

HUNGER
IN
AMERICA

LET THEM EAT WORDS

BY NICK KOTZ

"Use all the rhetoric,"
the President said,
"so long as it
doesn't cost... money."

In America the child that eats dog food is not well fed.

—Dr. Jean Mayer
AS MUST A STARVING MAN his bread, a morose citizen in these dismaying times must grasp hope where it is to be had. One thus gratefully applauds when Dr. Jean Mayer, the President's consultant on nutrition, stands against dog rations for children. And one takes heart from the very fact that America's politicians have at last discovered hunger. Nobody with faith in the relentless rationality of the human mind should doubt that we ultimately will stumble onto the cure for it. Hope survives. Mr. Nixon himself vowed just last May that we would "put an end to hunger in America for all time." If this inspirational did not enhance the bellies of millions of malnourished Americans, it may have fattened their dreams; at least it was food for thought to legions who often have only thought for food. Anyway, hunger can be cured, and the search for a politically palatable way to do it presses on—and on and on and on.

In fact, in this festive and frolicsome December, a vast host of Americans will rendezvous for three days in Washington to press the search still further. Doctors and scholars and technical wizards will gather, some common folk too, some 2,500 earnest citizens from all over, and they will converge in the sprawling subdivisions of the snazzy Sheraton-Park Hotel, and they will hear dieticians and bureaucrats and the presidents of soup and biscuit and cola companies, and, while together, this multitude will be known as the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health. Betwixt seminars and panel talk, the conferees will mingle, no doubt, in the Sheraton's elegant Cheshire Cheese Room, where a filet goes for \$7.50, or maybe the Pavilion Room, where \$5.75 fetches up a slab of roast beef, and, thus intermittently refueled, they will return to the main question at hand: What on earth could the cure for hunger be?

Perplexed by this puzzler, the President himself ordered up this august conference, and he put his new consultant, Harvard's Professor Mayer, in charge of organizing and energizing it, and White House minions let the word go forth that this event was proof positive of the Administration's profound concern for the nation's underfed millions.

Behind the scenes, it turned out, the Administration was taking pains to minimize certain voices at the conference—among them, curiously, one of the foremost voices of the hungry poor. Mayer himself invited George McGovern, chairman of the Senate's select committee on nutrition, to deliver the conference keynote. But then, while even a staff spokesman from his committee got dropped from one panel discussion list, McGovern got emphatically uninvited. His rejection was scarcely subject to interpretation. McGovern's committee, of course, had been energetically exposing the quantity and quality of hunger across the land; and, of course, Herbert Klein, the President's information coordinator, had already publicly castigated the McGovern committee for "traipsing around the country with TV cameras" making "hunger a political issue."

This move, as well as signs of intense lobbying by the food industry to stack some of the conference panels, hardly bolstered hopes that the White House conference would deal boldly with the hunger problem. "I can't believe," said one Washington consumer champion, "there will be a heartrending concern demonstrated for the nutrition needs of the poor." The group with which Mayer was formerly associated, the National Council on Hunger and Malnutrition, dryly stated similar apprehensions: "The poor may be seen

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and even heard, but not too loudly or with any power to control the direction of the conference...."

Perhaps such pessimism was unwarranted. We shall see. These doubts, in any event, did not reflect on Jean Mayer. The presidential consultant stands as a highly regarded specialist with a knack for hacking to the bone of the hunger issue. "The poor," he says, in an accent that betrays his French nativity, "should eat the same foods bought in the same stores as everybody else." In the light of Mayer's own record, anti-hunger crusaders hold at least some hope that Mayer will nudge the conference to some such transcendent wisdom. Yet doubts remain, doubts that the Government—regardless of what Mayer says or the White House conference does—is likely to act decisively or soon to wipe out hunger.

Doubts flow inevitably from the public record of the Government's past shuffling and dodging in the face of the hunger problem. And they are not likely to be dispelled by the minutes of certain White House meetings at which the hunger problem has been discussed. In these minutes one learns, for example, that President Nixon, a few weeks before he called for "an end to hunger in America for all time," said to a Cabinet member:

"You can say that this Administration will have the first far-reaching attack on the problem of hunger in history. Use all the rhetoric, so long as it doesn't cost any money."

The context? The time was last spring. The existence of widespread hunger in America needed no further proving (it being accepted that 15 million of us suffer from hunger or malnutrition), but it was being dramatically corroborated on all sides. There were the McGovern committee hearings. In south Florida, the South Dakota Democrat brought the wretched faces of the ill-fed children of migrant laborers once again to the nation's TV screen. And McGovern publicized the findings of Dr. Arnold Schaefer's devastating survey that showed nutritional deficiencies put poor children six months to two and a half years behind normal growth. Worse, in studying 12,000 mostly poor people in Texas, Louisiana, New York and Kentucky, Schaefer found 15 to 20 percent so malnourished that they deserved "immediate medical treatment." McGovern himself estimated: "Five million Americans live in families with less income than that needed for food alone."

Such dismal lore, the President was reminded at a White House meeting on March 17, was generating fresh public concern. His Urban Affairs Council recommended major reforms in the national food program. As the man in charge of many of the country's curious food policies (we still pay farmers \$3 billion a year not to grow crops), Agriculture Secretary Clifford Hardin felt a particular need for action. "I feel," said ex-college chancellor Hardin, editor of an anthology called *Overcoming World Hunger*, "very much on the spot." And here, according to the minutes of the meeting, the President advised him to hang onto the money—and let 'em eat rhetoric.

Nobody privy to this could have been surprised at the Administration's subsequent backing and filling on the hunger problem. In April, Nixon cut reform of food-stamp programs entirely out of his projected budget; in August, loud complaints compelled the White House to include in its welfare program some provision for food stamps for the poor—\$1,200 worth for a family of four, they asked. But the President did react to the national concern by calling the White House conference. Was its purpose to substitute for action, to fill the national pantry with fresh rhetoric?

The child that eats dog food, as Mayer says, is not well fed. Perhaps it should be added that it is more filling than rhetoric and more nutritious than empty promises.