

Uneasy Sacrifice: The Politics Of United States Famine Relief, 1945-48

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ABSTRACT The United States, which committed itself to alleviating the severe post-World War II global famine, failed to meet its relief commitments. Relief efforts failed largely because voluntary attempts at reducing consumption proved too difficult, and the U. S. government refused to return to mandatory rationing of food despite evidence indicating the majority of Americans, especially American women, would have welcomed such a move. Contributing to officials' opposition to mandatory post-war rationing were the revived ideology of government non-interference; a strong government/agriculture alliance; the focus on private, as opposed to public, interests and obligations; and increasing Cold War tensions precluding any worldwide efforts at famine relief. It seemed only the fear of Communist takeover could provoke Congress in partnership with business interests into sufficiently alleviating famine conditions, but only for those countries willing to abide by U. S. terms.

The United States emerged from World War II with its industries and economy thriving, signaling the arrival of what Henry Luce termed the "American Century" (*Life*, 1941). Because of the nation's great strength and the lack of war destruction on its own soil (excepting Pearl Harbor), most Americans did not fully comprehend the horrible devastation suffered in other countries. Understandably, Americans were anxious to get their troops home, return to their jobs, restore customary patterns of living, and forget the tragedies the war had wrought. But in postwar Europe and Asia, in fact all over the world, people were starving as farms and factories and whole economies were ruined by war and drought conditions. Until the Marshall Plan was conceived in 1948 there were three years of government indecision as to how best to provide for the estimated quarter of the world's population faced with the danger of starvation.

Although Americans and their leaders were acutely aware of the global famine in the first crucial years after the war ended, they failed woefully, in the face of

the greatest agricultural abundance the United States had known to date, to divert U. S. supplies to relieve the immediate crisis. At the same time the media were reporting near record wheat crops and ever-expanding domestic consumption levels, the USDA admitted that the country was not meeting its export goals for famine relief (*Famine Campaign Roundup*, 1946). The failure is ironic given the major WWII slogan promoting homefront food conservation campaigns: "Food Will Win the War and Write the Peace." While mandatory wartime rationing guaranteed a sufficient distribution of food among the military, allies, and the American public, the government failed to insist that food production and distribution help establish postwar stability as well. The United States reacted with sufficient aid only after it was too late for too many.

What accounts for failure of the U. S. government and Americans to respond to the post-war world's increased needs for U. S. food supplies? Why could not the richest and most abundant nation send its share of food abroad to help alleviate severe global famine

conditions? As will be discussed in this essay, although the public appeared ready and willing to reduce its consumption of food to alleviate the post-war famine crisis, the government was not, and failed to act adequately until fears of Communist takeover of Europe compelled it to action.

U. S. Responses to Post-War Famine Conditions

Throughout the Second World War the United States had been sending foodstuffs regularly to Allied and newly-liberated countries, mainly through two organizations, the Combined Food Board (CFB) and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).¹ As the allied armies reconquered Europe in 1944 and 1945, UNRRA found itself engaged in the largest and most complex relief effort ever mounted, and at the height of its operations employed 25,000 people. From 1944 to 1946 UNRRA disbursed \$4.5 billion in aid, a significant portion of which was provided by the U. S. (UNICEF, 1946).

Although the United States had conducted overseas famine relief programs throughout the war, Americans paid minimal attention to them. Toward the end of the war they were instead preoccupied with the death of President Roosevelt, with how Harry Truman would fare in office, and with the war in the Pacific, which was expected to go on for a year or more, until the government unleashed the fury of atomic force, bringing the war to an unexpectedly quick conclusion. With the war's end American political leaders greatly feared both industrial and agricultural overproduction, and the potential for a post-war depression (Matusow, 1967: 3; Wilcox, 1947: 278). Despite these well-publicized fears about the post-war economy, after V-E Day in May 1945 the public demonstrated marked concern about the world famine ("The Domestic Food Outlook," 1945).

A February 1946 report produced by the USDA Office of Foreign Agricultural Relations told the grim tale: The war combined with drought conditions had threatened wheat and rice crops in Europe, North Africa, India, China, and other parts of Asia, reducing the 1945 total estimated world food production by 12 percent *per capita* below prewar levels (Figures 1, 2). European production was 25 percent below normal. Japan was not producing sufficient rice. Australia and parts of South America were hit by drought. Production in Russia was still below prewar levels, and India and China were expecting conditions to worsen quickly. Government officials estimated that 500 million people faced famine conditions on all parts of the globe. By contrast, U. S. consumption even with domestic rationing during the war had actually increased (Figure 3). Moreover, signs indicated that American post-war consumption levels would dramatically increase further. While U. S. citizens consumed about 3300 calo-

ries *per day*, well above the average amount required, more than 125 million people in Europe, and millions more in other parts of the globe, subsisted on fewer than 2000 calories a day, 28 million were getting fewer than 1500 calories *per day* and in some parts people received as few as 1000 calories. Further, the next world harvest in 1946-7, while only slightly better, would still be below prewar levels (Famine Report, 1946; New York Times, 1947).²

Few countries were in any kind of position to relieve the worldwide famine. The United States, Canada, Great Britain, and parts of South America and the Middle East were the only countries with favorable harvests. Only one country, the United States, actually emerged from the war producing more food than it had before. The total U. S. food supply in 1946 continued to reach record levels, with food production about one-third above the prewar average. It was not surprising, then, that *per capita* consumption in the U. S. exceeded that of any previous year (Famine Report, 1946).

President Truman took to the airwaves to alert Americans that something must be done. "For the world as a whole, a food crisis has developed which may prove to be the worst in modern times," Truman told the nation in a special February 1946 broadcast. "Under these circumstances," he continued, "it is apparent that only through superhuman efforts can mass starvation be prevented. . . . I am sure that the American people are in favor of carrying their share of the burden." (Truman, 1946) Truman then outlined his plan to reduce wheat and fats consumption in the United States so as to donate as much as possible to needy countries. His plan, however, did not advocate returning to food rationing. Instead, it included such measures as prohibiting the use of wheat in alcohol production and discouraging the use of edible grain for the feeding of livestock. The government later announced a goal to earmark 16 percent of the U. S. food supply for famine relief (Anderson, 1946a). Truman's post-war plan was primarily based on paying subsidies to farmers, a wartime arrangement familiar to both farmers and the government. Business too would have to bear some of the burden. "I believe that with the wholehearted cooperation of food manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers the job can be done," announced the President confidently. Thus, the government's specific measures to aid the famine relied on voluntary sale of foodstuffs by agriculture and industry to the government, unlike the mandatory set-asides and rationing conducted during the war.

And what would be the cost to American consumers? What was to be their obligation in "winning the peace," in feeding the famine-besieged millions overseas who experienced the war firsthand? The famine campaign would affect the public, but instead of complying with mandatory rationing as they had done during the war, Americans, Truman later on informed

the public, "may not be able to get exactly the kind of bread that many prefer. We will not have as large a selection of meats, cheese, evaporated milk, ice cream, margarine, and salad dressing as we may like." But, he argued, "These inconveniences will be a small price to pay for saving lives, mitigating suffering in liberated countries, and helping to establish a firmer foundation for peace." (Truman, 1946) Americans were told by their president that tolerating mild annoyances when choosing which kind of meat or bread to buy at the supermarket would be sufficient to alleviate the famine and secure world peace. The government, in this famine relief effort, imposed less rigorous restrictions on its citizens than on agriculture and commerce, and as the following makes clear, less demanding sacrifices than Americans were willing to assume.

