

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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Food Assistance Policies and the Transformation of the Public/ Private Welfare State in the  
United States, 1964-1984

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in History

by

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## ABSTRACT

Food Assistance Policies and the Transformation of the Public/ Private Welfare State in the  
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This dissertation explores the shifting politics of hunger, the welfare state and, more broadly, public/private provision in the United States during the late twentieth century. In particular, the project explores how social provision was – and was not – transformed from the 1960s through the 1980s using the lens of food assistance policies to track these changes. This period has come to be understood as one of central government retreat and service privatization. In this telling, lower public expenditures were meant to promote self-reliance among the able-bodied while prompting private agencies and charities to do more to help the poor. Instead of the binary of program growth and retreat that this standard narrative traces, the lens of public/private state development reveals a more complicated story. I argue there was not a mere transfer of services from the public to private sector, but a complex reconfiguration mediated by the state.

My dissertation examines a range of food assistance programs including federal surplus commodity distribution, the food stamp program, the national school lunch program, the special supplemental nutrition program for women, infants, and children (WIC), and food



banking. During the 1950s and 1960s, public food welfare programs were relatively small. I identify how various constituencies reframed the idea of a right to food assistance in these decades, creating the conditions for rapid public program growth during the 1960s and 1970s. Then, stagflation of the 1970s placed limits on program expansion. Publicly funded food welfare became subject to increased political scrutiny in what was presented as a new era of budget austerity, individual responsibility, and heightened concern with waste, fraud, and abuse. This project tracks how legislators, policy intellectuals, and administration officials worked to reshape public and private food assistance in an age of limits. Changes made in the name of budget austerity in the 1970s became an opening for a more radical restructuring of public/private food assistance during the 1980s. Policymakers recategorized the need for food as a temporary emergency to be met through public subsidy for charitable, voluntary, and market-based solutions. While political differences were fought out directly in battles over legislation, I argue the equally if not more important battles took place in the hidden terrain of budget appropriations, program administration and implementation, and in framing the terms of debate. Through an analysis of the changing framing of hunger, and the mix of public and private welfare identified as an appropriate response, my project provides one lens to understand broader changes in social provision from the 1960s through the 1980s.

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## Introduction

During the 1970s and 1980s, hunger and food provision became sites of heightened contestation in American social politics. Following a period of expanding entitlement sparked by, among other things, civil rights and welfare rights activism, by the 1970s publicly funded food welfare became subject to increased political scrutiny in what was presented as a new era of budget austerity, individual responsibility, and heightened concern with waste, fraud, and abuse. Under the rubric of privatization, a number of sweeping reforms were introduced that would have long lasting implications for the rights and well-being of low-income people in the United States. Hunger, and by extension food welfare, can serve as an important lens to understand these broader changes in policies of social provision.

This dissertation is the story of how food welfare programs transformed from the 1960s through the 1980s, with particular attention to the transformation of public/private provision. The narrative focuses on what were the three largest public food programs at the time: the Food Stamp Program, the National School Lunch Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children.<sup>1</sup> The “rediscovery” of hunger during the 1960s led to a public response, with federal expenditures skyrocketing during the 1970s. Spending growth in food welfare programs fueled the idea that feeding the

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<sup>1</sup> The names listed above are the formal names for programs from relevant legislation. Throughout the dissertation, I use shortened forms or abbreviations to maintain consistency as program names shifted over time. I refer to the Food Stamp Program by its abbreviation, the FSP, or in shortened form as “food stamps.” The National School Lunch Program is referred to as the NSLP or “school lunch.” The Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children is referenced using its common abbreviation, WIC. Further, I use food welfare, food assistance, and food provision interchangeably to describe policies providing food to consumers. This in contrast to farm or agricultural supports, which supported the production of food by subsidizing farmers.

hungry is a popular policy prescription. However, the volatility in these programs, including during this decade of expansion, along with heated Congressional and public debates, tells another story. Hunger returned to the headlines in the 1980s, but this time was followed by a different kind of intervention. This period has come to be understood as one of central government retreat and service privatization. Nonetheless, this narrative is too simplistic. The reality was not a mere transfer of services from the public to private sector, but a complex reconfiguration mediated by the state. Policymakers recategorized the need for food as a temporary emergency to be met through public subsidy for charitable, voluntary, and market-based solutions. Through an analysis of the changing framing of hunger, and the mix of public and private welfare identified as an appropriate response, my project provides one lens to understand broader changes in social provision from the 1960s through the 1980s.

