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University of Maryland • College Park, Maryland 20742 • Telephone: 301-454-4103

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Plowshares into Swords: The Political Uses of Food

To make its research easily available to a broad audience, the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes a quarterly newsletter: *QQ—Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Named after the abbreviation for “questions,” *QQ* summarizes and supplements Center books and working papers and features other selected work on public policy questions. Articles in *QQ* are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Center or its sponsors.

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The United States produces and exports more food than any other nation, in a world where over a billion people are chronically malnourished and half a billion eke out an existence on the edge of starvation. Only a handful of nations produce more food than they consume, and the United States is chief among these, dominating the world’s food supply to a greater extent than all the nations of OPEC combined dominate the world’s oil. Such a vast productive capacity set against the rest of the world’s desperate need places the United States in a position of awesome power to determine whether its neighbors eat adequately or go hungry.

In recent years, the United States has freely wielded its “food weapon” to further both its own security and economic interests and the broader goals of world prosperity and peace. Presidents from Eisenhower through Carter and Reagan have used American food aid and sales to achieve their own foreign policy objectives, whether rewarding anti-Communist regimes for capitalist solidarity or punishing repressive regimes for human rights violations. Food exports have been manipulated to stifle criticism of the American military intervention in Vietnam, to chasten the Soviet Union for its military intervention in Afghanistan, and to forge peace accords for the embattled Mideast. The frankly political use of food aid is sanctioned by American law: Title I of Public Law 480 authorizes the use of food aid to develop foreign markets for American agricultural commodities and to complement U.S. foreign policy objectives; Title III links food aid to development programs (in contrast to Title II, which grants aid almost exclusively on humanitarian

grounds). And Section 116 of the Foreign Assistance Act provides for cessation of aid to nations whose governments engage in gross violations of human rights. Thus the use of food as a policy instrument has received legislative legitimation.

Some observers urge that food exports should become still more politicized, recommending that the United States join with other food producing and exporting nations to form a "FOPEC" (Food Producing and Exporting Countries) cartel on the analogy of OPEC. The lead article in the May 1982 *Readers' Digest* hails the use of food as "America's secret weapon," quoting Secretary of Agriculture John R. Block's assessment that "Over the next twenty years, food can be the greatest weapon we have." But others recoil from using food as a weapon, insisting that the starvation of millions of innocent persons—half of them children—must not be ignored or exploited to achieve political or economic ends.

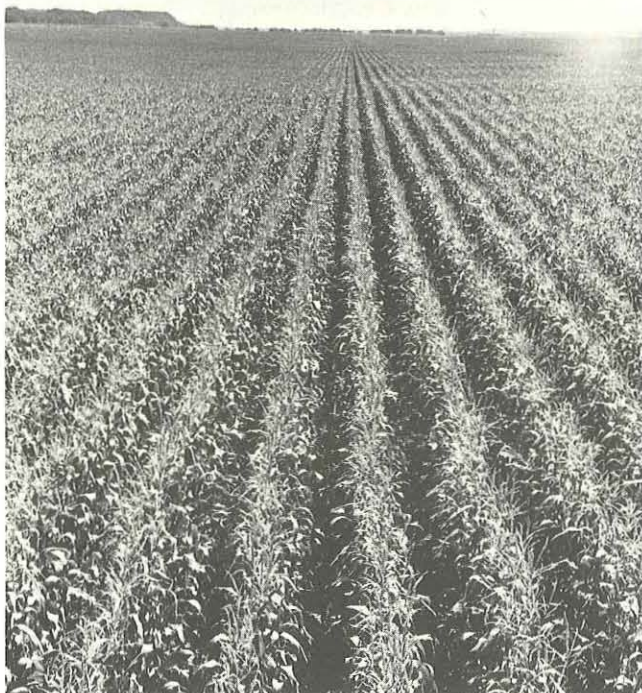
Is the political use of food a legitimate means to promote our military security and increase the export profits of our producers? Is it an acceptable tool for pursuing social, economic, and political justice and a stable world peace? Or is it wrong to use as a weapon or bargaining chip something which is the object of so central and universal a human need?

