

Science and Man By Joshua Lederberg

Paradox in U.S. Food Policy

THE WORLD FOOD supply panel sponsored by the President's Science Advisory Committee is an outstanding example of the kind of intellectual mobilization that can help the United States retain its position of world leadership. If the panel's recently issued report were to be adopted as the core of this country's policy, the world could reach a turning point as momentous as the establishment of the United Nations or the NATO alliance. Politics is, however, a subtler calling than science, and it is no novelty for a government's innumerable left hands to be unaware of its right hand's intentions.



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The central theme of the panel's report is the need to double food production in developing countries during the next 20 years. About 20 per cent of the increased demand is assigned to improving nutrition; the rest is the burden of population increase and the maturing of the existing crop of babies. The panel emphasizes the urgency of controlling the rate of population increase if there is to be any hope of rescuing the mired economies of the underfed, undercapitalized, overpeopled countries.

THE PANEL REPORT was released on June 18. On June 23, Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman announced a long-hatching policy decision to cut back wheat acreage for the coming year by 13 per cent. Meanwhile, according to a story by Felix Belair Jr. of the New York Times, President James A. Perkins of Cornell University had transmitted to President

Johnson the opinion of a General Advisory Committee on Foreign Assistance Programs: it would be "unthinkable that this country would consider a reduction in our own food production."

The most cynical construction that might be placed on these discrepancies is that the President is unmoved by the prospective hunger of Indian babies when confronted by the Midwest farm belt's political reactions to the current slide in farm prices.

This view may be an oversimplification. The statesmanship and compassion of governmental leaders have still to be tested by the long-term challenges posed by the panel.

Mr. Johnson could very well argue that the drop in grain prices manifests a fall-off of effective demand for our wheat exports. For this country to produce excess food, then give it away, would be to disrupt our own agricultural economy and inhibit the development of an independent capacity for food production in poorer countries. Many economists have pointed out that an artificial depression of farm prices is the best way to discourage new techniques of agriculture, investments in fertilizer and machinery and irrigation, and opening up of marginal acreage.

NO COMPARABLE pressure of oversupply can be seen for fertilizers. A more enlightened philanthropy would be the shipment

abroad of the half-million tons of fertilizer that might have been applied to the cutback acreage. That would help subsidize the investment in better farm technology towards which we must lead the traditional peasantry. Even greater leverage would come, progressively, from exporting factories for producing fertilizer, the expert technicians to design, build and manage such factories, and above all a cadre of educators to teach the skills needed for economic survival in a technologically advanced world.

These levels of aid all have their place in the panel's recommendations. Unfortunately, the higher the level, the longer is the lead time. Flour can make tomorrow's bread; fertilizer takes a crop year to be useful; to bring a major fertilizer plant into production takes five years; to educate from illiteracy to scientific sophistication in agriculture takes at least a generation.

The panel is vehemently critical of the neglect of technical assistance in our aid programs. This aspect of foreign aid has been submerged because not enough can be spent on it to attract a shrewd and ambitious bureaucracy or to provide an answer to the problem of surpluses.

But world economic development is far too important to the security of every citizen to be subordinated to inter-agency rivalry or treated as a side issue to our farm surplus dilemma.