

The 1972 Soviet-American Grain Deal:
The Unintended Environmental Consequences of Trading with the Enemy

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At lunchtime on October 16th, 1975, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called his counterpart in the Agriculture Department, Earl Butz, to talk about food, but he was in no mood to break bread. Kissinger snapped at Butz that the *Washington Post* had ruined his breakfast with a leaked report about negotiations between the US and USSR on grain sales. When Butz protested that his people had not leaked anything, Kissinger drily noted that no one at USDA knew anything about world politics anyway. He then complained, “You know, in fact, Earl, for a variety of reasons including total indiscipline in the government, we have not gotten out of this grain situation what we should have.” While Butz might have responded that no one in the State Department knew anything about grain, he chose to take the high road (not his preferred method of travel) and agree with Kissinger that the grain deals with the Soviets over the previous four years had been a mixed blessing.¹

Kissinger cannot be blamed for focusing on indiscipline in government given his first-hand knowledge of leaks, but it is fair to say that he never really contemplated all that might fall under his phrase “a variety of reasons.” Likewise, when he expressed frustration that the US had not gotten the leverage for which he had striven, he was not being very imaginative about the consequences of selling millions of tons of food to the Soviets. At the most basic level, the US failed to get what it wanted in 1972 because no fixed treaty could adjust for the vagaries of the weather over a nation as vast and challenging as the Soviet Union. And his focus on leverage prevented him from foreseeing the environmental consequences of shipping millions of tons of grain to the Soviets,

¹ Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between Secretary of State Kissinger and Secretary of Agriculture Butz Washington, October 16, 1975, 12:03 p.m. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-76, vol. 16, document 209.

which included an expansion of tilled acreage in the United States and abroad, as well as increased competition for grain globally. The US-Soviet grain deals ended up buying a few more decent years of food availability in the Soviet Union, provided a nice market to US farmers, and strained the world's food supply in ways that no one seemed to anticipate.

Yet when historians and participants write about the 1972 Moscow summit, the grain deal is usually an afterthought. Nixon and Kissinger barely touch on it, despite the thousands of pages of memoirs they combined to produce. Jeremi Suri, Robert Schulzinger, and Jussi Hanhimaki don't mention it in their biographies of Kissinger. John Lewis Gaddis has only a few words to say about it in his various books, and Walter LaFeber in *America, Russia, and the Cold War* briefly summarizes it as the "great grain robbery," in which the Soviets outfoxed US negotiators.² Arne Westad is one of the few I could find who analyzed it as a sign of Soviet weakness, but even that appears on just one page.³ It seems that only Raymond Garthoff among Cold War historians has paid sustained attention to grain issues, but then he had about 900 pages to fill. The general Cold War lesson about the grain sales seems to be that they did as much to tie the hands of the US, because American farmers expected the lucrative sales to continue, as they did to provide leverage over the USSR. Nick Cullather briefly discusses the implications of the deal, connecting it both to Butz's famous call to farmers to plant "wall to wall" and Nixon's desire to use food for strategic purposes.⁴ I consulted with my Russianist colleague, Cathy Frierson, who could not come up with the name of anyone writing about the deal from the Russian side. Given that the redirection of surplus grain from the United States to the Soviet Union had enormous consequences for the global food market and hence for people and the terrestrial environment almost everywhere, I believe that the grain agreement was in the long run as important as the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty and similar subjects that got and still get far more attention.

² Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War* 9th ed, 283.

³ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Time* p. 242.

⁴ Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Hunger in Asia* (256-7).