Food as National Property

The most extreme advocates of the politicization of food exports take the view that food is fully the property of the nation whose soil it is grown upon, just as oil is fully the property of the nation whose territory it lies beneath. America's abundant harvests were

grown on American soil; therefore they are ours, to distribute as we choose. On this view, it is both our right and our obligation to use the power that food represents; to reject or ignore the possibilities of using food to enhance our own position in the world and to increase the world's peace and justice is to squander a valuable opportunity bequeathed to us. Just as individuals are given talents and abilities which they are expected to use wisely and well both for self-improvement and for bettering the world around them, so are nations given natural resources which they are to exploit both in their own national interest and in the interest of the global community. Thus, Lowell Ponte, defending the political uses of food in the *Readers' Digest*, writes, "Should we consider food as a weapon? It is a power that destiny has put in our hands. Rather than reject it, we must consider the best and wisest ways to use this power to prompt development in other nations, to encourage cooperation, to discourage aggression."

Against this view it can be argued, however, that the fertile soil and long growing season that make possible America's agricultural bounty are not gifts of "destiny," but benefits arbitrarily parceled out by nature, to which their beneficiaries have no special moral entitlement. That oil lies beneath the sand of Saudi Arabia and wheat grows well in the soil of Kansas are arbitrary facts of nature, to which no moral significance should be imputed. As political philosopher Charles R. Beitz argues in *Political Theory and International Relations*, "The fact that someone happens to be located advantageously with respect to natural resources does not provide a reason why he or she should be entitled to exclude others from the benefits



Credit USDA Photo
by Jim Pickrell



Credit UNICEF Photo
by Sheehan

that might be derived from them." The accidents of nature do not provide a secure foundation for morally decisive ownership claims.

Of course, a great deal of our agricultural productivity can be attributed to American technology, to our free enterprise system, and to the hard work of American farmers. These considerations do establish a special American claim to the fruits of our own labor. But this claim must always be set in the context of the original natural endowments which allowed technology, free enterprise, and hard work to be as spectacularly successful here as they have been.

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Furthermore, food is not just one commodity among others, some random stuff that the United States has a lot of. Food is an essential requirement of every human being on earth. As such, it is the object of a basic and widely recognized human right. Even were America's claim to the surplus produce of its farms more secure, it would still have to be weighed against the urgency of this universal human right, which is at present so tragically unfulfilled.

The view that food is national property to be disposed of as we please, then, is unsatisfactory. At the very least this means that America is not free to use food as a weapon for promoting just any of our own national interests, at the expense of the more pressing needs of others. Nor are we free to use food to multiply the profits of American producers and distributors, at least not while millions suffer from chronic malnutrition.

It may be difficult to separate out cases in which food aid or sales are used merely to promote our own national interest from cases in which a broader set of goals is furthered: even highly politicized Title I food aid is directed only to countries with an evident use for imported food. Daniel E. Shaughnessy, former Deputy Coordinator of the A.I.D. Office of Food for Peace, points out, "Even the most humanitarian program has a political element to it, and conversely even the most political program has its humanitarian aspects."

But we are nonetheless able to identify certain political or economic uses of food that are ruled out once we reject the view that American-grown food is simply *ours*. Clearly, food aid that harms its recipients while benefiting American agricultural concerns is illegitimate. It would be impermissible to encourage a taste for American wheat in foreign rice eaters, with

the goal of creating a dependency on American exports. Such an economic program has no redeeming humanitarian benefits. Nor would it be permissible to cut off badly needed food exports simply to curb expressions of anti-American sentiment in receiving countries. These are kinds of political and economic uses of food that must be rejected as unacceptable.

Politics-Blind Food Aid?

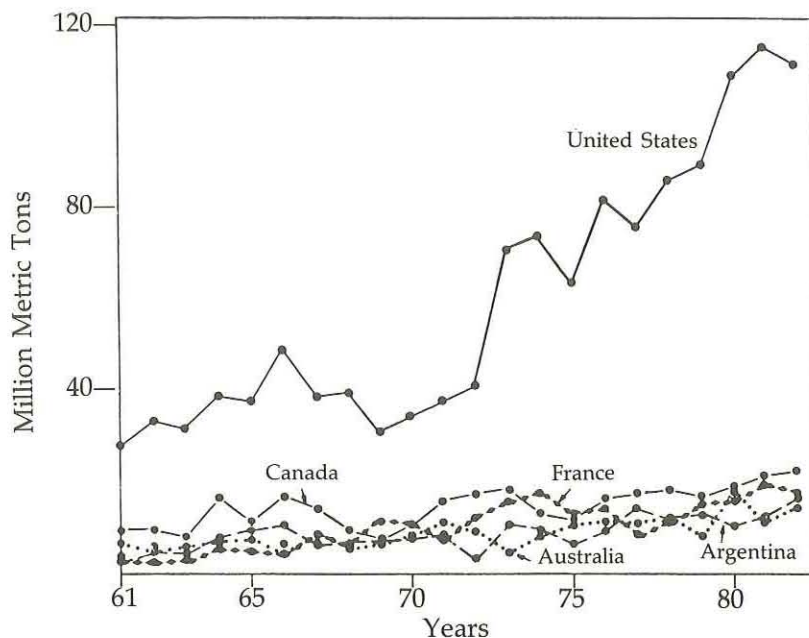
These considerations may suggest that *all* political uses of food are illegitimate, that food *aid*, at least, should be awarded strictly on nonpolitical grounds, directed solely to those most in need. Food should be allocated to the hungry, period, not to hungry anti-Communists, or hungry consumers of American exports, or even to hungry human rights activists. Philosopher Thomas Nagel writes that truly humanitarian aid "should be directed at the impoverished purely in virtue of their humanity. . . . Aid which simply lifts people off the absolute bottom and helps them to a minimally adequate diet addresses a need so general and basic that it is an inappropriate vehicle for the expression of political preference. . . . A humanitarian food aid policy would therefore base allocation solely on nutritional needs."

