

Selling the Sahel

by Karen DeYoung

Each year as appropriations time rolls around, the Agency for International Development must come up with a reason why the United States should have a foreign assistance program. Since Congress is notoriously fickle about what it thinks foreign aid should do, AID, as the agency responsible for both carrying out old programs and developing new ones, frequently finds itself caught between changing congressional priorities.

This year's AID marketing strategy uses a sales pitch that is new in the annals of AID salesmanship. The novel gimmick is *humanitarianism*—helping foreigners for no other reason except that they are poor and hungry. It has a nice ring to it.

Karen DeYoung is a Washington writer.

If the past is any guide, however, Congress will tire of humanitarianism as quickly as it tired of previous campaign slogans, and too quickly for the programs AID develops to do any good for anybody except the AID bureaucracy, which will have achieved the primary goal of all bureaucracies: short-term self preservation.

Since foreign assistance first began under the Marshall Plan, aid has been promoted and sold, in rapid succession, as a way of healing the scars of World War II in Western Europe, keeping the Communists out of the Far and Middle East, developing trading partners in Latin America, and, most recently, helping the war effort in Southeast Asia. It should come as no surprise that humanitarianism is AID's newest *raison d'etre*. By 1972, when Congress was

already fed up with Vietnam, AID was still conscientiously digging irrigation ditches for peasants to jump into when the bombs fell. As what came to be labeled U. S. imperialism became increasingly unpopular, AID took much of the rap for it. During the Foreign Assistance Act hearings of 1973, members of Congress lectured AID witnesses about global interdependence, least-developed countries, and world-wide famine. AID's protests that it had only been following congressional orders struck a somewhat sour note.

The wave of the future, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee decreed in 1973, was "to provide increased emphasis on the immediate needs of the world's poorest people," and if AID wanted to stay in business, it had better come up with a way to do just that.

In Search of the Poorest

Figuring out who is the poorest among the world's hordes of have-nots is no simple task. Luckily, just prior to these same hearings, a ready-made human disaster of monumental proportions had surfaced. Somewhere in the middle of West Africa, in between where the Sahara desert ends and the tropical rain forests begin, was a cluster of countries suffering the most severe drought in recorded history. With feeble, agriculturally based economies, these African nations had no water for their crops. Their cattle were dying of thirst and their children of hunger, and AID would have to go a long way to find any poorer people. Each of the six countries in the drought area had been officially classed as among the world's least developed. Best of all, neither the United States, nor Russia, nor China had ever given them any assistance to speak of before.

Dusting the cobwebs from its West Africa specialists, AID discovered that the area was called the Sahel, composed of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Upper Volta, and Chad.

Few had heard of the place before 1973. Once AID got the Sahel ball rolling in mid-1973, it quickly became one of the biggest international relief operations in history. The objects of unprecedented publicity, the dead cows and camels, the emaciated nomads and children of West Africa, soon found their pictures on televisions and in newspapers and magazines throughout the world. Within two years the United States had given the Sahel more than \$100 million of emergency food—more aid than it had received from us during the previous 13 years combined.

Voila!

AID's first move in marketing the Sahel was to capture the interest of Rep. Charles Diggs, then chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, and Senator Hubert Humphrey, a generous man whose state of Minnesota happens to supply much of the grain for the food relief program. *Voila*. A bill was sponsored requesting \$30-million worth of emergency food shipments to the Sahel. "These people are good people," Humphrey declared in pressing for the June 1973 emergency appropriation. "They have been friends to the United States. The trouble is that sometimes when they are so nice and friendly, we do not do all we ought to do. They have not caused us any difficulty. They deserve our help."

In early June 1973, AID arranged for a CBS television news team to go aboard C-130 cargo planes dropping relief grain in Mali. This was just the beginning. An inter-agency memo from the period outlined additional press strategy, reporting that "coordination on all aspects of U. S. activities in response to the drought emergency is being maintained with USIA for dissemination through their overseas media channels . . . a picture/caption layout is now in the hands of the Associated Press Wirephoto Service. . . materials have been offered to members of Congress for insertion

in the Congressional *Record* to stimulate attention... contact is being made with NBC-TV program to set up discussion of the drought disaster... discussions planned with 'Today' (NBC) and CBS Morning News for interview with AID and African officials... we are exploring a possible interview for CBS with Marvin Kalb... contact will be made with Washington feature programs."

