

Mark Sullivan Views the New Deal from Avondale

MARK SULLIVAN was born on September 10, 1874, in the upstairs bedroom his father had recently added to the family's farmhouse near Avondale, Chester County, Pennsylvania.* Nearly seventy-eight years later he was carried from the same room to die in the Chester County Hospital on August 13, 1952. Between these dates Mark Sullivan became a giant of American journalism, living and working for varying periods of time in Massachusetts, New York, Virginia and Washington, D. C., before returning to spend his last years where they had begun.¹

When he was fourteen Sullivan left his father's farm to attend West Chester State Normal School, as it was then called. Following his graduation from this school, he worked for two years on the *Morning Republican*, one of three newspapers West Chester supported in the early 1890s, though the town's population was little more than 8,000 at the time. Then, at the age of nineteen, Sullivan became half-owner and sole reporter of the *Republican*, a daily still being published in Phoenixville. Three years later Sullivan sold out to his partner and left Pennsylvania to obtain a full-scale college education at Harvard, where he earned an undergraduate degree in 1900 and a law degree in 1903. Sullivan's law career was, in his words, "as brief as it was briefless." Journalism attracted him more, and he worked for a time with Edward Bok's *Ladies Home Journal* and with *McClure's*, a pioneer among muckraking magazines.²

Mark Sullivan became more widely known after he accepted a

* I wish to thank the State University of New York Research Foundation for the grant that aided me in doing part of the research for this article.

¹ Mark Sullivan, *The Education Of An American* (New York, 1938), 1-2; *Mark Sullivan: Editor-Journalist-Historian* (West Chester, Pa., 1955), 10.

² Sullivan, *Education*, 2-203, *passim*.

position with *Collier's Weekly*. He was first an associate editor and then editor of that magazine as it marched in the van of American progressive reform. At the time of World War I, however, Sullivan felt that bankers, who had loaned large sums to the owners of *Collier's*, encroached upon his editorial independence. He resigned as editor for that reason, though he continued to write almost exclusively for that magazine for two more years. Then Sullivan started a new career.³

Today there are hundreds of syndicated columnists writing political commentary from Washington, so it is hard to realize they were a novelty hardly more than a half-century ago when Sullivan became one of the first of them.⁴ He started as a path-breaking political columnist with the *New York Evening Post* in 1919, moved to the *Tribune* and then to the *Herald Tribune* when the two papers merged in 1924.⁵ After the merger he had a long and distinguished career, writing nearly six thousand columns that appeared in the *Herald Tribune* and other leading newspapers between 1924 and 1952, usually under the heading "Mark Sullivan Says."⁶

Still, Sullivan was much more than a syndicated political columnist. He was a frequent, sought-after contributor to leading American magazines.⁷ He was a respected lecturer on the Chautauqua circuit and before various business and professional groups. He was a widely-read popular historian after writing *Our Times*, a history of the United States from 1900 to 1925, published in six volumes between 1926 and 1935.⁸ He published his autobiographic account *The Education of an American* in 1938, the golden anniversary of his entry into journalism. All this was in addition to writing at least three times a week a column of seven hundred words and a week-end commentary three or four times as long.

³ *Ibid.*, 204-317, *passim*.

⁴ Abe Bortz, "The Political Columnists" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1952), 430-482.

⁵ Sullivan, *Education*, 314-316.

⁶ The number of papers carrying Sullivan's column varied from year to year and even from month to month. Probably the seventy-five papers that carried the column during most of 1935 would represent the maximum. Margaret Marshall, "Columnists on Parade," *Nation*, Vol. 146, Feb. 26, 1938, lists the Sullivan column as being carried by fifty-four newspapers with a circulation of 4,000,000.

⁷ *The Reader's Guide To Periodic Literature* cites twenty-nine articles by Mark Sullivan between 1925 and 1928 and an average of about five a year thereafter.

⁸ Sullivan, *Our Times* (New York, 1926-1935).