This dissertation follows key actors who both built up and those who dismantled public food welfare programs, along with the strategies these actors employed. Grassroots activism coupled with media attention succeeded in raising the profile of the hunger issue. Anti-hunger advocates and legislators joined with farm interests to create a powerful, but tenuous, food welfare coalition. Then, legislators, policy intellectuals, administration officials, and some local providers employed a variety of strategies to contain and privatize responses to hunger, delegitimizing a public right to food assistance.<sup>2</sup> The politics of food welfare are contentious, and exploring this policy area sheds light more broadly on the politics of social policymaking while uncovering shifts in the changing configuration of public and private welfare programs.

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<sup>2</sup> Among other strategies, these included waging court battles over implementation, setting budget ceilings, employing negative rhetoric to describe public food provision, and changing administrative rules, for example shifting eligibility criteria.

## **A Brief History of Food Welfare**

Food assistance policies provide a unique lens to understand the shifting configuration of public and private welfare provision for three reasons. First, food assistance has always been an uneven patchwork of aid. Localized eligibility criteria and administrative practices created wide variation in the reach of public food programs. Second, from the first iterations of public food welfare, there has always been a component of private assistance. Undertaking this analysis from the 1950s through the 1980s allows me to trace how this relationship changed. Lastly, even at the height of government and public support, food assistance remained a precarious entitlement. While there have been “national” food welfare programs since the 1930s, these have rarely been true entitlements. In what follows, I outline the first public food assistance programs in the U.S.

The first food assistance policies emerged during the Great Depression. Congress sanctioned federal relief for farmers in 1929; however, relief for the unemployed remained defined as a state or local responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Politicians debated whether anyone was starving in the country. Without national data to back up assertions of widespread hunger, Congress refused to act.<sup>4</sup> It was not until three years later, in March of 1932, that Congress authorized the distribution of surplus food to the needy, but only after lengthy debates over the existence of hunger in the country and how these distributions were not a “dole.” President Herbert

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<sup>3</sup> In 1929, the Agricultural Marketing Act established the Federal Farm Board. The board was to aid cooperatives in stabilizing crop prices, notably wheat, by buying and holding grain in storage. This policy created large surpluses of government-owned wheat and cotton. Janet Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 33.

<sup>4</sup> Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat*, 72-73.

Hoover, no supporter of direct federal relief, acquiesced to this distribution. In addition, the Red Cross agreed to oversee distribution, which meant that there was no additional cost to the taxpayer.<sup>5</sup> On March 8, 1932, the first donated wheat left grain elevators in Nebraska bound for a drought-stricken region of South Dakota, with transport costs donated by railroads. This marks the first instance of federal relief for the *unemployed* during the Great Depression, something historian Janet Poppendieck characterizes as “the entering wedge” for federal relief for the poor.<sup>6</sup>

Elected into office in 1932, President Franklin D. Roosevelt continued to feed the hungry as an incidental outcome of supporting farmers.<sup>7</sup> FDR’s administration continued surplus commodity distribution while also incentivizing farmers to take land out of production to bring down surpluses. This demonstrates an ongoing commitment at the federal level to support the production of agricultural crops, not necessarily their consumption. Then, changes in the 1935 Agricultural Adjustment Act provided a new source of revenue for the Secretary of Agriculture to fund food welfare programs. Section 32 of the Act “encouraged the domestic consumption” of farm commodities “by other means from the normal channels of trade and commerce,” codifying commodity distribution so long as it did not interfere with

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<sup>5</sup> Federal Farm Board policies had led to 200 million bushels of wheat in government storage facilities by the end of 1932. In December 1932, the Senate Agriculture and Forestry Committee reported out a resolution to donate 40 million bushels for relief purposes. Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat*, 77.

<sup>6</sup> Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat*, 89.

<sup>7</sup> FDR shut down the Hoover-era Farm Board and replaced it with the Agricultural Adjustment Administration in 1933.

agricultural and commercial markets.<sup>8</sup> The USDA had continued intermittent commodity distribution since 1932, but now with the 1935 Agricultural Act had funds to make distributions more regularly.

However, by 1938, the Secretary of Agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, commented that some food producers and grocers thought commodity distribution was interfering with commercial markets. According to Wallace, “men in the food trades were especially conscious this system of distribution ‘by-passed’ the regular commercial system.”<sup>9</sup> In the end, outrage from both food producers and retailers that commodity distribution programs were diverting their consumers to free food led to a new stage in domestic food aid: the creation of America’s first food stamp program.

