

# The World Food Problem and U.S. Food Politics and Policies: 1979-1980

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A READINGS BOOK

*Ross B. Talbot*

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Ross Talbot is Professor of Political Science, Iowa State University

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# P R E F A C E

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Putting together a readings book is much more complicated than just selecting materials and writing introductions. A great deal of measuring, cutting, assembling, pasting, typing, proofing, and the like must take place. It is a tedious, exacting, sometimes nerve-wracking task. For those reasons, among others, I am especially obligated to William Parsons and Kris Earsom, a graduate student-research assistant and a parttime secretary, respectively. It was a novel experience for them, and they learned quickly and well.

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Ross B. Talbot

# CONTENTS

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## I. WHAT OUGHT THE UNITED STATES DO ABOUT WORLD HUNGER?

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS 1

### POLITICAL IDEALISM AND POLITICAL REALISM

Statement to the Presidential Commission on World Hunger

George Chauncey 5

An Interview with John Malecela of Tanzania 10

## II. THE WORLD FOOD SITUATION IN 1979-1980

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS 13

Global Food Assessment, 1980

USDA-ESCS 16

Crisis Countries 21

World Grain Situation Outlook for 1980-81

USDA-FAS 22

Population Growth and World Food Demand

Leo V. Mayer 23

FAO Director - General Says Development Hinges On Success In  
Agriculture 26

## III. WORLD FOOD PROBLEMS: CONTINUING CONFRONTATIONS

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS 28

### THE REFUGEES OF THE WORLD

1980 World Refugee Statistics 32

Kampuchean Refugees 34

Food Emergency in Africa 35

Somalian Refugees: An Unfolding Tragedy 36

### WORLD POPULATION, 1960-2000

Ambassador Marshall Green and Robert A. Fearey, Today's Children -  
Tomorrow's Parents 39

### DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

Aid in 1979

John Lewis 44

It's Time to Give Foreign Aid a Good Name

Richard Critchfield 48

The Hope of Development	
Douglas J. Bennet, Jr.	50
Only One Penny for the World's Poor	
Mary Jane Heyl	52
American Farmers and Foreign Aid	
Larry Marton	54
A Look at Our Roots	
OXFAM-America	55

#### MULTINATIONAL (TRANSNATIONAL) CORPORATIONS

The Nestle Boycott: Is it Fair?	
Stephen Webbe	57

#### AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

IADS, Investment in Agricultural Research	59
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#### THE WORLD'S VILLAGES

A Universal World Culture	
Richard Critchfield	64

### IV. WORLD FOOD INSTITUTIONS: CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

#### INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS 65

#### FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION (FAO)

FAO Director-General (Edouard Saouma) Calls for Greater Efforts to Boost Food Production	70
FAO's Programme of Work and Budget, 1980-81	74

#### WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME (WFP)

FAO, <u>FAO in 1979</u> (World Food Programme)	75
Vogel Describes Power of Food Aid for TV, Radio Audiences	76

#### WORLD FOOD COUNCIL (WFC) AND THE INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT (IFAD)

U.S. General Accounting Office, WFC Institutions Aid International Food Development Efforts	79
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#### WORLD CONFERENCE ON AGRARIAN REFORM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT (WCARRD)

The Three Tiers of "Basic Needs" for Rural Development	
Hernan Santa Cruz	86
Summary of His Speech at WCARRD	
Julius K. Nyerere	89
A Fresh Approach to Rural Development	
Royal Dutch/Shell	91

### V. U.S. FOOD POLITICS AND POLICIES

#### INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS 93

#### POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Frustrations of the Farmers	
Robert J. Samuelson	98
Economic Analysis and Politics in Agricultural Policymaking in the	

Executive Branch  
Bruce Gardner 99

#### U.S. AGRICULTURAL EXPORTS AND IMPORTS

USDA, Outlook for U.S. Agricultural Exports 104  
The World Dimension to U.S. Agriculture Trade  
Harold R. Breimyer and Abner W. Womack 108  
Transportation Hurdles Challenge U.S. Grain Shippers  
Beverly Horsley 112  
Dairy Folk Love Federal "Meddling"  
Lauren Soth 117