Sullivan knew and wrote about every twentieth-century President up to Dwight D. Eisenhower. He loved Theodore Roosevelt, felt betrayed by William Howard Taft, respected Woodrow Wilson, sympathized with Warren G. Harding, liked Calvin Coolidge, admired Herbert Hoover, mistrusted Franklin D. Roosevelt, and considered Harry Truman to be a spunky, underrated President.⁹

During Franklin D. Roosevelt's years as President, Sullivan spent an increasing amount of time at the farm near Avondale he and his brothers had inherited after their parents' deaths. Eventually he became its sole owner and worked out an arrangement which permitted him to live and write at his farmhouse, although most of his columns gave the appearance of emanating from Washington. Occasionally, however, their place of origin was indicated as "Avondale, Chester Co., Pa.", and these columns contained some of his most diverting criticisms of the New Deal and its chief architects.

Avondale worked well as a base from which to launch his criticisms of the New Deal, Sullivan believed, for the name of the small town evoked images of an older, quieter, more peaceful life. Late in 1933 he concluded that concrete examples packed more punch than general denunciations of New Deal principles. Consequently, he inserted accounts in his Avondale columns of "little fellows" who had experienced "persecution and oppression" by agencies or regulations of the "swollen" federal government. There were columns about Jacob Maged, the little tailor in Jersey City sentenced to serve thirty days in jail and to pay a fine of \$100 because he charged 35¢ for pressing a suit of clothes while the minimum charge permitted by the NRA cleaners' and pressers' code in New Jersey was 40¢;¹⁰ about the tiny quarry in Accord, New York, forced to remain idle for seven months pending a decision on a minimum wage appeal;¹¹ about Louis Zuccaro, an Ohio small businessman, pre-

⁹ These statements on Mark Sullivan's feelings about the Presidents are based on reading his nearly six thousand columns; his autobiography; *Our Times*; correspondence and other papers at the time in the hands of his daughter, Mrs. Jameson Parker (Lorton, Va.); and the Mark Sullivan collections in the Library of Congress, in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library (West Branch, Iowa), and in the Herbert Hoover Archives of the Hoover Institution of War, Revolution, and Peace (Stanford, Calif.), as well as pertinent materials in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park, N. Y.

¹⁰ Sullivan, "Tailor's Case Shows How NRA Has Changed U. S. Social Order," *New York Herald Tribune* (hereinafter abbreviated as *NYHT*), April 25, 1934, p. 2.

¹¹ Sullivan, "NRA Drag on Small Industry Shown in Crushed Stone Case," *NYHT*, Aug. 20, 1934, p. 2.

vented by NRA red tape for more than a year from investing \$30,000 of his own money in a Toledo ice plant.¹²

And there was the case of *United States v. Fred Perkins*, owner-manager of a little battery manufactory on the outskirts of York, Pennsylvania. A federal marshal, bearing a warrant issued by a federal court, arrested Perkins because, in order to stay in business, he had paid his twenty workers at a rate lower than the 40¢ hourly minimum required by the new federal codes. In one of his columns publicizing Fred Perkins' predicament, Sullivan pleaded for a modern Daniel Webster to defend small business as the historic Webster had defended his small college in the Dartmouth case. Otherwise, said Sullivan, small producers were doomed unless they could afford to pay wages at a level mandated by the federal government.¹³

Sullivan could be biologically informative while criticizing the New Deal's agricultural programs in his columns from Avondale:¹⁴

One day last month the sow gave birth to a litter of thirteen young. Our sow is a prolific female; last May she had a litter of nine. . . . It doesn't take long to create a litter of young pigs; the period of gestation is 3 months and 20 days. . . . Sows begin to bear young when they are only 11 or 12 months old—the rapidity of increase is astonishing. Secretary of Agriculture Wallace could shoot or otherwise destroy $\frac{3}{4}$ ths of all the pigs in the country, yet in 18 months or so we could have plenty of ham. If only the Administration will take its hands off, nature and the farmer will produce abundance. . . .

Or Sullivan could be whimsical as he was when he wrote that probably some “nosy, interfering, primitive ‘New Dealer’ ” had given the skunk a bad name by changing the dignified Latin “mephitis” to “an Anglo-Saxon synonym for something odious,”

¹² Sullivan, “Little Ohio Ice Plant Is Tied Up in NRA Red Tape For A Year,” *NYHT*, Oct. 17, 1934, p. 2.