Americans responded to Truman's programs positively, and demonstrated the will to endure even more drastic restrictions. The results of three different polls taken from August, 1945 to February, 1946 were consistent: Over 70 percent said they would be willing to put up with shortages of meat, butter, sugar, and other goods in order to give food to people who needed it in Europe (Cantril and Strunk, 1951: 218, 1106). Many Americans wrote their government leaders to endorse enthusiastically the famine relief measures. "Sir," wrote Mrs. E. H. Gempel from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, "We support any measure necessary to provide for the starving people of the world. Get tough. The average citizen wants to help but the story has to be hammered home day in and day out to keep his mind on it." A telegram from a woman in New York City simply read: "STOP Ringing Victory Bells and double overseas food instantly." (Letters, 1946)

Some, however, were less certain of the soundness of U. S. relief measures, either on principle or as a result of their own needs. "Dear Mr. President," went one such letter, "I know that Europe and many other places are suffering from starvation but down here in Florida the Mercy Hospital and colored section is terrible. And even in the United States many people are starving . . . Sincerely, Roberta Anderson. Mr. President, I forgot to tell you what are you going to do about it?" And others opposed any government measures at all. Mrs. W. H. Kear of Columbus, Ohio recited the familiar complaint about the U. S. government's "communist" practices when regulating aspects of citizens' lives: "All you talk about is to preserve food for Europe but no production of refrigerators to preserve food here . . . The merchants have a few samples in windows but are not permitted to sell them until Communistic OPA [Office of Price Administration] says so." (Letters, 1946) While many were tired of going without, and felt now the war was over it was their turn to reap the rewards of peace and prosperity, many others understood that "winning the peace" required ongoing sacrifice and articulated a willingness to comply with mandatory rationing.

Herbert Hoover's Famine Emergency Committee and Famine Survey Mission

It was inevitable that former president Herbert Hoover would play some role in post-WWII famine relief. Hoover, almost as well-known as an expert in food-related matters as he was the president who brought on the Depression, had served as Food Administrator during World War I, and after that war played a significant role in European famine relief. As Director of the American Relief Administration in the 1920s, Hoover led a relief effort that virtually saved the Soviet Union during a severe grain shortage. More recently, in 1939-40, he had helped create Commissions for Polish and Finnish Relief, as well as the National Committee on Food for the Small Democracies. Thus Hoover had both the experience and the credibility to speak on matters of food and famine relief (*UNRRA*, 7; Mullendore, 1941; Best, 1975; Burner, 1979; Kennedy, 1978: 89, 93).

Even before the war officially ended, Truman realized he could make great gains with the American public, and with an unruly and increasingly conservative Congress, by using Hoover in some kind of relief-coordinating capacity. In an approving tone *Time* magazine reported on a June 1945 meeting between the two men: "Harry Truman," *Time* surmised, "facing the gigantic problem of Europe's hunger and poverty . . . [i]n one master stroke . . . won the applause of Republicans and had sharply reminded the nation of the immediate necessity of feeding Europe." *Time* articulated exactly Truman's intention for employing Hoover in the government's post-war relief efforts: "Even those who had balked at the idea of the U. S. 'feeding the world,' " the article continued, "would now give weight to Herbert Hoover's passionate V-E day declaration: 'It is now 11:59 on the clock of starvation' " (1945). Hoover's intense compassion for and sense of obligation toward famine victims fueled his lifelong involvement with international famine relief. But his equally passionate belief in limited government and the ideology of voluntarism persuaded him that famine relief be conducted strictly outside government controls (Best, 1975). By appointing Hoover as head of the administration's newly-formed Famine Emergency Committee, Truman was helping to reintroduce the pre-Depression ideology of voluntarism and limited government intervention — the same ideology that had been rejected as deficient and an ideological failure by the New Dealers. That Hoover was again in the government forefront, shaping American food relief programs and goals, suggests a retreat to a more limited theory of government in the immediate post-WWII world.

The Famine Emergency Committee (FEC), a hastily organized group whose members were culled mainly from food-processing industries and government agencies, held its initial meeting at the White House in early

March of 1946. The committee stressed the idea that given the abundance of U. S. food supplies, there was literally no other country aside from Canada that could save the rest of the world from starvation. Even though the U. S. government would be buying food directly from producers and processors, the large quantities of grain and fats needed for famine relief would affect U. S. domestic supplies to some extent. Thus the committee deemed it necessary to garner public support and cooperation in controlling the domestic demand for food. However, like most economic conservatives, FEC members were firmly convinced that government involvement in the marketplace would weaken the economy, and that no sacrifice was legitimate unless it resulted from unfettered individual free will. Not surprisingly, they advocated that the best way to reduce U. S. food consumption was through voluntary means rather than mandatory civilian rationing. They asked Americans to reduce their consumption voluntarily, and expected the response great enough to provide for global famine relief. In quasi-religious terms, the FEC declared in a press release, "This country [is] the principal hope for salvation." "It was unanimous and strong feeling," it continued, in an attempt to stir Americans' sense of obligation, "that our people knowing the facts will want to stop all wastage of foods and to deny themselves a substantial proportion of their daily consumption of certain foods, so that millions may survive who are otherwise doomed to death by starvation." (FEC, 1946a)

Within a week of its first meeting the Famine Emergency Committee issued not enforceable guidelines but merely recommendations for how the United States could save food so that the maximum tonnage possible could be sent overseas. The Committee, agreeing that the most important foodstuffs to export were wheat and fats, asked that all Americans decrease their wheat intake by 40 percent and fats and oils intake by 20 percent during the following three months, the critical period until the next harvest. Realizing that such abstract percentages meant little, the FEC made specific though cautious suggestions as to how both restaurants and citizens in their own homes could cut wheat and fats consumption. It recommended that restaurants avoid placing baskets of rolls on tables and limit the number of crackers they gave patrons with their soup, and advised professional bakeries to reduce the size of their loaves of bread while increasing the number of slices *per* loaf. It asked Americans to substitute corn or buckwheat cakes for regular pancakes, to eliminate three-layer cakes, and to buy less bread and waste none of it. In addition, to cut down on fats people were asked to adhere to at least one meatless day a week and to boil or broil foods rather than frying them. "If we fail we shall see a world of disorders which will paralyze every effort at recovery and peace," the FEC warned, hoping to magnify the seriousness of

the situation, "we shall see the death of millions of fellow human beings. Guns speak the first word of victory, but only food can speak the last word." (FEC, 1946a)

Hoover's main task as honorary chairman of the Famine Emergency Committee was to embark upon a world tour both to survey the famine situation and to visit those countries that might be able to supply impoverished nations with extra rice and wheat. The 35,000-mile trip took Hoover and his entourage, which included government and military officials and nine newspaper correspondents, to over twenty-five countries in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and South America. Hoover was adamant that the nature of his trip was not political, but a "combined fact-finding and goodwill mission," but the world tour did have a strongly political purpose — to sell the Truman Administration's voluntary food relief program to Americans themselves (FEC, 1946b; FEC, 1946c; FEC, 1946d; Fitzgerald, 1969).