#### U.S. FOOD AID

World Food Demand and U.S. Food Aid  
Leo V. Mayer 118  
Food Aid: Does It Help the Poor?  
G. Edward Schuh 122

#### NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL GRAIN RESERVES

Status of International Grain Agreements  
Dale E. Hathaway 126  
U.S. House Committee on Agriculture, Press Release 129  
Interreligious Task Force on U.S. Food Policy, Gains Made in Lane  
Duck Session 130  
The Men Who Won't Give Up  
Richard M. Harley 131

#### THE SOVIET GRAIN EMBARGO

Soviet Agriculture and the Grain Trade  
John P. Hardt and Kate S. Tomlinson 132  
Agriculture: U.S. Food Power in International Affairs  
A. Ellen Terpstra 137

#### U.S.-PRC GRAIN AGREEMENT

Building Bridges to China  
Barry Murray 142

#### OUTLOOK FOR 1981

The Agricultural Outlook for 1981  
The Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago 145  
Looking for Goals  
Jerry Hagstrom 149  
Toward a More Just U.S. Farm Policy 150

### VI. STRATEGIES FOR THE 1980's

#### INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS 154

World Food Strategy for the 1980's  
John W. Mellor 157  
World Food Council Meets In Arusha, Tanzania, 3-6 June, 1980 160  
Presidential Commission on World Food Hunger, Summary of Report 164  
Let Them Eat Missiles  
Dick Kirschten 166

The Brandt Commission, Summary of Report	167
Illusions Amid High Hopes	
Ralf Dahrendorf	170



# I. *What Ought the United States Do about World Hunger?*

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## INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

A hundred years from now the historians who are studying the second half of the 20th century will surely record world hunger as one of the major public concerns of the U.S. Government, indeed, of most national governments and several of the international agencies. They will likely record, too, that a rather incredible amount of naivete on this subject prevailed during the late 1940's and throughout the 1950's: things will settle down after the fighting (World War II) stops; science and technology will team up to solve the food production problems in Asia, Africa and Latin America; the Marshall Plan is the analogue of the future, as examples.

During the late 1950's and the first half of the next decade we in the United States developed a kind of food surplus complex. Our agricultural production was so superabundant that one chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture exclaimed: "Get rid of it, somehow. In mid-ocean, if necessary." (A paraphrase.) We seemed to believe that if we must (although we shouldn't have to) the United States could feed the hungry world, and U.S. exports, heavily subsidized, to India during 1964-66 seemed to give some credence to what was really a myth. And to temper this false perception we should also have remembered that the United States was (and is) the world's major importer of food commodities.

Then in the latter years of the Viet Nam War, U.S. food became a subtle

but definite instrument of U.S. foreign policy, and, particularly so in Southeast Asia. A very complicated issue, generally summarized under the title of "food power", began to appear intermittently on the public agenda: should we--could we--how would we--would it work, and other such questions came, quite properly, to be subjects of research and public debate. Then followed the Egyptian-Israeli war and the rise of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) as a major world force, and the food power versus oil power controversy came to be an important topic of public discussion. However, within the (non-oil productin) developing nations that controversy was of no particular consequence. They were already in trouble, but the drastic rise in oil prices seriously aggravated an already worsening condition. And the economic and political shock to the nations of the West was also of major proportions, although rich nations could and did adjust to such shocks more effectively than the poor nations.

Occurring almost ~~simultaneously~~ were several developments which culminated in the creation of a world food crisis. Thus, in November 1974, nearly all of the world's nations and relevant international agencies met in Rome and held a third World Food Conference. This meeting was much superior to the others in that the resolutions (although still resolutions) were much more explicit as to what must be done concerning matters such as food aid, food reserves and food production. Of principal concern, then and now, was the issue of higher food production, in both the industrial and the developing nations, but with particular emphasis on the latter.