The grain sale agreement was a shock to most observers both because of its size and because it broke a larger pattern of US foreign policy. Exporting food freely had been a central US foreign policy tool and goal since 1775, as the US had long favored keeping food off contraband lists, for instance, as early as the Model Treaty. Passage in 1954 of Public Law 480, known sometimes as Food for Peace, had added the goals of converting neutrals into allies during the Cold War and promoting humanitarian relief to the old goal of defending neutral rights. Before, the federal government's job had been to improve conditions for exporting crops; now it was the federal government's job to seal deals. The agreements in 1972 to sell grain to both the Peoples Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics were different, then, because the United States was now going to use the superior productivity of its agricultural sector to modify behavior of countries that might be described as rivals, if not enemies. Rarely in history does a country offer to feed its enemy, even at a profit, and especially not, as in this case, at a loss. Of course, President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, perceived the world like they did morality, with plenty of grey area, and they saw grain sales as part of managing a complex strategic relationship with the Soviets, moving from enmity to rivalry and possibly partnership. But of course to do so the Administration had to use food that had previously been earmarked for other things.

From the Soviet side, the grain deal marked a dramatic shift away from trying to be self-sufficient in food, at least within the Eastern Bloc. Russia had long been thought of as the breadbasket of Europe, or at least Eastern Europe, but by 1970 it was becoming increasingly clear that the USSR had not figured out the finer points of agricultural management. The deficiencies of Soviet agriculture were rooted in a series of incredibly bad political decisions. To be fair, most of the western Soviet Union's farm land had been fought over during World War II, so the farm infrastructure had simply been destroyed and a generation of farmers had nearly been wiped out. In the mid-1970s, observers reported that the Soviet Union had two times as much farm land and six times as many people working that land as the United States, but with far lower productivity. One analyst noted that Russia had exported grain long before

anyone had dreamed of a United States; even in Stalin's day, the Soviet Union had exported grain.⁵

Brezhnev, however, maintained Stalin's prized collective farms without Stalin's system of terror that kept the farmers in line, willing to subsist on beets and potatoes while the grains left the country. Simply put, the peasants now expected to eat bread too even as the Kremlin wanted to export food to Eastern Europe to support its client states. And everyone wanted meat. A bitter protest in Novocherkassk in June 1962 had started over an increase in meat and butter prices. Workers turned violent and Soviet leaders responded with a show of force, killing more than a score of protesters and executing at least seven after trials. Soviet leaders drew their conclusions and never raised food prices again.⁶ Leonid Brezhnev, who took power two years later, decided that his survival depended on getting more meat into his comrades' bellies, with a target of 82 kilograms per person annually (production in 1970 was about 48 kilos per capita). That required more high-quality grain to feed the livestock, but almost none of the USSR was warm and wet enough to grow corn, compared to the huge swath of the American Midwest that appears to be nothing but corn. It should be noted that Brezhnev made his first big jump up the ladder in the 1950s when Nikita Khrushchev put him in charge of the virgin lands campaign; this was an important issue to him.⁷

Premier Brezhnev's solution was to adopt what political scientist Roy Laird called the extensive, high-technology aspects of US farming, in a setting where they simply could not work. Laird defined an extensive system as one that used machinery and chemicals instead of labor and natural fertilizer whenever possible, as well as having a focus on profit as the measure of success. By comparison, most of Europe used what he called an intensive system, which relied more on cheap labor and natural fertilizers, and in turn generated higher yields. The Soviet Union had inherited that tradition but its leaders decided that

⁵ Alexander Yanov, "Behind the Soviet Union's Grain Purchases," *New York Times* 31 Dec. 1975.

⁶ Samuel Baron, *Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union: Novocherkassk, 1962*, Stanford University Press.

⁷ Alexander Yanov, "Behind the Soviet Union's Grain Purchases," *New York Times* 31 Dec. 1975.

it was not sufficiently productive. Brezhnev reported in 1972 that the Communist Party was emphasizing “comprehensive mechanization, chemicalization, and large-scale land improvement.” Of course, this all was expensive, and Laird estimated that the cities had swung from being supported by farms to subsidizing farms to the tune of 11 billion rubles per year.⁸