Suddenly the American news media discovered Africa. Within weeks, dozens of reporters and camera crews were on their way to places like Timbuktu, Agadez, and Ouagadougou. In their wakes trailed members of Congress and their staffs on fact-finding expeditions; scientists, nutritionists, physicians, and engineers of infinite specialties. The Sahel was *in*. With pockets full of money and hearts throbbing in sympathy, representatives of a plethora of private clubs, agencies, and churches, "all the way down," remembers one long-time aid worker in Ouagadougou, "to the

Tennessee Ladies Hospital auxiliary," were on their way to Africa.

Even those reporters who could spell Ouagadougou had a hard time pronouncing it (Wah-gah-doo-goo) when they got there. Before the drought, it was probably one of the two or three most obscure capitals in the world. A dust-covered heap of adobe huts encircling several square miles of square, squat public buildings, it is the largest city in Upper Volta, a nation about the size of Colorado and completely landlocked. Upper Volta epitomizes in many ways the problems that plague the Sahel. Between population expansion and currency inflation, it has suffered a negative economic growth rate since independence. The life expectancy of the average Voltaic (30-35 years) is the lowest in the world. Upper Volta holds the world records for the lowest percentage of literacy and of children in school—both five per cent—the smallest number of physicians per capita—one for every 75,000 of its

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nearly six million people—and has as high an infant mortality rate as anywhere in the world.

American diplomats in Ouagadougou joke, in the macabre way that foreign service personnel in hardship posts have a habit of doing, that Upper Volta may soon surpass first-place Burundi (coming in at \$70) in the race for the world's lowest per capita yearly income, now that Burundi has lowered its population through a recent wave of tribal genocide.

Except for the few summer months each year when the rains come, living in Upper Volta is like living in the middle of a dust cloud. The air is hot, dry, and heavy and wraps around every living thing like a shroud. Like the aftermath of a continually recurring explosion, the dust seems to trickle ceaselessly down from the sky, so thick it dampens voices and limits visibility to about 100 yards. The Voltaic sky is rarely blue, but rather a dun color that renders indistinguishable the difference between air and earth. During winter and spring, the driest times, there is no real sunrise, only a gradual lightening, and around 10 a. m. a dull yellow disk appears through the dust. As it crawls across the sky its brightness is so obscured one can stare right into it, as if through smoked glass. Toward the end of the day it takes on the slightly blurred outline of an old silver coin and, long before it reaches the horizon, disappears into the murk.

Ninety-five per cent of Upper Volta's people live outside urban centers and most are miles from the nearest road. They are small village farmers who grow one crop of millet each year, or cattle-raising nomads who ceaselessly prod their herds through the dry savannah looking for pasture. After the drought began, and each year's dryness compounded the problems of the year before, the farming families were forced to move southward, toward the rain forests. The nomads, their cattle dead of thirst and

hunger, ended up in refugee camps. The drought was a big deal in Upper Volta. But not that big. In a place where half the children die before they reach their fifth birthdays, it is difficult to tell where run-of-the-mill starvation leaves off and drought-induced famine begins.

This, then, is what the outside world discovered when the planes began landing at Ouagadougou airport. A people who didn't know the meaning of the words "emergency" and "disaster" and a government punch-drunk from years of just trying to get by. "I never felt that the Voltaic government saw the drought the way outsiders did," remembers a Peace Corps administrator who spent nearly three years there in the early seventies. "Times have always been hard in Upper Volta. The drought made things worse, but I often sensed in talking with various officials a 'this too will pass' attitude. Not that they weren't concerned, just that they didn't start weeping and gnashing their teeth the way so many foreigners did when they discovered the drought. I never felt a sense of urgency or disaster when discussing it with Voltaics. There was no grand vision of what to do about it. If you asked any Voltaic official where he wanted his ministry to be, or what his overall development plan was for the next X number of years, you'd get a polite stare."

Man Bites Dog

Never mind that it often had little to do with AID's promised drought, reporters arriving in the Sahel found a little bit of everything that makes for news stories: human suffering, local government incompetence and corruption, past and present U. S. ineptitude in attempting to help. People were quite obviously poor, many suffered from malnutrition, and there wasn't enough to eat. They had clearly been in bad shape long before word of their plight got out and emergency grain began to arrive. Some of the expected



grain never arrived at all, ending up in dockyard stockpiles or sold for profit by greedy local officials.