The old myth (the United States can feed the world) was dead; a new myth was born: a developing nation must re-direct its economy toward the

strengthening--i.e., giving highest priority to its agricultural/rural sector). However--and this may be the Catch 22 twist--this can only be done if there is massive financial and technical support forthcoming from the Western and OPEC nations. Although the Conference resolutions emphasized the economic and technological factors, behind and governing those factors were those of a basically moral and political nature. And it is to that basic proposition that both of the reprints are directed.

To George Chauncey, the issue is essentially affirmed by the governance of a transcendental (noumenalist, if you prefer) truth. To have some half-billion to over one billion (the estimates vary widely) human beings in a condition of severe malnutrition and "absolute poverty" is to him (and to me) a moral outrage. The West's Judeo-Christian-humanistic ethic demands that the United States (his target of central concern) assume the role of world leadership and proceed to so act that this scourge may be removed, hopefully forever. As Chauncey is well aware, the political realities that prevailed in Washington D.C. and throughout the nation in 1979-1980 were not supportive of the economic and political decisions which would necessarily have to be made. Even so, in his judgement this moral issue must be presented, aggressively and positively, again and again.

The interview with Malecela is included so that the reader will have the opportunity to reflect on the dichotomy of political idealism versus political realism. True, there is a good amount of idealism in his presentation, too, as well as in the FAO's Regional Food Plan for Africa (1978). Nevertheless, note the sharp political realities of the African food situation, according to Malecela. Speaking to the elites at home, and by indirection to those in the United States, he presses hard on their desire, their need, for political stability; literally, their very survival may depend on

it. Preferably there should be "growth with equity", but at least there must be economic growth; otherwise, there will likely (surely?) be revolution, or so he argues.

In part, at least, because of this spectre, development assistance to the rural and agricultural sectors of the developing nations became the dominant theme of the 1970's and apparently will continue to be so well into the 1980's. Keep in mind, however, that the development assistance myth is still on the systemic rather than the policy agenda. (Political science terminology meaning that we are discussing the issue but not effectively acting on it, which are probably partial truths in both instances). Nor does there seem to be much reason for optimism as we look ahead to the 1981-1984 period, and notably so in the United States. We might translate the recent report (March 1980) of the President's Commission on World Hunger (Overcoming World Hunger) into political action, if we should come to really believe what the Tanzanian minister contends. This would be a kind of reversion to the "stomach Communism" that was so evident during the Marshall Plan period--i.e. hungry people become Communists; therefore, it is in our national interest to help put good food into their stomachs. It was actually an effective political slogan but surely we can find the political mind and political will to tie together the stomach and the heart!

## POLITICAL IDEALISM AND POLITICAL REALISM

## STATEMENT TO THE PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION ON WORLD HUNGER

by George Chauncey

Every answer to the question, "What ought the United States do about world hunger?" reflects at least three things: (1) an interpretation of the meaning of world hunger, (2) an analysis of the causes of world hunger, (3) a judgment as to the changes required if world hunger is to be significantly reduced.

I believe the Commission can best serve the President, the American public, and the millions of people who now suffer hunger if it engenders widespread public discussion of these three components in any answer to the basic question; if it solicits and identifies alternative views now held by various persons and groups in our society; and if it takes a forthright position and justifies its own stance.

The three questions which I pose as priority questions for the Commission are thus:

1. How are we to understand world hunger?
2. Why are so many millions hungry?
3. What changes are required if hunger is to be reduced?

I want to comment on each question.

1. How are we to understand world hunger? What are we to make of the fact that millions of men, women, and children suffer chronic malnutrition? What meaning shall we find in the death by starvation of a little child?

Understanding always grows out of both empirical data and those moral beliefs, commitments, and sensitivities that we bring to data. Empirical evidence is essential, for meanings cannot be imposed on life without regard to the facts. But sheer factual evidence is rarely if ever self-interpreting: it takes on meaning within the moral histories, loyalties, and purposes of persons and communities. As Roger Shinn has observed:

Human death, to take one of the most obvious of all facts, is never solely a fact: it enters human experience as fate or as accident, as tragedy or absurdity, as defeat or victory, as murder or manslaughter or simple error, as moral outrage or as natural necessity, as enemy or as friend. In any given case the meaning of a death is determined in part by the facts of the situation; it is determined also by the web of experience, beliefs, and commitments by which persons meet the death of themselves and of others.