In at least two ways, however, all food aid is and must be inherently political. In the first place, it is individual persons who suffer from hunger, while food aid is often awarded on a national level. Problems thus arise in making sure that the neediest individuals in any country are indeed those who benefit from food aid granted to their government. Political and economic considerations are relevant here in ensuring that food aid accomplishes what it sets out to do—that it relieves the hunger of the hungriest. Second, all major food sales and grants have political, economic, and

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social consequences that go beyond the immediate relief of hunger. "No aid," Nagel recognizes, "can be entirely nonpolitical in its effects," and no responsible food export policy can refuse to take these into account.

Food policies that are directed toward national governments must pay attention not only to a recipient nation's aggregate wealth or food supply, but to how wealth and food are internally distributed. In countries where wealth is greatly concentrated, as it is in much of the Third World, food and development aid may do little or nothing to relieve the misery of the poorest people, and may even aggravate distributional in-



**Total Grain Exports
Major Exporting Countries
1961-1982**

Source: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture

equities by channeling additional income and influence to the already better off. Likewise, food aid directed impartially toward the hungry of all countries, regardless of their political systems or the human rights records of their governments, may serve only to prop up tyrannical regimes or stave off revolutionary reforms. Thus, politics-blind food aid can work against the welfare of those it is designed to help most.

Among the most important ancillary consequences of food aid are its impact on Third World development and population growth. Food aid may work either to encourage or discourage development, and development may be either beneficial or harmful to the worst-off in an underdeveloped country. Food aid may perpetuate dependency, stalling programs to boost domestic production and to achieve self-sufficiency; food aid directed at stimulating development may disrupt local patterns of subsistence and undermine traditional cultures. Anthropologist Norge Jerome calls attention to "the tragic and costly effects of public and private economic development programs on millions of individuals throughout the world. The demands of economic development programs have often triggered rapid changes in the traditional system of food production, processing, distribution, and consumption, and a decline in . . . nutritional status." There is currently a great deal of debate among economists and anthropologists over what sorts of development our food aid should be targeted to stimulate or avoid. Food aid cannot be given out without some sensitivity to these debated consequences.

Food aid also has complicated and disputed implications for a nation's population growth. Opponents of food aid often claim that it pits the present poor against the future poor, by allowing the current generation of parents to continue to produce too many future

children. On their scenarios, food aid averts a smaller famine today only at the price of creating a larger famine tomorrow. These critics recommend that food aid be channeled only to countries which are making a good faith effort to control their rate of population growth, by linking food aid to contraceptive practice.

But such linkage might well be counterproductive. In the developed industrialized countries population curves have fallen off only *after* a certain level of prosperity was achieved. Population control seems to be itself dependent on the availability of adequate supplies of food. One leading explanation of this phenomenon is that parents limit family size once child mortality rates have lowered sufficiently to assure them that what children they do have are likely to survive. As explained by Michael F. Brewer, former president of the Population Reference Bureau, this "child survival hypothesis . . . suggests significant changes in the content and staging of U.S. aid programs," with family-planning efforts carefully coordinated to follow programs of food aid and development. If aid levels are too low, or family planning programs ineffective, food aid may exacerbate the very problems it aims to alleviate. Once again, food aid cannot be parceled out with an oblivious eye to its other implications.

