

'The Good Samaritan Was Not Using Food as a Weapon'

By Lane Vanderslice

John R. Block, the Secretary of Agriculture-designate, has stated that food can be used as a weapon in international relations. The idea of "food as a weapon" as a major thrust of the United States' international food policy is unacceptable. The idea of food as a weapon, though not a specific guide to policy, implies certain actions and motives, and rules out others.

The Good Samaritan was not using food as a weapon. He was taking care of the needs of another human being. Throughout human history, food has been used to establish and strengthen bonds between human beings. As with the Good Samaritan, it was used as a helping hand. Food is an expression of hospitality and of charity.

Food, in part because of its obvious importance, is considered sacred by every major religion. Using food as a weapon violates the most ancient and time-honored beliefs. Instead, our actions should express motives that are humanitarian, not self-seeking. In practical terms, food should be used as emergency aid for those stricken by famine and to build self-sufficiency among the world's poor on a long-term basis.

In political discourse in the United States, food as a gift from God may be an unfamiliar concept, but in a religious context here and abroad, it is widely understood. Of course human efforts do produce food but they do not represent the only creative forces in the process. Humans did not create the land, sun, water, air, and the genetic content of seeds. Many of us believe that God did. Food, in this context, becomes a gift from God, with human ownership not absolute.

Other actions are implied. If food is God's gift to us, the way is open for giving to others. Such aid should be given selflessly, with concern for the well-being of others. This reaffirms the concept of food as a helping hand, and gives us another reason for abhorring the use of food as a weapon. A gift from God is not properly used as a weapon.

Mr. Block modified his terminology several days after his original pronouncement. Instead of terming food a weapon, he called it "a tool for peace." This represents a softening of the language but not necessarily a real shift in policy. Rather, he should have proclaimed a policy of using food as a helping hand, enabling us to judge the new administration by how well it fulfills that standard. Unless he changes his position, there is real reason to be-

lieve that food will indeed be used as a weapon.

The Reagan administration seems to be planning to direct food and other aid to our "friends" — that is, in a way that will advance our strategic interests in the world. Compared with the Carter Administration's approach, this will probably be done with substantially less concern for the recipient governments' performance in meeting the basic human needs of their people. This is food used as a weapon.

Food as a helping hand, a step toward self-sufficiency, would reduce the dependence of other countries on food we produce. Yet Mr. Block sees such dependence as desirable because it would make other countries "reluctant to upset us." This appears to be yet another way of using food as a weapon.

The Reagan administration may not maintain or properly use the four-million-ton grain reserve for famine relief whose creation President Carter authorized in December. The food as a weapon viewpoint would not be comfortable with this reserve. The reserve would inhibit panic buying overseas in times of shortage and reduce the political leverage of food. A more serious mistake than misuse of the reserve would be difficult to make in a world of hungry people.

Finally, a word about the practicality of using food as a helping hand, which might be viewed as too soft for the current age of *realpolitik*. The trouble with *realpolitik* is that it is not completely in touch with reality. It focuses on arms and power-politics as the way to peace. But there are two paths toward peace. One is the path of weapons. The other is the path of forbearance, understanding, respect, and even love — the path of civilization. This second path is the more important one — it is certainly the one to be esteemed more highly.

The United States, it can be fairly said, has neglected this second path. One of the many signs of this is the serious and growing imbalance between our military spending and our faltering expenditures for the alleviation of hunger and poverty in the world. A further blow is struck when our international food policy is cast in the image of, and used as, a weapon.

Lane Vanderslice is an economist for Bread for the World, a Christian citizens' movement concerned with world hunger.