Conflicting Reports

Virtually every newspaper and network in the U. S. ran lengthy Sahel stories beginning in the summer of 1973. A random sampling during a single week in June 1973 finds a *Washington Post* correspondent reporting on huge numbers of dead cattle; the Shawnee, Oklahoma *News-Star* editorializing that "10 million people are about to die" and pointing out the shameful of worrying about "political folderol such as Watergate" when so many were starving; *The New York Times* attesting that only six million were going to die—but probably all before October; the *Los Angeles Times* Africa reporter blaming African leaders for "making a botch of their economies."

The news reports were not always consistent. While Carl Rowan, in the

Washington Star, was, upon returning from Africa, heatedly charging that the U. S. "goofed" in not being responsive to the urgent food needs of the Sahel, David Ottoway, in *The Washington Post*, was chastizing African officials for "not being interested in helping" their own people.

At times it seemed to aid workers who lived in the Sahel that the reporters had already written their stories before arriving in Africa and, once there, were in a big hurry to get out. A British private development program director tells of a Belgian TV crew that persuaded airplane pilots, dropping bagged relief grain to villages inaccessible from the ground, to drop bags of a type guaranteed to burst upon impact. They wanted to film bush women picking kernels of grain out of the dust and thus to demonstrate how relief efforts were screwed up.

"Most of the stories I read about the drought were sensationalism," says the Peace Corps administrator.

"It was discouraging because the development problems are so complex and subtle, and all of a sudden you couldn't turn around without bumping into some jerk who wanted pictures of people eating sand or of dead cattle. *Time* published a photo of a woman in a tree picking leaves and captioned it as if this was what she was reduced to eating because of the drought. In fact, people eat the leaves anyway and cook special sauces to go with them."

Official Visitors

One of the biggest problems involved in convincing official visitors on whistle-stop drought tours that the Sahel needed help was that the worst evidences of famine weren't close enough to the airport. There are stories of village chiefs, anxious to get a share of the relief, who made a practice of having all animal carcasses in the vicinity dragged to the nearest road, the better to be photographed.

"Once," the Peace Corpsman recalls, "Senator Javits was in Abidjan [Ivory Coast] at a conference, and he wanted to see the drought, so he came to Ouagadougou for 20 hours." All the refugee camps in Upper Volta were far north of the capital, and "there was no time to go that far during his visit, so they took him out to a house outside of town and showed him a lot of sick old people, quite unrelated to the drought. I told someone that his visit was a waste of time and they said, 'Look, now he can go back to Congress and talk about the suffering he has seen in Africa, and how important it is to pass the drought appropriation, and his vivid appeal might influence some other senators.' I guess that's the way it goes."

Senator John Sparkman flew over the Sahel during the drought, on a commercial flight from Abidjan to Paris. He noted sympathetically in a recent Senate hearing that, "[I]t was a pitiful sight seeing all the dead animals on the ground. Having seen

it," Sparkman said, "I can never forget how terrible it was."

The Sahel drought is now over, but the generosity lingers on. This year for the first time, AID has included in its regular proposal to Congress a section exclusively devoted to "The Sahel and Central West Africa," asking for \$26 million to begin 20 to 30 years of development projects designed to make the desert bloom.

While in dollar terms the money proposed for the Sahel is a drop in the bucket compared to what AID spent in Southeast Asia, the scope of development proposed for the area is the most ambitious ever envisioned. It includes complete reorganization of the agricultural economy from chronic importer to healthy exporter of grains and livestock; the elimination of endemic disease, along with implementation of an extended public health program; and a restructuring of social order, which AID says has been made unavoidable by the economic ravages of the drought.

"AID Saves The Sahel," is one possible description of the transformation of the Sahelian people from total nonentities to the darlings of the aid community. "The Sahel Saves AID," would be equally accurate.

Unlike earthquakes and floods, droughts don't just happen overnight. Although 1973 found AID in need of a tragedy on which to demonstrate its humanitarianism, the people at the edge of the Sahara had already been dying of thirst for nearly five years by the time the world got around to noticing them. And the nations of the Sahel were doomed to end up as LDCs—development jargon for "Least Developed Countries"—long before 1968, when the rains first began to slack.

Before the Drought

Fifteen years ago, soon after it first became unfashionable among Western nations to maintain overseas colonies, France decided to give up French West Africa. Suddenly, during the

summer of 1960, the metropole teat was abruptly yanked from the mouths of every African colony, and they were left infant nations alone—alone with an antediluvian monetary system called the franc zone that benefited no one but France, a stone-age agricultural economy, and a handful of black, Francophile bureaucrats and minor military demagogues with empty treasuries, holding court over millions of illiterate and isolated peasants.

