

CHAPTER FIVE

The Problem of Tobacco

Though I would just as soon get along without it, an humbling awareness of the complexity of moral issues is said to be a good thing. If such an awareness is, in fact, good—and if I, in fact, have it—I have tobacco to thank for it. To many people nowadays, there is nothing complex about the moral issue of tobacco. They are simply against it. They will sit in their large automobiles, spewing a miasma of toxic gas into the atmosphere, and they will thank you for not smoking a cigarette. They will sit in a smoke-free bar, drinking stingers and other lethal beverages, and wonder how smokers can have so little respect for their bodies. They will complacently stand in the presence of a coal-fired power plant or a nuclear power plant or a bomb factory or a leaking chemical plant, and they will wonder how a tobacco farmer can have so little regard for public health. Well, as always, it matters whose ox is being gored. And tobacco, I am obliged to confess, is my ox.

I was born in tobacco country, into a family preoccupied with the cultivation, the economy, and the politics of tobacco.

Many of my closest and dearest friends have been and are tobacco growers. I have worked in the crop from early childhood until now. I have liked and often enjoyed the work. I love the crop in all its stages. I think tobacco is a beautiful plant. I love the lore and the conversation of tobacco growing. I love the smell of tobacco and of tobacco smoke.

Burley tobacco, as I first knew it, was produced with an intensity of care and a refinement of skill that far exceeded that given to any food crop that I know about. It was a handmade crop; between plant bed and warehouse, every plant, every leaf, was looked at, touched, appraised, lifted, and carried many times. The experience of growing up in a community in which virtually everybody was passionately interested in the quality of a local product was, I now see, a rare privilege. As a boy and a young man, I worked with men who were as fiercely insistent on the ways and standards of their discipline as artists—which is what they were. In those days, to be recognized as a "tobacco man" was to be accorded an honor such as other cultures bestowed on the finest hunters or warriors or poets. The accolade "He's a *tobacco* man!" would be accompanied by a shake of the head to indicate that such surpassing excellence was, finally, a mystery; there was more to it than met the eye.

It is hardly too much to say that we were a tobacco culture. Our nationality was more or less American. Our religion was nominally and sometimes approximately Christian. But our culture was largely determined by tobacco, just as the culture of the Plains Indians was determined by the horse. It was our staple crop, the cornerstone of our economy. Because of "the program"—the federal regulations that limited production in order to control price—the tobacco market was the only market

on which the farmer was dependably not a victim. Though we practiced a diversified way of farming, our farming focused on tobacco. The rhythm of our farming year, as of our financial year, was set by the annual drama of the tobacco crop.

Because so much handwork was involved in the growing of tobacco, it was a very sociable crop. "Many hands make light work," people said, and so one of the most attractive customs of our tobacco culture was "swapping work." The times of hardest work were "setting," in the spring, when the plants were moved from the beds to the patches; "cutting," in late summer, when the plants were harvested and hung in curing barns; and "stripping," in the fall and winter, when the cured leaves were removed from the stalks, graded, and tied in "hands" for the market. At these times, neighbors helped each other in order to bring together the many hands that lightened work. Thus, these times of hardest work were also times of big meals and of much talk, storytelling, and laughter.

To me, this was a good kind of life, and it provided excellent experience for a boy. To work in the company of men and women who were superb workers, to learn their characters, to glean from their talk an intimate history of the people, farms, and fields that were one's true nationality—this was an education of inestimable value. To me, the tobacco patches and tobacco barns and stripping rooms of my native countryside have been an indispensable school. And so I cannot help but look on our tobacco culture with considerable affection and gratitude.

