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## Interview: Thomas T. Irvin

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# The need for modern agriculture: 'You can't move backwards'

*Thomas T. Irvin has been the Commissioner of Agriculture of Georgia, an elected office, for 21 years. Irvin has recently spoken out on the limits of "organic" farming. Irvin was interviewed by Marcia Merry on May 10.*

**EIR:** Both farmers and the general public are getting baraged by propaganda for what's called "low-input, sustainable agriculture," and also by scare stories, including from movie stars, about foods made unsafe by chemicals and pesticides.

**Irvin:** First, let me reiterate the fact that I am thoroughly convinced that the food that we place on the table today is the safest food that probably we've ever had since the beginning of mankind. Fully realizing that we do live in a chemical society, and we are using chemicals now, I feel that our ability to monitor and to regulate the proper use of chemicals has enabled us to regain any ground that we were able to obtain through organic farming.

I just feel that modern science has given us the techniques in order to properly use modern chemicals. In Georgia, we have the theory that the modern tools of agriculture can be used in a safe and a wholesome manner in order to provide a quality product, and do it in a fashion that we can monitor the residues and we can make sure that our levels are fully in line with the levels that are normally set by both the EPA and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

**EIR:** What is your own personal experience with so-called organic farming?

**Irvin:** I was born on a sharecropper farm, in extremely poor conditions. The only agriculture we had back at that time could be described under the concept of organic farming. I still remember those days on our farm, in which we would take all the manure out of the stables and the barn, and load it on the wagon, which was mule-drawn, and haul it out into the fields, and throw it, by hand, along in the furrows. We planted the corn in 4-foot rows with 36-inch spacing. And I remember, in addition to that, our attempts to carry on a garden operation under somewhat the same methods.

But even back then, we were not totally organic, because we had pests, and when we had pests, we had to deal with them. We took the chopping hoe, and we'd dig all the briars

and the crab grass, and the other foreign material out of our corn fields, and we'd dig it out of our cotton fields. And in the case of gardens, we found that if we didn't use a little arsenic, and other chemicals that were available to us even back in those days, then, your potato vines—the bugs would eat them up, and would eat up your beans, and many other garden products that we tried to produce in order to have enough food to eat. So, even though you relate back to those days of "organic farming," we were not totally organic, back 50 years ago.

**EIR:** As you've pointed out before, the terminology that is in use by the media, and also by many of the agencies that promote so-called organic gardening or farming, is very ill-defined and fuzzy.

**Irvin:** Well, we think, and we believe in truthfulness. If you're going to promote something, and if you're going to advertise to sell something, we have a very, very strong ethics in this department, that it ought to be absolutely truthful. You ought not to allege or to imply anything to that person who is going to buy your product that it's not. We are in regulatory agriculture, and regulate all the food that's sold in this state, and we just do not allow even the major companies to put on TV or on radio, or in printed matter, ads that are not absolutely truthful. I'll be the first to admit that some of the very articulate and very sophisticated New York ad agencies know how to come right up to the line on you. You have difficulty seeing where this is legal and this is illegal. Occasionally, we've asked and somewhat demanded that it be pulled.

But to go out here and to imply, as we are aware that some are trying to do now, that you have a product that is being mass produced today in an organic fashion, is untruthful. And we know it cannot be substantiated. They're using chemicals to some degree. You just can't do it without it.

We have no qualms, and we advocate, and we will continue to support, efforts to find more modern ways in which we can reduce the amount of chemicals we use; pest management, we've been leaders in that area, and if we can do something from a biological standpoint to rid ourselves of pests without using use chemicals, we're all for that. But for those who would say that I can produce you a product in any great quantity today without some of the modern techniques, we don't think it is possible.

**EIR:** What can you tell us about your boll weevil eradication program?

**Irvin:** We're extremely pleased. I'll give you a little history about that. I've been commissioner now for 21 years, and here in Georgia this is an elected position. I've served as a regional president and a national president of our professional organization, so I feel like we have proper credentials to call ourselves a national leader. And I served on the committee that first got assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to initiate the first boll weevil eradication program. I was convinced that modern science had developed to the point that we could eradicate a pest that once had been one of our major obstacles to a major crop in the South. And I was aware of how the thing was going to be implemented, starting up in Virginia and North Carolina, moving down into South Carolina, and in through Georgia, and the panhandle of Florida, and down to Alabama. And we have it that far, and it's going to go on west. I think it's going to be a great breakthrough.

We anticipate that once we've completed this job of eradicating the boll weevil, we can reduce the total tonnage of pesticides that is being used in our environment by up to one-third. I think we feel pretty safe with those projections. That's a lot, when you consider how vast agriculture is here in the South; that's a tremendous amount of chemicals that will not

be needed any longer in the production of food and fiber.

**EIR:** In a letter earlier this year to the *Atlanta Constitution*, you wrote, "We cannot go back to the past in agriculture any more than we can go back to the past in medicine, or in space or in transportation or in any other branch of science and culture."