After his tour Hoover returned home to make a speech in Chicago concerning the findings of his trip. In stark and dramatic language Hoover recreated for Americans the visually disturbing scenes he had witnessed:

I have seen with my own eyes the grimmest spectre of famine in all the history of the world. Of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the one named War has gone — at least for a while. But Famine, Pestilence and Death are still charging over the earth . . . Hunger hangs over the homes of more than 800,000,000 people — over one-third of the people of the earth. Hunger is a silent visitor who comes like a shadow. He sits beside every anxious mother three times each day. He brings not alone suffering and sorrow, but fear and terror. He carries disorder and the paralysis of government, and even its downfall. He is more destructive than armies, not only in human life but in morals. All of the values of right living melt before his invasions, and every gain of civilization crumbles. (Hoover, 1946a)

Hoover also attempted to win Americans' support of government relief measures by preaching the need to, if not love their enemies, then at least feed them for reasons of self interest. "There are others who, remembering the immeasurable crimes the enemy has committed against all mankind, believe in 'an eye for an eye,' a 'tooth for a tooth,'" Hoover told his audience in his London speech, referring to the Germans. "To these, let me say that to keep five hundred thousand American boys in garrison among starving women and children is unthinkable. It is impossible because of the danger to American boys of sweeping infectious diseases, which rise from famine. It is unthinkable because we do not want our boys machine-gunning famished rioters. It is unthinkable because we do not want the American flag flying over nationwide Buchenwalds." (FEC, 1946a)

Hoover's pleas proved effective, as hundreds of Americans wrote to the Famine Emergency Committee and its honorary chairman with their ideas and suggestions. "Evidence that Americans are turning their minds — as well as their hearts — to relief from starvation in less fortunate lands appears in the flood of letters that come to [FEC] headquarters," an April 1946 FEC release stated ("Public Responds," 1946). While this was indeed true, there were letters ambivalent toward or even critical of Hoover and the FEC. One woman's letter bluntly stated, "I thought the country was free from old Herbert Hoover. But, Pres. Truman had to go and get him mixed up in this, and send him running all over the world at the expence [*sic*] of the tax payers If I had done to the American people what Hoover did, I would not have had the nerve to ever show my face in public again, much less say anything." (Letters, 1946) Chances are more than one American balked at taking instructions about food consumption and famine relief from the man so strongly identified with the arrival of the Depression.³ Yet, others seem to have balked at the insufficient policies and measures prescribed by Hoover to ameliorate hunger abroad.

The Post-War Rationing Debate

By the time the U. S. began its famine relief campaign in earnest in early 1946, U. S. food rationing had been all but dismantled. There had always been internal disagreement over wartime rationing, especially among government agencies in charge of rationing and those whose job it was to protect FDR's support in Congress. Some in the Office of Price Administration (OPA), the agency responsible for overseeing rationing, had expected it to go on well into 1946. Even those in the War Food Administration (WFA), a rationing agency more beholden to farmers' interests than consumers', grudgingly admitted the possibility (McCullough, 1945; "Food Rationing After V-E Day," 1945). But the official government position, championed by Hoover and Secretary of Agriculture Clinton P. Anderson, and fully supported by business and agriculture, was that reestablishing domestic rationing in the postwar period was neither wise nor necessary.

Secretary of Agriculture Anderson and others opposed to the resumption of rationing rested their argument on four points, all grounded in the pre-New Deal ideology of limited government and individual voluntarism: First, reinstating the rationing program would take too long; by the time controls were in place the immediate crisis would be over. Second, rationing would actually decrease the amount of grain available for famine relief since it would lead to hoarding among Americans. Third, those opposed to mandatory rationing argued that it was better to let Americans make the sacrifice willingly and freely, that rationing would in

fact prevent Americans from gaining the satisfaction of sacrificing food from their own tables. A final and most compelling reason was simply that consumer rationing would not solve the problem. The solution, rather, lay with "intercepting" the grain much farther down the food chain, as it were. Since grain for famine relief was purchased from farmers instead of retailers, consumers need never be involved. The solution lay in production, not consumption. The public could simply purchase remaining available quantities on the domestic market. In his address to women broadcasters, FEC member Chester Davis explained:

Some seem to assume that simply by installing ticket rationing of bread we could assure meeting the goals. Nothing could be further off the mark. Consumer rationing is the end product of the process by which you cut down domestic supplies in order to increase exports. It is not the starting point. (1946)

While these arguments may appear convincing, a closer examination reveals a more complex situation that could have indeed benefited from mandatory rationing. Americans should have been confused by the argument that civilian rationing would not lead to more grain and fats available for famine relief. If what Anderson and others argued were true, that consumer rationing did not affect the amount of food saved at all, then why had there been wartime rationing in the first place? During the war, mandatory rationing functioned to distribute food more equitably among all Americans at fair prices, but it also worked to limit consumer demand for food, as removing demand at the retail end freed up more grain to be bought by the government at the production end. With mandatory rationing in effect, farmers knew that domestic consumption was limited, and therefore were more compelled to sell their grain to the government instead of trying to maintain their civilian markets, increase demand at home, and hold out for higher prices.⁴ Thus, post-war mandatory rationing for famine relief would function the same way. As it happened, without mandatory postwar rationing farmers held their grain off the market in the hopes of getting a higher domestic price (Matusow, 1967: 11). Moreover, immediately after the removal of meat rationing in 1945, all attempts at equitable meat distribution broke down as meat producers and processors sought the highest domestic prices possible. With meat prices climbing and domestic consumption skyrocketing, farmers rushed to sell their grain — grain that could have gone to famine relief — to ranchers as cattle feed (Wilcox, 1947: 180, 263).

So certain were post-war policy makers in their anti-mandatory rationing position that one official publication characterized those in favor of rationing as

lazy, even unpatriotic. "HAVE YOU MET THE CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR to food conservation who does nothing and says all this ought to be done by rationing?" it asked readers. Reflecting the anti-rationing rationale, the pamphlet continued: "Maybe there should be rationing and maybe there shouldn't be, but remember this: Rationing would not make available any additional food for shipment to the famine areas. . . . Rationing is a method of sharing what is left after the contribution for famine has been shipped, not a method of procuring food." ("Report - 5," 1946) What the pamphlet neglected to include was the fact that unlimited consumer demand influenced producers' willingness to sell grain for famine relief. It also neglected to mention that the government itself realized this strong connection between consumer demand and the amount of food available for relief efforts. After all, the FEC's voluntary rationing campaign was designed to do just what it argued mandatory rationing could not: reduce domestic consumption levels. Further, for the vast majority of consumers who had little control over matters of agricultural production, consumption was where they could make a difference. And most were willing to continue with mandatory rationing. That Anderson, one of the sharpest critics of FDR's wartime food policies, was now head of the USDA and dismantling rationing measures with speed indicates a sharp break with past government policy, and a distinct agenda aimed at serving the interests of private agricultural producers.⁵ One historian argues that "Nothing cast greater suspicion on Truman's sincerity on the subject of relief than his appointment of Anderson, [the self-proclaimed] 'apostle of abundant protection'." (Matusow, 1967: 9-10)

That consumers were willing to endure mandatory rationing after the end of the war is demonstrated by the post-war rationing of sugar. Americans during the war had been unhappy not so much with meat and canned goods rationing but that controls had been lifted and then reinstated without warning (Mansfield, 1947: 195-6). In contrast, Americans were used to and unfazed by sugar rationing, which had existed continuously without similar interruptions from its inception. The most significant reason the government continued sugar rationing was not that consumers were content, but that it was in business's best interest. For manufacturers and retailers it was better to maintain existing shares of short sugar supplies than to bet on benefiting from the higher prices that unrationed sugar would bring, and possibly end up with none at all. When sugar rationing was finally abandoned, well into 1947, supplies were plentiful, and the transition from rationing to free market sale and distribution was calm and orderly (Mansfield, 1947).