There is another, more practical benefit of tobacco that must be mentioned. For a sloping, easily eroded countryside such as I live in and such as comprises much of the "tobacco belt," tobacco has been an ideal crop, because it has permitted

significant income to be realized from small acreages, thereby sparing us the inevitable damage of extensive plowing, and because it has conformed well to the pattern of livestock farming. Tobacco, of course, has not been invariably kind to the land; grown on steep hillsides, as it often was, it was as damaging as any other row crop. But in general, I believe that a considerable saving of soil can be attributed to tobacco. If tobacco farmers had attempted to realize an equivalent income from corn, neither they nor their fields would have lasted long.

Perhaps nobody brought up as I was can speak of tobacco without at least some affection. I have said as much good of it as I know. But of course everything to be said about tobacco is not good. There have always been people who disliked it. There has long been a vague religious antipathy to it, though in tobacco country, to date, churches have generally been glad enough to receive their tithes from it. Some have thought, and not without justification, that smoking or chewing or dipping is a "filthy habit." Though it was often said, when I was a boy, that smoking would "stunt your growth," we did not know any smokers who had been stunted—unless, perhaps, they had been intended to be giants. Tobacco became an authentic moral issue only within the last thirty years and for two reasons: the case against it, as a serious threat to health, became extremely persuasive; and in spite of this widely recognized threat, tobacco has continued to be grown, and tobacco products continue to be advertised and sold. There is, in my opinion, no way to deny that this is a most serious moral predicament and no way to evade the questions raised by it or to lighten their gravity.

Because I have written a good bit about farmers who raise tobacco and because I have often spoken in defense of

the tobacco program, I often fall into conversations on the subject with people who are indignant. These conversations are always fragmentary because of the great complexity of the subject, and I have never been satisfied with any of them. And so I would like now to attempt something like a complete dialogue:

"Do you smoke?" I am asked.

And I reply, "No."

"Did you ever smoke?"

"Yes, from about the age of fourteen until I was thirty."

"Why did you quit?"

"Two reasons. One, I had young children."

"So you do agree that smoking tobacco is unhealthy?"

"Yes, though I still have some questions on the subject. Since, for example, there is nobody today whose lungs are polluted *only* with tobacco smoke, I would like to know what contribution other pollutants may make to 'tobacco-caused' diseases. And since nobody now smokes chemical-free tobacco, I would like to know the effect of the residues of agricultural chemicals in the tobacco. But, yes, I do believe that smoke inhalation is unhealthy."

"But most modern smoke is inhaled unwillingly. Why would anyone willingly inhale smoke that is dangerous to health?"

"Well, to start with, sociability."

"Sociability?"

"Tobacco smoke is fragrant, and smoking at its best is convivial or ceremonious and pleasant. Some would say it is a comfort. But you haven't asked me my second reason for quitting."

"What was your second reason?"

"Addiction. I didn't like being addicted. I had got so I could

smoke a cigarette without even knowing it. There was no pleasure in that."

"You're against addiction, then?"

"I'm against addiction to all things that are damaging and unnecessary."

"Like what?"

"Speed, comfort, violence, usury."

"You didn't mention drugs."

"Those, too. Legal drugs, too. And then there are some damaging things that are only necessary *because* we are addicted to them."

"For instance?"

"Petroleum. Most poisons. Automobiles."

"You're trying to change the subject, aren't you?"

"No, I'm just pointing to one of the dangers of the tobacco controversy."

"And what might that be?"

"That it is, to some extent, a red herring. In calling attention to the dangers of one kind of addiction, the tobacco controversy distracts from the much greater danger that we are an addictive society—that our people are rushing from one expensive and dangerous fix to another, from drugs to war to useless merchandise to various commercial thrills, and that our corporate pushers are addicted to our addictions."

"But say we are an addictive society, does that make the tobacco addiction right or excusable?"

"Of course not. It only means we ought to be aware of our inconsistency in condemning tobacco and excusing other damaging addictions, some of which are much more threatening than tobacco. Many people would like to think that our dis-

eases are caused by one simple thing, like tobacco, which can be easily blamed on one group and fairly easily given up. But of course they are fooling themselves. One reason that people die of diseases is that they have grown old enough to die of something; they are mortal, a fact that modern humans don't like to face. Another reason is that as a people we live unhealthy lives. We breathe unhealthy air, drink unhealthy water, eat unhealthy food, eat too much, do no physical work, and so forth."