I am concerned with the question of how we are to interpret the death of little children from hunger-related causes, how we are to understand hunger.

I discern at least two distinct understandings of the meaning of hunger in public discussion today. On the one hand, there are those who see world hunger as an historical misfortune. Millions are malnourished; that's too bad. Little babies die; that's a pity. The impoverished suffer; that's the way things are. According to this view, hunger, like cancer, is one of the baffling mysteries of life. Its victims are to be pitied--but their fate is to be accepted. Life is unfair. The poor we have with us always. That's the way things are.

In the other basic perspective, ~~first~~ in the first, those who suffer hunger are seen as victims; but their plight is regarded not as inevitable misfortune but as moral outrage, not as the fruit of the strange working of fate but as the consequence of the current political, social, economic arrangements, not as evidence that "life" is unfair but as symptom of a human-created disorder.

I am not at all sure what the various factors are that lead some to view hunger as mysterious misfortune and others to view it as moral outrage. I do not know why some find the death of little children from hunger-related causes morally tolerable, while others find it morally intolerable. Different interpretations of the causes of hunger surely play a role, as do different judgments as to the human culpability in creating those causes; and different perceptions as to whether those deaths are needless.

I am convinced, however, that the way in which we perceive the problem and the value which we place on those who are its victims will radically affect our response.

Are the wretched of the earth companions to whom we are bound in the solidarity of the human community? Do they by their very existence as persons have certain rights which create for the rest of us corresponding obligations? Do they, in their deprivation, lay claims which we ignore only to our own degradation?

There is much talk these days about the need to create "the political will" to address the problem of world hunger. Such public commitment, I believe, will emerge only from the interaction of persistent external pressure and the conversion of the public conscience. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a successful social revolution in this country because he both kept up the external pressure and appealed to the conscience of the American people. We could have successfully resisted him had he done only one and not the other. Because he did both, he won some significant victories. He forced us to see the racial situation in a new way.

This Commission has an opportunity to help the American people see world hunger in a new way. Your efforts will be of little avail unless the victims of the way things are keep pressure on us. We are not apt to make the required changes through moral suasion alone. But external pressure alone will not engender the required political will. We must see things in a new way.

I hope you will seize the opportunity that is yours to open up for the American public new ways of understanding hunger. I hope you will compel both public officials and private citizens to ask: Is this human misery necessary? I hope

you will help build a new public commitment to simple human decency and justice.

How you interpret the meaning of hunger can be a powerful factor in building a new political will. Dorothee Soelle suggests that we begin by "naming things by their right name." This means, she says, "calling the hungry, 'those we let starve'."

2. What are the causes of world hunger? As there are different interpretations of the meaning of hunger, so there are various interpretations of its causes. A valid analysis of the causes is, of course, essential, for the way in which we diagnose the problem will significantly affect our proposed remedy.

If we think millions go hungry primarily because bad weather occasionally ruins crops, then we will hope--and perhaps pray--for rain or sunshine, as the need may be. If we think the basic problem is a scarcity of food, we'll focus on increasing food production. If we think the problem is not a scarcity of food but its maldistribution, we'll look for new ways of distributing available food.

There seems widespread agreement that hunger is strongly correlated with, if not directly caused by, poverty; but this shared insight only pushes the question back to a deeper level: Why are there so many poor people despite a long period during which the gross planetary product has steadily increased? Shall we blame capitalism or imperialism? selfish leaders and ruling groups? the ignorance, corruption, and inefficiency of governments or the backwardness of societies? obscure machinations by multinational corporations? unchecked population growth? the exhaustion of cheap resources? Why are the poor so poor?

The underlying causes of global hunger and poverty are no doubt complex and interrelated; and the Commission would do itself and the public a disservice by providing an easy answer to a difficult question. Yet perhaps in the midst of the complexity there are some pivotal causes which would provide clues as to what is essential if the problem is to be responsibly addressed. I hope you will seek those pivotal causes.