Brezhnev ordered heavy investment in fertilizer, machinery, agricultural education, and even a mini virgin lands campaign in Siberia. And yet it was apparent to commentators in the United States that he was simply piling more weight onto pillars that could not support it. For instance, the Soviet Union produced 2.4 million tractors between 1966 and 1973, but the total number of working tractors went up by only 567,000, apparently because no one on the collective farms had the responsibility to park them inside. To their good fortune, the Soviets converted much of their fallow land to fields in 1973, and were rewarded by unusually good weather for grain to generate the record grain crop.⁹

And yet by 1975, despite this enormous effort, the Soviet farms simply could not produce enough of anything. US acres yielded about 60% more wheat, even adjusting for the differences between winter wheat and spring wheat. The Soviets produced only half as much meat per person as the US and less than 2/3 of what the Soviet government considered to be the desirable norm. And even milk per cow and eggs per hen were substantially below US levels. On top of all that, analyst Laird reported, approximately 15% of all grain was simply lost. So while there had been progress, he concluded, population growth and diminishing returns on the big investments meant that the Soviet government was actually going to lose ground on its promise to increase the quantity of meat available in the late 1970s. If adopting Western methods was not sufficient, then the Soviets would have to buy actual Western grain. Laird concluded that the Soviets started buying grain in 1972 as a means to ensure that that shortage did

⁸ Roy Laird, “Soviet Agriculture in 1973 and Beyond in Light of United States Performance,” in Bernard W. Eissenstat, ed., *The Soviet Union: The Seventies and Beyond*, D. C. Heath, 1975, 181-96.

⁹ Soviets plan to clear, plant western Siberia, 25 Mar 1974, CSM; Brezhnev reforms, *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 Mar 1975 (PHN).

not occur, but even so it was going to have to increase its purchases soon. As the *Boston Globe* put it, the wheat deal was an “indictment of Soviet agriculture.”¹⁰

Despite the motivation to make a deal, it took time to develop. In 1963, the US agreed to sell food to the Soviets but quickly ran into a problem with longshoremen who were not happy to load it, even with a law that required half of the grain to move in US ships, which were increasingly hard to find. In 1971, the Nixon Administration quietly rolled back the shipping rules, driven by a desire to tap the Chinese market as well, and started laying the groundwork to sell even more grain than the \$136 million-worth that went to the USSR that year. In February of 1972, a national security memorandum ordered the USDA to come up with a plan for sustained grain sales in two weeks.¹¹

While there were domestic reasons for the sale, US officials wanted a grain deal for diplomatic leverage. A 1972 National Security Council briefing paper was blunt: “*Our objective*, in brief, is to turn the Soviet interest in increased economic relations with us to *political advantage*.”¹² When Butz went to Moscow in April, 1972 to work on terms, the main impediment to a deal appeared to be the Soviet need for credit. The two sides spent hours discussing the appropriate interest rate and whose ships could be used, but looming over the talks was the PR problem of loaning money to the country that was supplying weapons to North Vietnam. With that in mind, Kissinger ordered Butz to find some procedural point to prevent completion of a grain deal before Brezhnev and Nixon met the next month to finalize deals on several subjects.¹³ Kissinger wanted to tie progress on grain sales to progress on a host of other issues, which he famously called linkage. In other words, the failure of the Virgin Land campaign and the need for more feed grain meant that the Soviet Union turned to, of all places, the American Dust Bowl to feed itself. Ultimately, and of course

¹⁰ The wheat deal: An indictment of Soviet agriculture,” 1 Oct. 1972, *Boston Globe* (PHN); Laird, 191-2.

¹¹ Raymond Garthoff, *From Détente to Confrontation*, 92-3.

¹² Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Staff, Washington, undated. FRUS, vol. 14, document 230.

¹³ Memorandum From Helmut Sonnenfeldt of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 10, 1972. FRUS, vol. 14, document 91.

unintentionally, what the Nixon Administration had agreed to do in 1972 was to trade Ogallala aquifer water for help ending the Vietnam War.