Although the government firmly defended its anti-mandatory rationing position, it had plenty of critics who thought otherwise and loudly protested the

government's policy.⁶ Those in favor of reinstating food rationing cited two main reasons, based on the premise that government intervention was the only way to meet commitments, and the only way to allow Americans to fulfill their desires to sacrifice for those abroad: First, voluntary rationing was simply not working. The U. S. was not meeting the grain tonnage it had promised, thus mandatory rationing was the only way to free up U. S. grain for famine relief. Second, critics of government policy pointed out that rationing was the most fair and equitable, the most "democratic," mode of food distribution. American citizens would be more likely to sacrifice food if they knew their neighbors had to do the same. Joseph S. Davis, of Stanford University's Food Research Institute, asserted

If some essential foods become so scarce that many consumers can get little or none of them while others 'hog' the limited supply, rationing will be a lesser evil, in the interest of fairness. It is nothing to fear, even if we find it inconvenient. In my opinion, we abandoned rationing (except for sugar) too soon. (1946)

Others were stronger in their criticisms of government policy, even going so far as to accuse the government of deceiving the public to serve the demands of business. Journalist I. F. Stone blasted the USDA for failing to enact stricter measures, and even accused the Secretary of Agriculture of lying. Clinton Anderson's "mistakes," Izzy Stone argued,

have been of the same kind: The kind that benefits farms and processor interests at the expense of wise planning and human need. The result is to increase hunger abroad and to stimulate the black market at home. We need rationing to cope with both, and to protect ourselves against adverse circumstances. (1946)

Women and Post-War Rationing, Voluntary and Mandatory

That those at the helm of government and business were opposed to mandatory post-war rationing was clear. But what did the American public, particularly women — as longtime guardians of family food preparation and consumption — have to say about the matter? While there is reason to be skeptical of the precision of public opinion polls, such surveys nevertheless provide important information about people's attitudes, and useful insight into their emotions and desires, and even their understanding of what measures lasting peace would require. In April 1943, a solid 63 percent of Americans polled thought post-war rationing would be necessary and thought it would continue for a year or two after the war (Cantril and Strunk, 1951: 225). This seemed in large part because of domestic shortages; Americans felt they would have a better chance at an equal supply of scarce goods if everyone submitted to mandatory rationing. Women were especially in favor of such measures. A January 1944 Office of War Information (OWI) report noted that more than 85 percent wanted to retain rationing if

there were shortages after the war ("What the Civilian Thinks," 1944). "Although many are said to be disgusted with food administration as they see it," the government's June *Housewives Report* noted, "there is little indication of any weakening in popular support of rationing." (1945) Many wanted price control and rationing after the war not only to maintain an equitable domestic consumption, but because it would contribute to world stability as well. A March 1945 poll showed that 79 percent of Americans thought it was in the country's best interest to help those overseas after the war (Cantril and Strunk, 1951: 737). In addition to anticipating post-war rationing for geopolitical reasons, Americans were willing to endure shortages after the war for more benevolent reasons. Women were even more likely than men to do without. A February 1946 poll asked, "Would you eat less meat and use less flour in order to send more food to the people of Europe?" to which 67 percent responded affirmatively. But significant is the breakdown of responses according to gender: 72 percent of women indicated they would eat less meat and use less flour, while only 61 percent of men did so (Cantril and Strunk, 1951: 219).

The limits of Americans' altruism and democratic obligation were made clear, however, if Japan were mentioned specifically. When asked if they would be willing to put up with such shortages "in order to give food to people who need it in Japan," the statistics almost reversed themselves: Only 33 percent indicated they would be willing to endure shortages for Japanese relief; 62 percent said they would be unwilling to do so. Moreover, only 12 percent of the one-third who responded positively said they would submit to mandatory rationing to feed the Japanese (Cantril and Strunk, 1951: 218). Hoover, in his attempt to persuade Americans to support global famine relief, came up against the same anti-Japanese feelings. Hoover knew full well that much of the good will Americans felt for those suffering abroad all but vanished when it came to the Japanese. He was aware of public opinion polls and the numerous letters Americans wrote to express their opposition to providing post-war relief to Japan. A few kind souls did write in support of helping the enemy. But many penned nasty letters revealing an ugly bigotry and hatred for the Germans as well as the Japanese (Letters, 1946). Despite such strong public opinion opposing aid for the Japanese, Hoover urged Americans to support shipping food to Japan (Hoover, 1946b). The statistics and sentiments support historian John Dower's thesis that the war in the Pacific was largely a race war, fueled by stereotypes that reinforced people's existing prejudices. Unlike Americans' ability to distinguish between the German people and the hated Nazis responsible for the war, a significant number of Americans by the end of the war bore a deep-rooted hatred for all Japanese, and regarded them

as subhuman beasts. Such a race of people, many Americans believed, were not deserving of any kind of help after the war, especially after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and their torture of American prisoners of war (Dower, 1986).⁷

But when asked about sacrificing food for victims of famine and war in a global context, the numbers were back to higher percentages. A March 1946 poll asked, "Would you be willing to go back to food rationing in order to send food to people in other nations?" to which 59 percent said "yes." Again, more women than men expressed their willingness to eat less: 64 percent of women as compared to 53 percent of men.⁸ Of those polled in April, after Truman's second speech concerning the world famine situation, the numbers of people willing to reduce their food intake climbed significantly to 70 percent. The next month, May, the figure dropped somewhat, to 65 percent, but again the number of women indicating their support for rationing (72 percent) was much higher than the number of men supporting rationing (58 percent) (Cantril and Strunk, 1951: 219). It is significant that every poll indicated that over half and as many as two-thirds of Americans were willing to sacrifice food and even to submit to postwar rationing to help feed those abroad in great need.

No doubt many Americans sought a return to rationing to ease the embarrassing, even painful discrepancy existing between the amount Americans and others consumed, a discrepancy growing more pronounced by the month.⁹ Some who wrote to the government expressed such sentiments couched in terms of guilt. That the United States was so rich while others had so little was for many almost too much to bear. From McLoud, Oklahoma a woman wrote: "As a missionary in China who helped relief work in 3 famines I know much more what the present world situation means than most people in the U. S. A. can imagine. The starving multitudes *haunt* me. *Please* let us *restore food rationing* for the people in this country and do *all* you can *quickly* to in every *possible* way share our abundance with our fellowmen." "If conditions in Europe are as I read," another wrote, "then I don't see how we can even enjoy a glass of milk. When we can keep these people from dying it's our duty to do so." (Letters, 1946)

Many Americans were adamant that the country should return to mandatory rationing in order to send as much food as possible overseas.¹⁰ Women's consumer organizations in particular voiced their criticisms of the Administration's current policies regarding famine relief. Women's protestations indicated that their felt democratic obligation extended beyond the private sphere of their own households. The female-dominated Consumer Advisor Committee to the OPA, for instance, sent a letter castigating Truman for what they perceived as his lack of commitment to the

cause. Drawing a distinction between consumers and producers, and acknowledging the corporate influence on government decisions, the women wrote

Please do not be misled, Mr. President, by the allegations or biased opinions of representatives of the "food interests." The people of this country have already offered compelling evidence that they would gladly accept rationing of scarce foods. It is our firm belief, and we are in touch with the countrywide membership of many large organizations, that you could take no more popular step at this time than to institute rationing.