I would be surprised and I think, somewhat disappointed, if the Commission reached full consensus in its social analysis: surprised because I assume different members of the Commission bring different ideological presuppositions to their analysis; disappointed because consensus would demonstrate that that assumption was unwarranted. But I hope you will reach consensus at least about the urgent need to hear divergent analyses and to lay before the President and the American people an overview of what those various interpretations are.

In particular, I hope you will make a conscious effort to solicit and hear the viewpoints of those who most seriously challenge commonly accepted US and Northern assumptions. Louis Wirth once observed that "The most important thing...that we can know about a person is what he takes for granted, and the most elemental and important facts about a society are those things that are seldom debated and generally regarded as settled." I hope that you will question the generally settled and debate the seldom debated. While the Commission has been appointed by the President, it is not a government unit, and it is under no obligation to reflect either the traditional analyses or recommendations of government agencies. You have an opportunity to think new thoughts. I hope you will seize that opportunity.



3. What changes are required? As I understand the situation, various persons and groups are calling for change on three different levels.

Some are calling for improvements in current US policies and programs. In what ways can we make US development assistance programs more effective? What changes are needed in agricultural policy? in domestic nutrition and feeding programs? This is the level of discrete policy decision-making, and is by no means unimportant. In recent years the Taskforce has made extensive recommendations on such matters to Congressional committees, the 1976 Democratic and Republican platform committees, the Carter transition team, the President's World Hunger Working Group, and the Secretary of Agriculture's Special PL 480 Task Force. (We hope, incidentally, that the reports of the latter two groups will be taken seriously by the Commission.)

On a second level, many are calling for systemic changes, that is, changes in the way the global political economy operates. Some regard the call for a New International Economic Order as a call for systemic changes, a "new set of rules to play the game by," although other observers note that the ideology of the demand is impeccably capitalist, and that all of the demands could be granted within the general framework of the current world social system. Thus, many on the second level are calling for something more radical than even reforms in how the present system is run; they are calling for a new system.

On the third level, many of the most thoughtful people of our time are calling for a perception change, a change in how we see things. In a recent book, Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen observe:

The literature of those who worry most about global well-being shows a remarkable consensus about this. Despite wide differences in both diagnosis of the present and prognosis for the future, there is one solid common conclusion: ours is a time in which change in perception is critical to any kind of humane future.

Different terms are used. Some speak of changes in "cultural premises," "core values," and "root images." Others call it change in "basic assumptions and beliefs," "definitions of the good life," and "world view." The thrust is unmistakably the same--a clarion call for more than technological fixes, more than ferreting out the structural causes of systemic disorders. Change in the inner world of society and culture is called for, and not only rearrangements in the vast outer apparatus, vital though that is.

I share the view of those who believe that we are now living at a time between the times, at a moment in human history when one era is ending and the emergent era has not yet been fully shaped. I am by no means an expert in these things, but I am persuaded by those who say that humankind is at a turning point; that a two hundred year boom in which the basic answer to gnawing social problems was always "more, simply more" is now drawing to an end; that we are now confronted with a cluster of interacting limits--resource, population, economic, environmental, social, and political--that has put us on the walking edge of many quagmires. As Birch and Rasmussen put it: "We, the human family, cannot afford the modern world; and neither can the rest of nature."



This means, among other things, that in the years ahead managing scarcity differently, rather than managing abundance differently, must be the way of closing the gap between the rich and the poor, the well-fed and the hungry. If we are to do this with any measure of justice, more will be needed than the application of common cultural perspectives. Different perspectives will be required.

Your assignment, to be sure, is not to convert the public to a new point of view but to develop some policy recommendations for the President. I hope, however, that as you develop your recommendations you will be sensitive--and will help the American people become more sensitive--to the human and moral meaning of hunger, to the new social, economic, environmental and political context in which we live, and to the need for changes not only in policies and systems, but also in perceptions and commitments. In a word, I hope the Commission will do much more than prepare one more traditional Presidential Commission report. I hope it will contribute to the growing understanding, as a group of Christians and Jews declared at an Aspen Consultation in 1975, that "a profound conversion from one set of values, interests, and loyalties to another will be required if global injustice is to be progressively diminished and global justice more perfectly realized."