It is still a bit unclear which side was the more anxious to complete the deal. Each side thought that the other really wanted the grain agreement, but it is evident that both had critical reasons to want to get it done. The US was facing a systemic trade deficit for the first time in decades, and it was about to get worse with the 1973 spike in oil prices, so from that standpoint selling the surplus made more sense than giving it away. Kissinger mused before the 1972 summit about who would use the deal to “screw” the other.¹⁴ But Nixon told Brezhnev directly that an agreement would have positive PR ramifications in the US, while Garthoff concludes that “the Soviets had skillfully played to [Nixon’s] overriding desire to sell surplus American wheat by expressing interest in a three-year purchase agreement *if* credits were available.” Kissinger later reassured himself that the Soviets feigned their lack of interest in the grain deal.¹⁵

While we might normally be reluctant to take Kissinger at his word, especially given Garthoff’s other comment that “the scramble to reap the political credit” became “a scramble to avoid blame” before 1972 had even ended, it is worth noting that the Soviets were nowhere close to being able to supply the grain they needed to meet all of their desire to increase food in the markets.¹⁶ Brezhnev had promised to expand availability of consumer goods, including food, in the eighth five-year plan, but it simply was not possible to do so on what the USSR could grow itself. As my colleague, Cathy Frierson, puts it, many of her Russian friends think of 1976 as the last good year in the Soviet Union, and it seems likely that growing food shortages afterwards were part of the decline.

Once the two sides worked out the details, the Soviets commenced to execute what many critics called the “great grain robbery.” Because they were short on hard currency, they were granted \$750 million of credits over three years, of which they could have \$400 million at any one time. They agreed to

¹⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, January 21, 1972, 8 p.m.–12 a.m. FRUS, vol. 14, document 39.

¹⁵ Garthoff, 306.

¹⁶ Garthoff, 306.

buy \$700 million worth of grain right away on their way to racking up a billion dollars' worth of orders for 1972. They bought nearly 30 million tons (or 400 million bushels) of wheat (and other crops) over the next several months, at an average price of \$1.65/bushel. Sales continued at almost the same level for many years, 15 million tons in 1977 and 25 million in 1979 for example. The Soviets continued to buy grain from the US until their empire dissolved and apparently were very fastidious about repaying the credits on time.¹⁷

Three months after the summit, a US intelligence report concluded that "There is evidence that the USSR is trying to signal the US and Canada to expand their grain acreage so as to ensure a source of Soviet imports in the future at favorable prices. This implies that the USSR recognizes it may be in the market for significant quantities of US grain in the future."¹⁸ They had good reason to stay in the market. As even Kissinger admitted, they had played the capitalist system very shrewdly by breaking their purchases up among several companies, thus hiding the extent of their efforts. Their purchases created a grain shortage in the United States that drove wheat prices up to \$3/bushel. On top of that, a quirk in US law meant that the US ended up subsidizing the purchase for approximately \$100 million. Senator and presidential candidate George McGovern led the charge in September with a speech that drew attention to the massive costs of the deal and started to turn the tide against it, but that didn't stop the momentum toward continuing grain sales.¹⁹

At the same time, the Chinese entered the global food market with vigor. Through a series of deals using the venerable Continental Grain Company, which they tried hard to keep secret for domestic reasons, the Chinese government ended up buying a million metric tons of US grain. While the total was a few loaves short of the massive Soviet purchases, and it does not appear that they benefited from the same subsidies, they still contributed to the global

¹⁷ Garthoff, 305-6, 576, 756; Jack Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (179-81).

¹⁸ Intelligence Memorandum, Washington, September 13, 1972. "The View from the Kremlin Three Months after the Summit." FRUS, vol. 14, document 45.

¹⁹ Garthoff, 306; Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 248.

shortage of food that developed shortly thereafter. Their need for grain also revealed to the world that the Chinese agricultural system was also failing.²⁰

Over the next several months, the grain deal created much anger in the United States. George Meany, head of the AFL-CIO, later told President Gerald Ford “We got ripped off in 1972 and the American consumer had to pay for it.”²¹ The anger was so great that Butz not only faced an investigation of USDA practices and possible corruption, but he also found himself ordering cancellation of contracts that he considered to be too large in 1975. But it did not stop the flow of food from the US to the USSR, just constrained that flow and the way it was reported.