Appealing to mandatory rationing as the most democratic of solutions, the women reasoned

The housewife wants a guarantee that when she takes pains to change her buying habits and the diet habits of her family to curtail her use of the scarce foods, all other housewives are doing likewise. Only a mandatory rationing system will convince her that food is going where it is most needed.

Others sent similar messages. Nearly 300 members of the "Wellesley College Community," including its president, sent a signed petition urging the president to resume rationing (Letters, 1946). Women's groups of all kinds expressed similar opinions on famine relief and all types of consumer interests, but according to one female member of Congress, they were not accorded much status in Washington, DC (Woodhouse, 1946).

It is significant that many invoked their status as women in urging the administration to resume rationing or send as much food as possible. As women who were endowed with the responsibility for matters of food, feeding, children and family, they felt a special license to speak on such matters. A St. Louis woman wrote

As a housewife with a family to feed, I most urgently pledge myself to do my part in conserving food so that we may meet all our commitments in sending food to the starving millions of Europe and Asia. I am sincerely in favor of your moving quickly to take food at the source and shipping it abroad immediately. All the women of our country will back you up solidly.

"My dear Mr. President," wrote Marjorie T. Webly, of New York City, "Every woman to whom I talk is only too willing to make sacrifices and to resume food rationing if only she can be assured that speedy shipments of food to European people will be the result." Another woman wrote:

I feel so ashamed and guilty for America's not sharing more . . . Feeding children is woman's natural concern - and believe me, every woman (and man too) that I know wants to feed all these children. Please let's do *lots* more *drastic* measures than this ineffectual voluntary campaign - let's not have selfishness or our negligence cause their *death*. (Letters, 1946)

If the women of the U. S. were willing to adhere to such measures, their letters implied, then surely the government had the consent of the entire American public to reinstate rationing.

Failures

While Americans expressed a strong desire to help relieve post-war famine conditions, when it came down to their daily meals it seemed that voluntary self-sacrifice, especially to feed a former enemy, was proving too difficult. Perhaps the majority of Americans indicated they were willing to accept mandatory rationing because although concerned about and anxious to help famine victims, they knew they were not very good at voluntarily decreasing their food consumption. The New York *World Telegram* articulated the dilemma:

More than 9 in every 10 Americans have heard or read something about the government's program to conserve food to send abroad, but considerably less than that number are doing anything now to save on the various much-needed foodstuffs, such as bread, flour, fats and oils.¹¹

A 1947 Gallup poll, when the public was still being asked to conserve food for famine relief, revealed that only 22 percent followed the government's suggestions of meatless Tuesdays, although 38 percent indicated they were planning to follow it. Twenty-nine percent responded that eating no meat on Tuesdays was "too difficult" (*Gallup Poll*, 1973: 686).

The bread shortages that developed did nothing to prove Americans' ability to decrease voluntarily their consumption of bread. The New York *Herald Tribune* reported that "Demand in New York for wheat bread is now so high that, despite European and Asiatic famines, many chain stores here are sold out of white loaves hours before closing time . . . Executives of [bread companies] cited rice and cornmeal as being too difficult to obtain in quantities, emphasizing that New Yorkers will not eat palatable substitutes unless they are compelled to do so . . . Chain dispensers of frankfurters were not hopeful of educating New Yorkers to eat corn pone with a hot dog ("Public Clinging to Taste," 1946). Businesses were not doing their part, either. The Secretary of Agriculture accused the bakery industry of lobbying Congress to kill the USDA order limiting domestic distribution of flour to 75 percent of 1945 levels (Anderson, 1946b). Another New York paper reported that fifty-five medium-priced restaurants were still serving two and three slices of bread *per* customer and placing heaping baskets of bread and rolls on their tables; more upscale restaurants, it seemed, were doing the same (Todrin, 1946). Post-war consumption levels reached new highs ("Food Crisis: 1946"). With such high demands for grains and meat at home, farmers and livestock producers had little incentive to divert their products away from such lucrative markets.

Only a few weeks into its famine relief program the U. S. government realized that voluntary rationing, and the campaigns to promote it, were failing markedly. As mentioned previously, the United States was

not meeting its export goals for famine relief at the same time that farmers were turning near record wheat crops, and American consumption levels of food reached an all time high. In the first four months of 1946 the U. S. fell short of its goal by 27,450,000 bushels of wheat (*Famine Campaign Roundup*, 1946). Chester Bowles, former OPA head, now director of the Office of Economic Stabilization, said in a broadcast he did not know "how many people have died" because of the nation's failure to meet its overseas grain shipment promises, "but it is on my conscience as I know it is on yours." To try to remedy the situation Bowles announced yet more free market incentives to persuade more farmers to sell their wheat to the government instead of elsewhere.¹²

What was to be the effect of these new measures on Americans? For the near future, they would be able to consume even more food than they were used to, especially meat, as it became clear that part of the reason the United States could not meet its grain pledges was because farmers were selling their grain to livestock producers for higher prices instead of to the government for famine relief. Bowles indicated there would be more meat on dinner tables during the next few months, but warned, "the 'pinch' is really going to be felt next winter and spring." "When the 'pinch' comes," he reasoned, "we aren't going to like it very much, but we would like ourselves a whole lot less if we went on callously, blindly, stuffing our own mouths while we defaulted on our plain obligations to the starving of this earth." ("Many Have Died," 1946) The announcement set off a fury of criticism, as many Americans felt strongly, as has been demonstrated, about sending aid abroad, even to the point of returning to mandatory rationing (Letters, 1946). While acknowledging the failure of voluntary measures and despite strong public sentiments, the government never seriously considered reinstating mandatory rationing measures.

Explanations

There was no doubt that the government's post-war famine relief program had failed. The richest nation, which had plenty left over after taking care of its citizens' needs, was not able to meet its grain pledges ("World's Densely Populated Areas are Hunger Spots," 1946). What had happened? First, many Americans could not or would not reduce their food consumption voluntarily. As indicated through polls and letters, many Americans were tired of the deprivation created by a decade of severe depression and a half-decade of war; they wanted to spend their money on, among other things, desirable foods such as red meat and baked goods. Some felt the measures curtailed their individual rights as Americans (Levenstein, 1993). Further, many were wary of a government requesting them to reduce their food intake, when during the Depression people had watched it destroy millions of

tons of food in the quest to stabilize agricultural prices. A number of Americans had tired of government regulation, or were not so sure wartime rationing had been necessary at all (Poppendieck, 1986; Leff, 1991: 1306; Mintz and Kellogg, 1988: 134). Some also were unwilling to reduce their consumption through voluntary means because they felt the U. S. should take care of its own first or, less benignly, because it had no obligation to feed the people of former enemy countries. Such sentiments contributed to the gross inadequacy of the voluntary rationing measures. Under such a program Americans, perhaps willing to reduce consumption for famine relief, were less likely to do so if they felt their neighbors were disregarding the restrictions by eating as much meat, fats, and wheat as they liked (Leff, 1991: 1302).

