

Global Games

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Earl Butz, the Secretary of Agriculture, has been taking a beating because he's so stingy with our food. The pressure to give away food to underdeveloped countries grows with each TV documentary showing yet another nation suffering from a case of permanent starvation.

For once in his life Mr. Butz may be right, albeit for the wrong reasons. Except as one-shot, emergency disaster relief, giving away food makes no sense. The poor nations, like the rich, must manage their affairs so they can grow enough food to feed their own people.

They can't do that if their best land, their water and their investment capital is used to grow agricultural commodities for export. In many places in the world that seems to be what's happening. There are reports, for example, that in the middle of the drought in the African Sahel, Mali was growing peanuts and exporting them while the relief planes were flying in food.

This is anything but a unique piece of irony. In Colombia, with an estimated 130,000 metric ton protein deficiency, "a hectare (about two and a half acres) devoted to the raising of carnations brings a million pesos a year, while wheat or corn brings only 12,500 pesos. As a result, Colombia . . . must use scarce foreign exchange to import basic foodstuffs," write Barnett and Muller in "Global Reach: The Power of the Multinational

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Corporations" (Simon and Schuster, 1974). "The development track of the global corporations features increased production of luxury items such as strawberries and asparagus for the international suburban market. But the money does not flow to the hungry majority . . ."

Joseph Collins of the Transnational Institute, a left-leaning organization specializing in world economic problems, points out that, while the production of broiler chickens in Colombia has doubled in less than a decade, "only about 20 per cent of the population can afford

to buy even one chicken a year." The rest are "economically inactive," which seems to be a polite word for starving.

Collins observes that, although the Green Revolution may indeed increase production, it means very little to the people growing it. Thus in Colombia 70 per cent of the grain grown is diverted to poultry feed to fatten chickens that Colombians can't buy.

According to his calculations one hectare of land used in that way will support 1,430 people—if they only had the money to buy chicken at 200 pesos a kilogram. The same land, if used to grow soy beans for direct human consumption, will feed 22,700 people at 12 pesos per kilogram.

If Collins is right Colombia is relatively better off than a place like the Dominican Republic, where he says Gulf and Western has set itself up in a sugar cane operation that is so self-contained the locals get no side benefits from it at all. Not only does the company import Haitian labor, but, Collins says, with their own repair shops and company stores, G&W doesn't buy anything from the host country.

"Agro-industrial enclaves that move in on a host country, use it and give nothing back to it are the economic equivalents to tapeworms. The tapeworm lives

in the intestines, where it globbles up the food which by rights belongs to the organism it has invaded. People with tapeworms come down with malnutrition—so the prospects are guarded for Brazil, where Collins reports that Volkswagen is raising cattle in the Amazon, not to sell to Brazilians, but to the Japanese. "They get \$20 a pound for the beef in Japan, and you don't get that for a VW," he explains.

If the food problem is analyzed as Collins does, then all the talks about population explosions and shifts in weather patterns are somewhat beside the point. It may not even be in our self interest to convince the natives to cut down on their procreations. The more there are of them, the more money we can make selling them the food we've finessed them out of growing for themselves.

True, this may increase the number of beggars and miserables in the world, but we needn't bother ourselves about the warnings we hear that if we don't feed the hungry, they're going to rise up and smite us. Starving people are too weak to smite many mighty smotes. They beg, they whimper, they die.

Therefore the next time a bleeding heart tries to trouble your conscience by saying eat less, that if every American would consume one less hamburger a day the grain saved in cattle feed would sustain Bangladesh for a month, the best thing to do is agree with him and go on eating your steak.