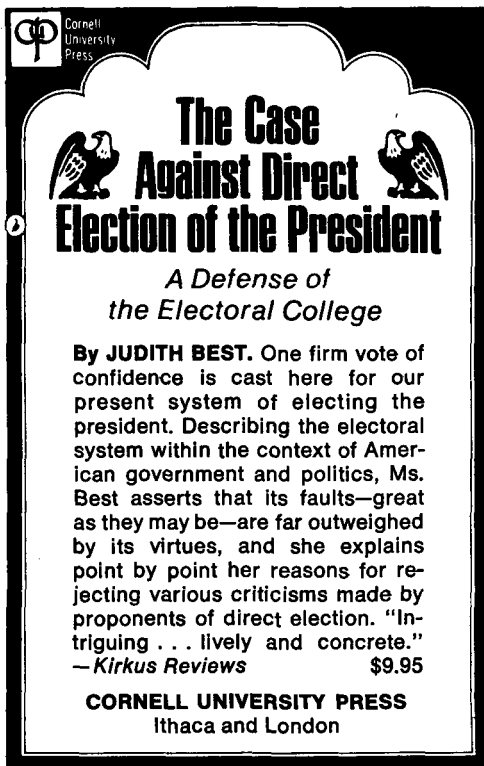
And there they remained. A few—Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Gabon—have managed to keep their heads above water, thanks to good climate and soil, developed ports, and a few natural resources. But most went through the inevitable progression from infant democracy, through autocratic one-party rule, to military coup and dictatorship, and, for the nations of the Sahel at least, an endless fall into an ever-deepening pit of poverty, trade deficits, and hunger. The rest of the globe was concerned with more pressing matters. Granted, nobody owed them a living. Although virtually every developed nation in the world was involved in foreign aid by the early sixties, most handouts were given on the basis of the “less eligibility” principle: the less a poor country had in terms of natural resources and strategic possibilities, the less aid it got.


In Search of Horatio Alger

U.S. policy in the area had gone from initial interest shortly after independence, through near total disregard of the entire continent, to the “emphasis” country period, beginning in the mid-sixties, when aid was directed to the ten African countries deemed most likely to succeed. The nations of the Sahel, needless to say, were not on anyone’s list of potential Horatio Alger stories. French businessmen, moreover, had a good thing going in the former colonies, and actively discouraged outside intervention. As most international aid donors

followed the U.S. flow of money, the Sahelian countries expended most of their energies just trying to find an air hole through the load of Saharan sand that was sifting in over their heads. By the time the Great Drought arrived, the decline in the quality of life was only one of degree.

Whether you choose to believe that the government acted in response to public concern, or that public concern was created and manipulated by the government, Americans eventually were informed that something was seriously wrong in the Sahel, and we acted. During 1973 and 1974 Congress appropriated more than \$100 million for food to keep the people of West Africa from starving to death. Appalled by words and pictures depicting the Sahelian tragedy, Americans dug into their pockets and paid their dues. Not all of the food traveled directly from American docks to the mouths of famine-stricken nomads. Ineptitude, corruption, and confusion were present on both sides of the



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Atlantic during the emergency relief effort. But most of the people got fed, and most of them survived.

The question, of course, is what now. Congress has requested, and AID has supplied, a long-term plan representing a new commitment to the world's marginal men, a plan that promises not only to protect against drought-induced famine, but to boost the Sahelian economy to a permanently respectable level. Based on millions of dollars worth of expert studies compiled over the past two years, AID proposes three decades of river basin and irrigation programs; range management and livestock development; grain production and marketing improvements; family planning, public health, and educational programs. The technology will range from ox-drawn plows to the use of satellite sensors to determine water sources and pasturage capabilities. Humanitarianism as a marketing strategy has settled in for another season.

Judging by past performance, it is doubtful AID can pull it off. In the first place, AID's marketing strategies seem to have that built-in obsolescence, and 20 to 30 years is a long time to expect the priorities and sympathies of Congress and the American public to flow with any degree of continuity. Pure humanitarianism is already starting to be passe. Next year, if our own economic situation doesn't look brighter, we may be ardent isolationists, and who can say, looking at where we were 10 years ago, that 10 years in the future won't find us more interested in colonizing Mars than in promoting self-sufficiency in West Africa.

