



Exporting Famine

by Tom Bethell

Several months ago, the *Village Voice* carried an unusual story about Somalia on its cover: "The Famine Food Created," by Michael Maren. In October he spoke at the Cato Institute, his talk billed as "Good Intentions Gone Awry." I decided to find out what he had to say.

He turned out to be a quietly spoken man of 37 who over the years has worked for the Peace Corps, Catholic Relief Services, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. He has spent time in India, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia, and to say that he had become disillusioned about food aid would be putting it mildly.

His message was shocking and newsworthy, but almost wholly neglected by the U.S. news media: the free food that year after year is dumped in these African countries undermines the local agriculture and so causes famines when rainfall is below normal. The famine in Somalia was caused by the food that for years had been unloaded at the docks of Mogadishu. "Food is killing people, and that must stop," Maren said.

Somalia has enough arable land to feed itself even in the worst drought, he said. Briefly, in 1987, Somalia actually exported food. The country has no "population problem." It has a total of 6 million people in a country the size of Texas. The problem is that free food undermines the market for locally grown food.

On January 13 there was an article on the subject by Alison Mitchell in the *New York Times*, but I think it was the only one they published this year. Here is how it began:

GENALE, SOMALIA—In this country of hunger, Faadumi Abdi Arush is cursed with corn. She has corn stored away in

barrels, corn stacked in sacks, corn to be tossed away as chicken feed. Mrs. Arush survived Somalia's civil war, and she and the farm hands on her large holding even managed to tend her fields, producing a bountiful harvest of corn four months ago.

But when she took her crop to the market, she found that the infusion of food from relief agencies was cutting demand. With food prices falling in a bottomless tumble, no merchant wanted to risk buying her corn and then see the prices tumble still lower, she said. "Nobody is interested," said the slender 52-year-old farmer, pointing in exasperation to the piles of corn already gone bad that had been thrown on a tarpaulin for chicken feed. "Everybody has his own relief supply."

This is the paradox of famine and famine relief. The international charity that stopped starvation eventually can become a problem in itself, threatening to destroy what little remains of the local farm economy.

Mitchell went on to note that the price of rice in Somalia was said to be the lowest in the world, having fallen to \$5 for a 110-lb. bag—less than half the price in the U.S. She added that "some relief agencies are starting to fear that the relief food will now cause another cycle of dependency by depressing the food market and making it unprofitable for farmers to farm." The principal relief agencies are CARE, Catholic Relief Services, World Vision, and Save the Children. Says Willet Weeks of Save the Children: "Prolonging free food distribution as the need is diminishing is a sure recipe for prolonging the famine."

To understand the problem that food creates, it is necessary to go back in time before the emergency arises. Most food aid—about 90 percent of it—is distributed in places where there is no famine and, of course, where there are no reporters or TV cameras. This is the invisible part of the

exercise, and the crucial part. It is here that native self-sufficiency is undermined, day by day. This is happening in many countries in Africa right now: for example, Zaire, Rwanda, Burundi, Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Togo, and Ghana.

And no doubt many more. These are simply the countries that Maren reeled off when I asked him to name the countries where free, non-emergency food is being distributed. In any given country, Maren told me, CARE or Catholic Relief Services or World Vision have routine programs: "School feeding programs, where they give food to children; mother-child health programs, where they give food to women with kids at clinics; and food-for-work programs, where they dump food on people for digging holes, things like that: digging wells, building roads." These projects tend to be make-work. Maren identifies one going on in Mogadishu right now: "Food-for-work consists of giving people empty garbage bags and then trading a bag of food for a bag of trash." This is doomed to turn into a scavenging exercise, he says, "with people looting garbage trucks as they once looted food convoys."

Meanwhile, in Somalia, as in other countries not yet known to the media or "the international community," local agriculture and self-sufficiency is undermined, sack by free sack. Once there is a drought or a civil war in which the normal channels of food distribution are disrupted, there is likely to be a famine. Then the relief organizations will telephone their friends in the news media and show up with more food—this time in a true emergency. The television crews will get the starving-children footage they need to make the evening news. And the relief organizations will be depicted in a very favorable light, alleviating on camera the starvation

Tom Bethell is The American Spectator's Washington correspondent.

