up with their own version of that 1974 moment when Barry Goldwater and Hugh Scott led a delegation of famous Republican senators to the White House and told Richard Nixon he had lost their support. And it was time to leave.

Martin Schram, an op-ed columnist for Tribune News Service, is a veteran Washington journalist, author and TV documentary executive. Readers may send him email at martin.schram@gmail.com.

OTHER VIEWS

NBA right to back team official's support of Hong Kong protesters

The People's Republic of China is the land of opportunity for many American businesses, with its vast and fast-growing middle class. But doing business there often entails many compromises, some of them painful.

The potential for enormous profits in China is enough to persuade many U.S. businesses to park their values and principles at the departure gate. But this week, the National Basketball Association has defied pressure from the Chinese government, businesses and fans to smack down a team executive who'd offended China with a politically charged tweet. Considering the stakes involved, that's a brave and welcome move.

At issue is Houston Rockets general manager Daryl Morey's declaration of support for Hong Kong's pro-democracy protesters late last week, which trig-

gered an escalating backlash. The Rockets owner quickly distanced himself from his general manager, and Rockets superstar James Harden, who is a key promoter for shoemaker Adidas in China, dutifully went before the cameras with teammate Russell Westbrook to say, "We apologize. You know, we love China. We love playing there They show us the most support and love."

The NBA isn't feeling a lot of that love, apparently because it stood up for Morey's right to speak for himself — even as it emphasized that he wasn't speaking for the league. "Values of equality, respect and freedom of expression have long defined the NBA — and will continue to do so," Commissioner Adam Silver said Tuesday. "As an American-based basketball league operating globally, among our greatest contributions are these values of the game."

Different viewpoints on issues are inevitable, Silver said, adding, "The NBA will not put itself in a position of regulating what players, employees and team owners say or will not say on these issues. We simply could not operate that way."

That's a principle worth sacrificing for. And it's clear that the NBA will be sacrificing something. According to CNN, every one of the league's official partners in China has cut ties with the NBA at least temporarily.

With about half a billion fans and plenty of goodwill in China, the league may be better situated than most U.S. enterprises to ride out this storm. Nevertheless, there are clear risks for the league. The NBA deserves credit for taking a potentially costly stance in favor of Morey's right to say the things China doesn't want him to say.