What AID Cannot Do

But even if we can commit our attention and conscience several decades into the future, we have no reason to believe AID is capable of carrying out the kind of revolutionary development program West Africa is going to need. AID is above all—by mandate, organization, and opera-

tion—a very large and centralized bureaucracy. As in all bureaucracies, AID personnel are selected and assigned primarily on the basis of how well they contribute, not necessarily to the end product, but to the smooth-running perpetuation of the organization. Each little cog in the massive machine is answerable only to the next biggest wheel above him. And this, say many non-AID development experts, is not any way to run an effective program in a place like the Sahel.

Development starts at the bottom, out in the bush, in the smallest, dustiest Sahelian village. For a development worker to understand what the farmer needs and is capable of absorbing, he must be willing to live like the farmer, sweat like him, and work like him for as long as it takes to effect a change for the better.

The Sahel is not a pleasant place for an American to live. It is blazingly, chokingly hot and dirty. The food is dull and the people, by the standards of Western social interaction, are even duller. Few foreigners with the requisite education and expertise, earning the salaries such qualifications command, are willing to make the sacrifices. For AID directors in the field, many of whom have accepted stations in African "hardship" posts as the bottom rung on a ladder to bigger and better things, the attractions of spending the day in an air-conditioned office in the capital begin very quickly to win out over the discomfort of a stint in the bush.

Segregation

U.S. government personnel are thick as flies these days in Ouagadougou. But, except for Peace Corps volunteers, they are rare animals in the bush. In the capital city, they do their best to overcome their hardships; and an impartial observer, not to mention the indigenous African, would be hard-put to find much difference between colonial divisions of 20 years ago and post-colonial



Jacob Javits and Hubert Humphrey with Lami Zura, president of Upper Volta, in Ouagadougou.

segregation today. Whites, predominately French and American, drive the cars in Ouagadougou; blacks ride the bicycles, donkey carts and motor bikes. While a black eating dinner in one of the city's several expensive continental-style restaurant gardens probably wouldn't cause a stir, it just doesn't happen very often.

Ouagadougou's main marketplace is as bustling as any in Africa, but, considering the number of whites in town, it is rare to see them there. Usually they send one of the two or three houseboys that every foreign government official seems to employ, or shop themselves in one of two modern supermarkets stocked exclusively with imported goods, where a small can of instant coffee costs the equivalent of several dollars. The special white butter bread the French bakery makes on Saturday morning sells out each week to foreigners at 950 CFA (African Financial Community) francs a loaf—about five dollars.

There is a white man sitting at the

biggest desk in every bank, ringing the cash register in nearly every pharmacy and retail store. But most of the whites are in Ouagadougou because they work on foreign development projects or in the embassies. They socialize almost exclusively with each other, forming a tiny incestuous community with all attendant gossip and intrigues, and entertain each other at an endless round of dinner and cocktail parties.

Twice weekly, the American embassy shows American movies. Admittance is ostensibly limited to U.S. government personnel only; in reality one need only be white to be admitted without identification, and each audience contains a good percentage of passers-by, itinerant travelers, hangers-on, and Europeans. The movies are held outside on the embassy lawn. Scores of Africans line up along the fence, craning for a view of the screen and listening for a snatch of movie dialogue in a language they can't understand.

Francois Gourier, a French doctor who has lived in the West African bush for three years now, says anyone who hasn't lived in the villages for at least a year has no business planning programs for the villagers. "It is only through big problems like the drought that we can see the lack of aid coordination that has gone on here for 50 years. Yet, even now it's the same. They [the donors] don't understand it's not a change in their own attitudes that is required, a change that results in more money and more projects—but a change in the attitude of one farmer, in one hut, in one village."

Even with the most dedicated field workers, however, it is difficult to imagine anything significant being accomplished within the AID framework. "The AID people I met worked very hard to please their constituency," recalls the Peace Corps administrator. "Unfortunately, by the nature of the system, their constituency was AID in Washington, not the African governments or African farmers. There is this long line of people looking over their shoulders: the AID field man trying to please his headquarters, which is trying to please the White House and the congressional appropriations committees, which are trying to protect themselves from their constituents who say, 'We gave the ungrateful wretches X million dollars and they voted against us in the U.N.'"

"This cover-your-ass syndrome paralyzes the field man from effectively programming. He is subject to the whims of Washington. One year the big policy is regional programming—no country-by-country assistance—and the next year it is birth control, which will singlehandedly cure all our problems. Now, I take it, the angle is helping the world's forgotten, marginal men. You can't hope to meet the Sahel's needs over a period of years with all of those changes."