¹³ Sullivan, “Small Employer Prosecutions Under NRA Likened to Woes of Kulaks in Russian System,” *NYHT*, Sept. 9, 1934, Section II, p. 2; “NRA Prosecution of Perkins Ranked With Dartmouth Case,” *NYHT*, Oct. 22, 1934, p. 2; “NRA Case Up For Trial Monday Seen as Test for Small Business,” *NYHT*, Nov. 29, 1934, p. 2; “Verdict in Perkins' Case Seen as Marginal Producer's Doom,” *NYHT*, Dec. 14, 1934, p. 23; “Case of Perkins, NRA Victim, Retold As Christmas Story,” *NYHT*, Dec. 24, 1934, p. 11.

¹⁴ Sullivan, “Pennsylvania Sow Produces Abundance Without U. S. Aid,” *NYHT*, Dec. 21, 1937, p. 21.

thereby doing an injustice to the animal and a disservice to the world:

The skunk is not only a gentleman in his personal relations, but also, in his civic attitudes, an exemplary citizen. A nation made up of skunks would be an ideal society. Every individual would have absolute self-respect. Because each would be able to enforce respect for himself, each would extend complete respect to others. No one would claim to be underprivileged, and woe to any one who would assert overprivilege. Woe likewise to any group that would try to set up a controlling cast of bureaucrats!¹⁵

Among the letters Sullivan received in praise of his "skunk" column was one from Thornton W. Burgess, whose *Old Mother West Wind* series and other tales had anthropomorphized such characters as Jenny Wren and Paddy Beaver. Burgess' letter thanked Sullivan for his attempt to rehabilitate "Jimmy Skunk's reputation," and concluded by wishing a "new deal" for Jimmy with "a revamped old deal for the rest of us."¹⁶

These ways of personalizing his criticisms from Avondale became a Sullivan trademark during the mid-1930s. For a time he had doubted the wisdom of attacking the New Deal in his column. But by the end of 1934 he was convinced that he was pursuing a popular course. "I did it with a good deal of apprehension but it has turned out all right," he wrote to Herbert Hoover. "The *Herald Tribune* gets many letters favoring it and very few not favoring it."¹⁷ To another correspondent he confided that in 1934 the number of papers subscribing to his column was greater than at any time since 1928 or 1929 and the number of letters from readers was unprecedented.¹⁸

Sullivan was also at first reluctant to criticize Franklin D. Roosevelt. "Governor Roosevelt is by temperament and personal back-

¹⁵ Sullivan, "The Skunk Finds a Defender—For Minding Its Own Business," *NYHT*, Feb. 1, 1938, p. 21.

¹⁶ Thornton W. Burgess to Sullivan, Feb. 1, 1938, private collection of Mrs. Jameson Parker.

¹⁷ Sullivan to Hoover, Mar. 2, 1934, Mark Sullivan Collection, Herbert Hoover Archives, Box 16a, Folder 9.

¹⁸ Sullivan to Henry Robinson, Mar. 21, 1934, *ibid.*, Box 21, Folder 4; Sullivan to Hoover, May 18, 1934, *ibid.*, Box 16a, Folder 9a; Sullivan to Professor John D. Clark, Oct. 29, 1934, *ibid.*, Box No. 13b.

ground on the side of decency and all higher ideals," Sullivan wrote after FDR's election in November, 1932.¹⁹ Early in the following summer, after the flood of legislation marking the Hundred Days of the new administration, he counseled Hoover against haste in attacking what had been done. "The simple truth is that the emergency is actually being cured," he informed the former President. "There can be no doubt whatever that the people are pleased with what has been done."²⁰ Nevertheless, not long after that the columnist began commenting on the President's alarming tendency to "wobble" and "zig zag." Toward the end of the President's first term, moreover, Sullivan's columns increasingly spotlighted what their author believed to be serious flaws in Roosevelt's character and performance.²¹

Painting with words the many facets of Roosevelt's complex personality called for a "supercraftsman," Sullivan admitted; nevertheless there were certain traits "bordering on the juvenile" that cried out for inclusion in the picture."²² Franklin D. Roosevelt loved the novel and dramatic. He was full of surprises—in Sullivan's words, "exceptionally unguessable." Roosevelt was capricious, so much so that it was difficult to fix his exact position on anything. Roosevelt was too flexible and too amiable. He could be pushed easily to the left by such energetic advisers as Henry Wallace, Adolph Berle, and Rexford Tugwell.²³

When Roosevelt campaigned for re-election, Sullivan wrote that he was no longer conservative by instinct, as the columnist had previously believed him to be. Instead, the President had become a

¹⁹ Sullivan, "Hoover Rejection Laid to Two Factors . . .", *NYHT*, Nov. 9, 1932, p. 13.

