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A Food Superpower

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Written by SIRS staff.
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A FOOD "SUPERPOWER"

The Arab oil-producing countries placed a temporary embargo on oil in 1973. Industrial nations are dependent on oil. They need oil to run their factories, heat their homes and fuel their cars. The threat **of** an oil embargo is powerful. If the Arab nations completely stopped exporting oil, they would disrupt the economies **of** many countries. Thus, the Arab nations can use oil as a tool to try to accomplish political goals.

The Arab countries have oil power; the United States has food power. **America's** fertile soil and mild climate have made farming a productive business. Since the time **of** the first settlers, **farmers** have easily fed their own families. Later, as the population grew, American **farmers** provided food for the entire nation. After World War II, the U.S. farmer accomplished the task **of** providing food to other countries as well. By 1975, the United States was producing 31 million tons **of** grain a year, nearly half **of** the world's supply. The U.S. became a food superpower.

MANY COUNTRIES DEPENDED ON U.S. FOOD

Many countries came to depend on the U.S. for grain. India, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Chad, Panama, Nicaragua and El Salvador are only a few **of** the less developed countries that have received food aid from the U.S. Even highly industrialized countries like Japan and Russia have needed **America's** grain. Until recently, the United States had a monopoly on the world grain market.

FOOD PRODUCTION GREW

In the early 1970s, **farmers** prospered from grain sales to foreign countries. The U.S. government encouraged planting "from fencepost to fencepost" and lent **farmers** money to buy more land and equipment. Large areas **of** fertile soil were converted to farmland. Advances in farming technology provided machinery for planting and harvesting, herbicides for killing weeds and pesticides for eliminating insects. By 1983, American **farmers** produced 153 million metric tons **of** corn and wheat--five times the amount produced eight years before.

BUT SO DID THE COSTS

After the 1973 Arab oil embargo, the costs **of** petroleum-based fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides soared, as did the cost **of** fuel for farm machinery. The new farm technology increased productivity, but it also increased costs. By 1983, wheat cost about \$6.30 a bushel to produce, but it sold for \$3.40 a bushel. Many **farmers** who had borrowed money from the government for more land and equipment could not repay their loans. They went out **of** business.

AND THE COMPETITION

Other countries with large farmland acreage have increased grain production. By 1980, Canada, Australia and Argentina were competitors with the U.S. for grain sales to foreign countries. The Common Market jumped into this lucrative business too. It subsidizes European **farmers** to grow crops for export.

USING FOOD POWER

The United States produces far more food than its citizens can use. The surplus is sold, traded or given to other countries. How the U.S. uses its food power is a controversial issue.

FOR HUMANITARIAN REASONS

Food supplies in many countries **of** the world are frequently scarce because **of** droughts, harsh winters, floods, pests and poor transportation systems. Populations in many countries are growing more rapidly than their food supplies. Some Americans believe that the U.S. should use its food surpluses for humanitarian purposes--to help the hungry people **of** the world, regardless **of** their population growth, food production or politics.

TO PRESSURE OTHER NATIONS

Other Americans suggest that the U.S. use food power to encourage poor countries to increase their food production and control population growth. They suggest giving a lot **of** food aid only to those countries that are successfully doing so and little aid to countries that are not. This policy would mean that the poorest nations would receive the least food help. Many people say that using food power to pressure hungry nations is a cruel and harsh policy.

TO STABILIZE PRICES

Many people believe that all **of** the countries with food power should work together to stabilize food prices. For more than 20 years, Russia purchased grain from other nations, including the U.S., because their domestic supply was not enough to meet their needs. When their domestic supply **of** wheat is small, they buy large amounts from other countries. World wheat prices rise because **of** the demand, and **farmers** are able to make money from their foreign exports. But poor countries cannot afford to buy wheat at the high price. When Russia does not need to buy large amounts **of** wheat, the price falls. Then **farmers**, especially in the U.S., are not able to cover their production costs.

TO ASSURE SUSTAINED ECONOMIC GROWTH

America's agricultural system is prosperous. Twenty percent **of** the American gross national product comes directly from the agricultural industry. In order for the U.S. to continue to prosper, it is important that other developing countries also achieve sustained economic growth, so that they can become effective trading partners with the U.S. One way to do this is by assisting **farmers** abroad. By promoting economic growth among **farmers** in developing countries, the U.S. is insuring its own economic stability, and expanding **future** international markets.

TO INFLUENCE GOVERNMENTS

Food has frequently been used as a "tool" by various U.S. administrations in an effort to obtain political cooperation from other countries around the world.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter imposed a food embargo against the former Soviet Union, in retaliation for their invasion into Afghanistan. Food aid was temporarily withheld from Ethiopia during the early phases **of** the famine **of** 1984, because **of** the belief that Ethiopia's government was pro-

communist. Later however, the U.S. participated in a joint effort with other countries to feed the starving people.

There has been a great deal **of** debate over the effectiveness **of** using food as a "tool **of** persuasion." Many critics feel it does little to stop other nations, who often simply go elsewhere to obtain the imports they need. Food embargoes are also counter-productive to farming interests. This was the primary reason why President Ronald Reagan lifted the 1980 embargo against the Soviet Union.

U.S. food policy changes with different presidential administrations. Some presidents believe that American food should only be sold to those countries that are friendly to the U.S. Others believe that food should go only to countries that protect the human rights **of** their citizens. Some people believe that the United States should not use food as a weapon. They argue that it is people in foreign countries and American **farmers**, not governments, who suffer from cutbacks in food aid.

PROTEIN--AS POWERFUL AS A BOMB

The importance **of** "food power" is well recognized. A Romanian agriculture official said, "You Americans have something more powerful than the atomic bomb--you have protein."

Some people believe that food power is dangerous. They claim the U.S. could gain more enemies than friends if it uses food as a political tool. A government official said, "It is absolutely unacceptable that a human need as basic as food should be manipulated for political ends."