"But the question remains, how can you have quit smoking yourself because you recognize the danger and yet support the tobacco economy?"

"I don't support the tobacco economy, which involves much that I don't like—seductive advertising, for one thing. I support the tobacco program."

"What is that?"

"To risk oversimplification, it is an arrangement, sponsored by the federal government, voted for by the farmers, by which they agree to limit production in order to secure a livable return on investment and labor. This strategy of production control is commonplace in other productive industries but rare in farming. And the tobacco program has worked well. In my part of the country, it has ensured the survival of thousands of small farmers for more than half a century."

"Why should these people receive a government subsidy for growing a crop that the government acknowledges to be dangerous to health?"

"It is not a subsidy. The tobacco that receives a top bid that is less than the support price is placed under loan by the program, the title to the crop remaining with the farmer until its ultimate sale by the cooperative. The government supplies the loan, which is repaid

with interest and all expenses. And for several years now, tobacco farmers and manufacturers have been assessed one cent each per pound to pay administrative and other costs so that the program can be operated at no net cost to taxpayers."

"But it's tobacco they're growing. To support the program is to support tobacco and everything that goes with it."

"Well, let me ask *you* a question. Do you think everybody is going to quit smoking?"

"I suppose, considering the failure of Prohibition and the current popularity of illegal drugs, the answer probably is no."

"And there is a probability, isn't there, that condemnations and warnings, even proofs of danger, will make tobacco more attractive to some people?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"And if some people continue to use it, other people will continue to grow it—is that not right?"

"I suppose it is."

"And so, if you destroyed the program, destroying in the process the farmers who depend on the program, who would grow the tobacco?"

"I haven't thought much about that. Large corporate growers under contract to the tobacco companies? Cheap laborers in Third World countries? I don't know."

"Most of the farmers who now grow it would, at any rate, be out of business."

"Probably."

"And what would become of them?"

"They could move to the city."

"And into other work?"

"Maybe."

"Or they could go on welfare?"

"Maybe."

"But you don't know. You do admit that whatever happened, the loss of the program would be extremely painful, disorienting, and costly for many thousands of families?"

"Yes, I will admit that."

"So, you see, to support the program is only to say that if tobacco is to be grown, you want it to be grown by the people who have always grown it—not by the sort for whom the failure of these people would be a 'window of opportunity.'"

"Now let me ask *you* something. If these people can't make it on their own, if they must always be helped by some sort of program or other, why not let them fail? Is that not the way things should be—and, in fact, are? Adapt or die. The survival of the fittest. If they can't survive, they deserve to fail. And, yes, their failure then properly becomes a 'window of opportunity' for somebody else."

"Well, I would question the historical validity of that idea and that attitude. I don't believe that any human community can be shown to have survived by the principle of all-out competition among its members, which the Bible (if that matters to you) explicitly forbids. And the implications for land use of that principle are absolutely ruinous. It makes impossible the establishment of a competent, long-lasting, soil-husbanding community on the land. Your 'fittest,' you know, would be the biggest or the wealthiest but not the best caretakers."

"The fact remains: you support the people who grow tobacco that supports an addiction you say you don't support."

"You bet I do! They are my own people, who are as good as other people."

"You can be a good person and grow tobacco?"

"Why don't you say what you really have in mind: Can you be a good person and be a sinner? Our religious tradition certainly says you can. People have faults and they have virtues. Which they have the most of is a judgment we are not supposed to make, for the very good reason that none of us can be sure of having all the evidence."

"But our religious tradition also warns us again and again of the danger of choosing a known evil over a known good."