²⁰ Sullivan to Hoover, June 23, 1933, Mark Sullivan Collection, Herbert Hoover Archives, Box 15a.

²¹ Sullivan, "Roosevelt's Chameleonic Shifts Held Suited to Changing World," *NYHT*, Jan. 11, 1934, p. 8; "Clarification of President's Social and Economic Plans Declared Need for Nation," *NYHT*, Jan. 14, 1932, Section II, p. 2; "Roosevelt Seen Facing to Left, But Walking Backward to Right," *NYHT*, Oct. 15, 1934, p. 2; "Americans Urged to Rise Above 'Myth of Superman Roosevelt,'" *NYHT*, July 1, 1935, p. 2; "Roosevelt Attack on 'Thrifty' Called Clever Bid for Headlines," *NYHT*, Aug. 2, 1935, p. 13; "President Called On To Name Anonymous Figure He Cites To Support Speech Arguments," *NYHT*, Dec. 15, 1935, Section II, p. 3; "Roosevelt's Voice Called Lullaby Putting Voter To Sleep As To Facts," *NYHT*, Oct. 15, 1936, p. 25.

²² Sullivan, "Painting Roosevelt With Words . . .", *NYHT*, Aug. 29, 1937, Section II, p. 2.

²³ Sullivan, "Merciless White House Critic Is Called For To Check Ardor of Administration For Novelty," *NYHT*, May 24, 1936, Section II, p. 2; "Roosevelt . . . Diverted to Left by Energy of Radical Advisers," *NYHT*, Feb. 11, 1934, Section II, p. 2.

man whose temperament caused him to lean to the "radical side."²⁴ What was Roosevelt's "optimism" in 1933 had become his "happy-go-lucky air" by 1936. In three years Roosevelt's "brilliant improvisations" had been replaced by his "hit and miss methods." "Mercurial" had replaced "flexible" as an adjective to describe the President's personality.²⁵ Moreover, Sullivan now made very little distinction between the President and the New Deal, as he had in 1933 and 1934. Roosevelt was the New Deal and the New Deal was Roosevelt by 1936.

In spite of these criticisms, Roosevelt and Sullivan remained friendly. At some of his press conferences the President joked with "old Mark," as he called the columnist, and on one occasion offered to bet that potatoes grown at Hyde Park were just as good as those from Sullivan's Pennsylvania farm.²⁶ Three months later, having heard nothing from the President about a potato-growing contest, Sullivan devoted a syndicated column to the subject. "Dear Mr. President: Some while ago you said you could raise a better crop of potatoes on your Dutchess County farm than I could on my Pennsylvania one," he began.

There had been some publicity about the matter, the columnist continued, so he wanted to be sure what the rules were because it was nearly potato-planting time in Pennsylvania. He assumed the winner would be the one growing the largest number of bushels per acre, though he had considered the possibility that Roosevelt shared Secretary of Agriculture Wallace's theories about the virtues of crop limitation, in which case the winner might be the one who raised the *fewest* potatoes. If that should be the test, Sullivan wrote with tongue in cheek, he would have to withdraw: "The folks on the farm here would take no pride in winning such a competition, their views about the economy of scarcity being something I would prefer not to repeat in a friendly letter."²⁷

²⁴ Sullivan, "Roosevelt Viewed as Unlikely to Become More Conservative If He Should Win Re-election," *NYHT*, Oct. 11, 1936, p. 3.

²⁵ Sullivan, "Roosevelt Trait Seen Promising More Sensational Developments," *NYHT*, July 17, 1937, p. 2.

²⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Press Conference No. 414, Vol. 10, pp. 398-399, Dec. 7, 1937; see also, Press Conference No. 185, Feb. 20, 1935; No. 409, Nov. 9, 1937; No. 403, Oct. 15, 1937, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

²⁷ Sullivan, "Roosevelt Urged To Set Terms of His Potato-Raising Challenge," *NYHT*, Mar. 19, 1938, p. 15.

Besides, Sullivan added, some of his close neighbors as well as the Pennsylvania Germans in nearby Lancaster County were members of religious sects that regarded limitation of crops as being against God's goodness. For that reason, they had refused to accept money which Secretary Wallace, under AAA, was paying to farmers for not raising wheat and not breeding pigs. Therefore, "Even if a contest in limitation were not in conflict with my economic and political principles, I should want to refrain out of regard for my neighbors' religious convictions," Sullivan declared. But, he concluded, "If as I hope, the contest is to be a normal one, a contest in abundance, to see who can raise the most potatoes an acre, then say the word and let's go to it."²⁸ The President declined to respond, either at a press conference or in any other manner, so Sullivan dropped the subject of the Hyde Park-Avondale potato-growing contest.

In his role as farmer-columnist Sullivan strongly opposed the marketing quota and acreage allotment features of the New Deal's second Agricultural Adjustment Act.²⁹ Before the act was passed Sullivan pecked away at sections of it, sometimes using Avondale's fowls or animals as chief characters in his criticisms. As originally written, the administration's farm bill forbade farmers to raise livestock or poultry on land taken out of wheat, corn, rice, tobacco, or cotton production. In one of his columns Sullivan hypothesized that according to this provision a farmer whose hen snapped up a grasshopper from one of the "forbidden fields" risked federal reprisals if he sold either the enterprising hen or her eggs.³⁰ Actually, the clause under which this might have been possible was eliminated from the bill before it became law, thereby giving Mark Sullivan a share in a minor correction to the New Deal farm legislation.

Perhaps because of this success, Sullivan continued with his "hen stories." On the day of a Presidential press conference in February, 1938, his syndicated column in the *Herald Tribune* consisted of an account headlined "Economic Royalist Among Hens Grows Plump

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See, for example, Sullivan, "'New AAA' Like Predecessor, Held Aimed at Regimentation," *NYHT*, Apr. 3, 1936, p. 21.

³⁰ Sullivan, "Crop Control Bill Fences Off Forbidden Field On Every Farm," *NYHT*, Dec. 28, 1937, p. 19; "Farm Bill Clause Tells Chicken Which Grasshopper It May Eat," *NYHT*, Jan. 11, 1938.

by Own Ingenuity." The column related that one of his hens stationed herself about a yard in front of a horse as it grazed through a field of grass. As the horse moved forward, the hen stepped backward, keeping herself at the bottom of the arc of leaping grasshoppers stirred up by the munching horse. Busily clutching and gulping, the hen soon had her fill. This hen had a personality which distinguished her from the flock, Sullivan wrote admiringly; she had self-reliance, initiative, intelligent persistence and a marked individuality. Still, the other chickens were undisturbed by the technological improvements she had devised. "They do not propose any undistributed surplus tax which would penalize her superior ingenuity, nor in any way do they show any spirit of 'share the hoppers'" the columnist concluded.³¹

That afternoon at his press conference the President complimented "Farmer" Sullivan on his latest column. "That is good—I like your natural history—I am fond of it myself—I would like to see your farm," Roosevelt said, to the accompaniment of much laughter.³²

None of the foregoing is meant to suggest that Franklin D. Roosevelt regarded Mark Sullivan as an inconsequential critic. Scrapbooks kept by administrative assistants give plenty of evidence to the contrary, for they contain hundreds of Sullivan's columns, clipped from the *Herald Tribune*; from the *Washington Star*, which carried his column on three week days; and the *Washington Post*, in which Sullivan's longer column appeared each Sunday.³³ Moreover, the President's personal files included one labeled "Mark Sullivan" and its contents show that administration supporters often urged Roosevelt or his assistants to reply to Sullivan's criticisms.³⁴

³¹ Sullivan, "Economic Royalist Among Hens Grows Plump By Own Ingenuity," *NYHT*, Feb. 15, 1938, p. 17.

³² Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Press Conference No. 434, Vol. 11, p. 152, Feb. 15, 1938, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

³³ About fifty of these scrapbooks are arranged chronologically in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

³⁴ Presidential Personal File 7157, *ibid.* See especially Louis Howe to Olga Wulf, Mar. 16, 1934; Elzey Roberts to Stephen Early, Nov. 25, 1935; Acting Secretary of Agriculture Brown to Roosevelt, Oct. 20, 1938; Roosevelt to Stephen Early, Oct. 20, 1938; Prof. James H. Roberts to Roosevelt, Jan. 27, 1939; David K. Niles to Missy LeHand, Jan. 22, 1940; James A. Healy to Roosevelt, Dec. 24, 1940.

Nor should it be assumed that Sullivan was an unsuccessful critic. Although Roosevelt won re-election in 1936 by an historic margin, he lost the Supreme Court fight only a few months after his second inaugural—a fact Sullivan took some credit for. When the Senate debate on the Judiciary Reorganization Bill reached its height in July, 1937, Sullivan was unwilling to leave the scene of battle. In a night letter to Hoover he explained why he could not accept his invitation to attend the Bohemian Grove encampment that summer: “The situation here is tense and explosive. . . . Under this condition I really owe it to the papers taking my service not to go away from Washington; besides the men who are making the fight here would not understand my going away.”³⁵

The death knell of the Judiciary Reorganization Bill came on July 22 when the full Senate voted to send it back to the Judiciary Committee, but Sullivan stayed at his post. On the 29th he telegraphed in response to a Hoover fishing invitation, “Conditions are too critical here. . . . It would be just too reckless for me to leave.”³⁶ Two weeks later he once more turned down a fishing vacation with the former President. “It would be fatal to my dispatches to be away when things erupt so rapidly,” he wrote to Hoover, showing his sense of responsibility to his readers as well as his sense of personal involvement in the fight over Roosevelt’s court plan.³⁷

By this time Sullivan was well on his way to becoming a permanent resident at the farm near Avondale. For him it had become THE FARM, archetype of all farms and a source of great contentment to him. “I own the farm I was born on,” he wrote in one of his earlier Avondale columns. “It is a plain farm in a characteristic old farm neighborhood. . . . I go there for solace, when realization of what the New Deal will do to America becomes too somber to endure.”³⁸ But Avondale represented more than a search for contentment in Sullivan’s later years. Avondale stood for all that

³⁵ Sullivan to Hoover, July 17, 1937, Mark Sullivan Collection, Herbert Hoover Archives, Box 16a, Folder 9.

³⁶ Sullivan to Hoover, July 29, 1937, *ibid.*

³⁷ Sullivan to Hoover, Aug. 12, 1937, *ibid.*

³⁸ Sullivan, “Giving Farmer Right to Raise Crops He Prefers Is Suggested,” *NYHT*, July 31, 1935, p. 13; “Harassed Student of New Deal Visits Old Home on Farm and Becomes a Trifle More Mellow,” *NYHT*, May 13, 1934, Section II, p. 2.

Sullivan felt was threatened by the New Deal and he wanted to challenge the threat from the symbolic spot in Chester County.

Others might debate whether the New Deal was evolutionary or revolutionary. There was no doubt in Sullivan's mind. It was perhaps "revolution by ruse," as he called it on July 4, 1937; still, it *was* revolution, bent on significant, deleterious, and unnecessary changes in American society and government.³⁹ It had sought to stamp out the little businessman through NRA and to control the traditionally independent American farmer through AAA. Thwarted by the Supreme Court, it had proposed a plan so threatening to the independence of the federal judiciary that Congress had overwhelmingly rejected it, even though the plan was the President's and the President's party controlled Congress by an enormous majority. Moreover, if the capricious President began his second term with an attack on the Supreme Court, what other unpleasant surprises lay ahead? Such an analysis made sense in the 1930s to millions of Americans who shared Mark Sullivan's view from Avondale, because they, too, had come from or continued to live in hundreds of Avondales in Pennsylvania and elsewhere.

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³⁹ Sullivan, "New Deal Technique In Changing American Form of Government Is Assailed," *NYHT*, July 4, 1937, Section II, p. 2.