The irony was that by 1975 the agreement was being thought of differently. The *Los Angeles Times* stated simply “Great Grain Robbery? Not Now.”²² Both sides had wanted long-term grain deals, which they thought would bring stability, but each failed to take into consideration the wild swings in Soviet agricultural production. The US hope to use food as leverage relied on the Soviets actually needing to buy food more than Americans needed to sell it. Some years that was the case, some it wasn’t. 1975, without the subsidies, was a good year for the US. In January 1976, Ford asked the Soviets to buy even more grain because he thought prices for farmers were too low.²³ In 1977, the Carter Administration’s USDA agreed to sell 15 million tons of food to the USSR without bothering to get support from the State Department or the White House, and then in the fall of 1979 topped that by taking orders for 25 million more tons

²⁰ Min Song, “A Dissonance in Mao’s Revolution: Chinese Agricultural Imports from the United States, 1972-1978,” *Diplomatic History* Vol. 38, no. 2, April 2014, 409-430.

²¹ Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, August 26, 1975, 3:30 p.m. FRUS, vol. 16, document 180.

²² *Los Angeles Times*, July 20th, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers (PHN).

²³ Message From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to Secretary of State Kissinger in Moscow, Washington, January 21, 1976, 0335Z. FRUS, vol. 16, document 248.

of grain for \$2.4 billion, which of course became a problem two months later when the USSR invaded Afghanistan.²⁴

The balance depended in large part on the weather across several Soviet time zones, which was notoriously capricious. If the weather was reasonably cooperative, then the need for American grain could drop precipitously. After all, the Soviets in good years were producing far more grain than they had in the 1960s; but in bad years, their modernizing agriculture slipped back to pre-modern levels of production. US farmers had a hard enough time planning for the vagaries of their own weather, much less that in a country that would not even tell its own citizens that it had bought US grain.

A database search for major US newspapers in the period between 1972 and 1975 demonstrates a fascinating inability to understand or predict whether the Soviets were having a good or bad year. For instance, in September 1974, the *New York Times* reported that the Soviets were on pace for the second best grain crop ever. Just six weeks later, the paper reported that weeks before the Soviets had ramped up purchases in the West because they were going to miss their goal by 15 million tons, or about 7%.²⁵ The next year, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that the nation was on course to hit its goals in agriculture for the first time in 48 years; in fact, the Soviets ended up missing their target of 215 million tons of grain by a shocking 78 million tons.²⁶ When the rain failed on the no-longer Virgin Lands of Kazakhstan, the Russian and Ukrainian breadbaskets were simply not sufficient to make up the deficit.

The transfer of US grain to its Cold War adversary affected the global food market and led to long-term environmental ramifications. First, the flow of grain to the USSR meant that poorer countries, or, as one writer sourly put it, peasants in loincloths, had a much harder time importing food. The post-war population bomb, to use Paul Ehrlich's phrase, had left many countries in need of imported food, from poor ones like India to wealthy ones like Japan. One 1974 estimate was that 20 countries faced a combined food deficit of 8 million tons even after

²⁴ Garthoff, 576, 744.

²⁵ *New York Times*, 12 Sept and 26 October 1974 (PHN).