Food for Peace and Prosperity

The use of food aid to control population growth raises the question of the moral legitimacy of using the promise of food or the threat of its withdrawal to manipulate the behavior of individuals and nations. To make population control a condition of receiving food may seem a coercive interference in the internal affairs of sovereign nations, as well as in the very private and personal decisions individuals make about

the size of their families. Shaughnessy dismisses efforts to link food aid with population control by asking, "Would the United States accept any foreign proposal that carried with it the caveat that we would have to meet birth control criteria?"

In the case of population control, food is used as an incentive to behavior that will end up reducing future hunger. Food is used, at least indirectly, to ensure the adequacy of future supplies of food. The same might be said of food programs designed to encourage or discourage various development patterns: the end goal of the manipulative pressures is to establish a solid agricultural base to feed future generations.

In other cases, however, food has been used manipulatively to achieve ends much less clearly related to the reduction of world hunger. President Carter, for example, cut off PL 480 food aid to Pinochet's Chile and Somoza's Nicaragua as part of his campaign against human rights violations. Both Kissinger and Carter used promises of increased food aid to bring about an Egyptian/Israeli peace settlement, dramatically increasing food aid to Egypt after Sadat's signing of both the Sinai peace agreement and the later Camp David accord. Recently Lester R. Brown of the Worldwatch Institute has suggested that U.S. grain sales to the Soviet Union might operate as a possible deterrent to any future nuclear exchange.

Is food an appropriate diplomatic tool for protesting human rights violations and giving peace its best chance? Despite the worthiness of the goals in these instances, it may still seem that food is a singularly inappropriate instrument of behavior modification—that, although the consequences of food aid and sales must be carefully weighed and assessed, it is wrong to use food to apply deliberate manipulative pressure on the governments of hungry people. The offer of food or the threat of its withdrawal can have an irresistible coercive force. It may seem unfair to use food as a diplomatic lever, however high the stakes.

It seems overly fastidious, however, to refuse to make any distinctions among the ends for which food aid or sales may or may not be manipulated. To use food exports as a tool for ultimately improving world nutrition levels, or to dampen the nuclear arms race, is very different from using them to punish developing countries for trade with Cuba or the Soviet Union. That food is a central human need and the object of a basic human right does not make food exports sacredly immune from diplomacy and negotiations that may even work to ensure greater satisfaction of that need and protection of that right. Nor is the right to food the only right that we care about protecting. Rights not to be tortured and rights not to be killed are very weighty as well, and manipulation of food to secure these rights may be fully justified.

How, then, do we sort out acceptable from unacceptable uses of food? One first try at a principle is this: food exports may be used politically with the objective of reducing world hunger or preventing conditions that are equally grave and distressing, such as immi-

nent war and widespread and egregious violations of human rights. It is not wrong to withdraw food aid or sales from repressive regimes to punish their systematic violation of international human rights; it is not wrong to promise food aid or sales to belligerent regimes on the condition that they abstain from the horrors of war.

Two caveats are in order, however. The first is that the political use of food carries with it the ever-present danger of self-deception and outright dishonesty. It is all too easy to convince ourselves that U.S. economic and security interests just happen to coincide with the needs of the hungry. Those who believe, or pretend to believe, that the menace of spreading Communism is an evil on a par with mass starvation will feel justified in diverting food from those who may need it most. Thus shipments of food to famine-stricken Bangladesh were delayed in 1974 when the United States discovered that that nation had sold jute to Cuba. There may well be good practical reasons for a near-universal ban on such overtly political manipulations of food. Otherwise we may find ourselves covertly filtering food aid and sales through the blinders of our own self-interest.

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Second, even the most sincere efforts at making the world better may tragically misfire. Thus Jerome points to the dangers of well-intentioned development programs that work only to increase the poor's poverty and powerlessness; Brewer warns that the child-survival hypothesis is only weakly supported by available evidence, so that inadequate food aid programs may contribute to inadvertent population crises. Perhaps in the face of such widespread uncertainty we should harbor no grand schemes for using food to bring about any major international improvements. Our only sure truth seems to be that a quarter of the world's people are severely malnourished, and half of these are young children, innocent if anyone in this world ever is. Thus all we can do is to act, as sensitively and sanely as possible, minimizing whatever inevitable damage we unwittingly cause, remembering that in the final analysis, food is for eating and not for waging even the noblest political and ideological crusades.

The views of Daniel E. Shaughnessy, Thomas Nagel, Norge W. Jerome, and Michael F. Brewer are taken from their contributions to Food Policy: The Responsibility of the United States in the Life and Death Choices, edited by Peter G. Brown and Henry Shue (New York: The Free Press, 1977); other chapters in that volume also discuss many of the issues addressed here. To order Food Policy, see page 15.