"That's true. But for most tobacco farmers, the growing of tobacco has not been so clearly a moral choice. They did not choose to grow tobacco in the same sense that David chose to send Uriah into battle. Many of them began growing tobacco before the moral issue arose. They were simply born to the crop, as were the generations before them, going back to the seventeenth century. The younger ones—the ones born, say, after the surgeon general's report of 1964—were either born to tobacco growing or they bought into it when they bought their farms. For them, tobacco growing came, literally, with the territory. In tobacco country, the choice not to grow tobacco (in the circumstances of the present agricultural economy) is tantamount to a choice not to farm."

"And yet now they all know the argument against tobacco. Now it is an evil that they knowingly consent to."

"That is true. They consent to it in the same way that people involved in the present energy economy consent to a whole array of toxic exhausts and other results that they know to be evil. They consent, they are guilty, and they can't see their way out."

"You are going on as if you expect to win this argument. Do you?"

"Do I expect to argue my way to some uncontested justification of tobacco growing? No. I am arguing only that tobacco growing is a complex, difficult issue. And I am explaining why I choose to stand with my people in their dilemma."

"In other words, why you don't dissociate yourself from this evil. Why don't you?"

"Why don't I dissociate myself from automobiles? Because I don't see how to do it—not yet. And I don't want to dissociate myself from the world."

"Well, I've heard you speak of some things—war, for instance, and the nuclear power industry, and the use of throwaway containers—as if you would like to see those evils stopped at once. Why not tobacco? If we can't stop people from using it, why don't we immediately put an end to any form of governmental approval of or support for its use?"

"Because that would destroy the program, which would destroy many farmers. There are alternatives, you know, to war, nuclear power, and throwaway containers."

"And tobacco farmers have no alternative to growing tobacco?"

"At present, none at all. That's why their 'choice' to grow tobacco is not really a choice. They have had, as farmers, nothing else to choose."

"What sort of alternative do they need?"

"They need a crop, or several crops, that can produce a comparable income from comparable acreages, that can be grown with family and neighborhood labor, and for which there is a dependable market."

"They need to be growing food crops, you mean—fruits and vegetables."

"I think so. Along with the meat and milk that they already produce."

"I see you are still clinging to the idea of an agricultural economy of diversified small farms that produce for local markets and local consumers."

"Yes, I'm still clinging to it. I want people to continue to eat. I want them to have, as dependably as possible, a local supply of good food. I want their food budget to support a thriving population of local farmers. That way, the land will thrive."

"And you see the tobacco farmers as necessary to that?"

"I see *all* farmers—all that are left and, I hope, some more—as necessary to that. Tobacco farmers are farmers and among the best of them; their know-how is a great public asset, if the public only recognized it. They are farming some very good land. They should be growing food for the people of their region, the people of neighboring cities—or they should have a viable choice of doing so. The people who so eagerly condemn them for growing tobacco should be just as eager to help them find alternative crops. It is wrong to condemn people for doing a thing and then offer no alternative but failure. A person could get mad about that."

"So you're not reconciled to your people's dependence on tobacco?"

"Far from it."

"You see it as a problem to be solved?"

"I see it as a problem to be solved. And that means, too, that I'm not reconciled to the general lack of interest in solving it."

"You mean that in state government and the universities there is no interest?"

"I would describe their interest, so far, as small—too small to generate any real hope of a solution. But the difficulties are enormous, and they had better be acknowledged. For one thing, the idea of local food economies, or 'local food self-sufficiency,' has few advocates and, so far as I know, no powerful ones; it has been eclipsed by the 'global economy' and the 'free market.' For another, most people are satisfied so far with the present system of food supply—though it is a satisfaction based on ignorance. And most difficult of all, if we are to wean farmers from tobacco onto other crops, we must somehow cause a local demand and a local supply to come into existence simultaneously."

"Do you foresee no help with this from the federal government?"

