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The Food Weapon

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An Associated Press dispatch from Saigon Sept. 3 included this passage:

"The Seventh Fleet disclosed that one of its vessels had intercepted and seized two and a half tons of rice that it said the Chinese had tried to float ashore from a freighter [off North Vietnam] in waterproof plastic and burlap sacks."

The sentence was well down in a roundup of military action in Vietnam that day. The United States Navy's seizure of rice being shipped to North Vietnam was evidently regarded as routine. But for some readers it raised significant questions.

When the United States began its blockade of North Vietnam last May, President Nixon spoke of "tanks, artillery and other advanced offensive weapons supplied to Hanoi by the Soviet Union and other Communist nations." He said the "one way to stop the killing" was to "keep the weapons of war out of the hands of the international outlaws of North Vietnam."

The announced seizure of those bags of rice raises the question whether the American blockade is in fact limited to military supplies.

The question was put to a Pentagon expert. In reply he first pointed out that this particular seizure of rice took place near Honla Island, off the southern panhandle of North Vietnam 75 miles above the demilitarized zone. He called it a "conduit area," where and food "has to be for troops or for those working the supply system." But this point turned out to be of no significance.

After checking with higher authority, the Pentagon officer stated that the U.S. Navy was under orders to stop food and anything else discovered anywhere off North Vietnam. He said:

"The policy is to interdict all supplies going into North Vietnam by sea."

In short, the United States is carrying out a total naval blockade of North Vietnam, not one limited to military supplies. What makes that highly important is the fact, not widely understood, that only a tiny proportion of North Vietnam's imports by sea is of a military character.

An analysis of North Vietnamese imports was made in the opening weeks of the Nixon Administration. It appears in National Security Study Memorandum No. 1, known as NSSM-1.

About 85 per cent of the aid from her Communist allies reached North Vietnam by sea, NSSM-1 said. And that was almost entirely food and

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other "economic" aid rather than military. "The military equipment provided by the Soviets and Chinese" came mainly by rail through China, it said.

During the first nine months of 1968, NSSM-1 estimated, the seaborne cargo broke down as follows: "Foodstuffs [chiefly rice and wheat] 38 per cent of total volume, general cargo 33, petroleum 20, fertilizer 8, timber 1." The memorandum added:

"The importance of food imports can hardly be overstated; even with them, North Vietnam has been forced to strictly ration foodstuffs."

There is no reason to think that the import proportions have changed drastically since the NSSM-1 analysis. The hawkish Economist of London estimated recently that in 1971 only about a quarter of North Vietnam's imports were "military-related, much of the rest being raw materials and food."

From all this two things are unarguably clear:

- North Vietnam is dependent on imported food to a significant degree to feed her population.

- The American blockade, to the extent that it is effective, must have one of its principal impacts on the food supply. And those who made the policy well understood that when they instituted the blockade.

There is of course the view, expressed by a number of military figures, that no distinction should be drawn between Vietnamese military and civilian activity or personnel: They are all helping the war effort, after all, and if they called that off they would have no trouble importing the food they need.

But our moral system does not allow such obliteration of the military-civilian distinction. We all recognize that it is one thing to bar, say, missiles from Cuba and another to cut off food and everything else. One of the Nazis condemned to death at Nuremberg was the wartime governor of Holland who caused a civilian famine by ordering the dikes destroyed.

Considerations of this kind are not likely to move Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger or the other men who believe that American honor requires bombing, mining and selling Indochina indefinitely to keep Nguyen Van Thieu in office. But the rest of us might have a feeling in the pit of our stomach the next time Mr. Nixon tells the heart-rending story of little Tanya, the 12-year-old Russian girl who saw her family die one by one in the famine during the German siege of Leningrad.

"Little Tanya" - see Nixon acceptance speech, 23 Aug 72, (SPEXaminer 24 Aug 72, this file.)

"Little Tanya" - see Anthony Lewis, "The
Food Weapon", NYTimes 11 Sep 72, this file.

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