**Irvin:** We can't move back. We live in a modern society. Our standard of living is built around that modern society. When I was a kid, we had approximately 50% of our people involved in some type of agriculture. I'll be the first to admit, all of them were not fully involved in total commitment to agriculture, but there was some type of food production tied to 50% of our people. We're down now to where the vast majority of our food is probably being produced by 1%; 3% would nearly cover the total involvement. And that tells you that we're geared up in America today to live a different lifestyle than we were 50, 60, and 70 years ago. And I don't believe that there is anybody out there that is advocating that we return to the ancient ages.

**EIR:** On the issue of guaranteeing the food supply. . . .

**Irvin:** Not only do we feed ourselves, but we have input to the food needs of nearly one-fourth of the world's population. We may not provide their total diet, but we sell food all over

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When we first started talking about selling grain to the Russians, it was quite a hot issue here. And I know there was a certain amount of pressure against me to speak out on that issue. But I spoke out, and I said, well, I'm for making our surplus products available to him who has the resources to buy. And furthermore, if our enemies—that being the Russians—were to grow dependent on us for food, I just didn't see any possibility of a nation that would depend on us to help feed their people ever declaring war on us. I thought it was a peace-making issue. Kind of going in the back door.

**EIR:** On the issue of low-input "sustainable" agriculture: You have mentioned before the nutrients per acre that you can calculate plants need, a certain amount of tonnage per acre of nutrients. If you cut back on that, you are going to cut back on food output.

**Irvin:** You see, I'm not an agronomist, I'm not a scientist, I'm just a layman. But we can continue to do massive research—which I'm a strong supporter of—for ways in which we can do the job even better. You know, when I was a kid, 8, 10, 12 bushels of corn per acre was a bumper crop. I used to be a school board member, and I'm a past president of the Georgia School Board Association, and had close ties to the Future Farmers of America and 4-H, a lot of our youth groups. I can still remember when we first started trying to get a 100 bushels of corn per acre, then 150, then 200 bushels per acre, and then 250. And scientists tell me today that it's within our reach to produce 500 bushels of corn per acre. But I'm not naive. Today, it may not be the most efficient way to produce that major crop by trying to extract out of the soil the maximum. There may be a plateau, that you can put so much nutrients into the soil, and get so much production, to have sufficient product to fulfill the marketplace and ultimately make it more profitable to the farmers. I'd like to see us to continue to promote that theory. That's what we call a balanced input versus a cost benefit.

**EIR:** The farm effort during World War II shows that we can set production records if we have to.

**Irvin:** We can do it again, if need be. But by the same token, let's don't shoot ourselves in the foot by going backward. Let's use some of that modern technology to find a more efficient way to do it when we've got the time. We've got the time frame. There's no pressure on us now. Let's go out and use that modern technology to produce with less input, with hopefully less input.

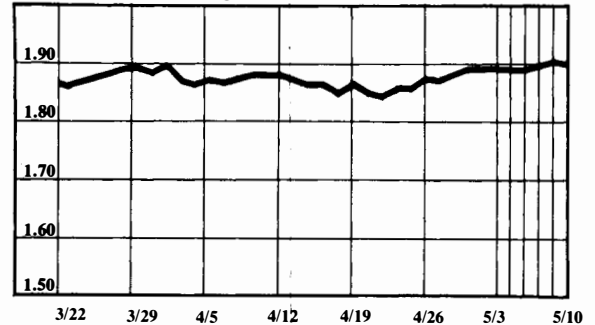
**EIR:** With modern technology. If we put the Shuttle back up into space, I'm sure we can find a way to deal with these things on Earth.

**Irvin:** We can. We just have to keep our eye on the big picture.

## Currency Rates

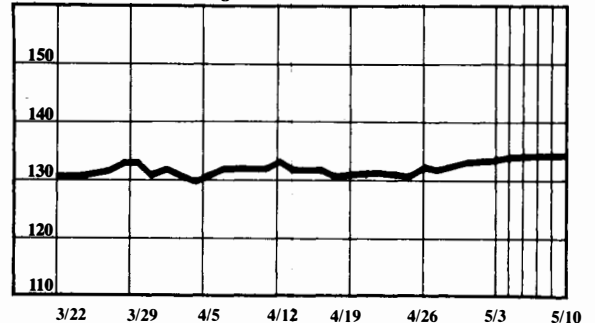
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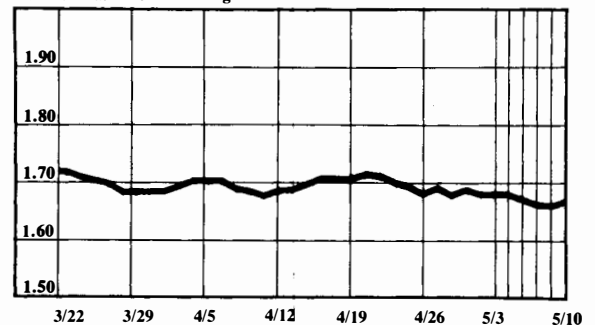
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