

States of the Union

'STAMPING' OUT HUNGER

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*O God! that bread should be
so dear,
And flesh and blood
so cheap.*

—THOMAS HOOD,
"The Song of the Shirt"

THE FORD Administration, all heart as usual, has been trying to render bread more dear by raising the price of food stamps, those precious coupons that each day, in millions of homes, fend off starvation. Under the present rules, a poor person can buy about \$46 worth of food stamps for \$33, though this varies with size of income and family; under Ford's plan, the price would have jumped to \$45. Some bargain.

The government's logic is flawless, provided one overlooks such minor miseries as malnutrition and hunger: Federal expenditures on food stamps are inflationary; *ergo*, they should be curtailed. "If the price of food stamps rises," an Administration spokesman happily explained to members of the House Agriculture Committee last month,

"people will drop out of the program and the government will save as much as \$645 million." In other words, "Whip Inflation Now" (WIN) turns out to mean "Starve More Americans Cheerfully" (SMAC).

The congressmen on the committee were not impressed. By a vote of 33-2 they approved a bill designed to prevent Ford from inflating the price of food stamps; the full House supported the committee recommendation, 374-38, and the Senate went along by a margin of 76-8. Apparently there isn't much political capital to be gained from baiting the poor; they have grown too numerous. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the agency that administers the program, 17 million Americans are now buying their groceries with stamps. Only six months ago the figure was 13.6 million—a dismal difference of 26 per cent.

Many out-of-work Americans, maybe for the first time in their lives, are facing the possibility of going without food. They haven't yet organized any hunger marches, as

workers did during the Great Depression, but if unemployment persists, parades will surely follow. "An empty stomach," warned Albert Einstein in a speech on the rise of Fascism, "is not a good political adviser." And 17 million empty stomachs, all rumbling, can cause quite a ruckus.

Actually, that number is misleading; it is much too low. Many citizens who are eligible for food stamps never receive any. Some have no way of getting to where the stamps are; others would rather make do than go through the humiliation of handing "poverty stamps" to the local grocer; still others have not heard of a program that in many a miserly county is treated as a top-security secret. The upshot is that about 23 million eligible persons have been deprived of stamps, and this in turn may mean that about one-sixth of the entire population goes to bed hungry each night and wakes up hungry each morning. Some country.

It is hard to believe that this anemic program, which the White House had hoped to bleed some more, represents the total national response to those electrifying anti-hunger crusades of the '60s. One recalls that there was a time when we believed nobody starved in America. Even Michael Harrington, who had to reinvent poverty to get us to see it, barely included hunger in his picture of *The Other America*. As recently as 1964, so shrewd and humane an economist as Herman P. Miller could write, "The term 'poverty' connotes hunger; but this is not what is meant in discussions about poverty in America."

In those days Galbraith and others were still prescribing soothing economic lenses; we spoke only of pockets of poverty in a sea of affluence. Then, in the spring of 1967, Senators Robert Kennedy (D.-N.Y.) and Joseph Clark (D.-Pa.) took their Subcommittee on Manpower, Employment and Poverty to Mississippi—and the myths

collapsed. As Nick Kotz describes it in his excellent book, *Let Them Eat Promises*, the senators "discovered . . . raw hunger inbedded in the worst poverty the black South had known since the Depression. . . . Driving along muddy, forgotten roads, the two senators and their aides stopped at shack after shack to see with their own eyes hungry, diseased children; to hear with their own ears the poor describe their struggle for survival."

Partly because Robert Kennedy himself was news, hunger in America became newsworthy. CBS delivered a blockbuster documentary on the subject. Reporters, reformers, politicians, and new investigative committees roamed the ghettos and the countryside, finding hunger and malnutrition wherever they looked. Suddenly it seemed that FDR's gloomy, 1937 vision of America—"I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished"—was still applicable. Little had changed in 30 years.

In 1968 a special citizens' Board of Inquiry, financed by foundations and made up mostly of physicians, issued a report that classified 256 U.S. counties as "hunger counties"—i.e. where the incidence of poverty and of infant mortality was unusually high, while the level of participation in government food programs was unusually low. The report recommended massive emergency aid.

Few reformers doubted that the government would act. After all, *children were starving*. As Senator McGovern (D.-S.D.) has written, "Somehow, we Americans are able to look past the slum housing, the polluted air and water, the bad schools, the excessive population growth, and the chronic unemploy-

ment of our poor. But the knowledge that human beings, especially little children, are suffering from hunger profoundly disturbs the American conscience."

AS MATTERS turned out, the American conscience had a short attention span. Congress did appropriate more money for food stamps and for other measures such as the Commodity Distribution program; and for a while more Americans in more counties ate better and more often. But after the fireworks died and the committees of inquiry went home, people forgot. Hunger began to resemble all those other problems McGovern had mentioned; it had become a taken-for-granted blemish on the U.S. landscape, something else we were "able to look past." It turned into a rhetorical device. "We will put an end to hunger in America for all time," intoned Richard Nixon in 1969, three years before he attempted to impose food stamp funds.

It is not that we are an especially cruel! people, only a cruelly ingenuous one. We hire foxes to guard chickens. Since New Deal days the Department of Agriculture has been administering programs to feed the hungry, yet its prime constituency has not been the poor consumer but the comparatively rich producer. Thus, the entire system—the food stamps, the Commodity Distribution, Special Milk and School Lunch programs—has been geared to support farm prices, to dump surpluses, and to keep the market green for growers.

The poor have always been incidental. "We are most sympathetic to the plight of needy persons," Agriculture Secretary Ezra Taft Benson assured congressmen in 1959. "We must, however, not lose sight of the fact that primary responsibility of the Department is to carry out the farm programs that benefit farmers."

The Food Stamp Act of 1964

opens with a list of purposes: First, "to strengthen the agricultural economy"; next, "to help achieve a fuller and more effective use of food abundances"; and finally, rather as an afterthought, "to provide for improved levels of nutrition among low-income households. . . ."

In the long run, as Jan Kernodle has noted in an eye-opening paper on Federal food plans, "efforts to protect the nutritional welfare of the poor have become a mere adjunct of agricultural price support mechanisms." That seems to have been a pattern of the '60s: In pleading the cause of the poor, liberals continually hitched their star programs to the wrong institutional wagons. How can the Department of Agriculture, with its traditional priorities of the marketplace, be expected to feed the poor?

On the other hand, how can any government agency—even one free of contradictions—be counted on to administer so many disparate and badly designed philanthropies? Oh what a tangled web Congress has woven! Besides the programs already mentioned, there are the Supplemental Feeding Program, the Summer Feeding Program, the Day Care Feeding Program, and the Women, Infants and Children (wic) Feeding Program. Each of these features its own set of eligibility standards, its own rules of procedure and its own *raison d'être*. And each is so administered as to deprive many eligible persons of its benefit.

Now President Ford, in his latest budget message, says he wants to abolish these, and give funds instead to the states. But wouldn't it be simpler, and maybe even cheaper, to let the poor have that money, either through a generous reverse income tax or some other minimum-income plan? The White House ought to stop tinkering with nickel-and-dime food programs. Stamps and grants won't cure America of hunger; money will.

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