

Affluence and Survival

"If the strong attempt to impose their views, they will do so at the cost of justice. . . . [Improving] the quality of life has become a universal political demand, a technical possibility and a moral imperative."

—Secretary of State Kissinger
at the United Nations

By Anthony Lewis

It must have been Oscar Wilde—or was it Mao Tse-tung?—who said: "When I hear Henry Kissinger talk about justice and morality, I reach for my dramamine." Anyone might suspect cynicism in such talk by a man who has wasted five years so far, and numberless lives, trying to impose American views on Indochina, and who until recently showed not the slightest interest in questions of world poverty, trade, finance and resources.

But however cynical Mr. Kissinger may be, and however late his discovery of economics, his speech to the special United Nations session on raw materials and development did deal with what is very likely the most important long-term issue we face. That is, putting it broadly: How can the fruits of this earth be shared equitably enough at least to reduce the chances of mass starvation, economic collapse and war?

The trouble is that the Secretary of State alone cannot begin to deal with all the profound problems of material yearning, psychology and nationalism involved in that issue. Even if he could find time to negotiate with other countries about world economic conflicts as well as arms control and the Middle East, he could not carry the burden of policy and exhortation at home. And on these questions change in the world depends on change here in America.

Consider a homely example. While Americans fretted over waiting in gasoline lines this winter, farmers in India waited in lines for five days to fill a five-gallon gasoline can. They needed the fuel not for commuting or pleasure driving but to run the pumps that give their farms water.

There was not enough gasoline in India for that most urgent necessity, and the direct result of inadequate watering is now apparent. The U. S. Department of Agriculture estimates that lack of fuel for the water pumps has cost India one million tons of her spring wheat crop.

The Indian grain picture is even grimmer when the fertilizer problem is figured in. Nitrate fertilizers are made from hydrocarbons, oil or coal or gas. The quadrupling of oil prices plus price pressure on fertilizers because of growing demand have pushed

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their prices so high that a country as poor as India simply cannot buy what it needs.

What has all that to do with us? Does it matter to Asian peasants how we live and think in America? The answer is that it matters to the point of life and death. We must begin to understand why.

In the short run American economic and aid policies are of vital importance. What must our sense of values be, our grasp of the real problems of humanity, when this year we are spending more than ten times as much on South Vietnam (population 19 million) as on India, Pakistan and Bangladesh combined (population 711 million)?

Even to begin talking about world action on food and resources, Henry Kissinger has had to overcome tough opposition from the Treasury and Agriculture Departments on the narrowest commercial grounds. Secretary of Agriculture Butz tours Japan and Taiwan to view good dollar customers for American farm products, but he does not get to South Asia.

But we are connected with the needs of the world in a deeper sense. Stability, even survival, will not be possible for hundreds of millions of people if Americans continue relentlessly to pursue super-affluence.

If this country eats and uses and burns so much of the world's resources on an ever-increasing scale, then the supply for others is likely to be shorter and dearer. Certainly in oil, the crucial commodity now, we could have a much more potent influence toward deflating the wild prices by curbing our own huge demand growth prospect than by talking at the United Nations.

These are requirements not of charity but of wise self-interest. It would not be much of a future to defend a fortress of affluence in a hungry world.

For a while this winter William Simon talked of making permanent changes in the American lifestyle, moving us from a habit of waste to one of conservation. But all that has been forgotten in the pell-mell rush for normalcy, meaning exploitation.

Mr. Kissinger's speeches will not count for much while we have a President who tells the Seafarers Union, as Mr. Nixon did last November, that America uses 30 per cent of the world's energy and "that isn't bad; that is good. That means we are the richest, strongest people in the world. . . . May it always be that way."