²⁶ *Christian Science Monitor*, Brezhnev reforms boost Soviet farm output, 27 March 1975; Soviet crop failure puts US plenty in new light, 16 Dec. 1975 (PHN).

they bought what they could and got food aid when possible. Hence, even as the Soviets were still trying to export their policies to countries like Angola and Vietnam, they were demonstrating that they needed the capitalist world to feed themselves. At the same time, the new Soviet demand for imported food was straining the international grain market. In 1971, the world had a surplus grain supply of about three months; by 1975, it was under one month.²⁷

One major implication of the rising demand for grain was the expansion of acres under the plow in the United States and the world. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported in 1973 that President Nixon had released 50 million acres from land set-asides to be used for grains; two years later, it reported that there effectively was no idle crop land in reserve in the United States.²⁸ World bank data shows that the amount of land under cultivation in the US had been slowly dropping until about 1973, when it leveled off and then rose in the early 1980s for the only time between 1961 and 2005.²⁹ For the world as a whole, the World Bank data shows a brief leveling in 1974-5 and then a resumption of expansion of land under the plow, which was not broken until the 1990s.³⁰

The end of the American crop surpluses, which had lubricated food trade since the end of World War II, had a ripple effect around the world. A May 1973 *Time* magazine cover had been devoted to the role of eating beef in soaring food prices, and then in August another cover had shown a diminutive President Nixon being chased down a football field by three giants (or possibly Green Bay Packers, based on their uniform colors), one of whom was labeled "food prices."³¹ By coincidence, the world faced general food shortfalls in 1973 and 1974, with food production per capita below 1960 levels. In a decade, food importing countries would probably need 85 to 100 million tons to make up for their own shortages. Even if the surplus was available, moving that much food would be a

²⁷ Richard L. Strout, "Food: the Soviet Drag," 12 Dec. 1975, CSM (PHN).

²⁸ "Rising affluence swells demand for grain," 25 May 1973, CSM; Strout, "Food" (PHN).

²⁹ World Bank, Agricultural land (as % of land area), United States
<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.AGRI.ZS?locations=US>

³⁰ World Bank, Agricultural land (as % of land area),
<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.AGRI.ZS>

³¹ <http://time.com/vault/year/1973/>

logistical challenge. The new Prime Minister of New Zealand, Norman Kirk, had cited the food crisis as one of the biggest problems left unsolved by the great powers, whom he generally blamed for the world's problems.³² When the NSC proposed using NASA satellites to estimate wheat crops around the world, State worried that Argentina, Australia, the PRC, and the USSR would suspect that the US was using the data for commercial advantage, not to help gauge what crop production might be.³³ In September 1973, the United States proposed a UN conference on food as a means of getting ahead of proposals to deal with food shortages that might harm US interests and score points with the domestic audience. The Group of 77 nations had made a similar suggestion, so it was not wholly an American idea.

Speaking at the UN, Kissinger suggested that such a conference could address "ways to maintain adequate food supplies" in general as well as how to deal with hunger and malnutrition from natural disasters. The US followed up by reaching out to governments throughout Europe and Asia to drum up support for the conference, which would address imbalances in supply and demand for food, widespread crop failure, the inability of developing countries to meet rising demand, and demand coming from rising income and population. It was an ambitious range of topics, and Kissinger promised his ambassadors around the world that the State Department was developing an agenda that would address both new solutions and old ideas.

At the same time, Kissinger was concerned with the mechanics of the meeting. Previous food conferences had been open to the public and hence ineffective, so the US expected this one to take place at the ministerial level to increase the chances of actually accomplishing something. The Food and

³² Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–12, Documents on East and Southeast Asia, 1973–1976 Doc. 40. Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, September 27, 1973.

³³ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–3, Documents on Global Issues, 1973–1976. Doc. 87. Memorandum From the Executive Secretary of the Department of State (Pickering) to the Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft), Washington, October 26, 1973.

Agriculture Organization was the logical host for the conference, but the USSR was not a member. A UN conference would allow inclusion of the USSR and Peoples Republic of China, but the UN had no experience with such meetings. Holding the meeting in the US would reinforce that it was a US initiative to address a complex problem, but would also put pressure on the US to take the lead in paying for solutions.