Despite the failure of voluntary rationing, however, there is clear evidence that the majority of Americans during this crucial period of post-war famine were willing to submit to post-war mandatory rationing. The government, by contrast, was not. The refusal to reinstate mandatory food rationing meant that women's kitchens were no longer the battlefronts the government had deemed them during the war; Americans' consumption habits were no longer the government's business (Bentley, 1992). Food had indeed "won the war," but was seen as no longer necessary to "win the peace," as it had been characterized while the war was in progress.

The United States failed to honor its commitment to overseas famine relief in part because of the return to a pre-1930s conservative ideology of voluntarism and government noninterference, an ideology embodied in the former President and post-WWII famine czar, Herbert Hoover (Dawley, 1991: chapters 8-9). First, long-standing ideologies of limited government and free-market capitalism had been only briefly interrupted by the Depression era and the war; now it was time to return to such a system whether or not its citizens agreed. The corporate world, which had developed a cozy relationship with government during the war, now asserted its ever-growing power to demand that the marketplace exist "unfettered." (Leff, 1991: May, 1991; Bernhard, 1991; Dawley, 1991) This was in part because the U. S. government itself was experiencing a changing of the guard. The Rooseveltian New Deal/wartime ideology of the government's social responsibility had ended, and in its place emerged an increasingly more Republican and more powerful Congress no longer willing to abide by such a philosophy (Mansfield, 1947: chapter 8). Second, as Jan Poppendieck has thoroughly documented, the USDA and the House Agricultural Committee were firmly in the hands of farm interests. Both were reluctant and at times vehemently opposed to any measures such as post-war rationing, which presented even the possibility of putting farmers at a disadvantage (Poppendieck,

1986: 93, 241; Poppendieck, 1985). In contrast, those willing to submit to mandatory rationing in order to send more food abroad, which included the majority of women, did not have access to such power (Woodhouse, 1946; Reid, 1944).

Perhaps as important as the ideology of the free market was the *lack* of a public ideology concerning the "public good," at least one defined by the forces of capitalism. Cultural historians examining notions of wartime sacrifice have defined what they call the "politics of sacrifice" and the notion of "democratic obligation." Both Mark H. Leff and Robert B. Westbrook have persuasively argued that during World War II, meanings of the war were largely conveyed to Americans by government and corporate image-makers as individual, personal concerns. Limited notions of wartime sacrifice and obligation couched in private terms were images and ideas driven from the top down, from Madison Avenue and Wall Street to American citizens. That is, they were ideas that justified the *status quo* and the imperatives of the "private" as defined by capitalism (Westbrook, 1990; Westbrook, 1993; Leff, 1991; Walzer, 1970). Leff and Westbrook argue that for those on the battlefield as well as the homefront, the meaning of the war revolved around essentially "private" matters such as protecting the home, the family, and consumption patterns ("Mom, apple pie, and Chevrolet," as it has been termed elsewhere). "Public" meanings about the war — even the conflict between democracy and fascism — were couched in terms of personal consumption. Thus, instead of explaining and illustrating war aims through larger, more philosophical explanations that applied to all people everywhere, private advertising and government propaganda overwhelmingly told Americans they were fighting the war to protect the "American Way of Life" (meaning the abundant material goods and pleasures), and to protect one's sweetheart and one's own family (instead of all people, or even all Americans) from Hitler.

While Leff's and Westbrook's arguments about Madison Avenue's construction of wartime ideology are convincing, I would like to suggest that Americans' understanding of such notions as the "politics of sacrifice" and "democratic obligation" are at times more public-oriented and expansive than these articulations allow. Indeed, the willingness of Americans, especially American women, to sacrifice foods at the end of the war and in the first years of postwar reconstruction in order to provide famine relief, indicates that the felt obligation of ordinary Americans toward war-devastated countries extended well beyond a mere concern for their own homes, families, and consumer desires. Many Americans, perhaps the majority, felt an obligation and a willingness to make private sacrifices on the basis of decidedly public — and moral — consideration. This larger, more public understanding of

sacrifice and democratic obligation stopped short, however, as it collided with largely racist-inspired feelings about the Japanese, the former enemy to the east.

The rationale and exploration of government policy makers and post-war food administrators, however, were much more narrow and "private" insofar as they were less willing to impose on the American people sacrifices Americans themselves were ready to make. In part this has to do with the private interests of the agriculture lobby, and in part with the reemergence of a conservative ideology grounded upon the premise that government interference in the marketplace was destructive of private interests, that government had a limited role in shaping peoples' decisions, and that the only significant government responsibility revolved around national security obligations. This combined ideology of voluntarism and producer-oriented economics resulted in a weak and ultimately inadequate response to global famine in the post-WWII era. The argument that the American people had a great worldwide obligation ran into an official ideology essentially contending that the government would take care of only those problems it felt that voluntarism and market forces could not address (Dawley, 1991).

The final contribution to the failure of post-war famine relief measures were increasing tensions between the U. S. and the Soviet Union, tensions that soon overpowered any other mode of global organization. It can be argued, for instance, that Hoover's Famine Survey Mission and subsequent food relief helped to divide the East and West, setting the stage for the Marshall Plan that would shortly emerge. Hoover himself was a staunch anti-Communist; from his diary and other writings it is clear that he saw much of the world in "us versus them" terms, terms that were becoming the norm at that time (Hoover, 1945; Hoover 1946d). Between Truman's first plea for American famine relief in February of 1946 and the announcement in May that the U. S. had not fulfilled its grain pledges, the world had heard Secretary of State James Byrnes's personal declaration of the cold war, Churchill's famous "Iron Curtain" speech in Fulton, Missouri, and had witnessed the USSR make its moves into Iran (Messer, 1982). After his meetings with French officials, with whom he was terrifically unimpressed, Hoover recorded in his diary: "I am confident that if we wish to save western civilization it must come from stopping famine in Western Europe first . . . this area west of the Iron Curtain must have preference." (Hoover, 1946d)

By 1946 it was clear that UNRRA, the organization in charge of famine relief, was not to survive the widening rift between the wartime allies. As relations between East and West became increasingly adversarial, the Soviet Union found itself backing away — as well as being invited to back away — from "united nations" relief, and turned toward taking care

of countries within its own sphere of influence (Higgins, 1947). In 1947 the United States withdrew its support of UNRRA, effectively killing the organization, and itself practiced what UNRRA Director General Fiorello LaGuardia disparagingly called "bread diplomacy," a policy of aiding only those countries whose politics was compatible with the U. S.'s (Hirshmann, 1949: 146-7; Pemberton, 1989: 93). International relief under "impartial" UN auspices, it seemed, was among the first casualties of the Cold War.

