ASA Presidential Address—The Agronomist and Food for Peace

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Food is one of man's greatest needs and until it is satisfied he has little time for or interest in anything else. Hendrick Van Loon tells us that "history is the record of man in quest of his daily bread." Many of our past presidents have had much to say about food, and right they should, for the production of food is our business.

But, how are food and peace related? Unfortunately, food does not guarantee freedom from war, either hot or cold. Some aggressor nations "in our time" were not hungry, but lack of food as much as any other one thing brought them to their knees and has no doubt deterred others from going to war. Regardless of the relationship between food and mortal conflict, this much we know: A hungry man knows no law and experiences no peace. He is ready prey to any idea that promises escape from his misery and is usually incapable of weighing the consequences of accepting false gods.

Recent studies reported in "The World Food Budget" reveal that "diets in 1962 are inadequate on a national basis in much of Latin America and West Asia, and in most of Africa, the Far East and Communist Asia. By far the most serious shortages are in the Far East and Communist Asia where consumption of all nutrients is below levels needed to sustain a desirable level of health and activity. Population growth in undeveloped regions will continue to offset increases in food production, and shortages in 1966 will remain at about 1962 levels." An exploding world population threatens to double the number of mouths to be fed before the year 2000. The current rate of population growth, if continued for 600 years would leave every inhabitant of the world with only one square yard to live on. Although I am sure that man will solve the population problem long before that day, the fact remains that two-thirds of the people in the world today are hungry, and they are likely to continue to be unless we can create a "food explosion" that can keep pace with population growth.

Dark as this picture may be, the agronomist should not be pessimistic. He, with some help from specialists in related areas, has drawn a "blueprint" for a "food explosion" that has outdistanced population growth in part of the world. Here the people are well fed and there is extra food to be shared with others, thanks to these "blueprints" and farmers who have invested billions of dollars. They have skillfully used these plans. The fortunate countries, far more than they realize, have food for peace and their freedom from hunger to thank. A small surplus in excess of consumption and less than 4% of our total annual agricultural output should be regarded as insurance guaranteeing hunger and freedom from excessive food prices.

The blessing of these food surpluses have not been beyond the bounds of the countries that need them. During 1961, 100 less-fortunate countries received 1.7 billion pounds of food and fiber from the United States under its Food for Peace program.

It is the surpluses of only a few foods after a number of years that have caused the great part of a poorly informed public. Looking at stockpiles and the annual cost of maintaining them, Americans have made "whipping boys" out of military and agricultural specialists. These critics would look long at hungry nations, where lesser achievements are recognized with loud acclaim. California's Perry Stout, an ASA member, in his book entitled, "A Case for a National Food Cache," has made an excellent case for storing food in this atomic age. If properly stored and located, huge stockpiles are just as essential and are less likely to become obsolete than our stockpiles of military weapons. In the event of a war followed by poisonous fallout, such food would enable those who are left to survive.

People with genuine concern for their fellowmen, for a long time been asking, "How can we help the hungry?" In reply we should say, "Give them our great stockpile of food." Did not know that this food, accumulated as annual surpluses over a number of years, would fill the food gap in the hungry nations for only a few years? With a limited knowledge of economics have the United States produce all the food that it can under contract to the nations that need it, and pay for this much food even if the United States produce it.