A few days later, the State Department drew a blunter picture of US interests: "U.S. leadership is required to steer the conference agenda toward issues where progress is possible and away from items which will result in a waste of time or, worse, in confrontation among countries with differing interests." Only through this meeting would the US be able to use influence that it had gained in "nonagricultural negotiations" to solve agricultural problems, and only through this meeting could the US improve access for its exports.³⁴

While US diplomats were certainly interested in protecting the US position, they also developed a sophisticated understanding of the global problems of food access. They understood that the current shortages were a critical problem, but they also recognized that planners should consider what might happen when food supplies returned to surplus. They encouraged thinking about the full scope of implications of the low and high range of assumptions for both demand and supply. Perhaps most important, they recognized that there were lessons to be learned from the green revolution and the constraints on adopting technology in various places around the world. At the same time, they recognized that consumer reluctance to accept new strains of crops or synthetic foods might do more to affect those estimates than other obvious factors.

The US position then was to separate the immediate food crisis from longer-term issues. With a World Population Conference coming up in August of 1974, the State Department hoped to head off discussion of that topic at the

³⁴ This and the next two paragraphs are drawn from Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–14, Part 1, Documents on the United Nations, 1973–1976. Doc. 131. Telegram 222510 From the Department of State to Certain Diplomatic Posts, November 10, 1973, 0307Z

food conference. Its policymakers were optimistic that long-term trends suggested that there would be food surpluses rather than shortages, but only if developing countries did not lean on food aid rather than reforming their economies. As the department bluntly stated: “The U.S. delegation should make clear that the U.S. does not intend to carry reserves for the whole world again.” In fact, the problem, as the US analyzed it, was that too few countries had been supplying the global food market. Reflecting what has been called the Nixon Doctrine from 1970, the US decided that making sure that there was enough food for the world was now a global responsibility, not an American one.

In May of 1974, Nixon’s cabinet met and discussed the food crisis. Butz outlined how the administration differed from Senator Hubert Humphrey and others who wanted the US to maintain a food reserve: “We are out of the food reserve business and I think we should stay out. We carried the world food reserve and everyone got soft—they didn’t have to plan. We need food reserves, but they can be carried by private industry and foreign governments. We have carried the lion’s share of production aid for years, going back to the Marshall Plan.” Nixon went even further: “The whole idea that if we feed the world there will be peace is nonsense.” Yet he agreed that “food is indispensable in our foreign policy” and should be used as a bilateral tool to “influence governments and what they do.” He particularly had the Middle East in mind, where US food could counter Soviet arms in the battle for influence.³⁵

By the time the conference opened in Rome in November 1974, Nixon was gone and Kissinger was free to emphasize whatever he wanted. Two days before he was to speak to the delegates, he received a note from National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft about President Ford’s position. While Ford was “anxious to watch the football game” he had called Scowcroft to find out how Kissinger had finalized his language on the question of food aid. Ford was confident that Kissinger would “fuzz it up somewhat” in order to convey that the US would do all that it could “without tearing things up back here,” presumably in terms of adding to inflation by making food more scarce. Two

³⁵ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXXI, Foreign Economic Policy, 1973–1976. Doc. 259. Editorial Note

days later, Kissinger told the delegates that “The American people have a deep and enduring commitment to help feed the starving and the hungry. We will do everything humanly possible to assure that our future contribution will be responsive to the growing needs.”³⁶ That was probably a bit smoother than Ford desired, but at least the Redskins had won that Sunday.

Listening to Kissinger were delegates from 133 countries. Not surprisingly, there were deep differences among the delegates on defining the core problem. India’s agriculture minister blamed the food problems in his country on the legacy of colonialism, and countered that the US position that developing nations had not prioritized agriculture was “unfounded and unjust.” Yet both an FAO official and a Western diplomat told a reporter that India had been sitting on several million tons of food, including a million that had been smuggled in from Bangladesh of all places. Observers presented a range of suggestions on how to fix the problem, from a Dutch think tank that suggested that recent Bulgarian and French experiences proved the need to organize more peasants into large cooperatives to a professor from Iowa State who thought that the problem with the Green Revolution was that not enough sociologists and psychologists had gone out to “ask whether the village leader can be sold on some new innovation.”³⁷