The United States would limp along in its efforts to meet food needs around the globe until the formulation of the Marshall Plan, which in 1948 finally became a coordinated effort to rebuild war-ravaged countries. In a move that both shocked and angered its allies, the day after V-J day the U. S. abruptly canceled all Lend Lease aid programs, arguably just at Europe's time of greatest need (Matusow, 1967: 13). By 1946 it was clear the U. S. Congress was reluctant to appropriate any more aid in significant amounts to Britain and other European nations. Meanwhile, Secretary of State George C. Marshall predicted "The patient is sinking while the doctors deliberate." After describing in a 1947 Harvard commencement speech the seriousness of the plight of Europe, Marshall suggested that European countries themselves devise a plan for European recovery, for which the United States could supply aid. Marshall declared, "Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos." In the U. S., momentum gathered to supply aid, especially when portrayed as a way to fend off the threat of Soviet-dominated communism. As it turned out, the U. S. agreed to fund only European nations accepting American terms, which contributed to the Soviet Union's denunciation of the Marshall Plan as an attempt to extend U. S. economic and political imperialism. A significant sum of \$12.5 billion over four years helped to supply countries with immediate aid, including foodstuffs, and to restore European economies in a relatively short period. By 1951 countries receiving U. S.-sponsored Marshall Plan aid saw their industrial output raised by 40 percent over 1938 (Cleese and Epps, 1990; Gimbel, 1976: Blum, 1977: 720).

Where the government-sponsored and -implemented Marshall Plan in the late 1940s succeeded in providing food to select European countries while rebuilding their economies, earlier attempts to relieve immediate post-war famine conditions through voluntary rationing failed. The majority of Americans, the most vocal of whom were women, had urged more pronounced famine relief measures, particularly for Europe. But public support for relief measures and even a stated willingness to reduce their own consumption was not enough to convince U. S. leaders to amass adequate aid through the return to mandatory rationing. It seemed only the fear of Communist takeover

could provoke Congress — in partnership with business interests — into taking sufficient measures to produce a lasting impact on famine conditions.

Notes

1. The Combined Food Board, begun as the Anglo-American Food Committee, was responsible for sending food to Britain under Lend-Lease. Eventually its name was changed, and Canada added as a member, but the organization proved too narrow to conduct any major food relief, especially after the war. (Rosen, 1951: chapters 7-8; UNRRA, 1944: 18). UNRRA was established in 1943 by the forty-four Allied countries that made up the recently-organized United Nations. Each country was to contribute one percent of its national income so that UNRRA might both bring "relief," meaning immediate aid, as well as "rehabilitate," to begin the long-term process of economic and agricultural stabilization in war torn countries (Hirshmann, 1949).
2. The news article declared 2500 calories to be the essential daily minimum number required (*New York Times*, 1947). A more recent article cites 2000 calories per day for the average woman and 2700 for the average man to be the number of calories burned per day ("Science Notebook," 1992).
3. Alan Dawley effectively argues that popular myth has placed too much emphasis on Hoover's inaction, and too much credit to FDR for his intervention during the Depression. The actual record, Dawley argues, is much more complicated (Dawley, 1991: 343).
4. It was hard enough with mandatory rationing and price controls to prevent farmers from doing this (Wilcox, 1947: 79).
5. As a congressman Secretary of Agriculture Clinton P. Anderson was chair of the House Food Committee, which during the war had been labeled by one newspaper a "frequent and caustic critic of Administration policies" ("House Food Probe Group Likely to Disband After Trip," 1945).
6. Occasionally there was even some indication of dissenting opinion within the government (Montgomery, 1946).
7. It is interesting that no similar poll asked Americans if they would be willing to eat less and ration food for Germans; most polls focused on relief measures to Europe as a whole. This omission itself is interesting, and perhaps indicates people's willingness to forgive Germans for wartime atrocities and their inability to forgive the Japanese. A couple of polls do compare Americans' responses toward food relief for Germans and the Japanese. A December 5, 1945 poll showed both 49 percent of Americans in general and veterans in particular thought that Germans in U. S.-occupied territory would "get enough to eat this winter." Forty-eight percent of Americans and 38 percent of veterans thought the U. S. should ship more food into this area. A March 1946 poll indicates people in roughly equal numbers

- thought the U. S. should either sell or give outright food to Germany and Japan. Twenty percent of those polled, however, thought the U. S. should give or sell nothing to Japan, as opposed to 13 percent who thought the U. S. should give or sell nothing to Germany (Cantril and Strunk, 1951: 218-219).
8. And by political affiliation, 65 percent of Democrats answered "yes" as opposed to 55 percent of Republicans (Cantril and Strunk, 1951: 219). The only poll I have come across in which a majority of respondents were not willing to go back to rationing was another March, 1946 poll, in which 46 percent approved of "having rationing again to feed people in other nations," as opposed to 50 percent who disapproved (Cantril and Strunk, 1951: 219. See also Weatherford, 1990: 215).
 9. Americans consumed more food than ever, many realized that the U. S. was regarded as gluttonous by those in famine-stricken countries. A U. S. journalist who was part of the Hoover entourage cabled home this message: "Average British person here on streets resents American full dinner table. Can't understand why rationing not reinstated. Thinks voluntary food conservation won't work in America." (Battles, 1946) Rationing measures, an OPA memo stated, would "help to clear this country of the blame of shirking its responsibility toward Europe. More and more newspaper and magazine headlines are carrying the implication that the American people in some way may be to blame for the developing food situation in Europe . . . Appraisal of opinions from many sources received by this Unit indicates that Americans are also willing to endure meat-fats rationing somewhat longer for the same reasons." ("The Domestic Food Outlook," 1945)
 10. Similarly, women in large numbers voiced their outrage at the infamous "pig slaughters" the government conducted to raise agriculture prices during the 1930s Depression (Poppendieck, 1985: 125).
 11. This discrepancy may have been in part because Americans were unsure of how much they are expected to cut down in food consumption. The poll indicated that most Americans thought the government asked them to reduce their bread intake by only 25 percent, when the number was actually the much higher 40 percent. Only 12 percent thought they needed to cut down on their fats and oils intake by 25 percent, which was close to the government's request of 20 percent (Gallup, 1946).
 12. There is strong evidence that Bowles was in favor of mandatory rationing for famine relief (Montgomery, 1946).