"The federal government sponsors the tobacco program, which is unusual behavior for the federal government, and the program has always had to deal with the dangers implicit in its unusualness. It has always had enemies, for in general the federal government's agricultural policy has been exactly the fight for survival that you were talking about: leave the markets unregulated and production uncontrolled, and let the farmers compete against each other year after year to survive the overproduction that is the result of their competition; then, every year, the 'least efficient' farmers fail, and their failure makes American agriculture stronger and better. The government, so to speak, sees homicide as the perfect cure—which it is, if you like homicide. Let me be plain with you. I see no chance at all that the federal government will soon take to heart the issue of the survival of tobacco farmers, or of any other farmers, or the survival of the rural communities those farmers represent. It would be pleasant

to hope otherwise, but that would be to hope without reason. Nor do I hope for much from state governments or universities. The consensus seems to be that whoever or whatever fails deserves to fail and that something better will inevitably be built on such failures."

"You have, then, no hope?"

"To have given up illusory hope is not to be hopeless. I see, simply, that the institutions that have most influenced agriculture for the last forty or fifty years have demonstrated an almost perfect lack of interest in the survival of farmers."

"And so what hope do you have?"

"When hope leaves government, it must go to the people. So long as there is a demonstrable need and an imaginable answer, there is hope. We need to make it possible for farmers to choose not to grow tobacco and yet continue farming, and we need a better, safer, fresher supply of food, which is to say a *local* supply. And these two needs are, in fact, the same."

"You're going too fast. Why, necessarily, a *local* supply?"

"Well, the more local, the more fresh—there's no problem with that, is there?"

"No."

"And as you shorten the distance between consumer and producer, you increase the consumer's power to know and influence the quality of food. Kentucky consumers, for instance, could influence Kentucky farmers much more easily than they could influence California farmers."

"I can see that."

"Moreover, 'fresh' implies short distances and therefore lower expenditures for transportation, packaging, refrigeration, national advertising campaigns, and so on. A local food econ-

omy, in short, implies higher prices for farmers and lower costs to consumers."

"And you think the government doesn't see this but the people do?"

"Some people see it now. And more are going to see it; for it is going to become easier to see. And those who see it don't have to wait for the government to see it before they do something."

"But what can they do?"

"They can start buying produce from local farmers."

"As individuals?"

"As individuals, if necessary. But groups can do it, too, and can do it more effectively—conservation organizations, consumer groups, churches, local merchants, whoever is concerned. The government's approval is not necessary. In fact, the process has already begun. Scattered all over the country, there are farmers who are selling produce directly to urban consumers. There have been consumer cooperatives for this sort of dealing for a good many years. Local merchants sometimes stock local produce. If churches and conservation organizations—the two groups with most reason to be concerned—would get involved, much more could be accomplished. But everything that is done demonstrates a possibility and suggests more that might be done. That is the way it will grow."

"What are you talking about—some kind of revolution?"

"Not 'revolution.' I'm talking about economic secession—just quietly forming the means of withdrawal, not only from the tobacco economy but from the entire economy of exploitive land use that is ruining both the countryside and the country communities. The principle of this new economy would simply be good use—the possibility, often demonstrated, that land

and people can be used without being destroyed. And this new economy would understand, first of all, that the ruin of farmers solves *no* problem and makes many."

—1991

CHAPTER SIX

Peaceableness Toward Enemies

Some Notes on the Gulf War

I. We went to war in the Middle East because our leaders believed that war was their only choice. If this war had been an issue only of the present time, as our leaders would like us to think, any discussion of its origins or effects would be pointless. But we know that this war descended from a history of war and that it evokes the fear of other wars that may descend from it. To ask, in the circumstances of that history and that fear, if war should have been the only choice is to imply no disrespect toward our country but merely to do one's duty as a citizen and a human being.

II. This latest war has been justified on a number of grounds: that it was a war to liberate Kuwait; that it was a war to defend "the civilized world" against a dangerous maniac; that it was a war to preserve peace; that it was a war to