WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH COTTON?

If you live in a section of the country where they grow corn or wheat or fruit or soybeans or some other crop besides cotton, cotton may not mean much. And yet it does. It is the cash crop for a substantial area and a large number of farmers. How much cotton they produce, and what they get for it, determines what and how much they buy of the goods and commodities produced in other sections. But the cotton business is sick. The soil in the deep South is getting thin from over-usage. Fertilizers must be used constantly. The quality is not what it should be if it must compete against cotton grown on better and newer soils. It is still a one-mule crop and costs are high. The outlet for our cotton in world markets is not too bright. There is the usual mass inertia about changing to other crops. The effort to hold up the price, by artificial methods is of only temporary effect and is a bit dangerous when considered from the standpoint of our future.

SOME SIGNIFICANT FIGURES...

Thirty years ago — and that's not so long ago — the U.S. produced 64% of the world's cotton. Now it produces 40%. That's a pretty substantial decline. Thirty years ago, 32 million spindles were spinning cotton into cloth in this country. Today there are only 25 million spindles. That's quite a drop. It's even more significant if you consider that the number of spindles for the world increased from 143 million to 166 million. That means keener competition from other countries with cheaper labor. In other words, the cotton business is losing ground in the world market.

PRODUCTION AND USE.

Now look at our production and use of cotton. Roughly, we produce about 12 million bales a year and use about 7 1/5 million bales. The cotton we do not use must be sold in world markets or must go into warehouses and be held. If world production continues to come up, sell our production must go down or provide an excess which we cannot un-less we subsidize the sale to the tune of 5 or 6¢ a pound with money out of the public Treasury. Of the 7 1/5 million bales we use every year, about 2.7 million bales go into clothes, about 1.8 million go into household uses such as gauze, quilting and what not and the other 2.7 million go into industrial uses such as cord for making tires. But look. Rayon is getting cheaper and becomes a vigorous competitor for cotton. That's not only true of clothing uses such as women's hose but industrial uses also. The War Department made some tests and issued a report saying that cord for tires which is made of rayon is better than cord made from cotton. That's not so good for cotton. Think also of how paper has come to displace cotton for towels, napkins and a lot of other uses. So what? Uses for cotton decrease and we don't need as much cotton. But what about that host of one-crop cotton farmers who depend on it for cash.

COMES NOW THE SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE

Recently, Secretary of Agriculture Wickard suggested to Congress that the subsidies and supports on cotton prices be withdrawn and that subsidies be paid to cotton farmers direct if they would gradually switch from cotton to other crops and if the production of cotton would be mechanized so more could be produced at lower cost. Of course, this is a program that will take time, but it would result in cheaper cotton that could compete with paper and rayon and also in world markets. Now why is this so important. Well, you can see from the figures quoted above that if production drops, if consumption drops, if this trend continues, and if spinning spindles decrease, it also means that jobs will disappear. And then what about the 60,000 000 job program you've heard so much about. Funny how you get back to that old admonition in the Scripture, "No man liveth unto himself alone." Nor does any section or any country live unto itself alone.