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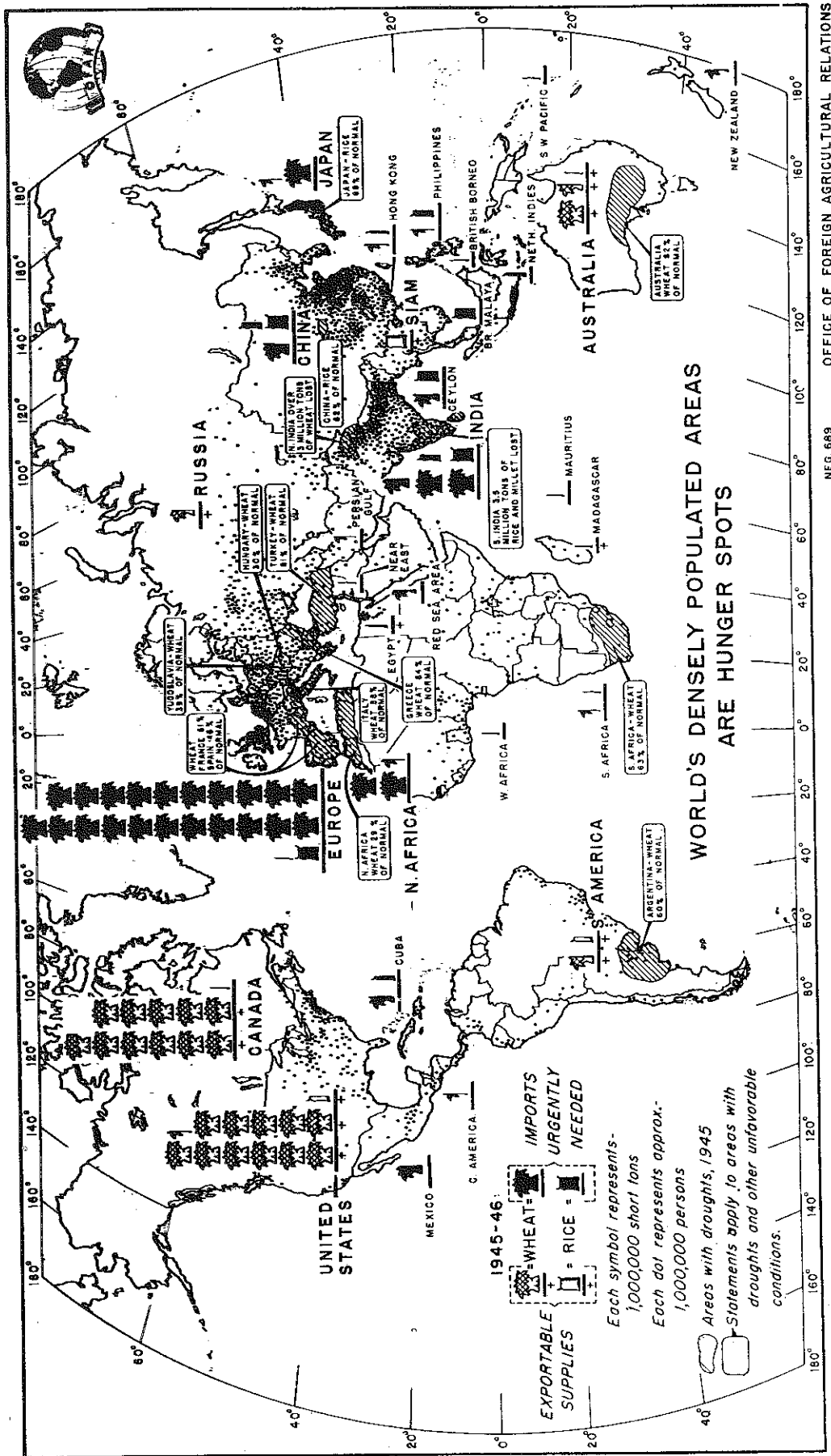
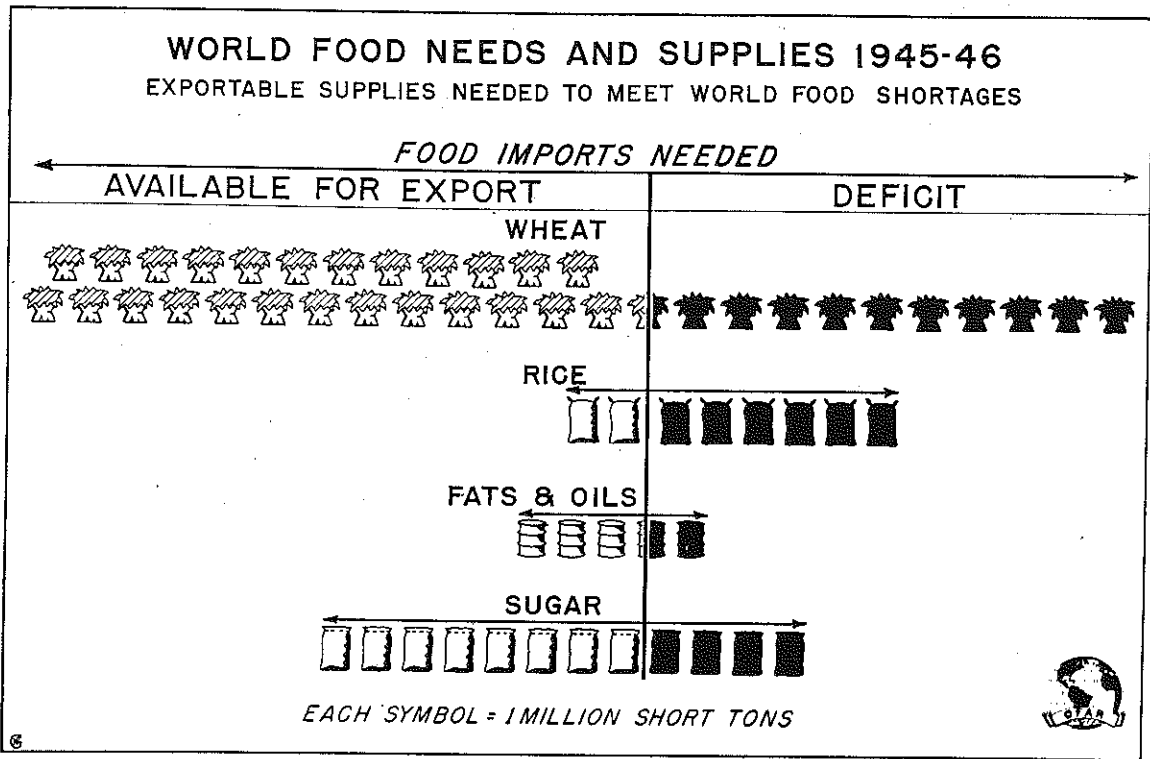


Figure 1. Part of *Facts on Food Around the Globe*. USDA Office of Information, April 1946. Reproduced at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.

Figure 2. From *Facts on Food Around the Globe*, USDA Office of Information, April 1946. Reproduced at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.



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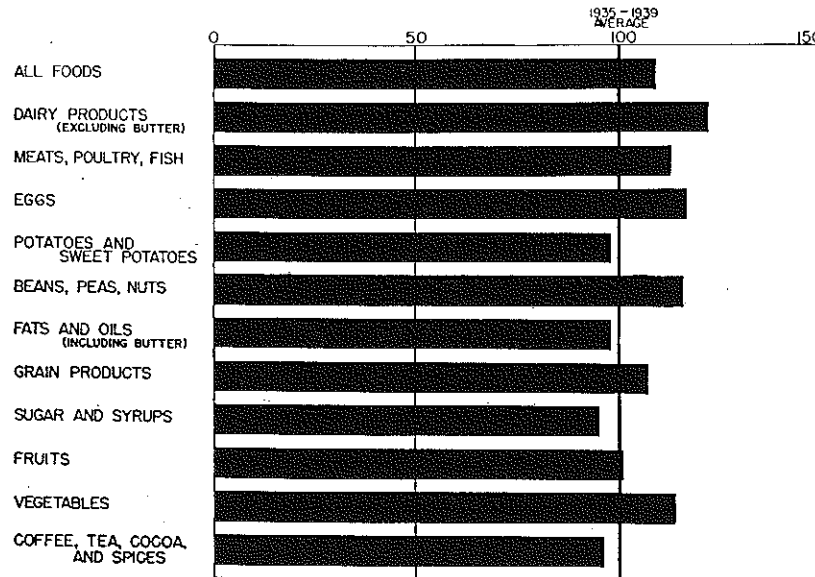


Figure 3. Civilian per capita consumption of major groups of foods during World War II as percentages of 1935-39 averages. From Walter Wilcox, *The Farmer in the Second World War* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State College Press, 1947).