

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Mike Mansfield Speeches, Statements and Interviews

Mike Mansfield Papers

6-29-1959

Agricultural Surpluses: Poverty in the Midst of Plenty

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/mansfield_speeches

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Mansfield, Mike 1903-2001, "Agricultural Surpluses: Poverty in the Midst of Plenty" (1959). *Mike Mansfield Speeches, Statements and Interviews*. 356.

https://scholarworks.umt.edu/mansfield_speeches/356

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Mike Mansfield Papers at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mike Mansfield Speeches, Statements and Interviews by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

Statement of Senator Mike Mansfield (D. Montana)

JUN 29 1959

extra copies in office in book

Agricultural Surpluses: Poverty in the Midst of Plenty

Mr. President:

Food is neither a blessing nor a burden. Food is neutral. It is what we do with it that converts it into one or the other.

The vast stream of food and fiber which is flowing as surplus into the warehouses and storage bins of the nation is no blessing to the countless millions who do not get enough to eat. And what are surpluses to the well-fed, if they are not a burden? These surpluses have cost ten or eleven billions of dollars of public funds to acquire. They cost all of us another billion a year just for maintenance in storage.

As I said at the outset, Mr. President, food - food and fibers - are neutrals. It is what we do with them that counts. And what we are doing with agricultural surpluses now comes perilously close to proving that we are unwilling to face the responsibilities of intelligent self-government.

The Administration plays politics with this problem of ever-mounting agricultural surpluses. And let us face it, we in the Congress have hurled our share of recriminations, some justified, some not, at the Administration in retaliation.

The people of this nation, I believe, are sick and tired of this entire business. They are sick and tired of an Administration which, either because it is unwilling or unable to lead, seeks to frustrate every effort of the Congress to make a dent

in the problem. They are sick and tired of a Congress which does not try harder to make a dent in this problem.

For the fact remains, while the recriminations are hurled back and forth, while everyone agrees that the situation is deplorable, we continue to pay out vast amounts of public funds which stimulate the production of surpluses. We continue to pay out vast sums of public funds to store the surpluses. We continue to pay out vast sums to get rid of the surpluses. Prices of food stay high and go higher. A new class of get-rich-quick surplus millionaires has appeared. And all the while, the small farmers go under by the tens of thousands each year. And all the while, the hungry do not get enough to eat. And all the while the surpluses pile higher.

If we go on this way, how much longer will it be before we discover that it is cheaper to burn wheat than to store it, to dump the rotting eggs into the sea, to put the mildewing corn into free cold storage in the Antarctic? Is that where we are headed, Mr. President? It is clear from recent debate on this problem that we are rapidly approaching some such point of ultimate futility.

Mr. President, I am not an expert on the technical intricacies of agricultural surpluses. There are men in this body who know far more about that problem than I. There are hundreds of experts on this problem in the Department of Agriculture.

I think I know a little, however, about human needs and I think I can recognize a callous indifference to those needs when I see it. I think that every member of this body is aware that there is something wrong in the picture of warehouses all over the land bulging with food while millions of Americans do not have enough to eat, while countless millions abroad stand looking on, with hunger-filled eyes and distended bellies.

I know, Mr. President, there is legislation on the books which is designed to get the surpluses into the stomachs of the hungry. Some food, to be sure, has gone to the unemployed and their families. Some of it has gone to the aged who are trying to make ends meet on a Social Security pittance. Some of it has gone to citizens compelled to depend on public welfare. But does the Senate know, really, how little has been done in this respect? Does it know of the foot-dragging and inertia which characterize the administration of this legislation that is supposed to get the surplus food to people in need?

In 1958, for the entire year, this government put an average of \$16.00 worth of food into the hands of each needy person in the country. That \$16.00, Mr. President, buys about 100 lbs. of food; the average man consumes about fifteen hundred pounds a year. In short, Mr. President, we are making available to our fellow Americans in need far less than 10% of their food requirements out of the overflowing surpluses in the warehouses. And in order for some of these needy people to get even that drop in the bucket, they have sometimes had to take cuts in

welfare checks and to submit to all sorts of personal indignities.

I do not underestimate the administrative difficulties involved in channelling available surplus food to people in need in this country. But surely, Mr. President, the way the intent of the Congress in this respect has so far been carried out, borders on a national disgrace. Surely we can do better than we are. Surely, the nub of the difficulty lies not so much in any technical inability to distribute the food as it does in the lack of will to do it. I regret to say it, Mr. President, but in my opinion, the problem is directly traceable to the callous indifference of this Administration to human needs. This Administration appears to be more interested in proving some obscure theoretical point about agriculture and the government's role in it, than it is in seeing to it that people who are hungry get a little more to eat. It appears more interested in sweeping this problem under the rug or passing it off to the states than in rolling up its sleeves and going to work on it.

