Food as a Weapon: Here We Go Again

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Yet another President has decided to use food as a weapon. President Bush in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait has declared that all imports, including food, by that country be stopped.

No question about it, food can be an important and powerful resource. Its availability or lack of availability can affect the ability of a country to wage war. This is especially the case for a country that is as heavily dependent on imports as is Iraq. For example, that country imports three fourths of its food and other agricultural products, including feed grains used for poultry and animal production.

The arguments for including food in a “total embargo” are familiar: consistency of treatment across products, ease of enforcement, evidence of resolve, a means of undermining political support within the targeted country.

The simplicity and seeming elegance of blanketing all trade under the President's edict was too seductive for the President and his advisors to resist. But they would have been well advised to have made food an exception from the start. For, in the end, U.S. farmers and world opinion will force the Administration to retreat from limiting food imports by Iraq.

Agriculture's Response

The problems begin at home with U.S. farmers and the businesses that serve them.

Some might expect farm groups to support military activities to protect the flow of petroleum to the United States and other countries. After all, petroleum is important in farm production and for economic activities around the world that undergird the import demands of other countries for U.S. farm products.

However, of the many possible farm policy lessons to have been learned during the first half of the 1980s, one stood out above all others. Namely, that the future prosperity of American agriculture is irrevocably tied to the nation's success in building and maintaining markets abroad. The policy adopted in the 1985 Farm Bill gave expression to that painful and costly lesson. And, our trade negotiators have spent most of the past four years struggling to make the case at home and abroad for more open international markets and reduced levels of support.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the U.S. farm community is less than enthusiastic in its support for another embargo. And while their discontent might be subdued at present, it will grow. If there is any doubt about this generalization, just ask those who were advisors to President Nixon when exports of U.S. soybeans to Japan were restricted in an effort to mitigate inflationary pressures. Likewise, ask those who were advisors to President Carter when restrictions on exports to the USSR were imposed in response to the Soviet's invasion of Afghanistan.

Not only does this lack of political support from the farm community lead to costly forms of compensation, but it also becomes a major target of political opportunity. The case of President Carter's embargo of food shipments to the USSR is instructive. To offset any adverse market effects of the embargo (which, incidentally, was only a partial embargo of food), the Federal government spent over $2 billion buying grain and retendering sales contracts. Politically, “no more grain embargoes” became a principal rallying cry of candidates Reagan and Bush, not only in 1980 but in 1984 and 1988 as well. Not surprisingly, it was an issue that played strongly to the candidates advantage in farm country.

There is also the issue of effectiveness, not only in the physical sense of halting shipments but in the more elusive sense of undermining morale and the popular support for the targeted government. Past experience strongly suggests that an absolute ban on shipments will be difficult and costly to achieve and even harder to maintain. Evidence of the effect of such hardship on the population of a country is problematic. While it might sow the seeds of discontent it can be argued with equal persuasiveness that it might also stiffen resolve and prolong the conflict.

World Opinion

But neither the response of U.S. farmers nor the ineffectiveness of the action is the primary reason why the United States should not apply trade prohibitions to food. Rather, it is because world opinion will not allow such restraints to be applied effectively over significant periods of time. Imagine how the United States' international political position and, in turn, its military posture in the Middle East would be undermined this coming winter if the evening news programs showed Iraqi children and elderly people starving to death. Neither Americans nor other free world people would pause to find out if the scenes were faked by Iraqi leaders. Even Ethiopian leaders have difficulty withstand the glare of international news focused on their acts which allow children to die.

Obviously, the Bush Administration has already encompassed food in their immediate response to the invasion of Kuwait. What are they to do? The answer—retreat from the position as soon as possible; find soon an opportunity to abandon quietly the inclusion of food. To delay will only make the eventual abandonment of this particular part of the response to Iraq more embarrassing and difficult.