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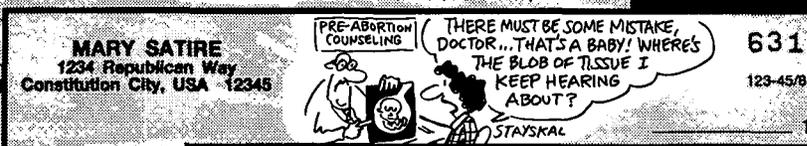
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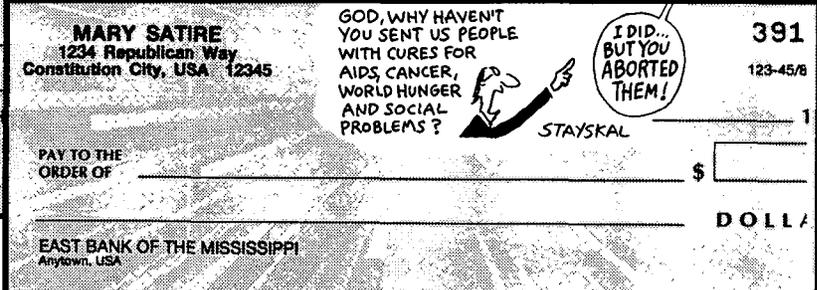
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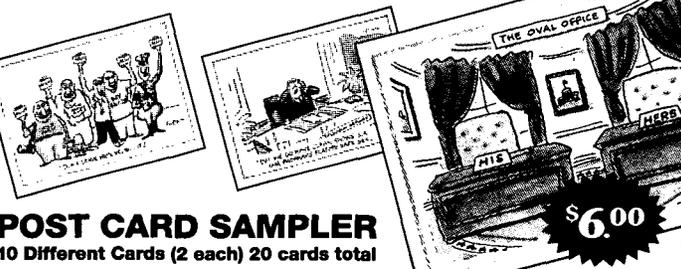
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that their earlier off-camera efforts had helped cause.

Maren points out that news organizations are likely to be dependent on the relief agencies when they arrive in a new famine area for the first time. In March, Maren gave a speech to the Camel Breeders, a group of Cornell University graduate students who are preparing to work in international development. The speech was reprinted in *Harper's* in August. Here's an excerpt:

Historically, the press has been willing to uncritically accept whatever image of Africa the western vanguard has been selling. In the case of the PVOs [private voluntary organizations, such as CARE] the press has bought their line because reporters are as dependent on aid organizations as the organizations are on them. It would have been impossible, for example, for the press to cover Somalia without the assistance of PVOs. There's no Hertz counter at the Mogadishu airport and no road maps available at gas stations. If a journalist arrives in Africa from Europe or the United States and needs to get to the interior of the country, PVOs are the only ticket. Journalists sleep and eat with PVO workers. When they want history and facts and figures, they turn to the PVOs. In press coverage of Somalia or almost any other crisis in Africa, it is always the PVOs who are most often quoted and are regarded as the neutral and authoritative sources—as if they have no vested interest in anything but the truth.

Where do these organizations get the food that they give away? Mostly from the U.S. and Canadian governments, and from the European Community. Farm price supports generate food surpluses in Western Europe and North America, which then pile up in storage depots. In the Eisenhower years it dawned on someone that giving the food to foreigners would rid us of embarrassing surpluses and perhaps even give foreigners reason to love the Yanks for a change. Shipping interests got into the act. If the (unionized) price was right, they'd be happy to ship grain from Port Arthur to wherever. So it was agreed that half the food would be transported in U.S.-flagged ships. Thus Public Law 480 was born—Food for Peace. It has turned out to be one of the more conspicuously harmful components of the U.S. foreign aid program. About half of the food aid worldwide comes from the U.S.—

about \$1 billion worth a year. It gives new meaning to the phrase “global economy.”

Because of price supports, too much food is grown here. It is shipped abroad, and as a result too little food is grown there. Next there are famines. Pictures are shown on television, and the man in the White House feels compassionate. He sends a military escort to ensure that the food gets delivered. Some of the soldiers are killed and they in turn are shipped back to the U.S. Food for Peace began in 1954 but it didn't really get going until the 1960s. At that point Africa was still self-sufficient in food production. This April the *Economist* noted:

Each year throughout the 1980s, western donors spent \$1 billion shipping millions of tons of food to the hungry in Africa. It saved many lives. Yet by the end of the decade the proportion of African children who weighed too little because they ate too little increased. And the amount of food that Africans grew per person fell. Africans began to ask: Is food aid part of the problem?

In a 1984 article in the *Wall Street Journal* (“Free Food Bankrupts Foreign Farmers”), James Bovard pointed out that “per capita food production in Africa has decreased 20 percent since 1960, and PL 480 donations have helped governments perpetuate the destructive status quo.” Aid officials try to argue that giving Africans wheat doesn't discourage the local production of sorghum—as though the provision of one form of grain doesn't discourage the production of another. As Bovard put it, if the Department of Agriculture really believed that giving away food has no effect on local farmers, presumably the Secretary of Agriculture wouldn't mind “if the European Economic Community sent over a billion pounds of cheese to feed all the hungry Americans they hear about.” Our farmers have the clout to prevent such shipments. But the free food we send abroad goes to countries where the farmers are politically powerless. And the never-ending stream of food keeps them that way. Agencies such as CARE and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) are in effect government contractors and should be viewed as such.

Illustrating the point, Maren (when I spoke to him later) pulled out a copy of CARE's annual report at random. In 1986, CARE's total revenues were \$401 million,

65 percent of which were agricultural commodities and ocean freight donated by governments. For CRS, that percentage is higher—between 80 and 90 percent, Maren estimated. The dominant incentive for these groups is to sign up as many people as possible for free food. They “fight like Coke and Pepsi” to expand their share of the donated food: their jobs depend on it.

A “crystal moment” in Maren's career came when he was working with CRS “in a famine situation in northwest Kenya.” At a meeting in Nairobi, an American woman with CRS stood up and said: “We have to take advantage of this famine to expand our regular program.” Keep 'em hooked, in other words. “When I'd return to Nairobi every few weeks,” Maren told his Cornell audience, “my boss . . . had only one question: How many more recipients did you sign on? More recipients meant more government grant money, which meant we could buy more vehicles and hire more assistants.”

It's interesting that this is a story about the dangers of subverting markets, yet it has been told almost exclusively by the left. Maren himself comes from a leftist background. For years now the left has been issuing warnings about the problems caused by food-dumping in the Third World. Frances Moore Lappe writes about it. The aid literature is full of it. The BBC broadcasts it (Maren can get on British but not American television). Conservatives seem to have overlooked the argument almost completely. P.T. Bauer, a leading critic of foreign aid, missed it, and I am not aware that Milton Friedman has written about it, although it intensifies his claim that there is no such thing as a free lunch: when they do exist, free lunches may well be harmful to your (future) health.

Maren and Bovard think the explanation is that leftists are more likely to be out there in the field. They know what's going on. Conservatives don't really believe in “development” anyway, and aren't too excited about one more story of good intentions gone sour. They can point to the moral—doing good with other people's money is likely to do harm—but they don't have the facts (and typically aren't interested in reporting either, which is why there are so few conservative journalists). Leftists have the facts, but of course they shrink from the moral. Maren is one who does not. □

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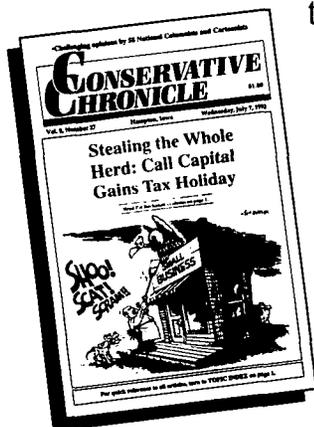
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Bridge to the Sun, by Gwen Terasaki. A Tennessee girl falls in love with a Japanese diplomat just before Pearl Harbor, marries him, is deported, and lives in the mountains of Japan during World War II.

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