AID says its new proposals are based on intensive field studies which have pinpointed the needs and capa-

cities of the Sahelian people. But this critic argues, "It's a waste of time. AID is big on sending out teams of 'experts' with impeccable credentials to do an 'intensive' two-week study and then write up a three year, multimillion dollar program. It cannot be done meaningfully, no matter how brilliant the team. They overwhelm local officials, often ask the wrong questions, and end up with the highly suspect answers."

Rules of the Game

Back in Washington, where the highest-level AID derrieres are covered, it probably will make little difference whether or not humanitarianism succeeds in the Sahel. Since Congress keeps changing the rules, the name of the aid game is not justifying past losses, but keeping up with the changing rules. AID knows as well as any Madison Avenue neophyte that the *sine qua non* of any successful marketing strategy is to convince the consumer that the product in question, however familiar it may appear, is really "new-new-new!" Thus, the 1974 AID funding proposal promised to "launch a major reform effort," which would result in a "new" program. President Nixon's first foreign aid presentation to Congress in 1969 guaranteed "a reappraisal of the U. S. foreign assistance program," followed by a "fresh approach" to foreign aid. The same gambit worked for AID under President Kennedy, and even for its predecessor organization under Truman.

The technique probably will work this year. "The food, population and energy crises," reads the 1976 AID proposal, "reaffirm the urgency and thrust of the new directions of our development assistance program."

The "urgency" is on the word "new." As long as humanitarianism remains in vogue, the Sahel will remain a marketable commodity. Whether or not anyone will remember 10 years hence that such a place exists is another question. ■

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Tidbits and Outrages

Rubber Stamps

As the cost of the food stamp program grows, it is coming under increasing criticism from right and left. But imitations also continue to flower. For example, a spokesman for a garment workers union recently proposed that the poor be issued "clothing stamps" because their self-images were being eroded by having to wear hand-me-downs. Bob Wyrick of *Newsday* has now discovered that the federal government has spent about \$100,000 mailing letters to teenage boys offering them discount stamps good for a dollar off on the purchase of a dozen condoms.

Assuming that cost was the only reason young men did not use prophylactics as protection against venereal disease, someone in OEO back in 1971 dreamed up the idea of condom stamps. The program never really got off the ground, but it was tested extensively in Cleveland and Philadelphia.

In both cities the stamps were mailed to a list of boys believed by the local community action agency to be "sexually active." The Wyrick story gives no details on how such a list was assembled.

The boys on the "sexually active" list were subjects for what direct-mail professionals call a "test mailing" of the condom offer. The idea is to see what kind of response you get from a representative sample before sending mailings to a larger group. In this case the test mailing was a failure. After 43,000 letters were mailed, only 254 condom stamps were ever redeemed, despite extensive efforts which persuaded hundreds of drug stores to participate in the program.

The cost worked out to more than \$30 for every condom purchase. And this does not count the cost to the Postal Service of handling several parents' complaints that their sons were receiving obscene mail from the government.

Incidentally, now that the government is into the direct-mail game, it could probably earn back that \$100,000 by licensing those 43,000 names to a list broker for sale to other direct-mail advertisers and political groups. It might be the most profitable list since that jealously guarded compilation of 1972 McGovern contributors.

Now Let's Gear Up for Inhuman Cruelty Day

The final police report on Human Kindness Day, which was celebrated in May at the Washington Monument, states that there were 637 complaints arising from the happy occasion, of which 598 were robberies, larcenies, or assaults.

Selfless Idealism

Stuart Auerbach of *The Washington Post* has come up with more evidence of the selfless idealism of our doctors and dentists:

Medical and dental students have told Congress they strongly object to a bill that would force them to pay back some of the federal funds given their schools to pay for their education.

Although doctors and dentists are among the nation's highest paid professionals—doctors earn an average income after expenses of \$52,000 a year, dentists net \$37,500—and are the only professionals to receive direct federal subsidies for their education, the students said they could not afford the added \$8,000 debt the new law would entail.

A third-year dental student at the University of California at Los Angeles, Jeffrey White, promised that "any sum of money which I as a dentist must pay the federal (government) after graduation will ultimately be paid for by my patients."

Another dental student, Gerald Shinkawa of San Francisco, complained that he would have "the problem" of passing "the costs to the patients" and then justifying them to dental insurance companies.

"There is no room in my economy," he continued, "for the demands this bill is trying to force upon me."