Time and again, this Administration has emphasized its disapproval of any effort on the part of Congress to do something about getting more food to Americans who need it. Just recently it has made known its die-hard opposition to the attempt of the distinguished Senator from Vermont (Mr. Aiken) and the distinguished Senator from Minnesota (Mr. Humphrey) and to the efforts of the distinguished Senator from Massachusetts (Mr. Kennedy) and other able Members of this body to liberalize the distribution of surpluses and to put a touch of humanity into the process.

If this Administration has dragged its feet on a more generous distribution of surpluses at home, it has certainly behaved in exactly the reverse fashion abroad. It has been more than eager to get rid of these surpluses to any nation which will take them. Acting largely on the strength of Public Law 480, it has given away or sold on terms little short of gifts about \$8 billion of surplus. It has been so eager to unload abroad, that it has antagonized other friendly exporting nations such as Canada, Australia and Argentina in the process. In all fairness, however, I believe we must recognize that the many nations that have taken this surplus food have benefited enormously from the gifts and by the easy terms under which these surpluses have gone to them.

But there is a point of diminishing returns, under Public Law 480 and we are approaching it very rapidly. Unless we propose to delude ourselves by claiming to "sell" surpluses abroad when there is no prospect of any real payment in return, and unless we propose to antagonize friendly food exporting nations beyond reconciliation, I do not see that we can do much more under Public Law 480 than we are now doing. Indeed, we may shortly find ourselves compelled to do less. I do think that some new approach is needed in this connection. I respectfully commend to the attention of the Senate the "Food for Peace" proposal which is advanced by the able Senator from Minnesota (Mr. Humphrey) in S. 1711 and cosponsored by many other Members. I trust that the Committee on Foreign Relations will give this bill prompt and favorable consideration.

Despite the present high-pressure forced-draft distribution of surpluses abroad by this Administration, there is every indication that the government surplus stockpiles, now in the neighborhood of \$10 or \$11 billion, will continue to grow, and to grow astronomically. There is every indication that the cost of storage will rise far above the billion dollars a year at which it now stands.

It is incumbent on the Administration and on Congress to face this problem and to stay with it. It is clear that some new approach is essential. But until we make such an approach and until it begins to cut down on the annual accumulations of excess food and fiber, we have got to live with the surpluses that are already in our midst. It seems to me that we cannot let them rot. We cannot burn them. We cannot dump them into the sea.

In good conscience, we have got to put this bounty into the hands of those in need. In doing so, moreover, let us recognize in all humility that we shall be helping ourselves - the entire nation - no less than those who take the surpluses.

It is time, Mr. President, to ask this Administration to stop trying to make Congress say "Uncle" and to force its own peculiar economic theories down the throats of the American people. It is time to ask this Administration to recognize that a better use can be made of existing surpluses other than spending a billion dollars or more a year of public funds to keep them rotting in storage.

Since it is reluctant to accept legislation originating in the Congress which is designed to put these surpluses to better use, then it is time to ask this Administration to lead itself on this problem. It is time to ask this Administration to put to work the hundreds of experts in the Agriculture Department and in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare not in order to prove that nothing more should be done with surpluses but in order to work out ways in which more can be done. It is time to ask the Administration to lay before the Congress a program which will see to it that every needy person in this country gets an equitable share of the food and fiber which comes out of the good earth of the United States, and is paid for out of public funds only to go into costly surplus storage in the warehouses at public expense. It is time to ask this Administration, moreover, to come up with a program which sees to it that those in need in this country can get food without being subject to humiliation and degradation, that they can get it as a matter of common decency, that they can get it because they are entitled to it as self-respecting fellow Americans.

It is time too, Mr. President, to call upon this Administration to interpret into action the noble words written by President Eisenhower in February, 1959 in a letter to Secretary Benson. At that time he said:

"We in America must do more to assure that food abundance - our own and that of our friends abroad - is used as effectively as possible where

it is most urgently needed.

"My earnest hope is that our people will put their hearts and minds into this effort. . . I request that you as Secretary of Agriculture take the lead within our government in organizing and energizing this effort."

That was in February, Mr. President. I must ask where is the organizing? Where is the energizing?

We are getting short on dollars for helping others abroad but we are not short on food. I should very much like to see set aside, Mr. President, a substantial portion of the surpluses now threatened with decay in the warehouses. I should like to see it offered by the President of the United States as a gesture of peace and understanding to the world. I should like to see it offered on behalf of the people of the United States on such terms and conditions as the nations - exporting and importing food nations alike - agree will benefit most directly those most in need.

I know, Mr. President, that distributions of this kind are not going to end the surplus problem. But so long as we must live with this problem, let us at least try to live with it in decency. Let us at least try to live with it in a fashion which helps those who need help, both here and abroad. Let us stop wringing our hands as the stockpiles mount ever higher. Let us move in a fashion which serves the interests, not of the few, but

of the entire nation and of mankind. Let this Republican Administration shift from words to action towards these ends. If it does so this Democratic Congress, I have no doubt, will do whatever is needed to support its efforts.