

U.S. Cutting School Lunch Funds

By Jack Anderson

At Christmas time, 1969, President Nixon made a sugar-plum promise to the nation's nine million needy children to end their hunger. Now his accountants are squeezing \$300 million out of the states' school lunch program, which would have the effect of taking food from the mouths of those same children.

By depriving hungry children of school lunch money, the Nixon administration would save enough ready cash, say, to bail out the corporate executives who have been mismanaging Lockheed.

The school lunch budget is a complex \$1.1 billion document, which provides lunch subsidies that vary according to the needs of the children. The most needy children were supposed to get 60 cents per meal until the White House Scrooges went to work on the budget. They triumphantly saved \$300 million by slashing the subsidy to a stark 35 cents under a complicated new formula.

Theoretically, the states are supposed to make up the difference. But most states, lacking the funds, will merely reduce the feeding of hungry children.

This scheme to water the soup of the poor was worked out by budget and agriculture officials in a series of private meetings and telephone talks. The chief Scrooge at the back-meeting was President

Nixon's assistant budget director, Richard Nathan. The Agriculture Department was represented by Assistant Secretary Richard Lyng and nutrition administrator Edward Hekman.

Double Pressure

They were under pressure to cut the budget not only from the President but from the equally formidable Rep. Jamie Whitten (D-Miss.). As chairman of the House Agriculture Appropriations subcommittee, he is accustomed to dictating how agriculture funds will be spent. And school lunches come out of the agriculture budget.

Part of the money set aside by Congress for the lunch program is supposed to be taken from a customs revenue fund, which Whitten has always guarded jealously. He wants to keep this fund available to bail out rich farmers who have poor harvests.

State officials, meanwhile, have raised an almighty howl over the report that their needy children will be short-changed 25 cents per meal. Agriculture Department spokesmen, talking to us, sought to minimize this outcry. But we have obtained some of the complaints from their private files. Here are typical excerpts:

• Memphis School Superintendent John Freeman: "We cannot continue our free lunch program as it is presently operated if the (Agriculture Department) puts its proposed regulations into effect."

• Mrs. Carl A. Peterson, Nebraska's Urban League welfare task force chairman: "It would be a grave error for the (Agriculture Department) to deny to hungry children what in thousands of families is the only real meal such children have each day."

Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.), the Senate nutrition committee chairman, is also mad as a hornet over the school lunch slash. In a private letter to Agriculture Secretary Cliff Hardin, the senator has condemned the reduction as "regressive." He has also summoned budget and agriculture officials to an emergency hearing on Sept. 7.

This has unnerved agriculture officials who now tell us their minds are still open. The budget cut "is not locked up by any means," administrator Hekman assured us.

Washington Whirl

Contaminated Ducks—Duck hunters who eat their quarry may get an overdose of mercury. The first alarm went out last year after serious mercury contamination was found in the bodies of nine wild ducks shot on the shores of Lake St. Clair, the smallest of the Great Lakes. Thereafter, the carcasses of 307 wild ducks were examined in the laboratory. The unannounced results: 10 per cent had mercury levels considered unsafe

for human consumption. All 12 ducks bagged near Mobile Bay in Alabama, for instance, had twice more mercury residue than is safe. Some ducks has as much as eight times the safe level. The Fish and Wildlife Service will issue a public report but won't restrict duck hunting.

White House Apology—The White House has mailed letters of apology to 47 congressional interns from Connecticut who heard a presidential aide call Rep. Bob Steele (R-Conn.) a "liar" and a "moron." Brash, young Jeff Donfeld, who once worked for the Nixon law firm and paid court on Tricia Nixon, gave the interns a narcotics briefing. One intern asked about Steele's findings that 10 per cent of the GI's in Vietnam were heavy heroin users. Donfeld, who had come back from his own Vietnam visit with lower figures, snapped that "Steele is a liar" who acted like a "moron" in assembling his data. Steele, an experienced ex-CIA agent, was furious. His complaints swiftly reached the White House. Although Donfeld originally told us he would stick to his charges, he finally was compelled to eat crow. The White House mailed out the letters of apology to placate Steele, then quietly promoted Donfeld to be assistant director of the President's Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention.