

## Uncle Sam Could Sell Some Real Estate

THE UNITED STATES could reduce its trillion dollar debt and save billions in operating costs by selling land and buildings the government owns but does not need.

This would bring in a lot of cash, saving borrowing and interest. It would eliminate costs of hiring thousands of people to take care of these properties. New owners would begin paying taxes on income from the properties.

None of the multitudes of federal bureaus seems to have much idea of the value of land and buildings Uncle Sam owns. Values are carried at original cost, some going back 150 or 200 years. Records do not reflect inflation or other changes in values.

Some figures are available. For one thing the government owns 744.1 million acres of land, which is about one of every three acres in the country. Some of this yields timber or grazing but most of it is idle and will not be developed by the government.

Someone has figured that the 405,147 buildings listed have floor space equal to 2,253 Empire State buildings, among the biggest.

The whole works is listed at \$104.9 billion valuation. The land is valued at \$9.7 billion, about \$13 per acre. Part of this is desert or mountains but who wouldn't give \$9 billion or more to own one-third of the United States? Much of this could be productive.

Homesteading might be allowed on land for which there were no bidders available. Water resources would be the problem. Difficulties of transportation, schools, supplies, medical aid and other hardships experienced by pioneers a century ago could be handled.

Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt seems to have reversed his stand for leasing government lands for oil, gas and mineral development, but this remains a potential source of significant revenue.

Environmentalists oppose the very thought of doing anything useful with federal lands. Some also oppose farming for profit and building nuclear plants for generating power. They seem to want us to keep the land just to look at and provide them with recreation.

Certainly, sizeable parts of our territory should be retained for beauty, parks, hikers, campers, hunters, fishermen and vacationers but one-third of the entire nation may be more than we can afford.

Encouraging people to move from crowded cities to develop the land and its resources through modern pioneering might help some of those on welfare to become self-supporting.

The State of Oklahoma also owns a considerable acreage of land it doesn't need, about 1,200 square miles of school land. This is all that is left of 3.1 million acres set aside to help fund public schools. The precedent for selling was well established long ago. If sold to private owners, it might yield about as much in interest on the cash plus taxes as it now does from low rates charged for leases.

Government needs to own some land and buildings, of course, but in a free country the more that is owned by the citizens, the better. Private land ownership is a tangible symbol of liberty.