As cynical historians, we usually assume that such conferences are doomed to failure by the inability of a host of nations to come to any sort of agreement on what time it is, much less how to manage the huge flow of commodities around the world. Platitudes tend to rule the day, and every country agrees that cooperation would be really good, so long as cooperation occurs on that country’s terms. Indeed, the World Food Conference generated its share of meaningless nonsense, but it also opened a window for cooperation. Despite the range of opinions, 16 resolutions came out of the meeting, including the establishment of the International Fund for Agricultural Development

³⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXXI, Foreign Economic Policy, 1973–1976. Doc. 272. Editorial Note*

³⁷ *Washington Post*, 11 November 1974.

(IFAD), as well as a World Food Council to lead efforts to solve large-scale problems.

The head of that council was John Hannah, the long-time president of Michigan State University, first Chairman of the US Commission on Civil Rights, and director of the US Agency for International Development.³⁸ Hannah came to see his fellow Michigander Gerald Ford in April 1975 with his hat in hand. He had myriad problems. His council had to be 36 nations to represent everyone's interests, but it was therefore unwieldy. No one from the 36 nations wanted to head the IFAD, which had been proposed by OPEC nations, who agreed to fund it. Hannah thought that he could get \$500 million from OPEC nations, but he still needed at least \$200 million from the US, and he knew that Butz and Ford would be a hard sell. Hannah, though, was a good salesman: "For the first 175 years of our 200-year history, the US was seen as a friend of poor countries. But we have lost this. There are not going to be many chances. Five months after the food conference is over, the world is still looking for ways to help meet food needs of poor countries. The only people who appear really tough are western nations. The US has to do its fair share."³⁹ He got his money, so effectively the US was easing back from the Butz/Nixon position that it would no longer be the source of free food for struggling nations.

In the end, like the population bomb fear, the food shortage emergency turned out to be short-lived. The world food crisis of the mid-1970s reverted to the post-war norm of a series of regional crises that were addressed, sometimes poorly, via better distribution networks, cultivating more land, and increasing crop yields via technology and fertilizer. The amount of food per capita increased steadily from about 2400 calories per day in the early 1970s to nearly 3000 in 2015; even in the developing countries the numbers grew from 2150 to more than 2800.⁴⁰ Food prices over a 100-year scale compared to US consumer prices turned

³⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, 27 February 1991.

³⁹ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–14, Part 1, Documents on the United Nations, 1973–1976. Doc. 155. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, April 21, 1975, 12:45 p.m.*

⁴⁰ FAO, Global and regional food consumption, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/ac911e/ac911e05.htm> (accessed 17 Sept. 2016)

out to be highest by far in the early 1970s, and would in fact drop to their lowest point on record by 2000, even as grain production stuck fairly close to population growth over that period. In part the decline in prices roughly correlated with a decline in the surplus on hand, which dropped from an amount approximately equal to consumption in 1966 to an amount about 1/3 of consumption in 2000. The value of US food exports soared to fill gaps around the world. The World Food Council seemed less necessary and hence was absorbed into the Food and Agriculture Organization in the 1990s.

Perhaps the food production and distribution systems would have evolved and improved without the new US approach to disposing of surplus crops. Certainly population growth would have raised demand for more food production anyway, and technology and new strains of crops would have led to greater yields per acre. At the same time, improved transportation would have made it possible to get food to where it was needed more reliably. And yet over the course of the subsequent decade it appears that the grain sales between the United States and its two Cold War opponents caused reverses in two trends, lowering global food prices and land tilled in the US, and in the longer run the deals reinforced three global trends, towards more land tilled, greater use of artificial fertilizer and other agricultural technology, and a thinner margin of reserves. When I consider the global food situation, I am reminded of Paul Ehrlich's population bomb theory, that overpopulation will cause a catastrophe at some point. Ehrlich's idea is now about 50 years old, so it is easy to dismiss, but perhaps the only thing he got wrong was the length of the fuse.