In order to better integrate the consumer and retailer in food provision, FDR introduced a stamp system in 1939. Food stamps could be used to purchase agricultural goods deemed in surplus by the Secretary of Agriculture.<sup>10</sup> On April 20, 1939, the administration announced the first food stamps would be available for purchase in Rochester, N.Y, and by late 1939, the program had expanded to a dozen cities.<sup>11</sup> The food stamp program operated through commercial grocery stores much like food stamps today and

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<sup>8</sup> 30% of customs revenues were set aside to purchase food for those who could not otherwise access it. H.R. Rep. No. 94-1460, *Food Stamp Act of 1976: Report Together with Supplemental Views, Dissenting Views on H.R. 13613*, at 391 (1976). See also Ardith Maney, *Still Hungry After All these Years* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Wallace quoted in H.R. Rep. No. 94-1460, *Food Stamp Act of 1976: Report Together with Supplemental Views, Dissenting Views on H.R. 13613*, at 393 (1976).

<sup>10</sup> Consumers purchased orange stamps at face value; \$1 bought a \$1 stamp that could be used at participating grocery store like cash. But they also received \$.50 in blue stamps for each \$1 stamp purchase. Orange stamps were used to purchase eligible surplus commodity items.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 396-398.

embodied a public/private partnership that benefitted farmers, grocery retailers, and poor consumers. Nonetheless, it was short-lived and ultimately dismantled in 1943. The Secretary of Agriculture described the end of surpluses coupled with a sharp decline in public assistance cases meant that there was no more need for “the direct distribution of food stamps and other Government programs through which foods were made available to needy consumers.”<sup>12</sup> However, the commodity distribution network was left intact while surpluses were also distributed through a nascent National School Lunch Program, which was signed into law in 1946.

During the 1940s, Congressional concerns over agricultural surplus and national security found a shared solution in the National School Lunch Program, or as one historian has put it, “the most important and lasting part of the surplus disposal program.”<sup>13</sup> Sen. Richard B. Russell (D-GA) was the main sponsor of the National School Lunch Act. While an opponent of civil rights, he was concerned about poverty in his region. However, in securing votes for the school lunch program, more liberal members of Congress were forced to strike a bargain with Southern Democrats who demanded local control of the school lunch program. The lunch program also grew out of concern over the impact of poor nutrition on the fitness of men for military service. Statistics held that as many as one-third of all recruits in WWI were turned away due to issues stemming from poor diets, with underweight and

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<sup>12</sup> H.R. Rep. No. 94-1460, *Food Stamp Act of 1976: Report Together with Supplemental Views, Dissenting Views on H.R. 13613*, at 418-419 (1976).

<sup>13</sup> Sue Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America’s Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 46, 73.



malnourished recruits ineligible to serve during WWII as well.<sup>14</sup> In June 1946, President Truman signed the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (NSLA) into law. For the first fifteen years of the NSLP, the scales tipped toward farm support, when “commodities were bought not because schools needed them, but because farmers could not sell them at good prices.”<sup>15</sup>

It was not until the early 1960s that public and political attention returned to domestic hunger. In his first Executive Order as President, John F. Kennedy directed the Secretary of Agriculture to expand distribution of food to the needy.<sup>16</sup> Immediately, a pilot FSP began operation, with several states accepting stamps in supermarkets much like the system today.<sup>17</sup> President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Food Stamp Act into law in 1964 as part of a larger slate of Great Society programs designed to combat poverty and inequality. Even so, as late as 1969, the FSP had less than 3 million participants with nowhere near national coverage. Food stamps were implemented nationally and standardized under President Richard Nixon in 1974, with later reforms further easing access and increasing participation.<sup>18</sup> The school

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<sup>14</sup> Levine, 69; Dave Phillipps, “Trouble for the Pentagon: The Troops Keep Packing on the Pounds,” *New York Times*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/04/us/military-obesity.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Harvey A. Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 78.

<sup>16</sup> John F. Kennedy, “Executive Order 10914 of January 21, 1961, Providing for an Expanded Program of Food Distribution to Needy Families,” The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58853>.

<sup>17</sup> “A History of SNAP. Snap to Health: A virtual town hall on SNAP (food stamps) and nutrition in the United States.” *The Aetna Foundation*. Accessed March 14, 2014 <http://www.snaptohealth.org/snap/the-history-of-snap/>.

<sup>18</sup> “A Short History of SNAP,” Food and Nutrition Services, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap>.

lunch program also grew during the 1970s, with more funds earmarked for free and reduced price lunches, while the WIC program moved from pilot program to one with national authority by 1974. It was in the 1970s that food assistance was poised to become an entitlement.

However, it was only six years later that President Ronald Reagan's administration put a stop to expanding food welfare programs. For the Reagan administration, the large growth in food stamp participation through the 1970s was a problem, with as much as 10% of the population receiving monthly benefits by 1980. The Reagan administration enacted deep cuts to public food welfare programs, reframing hunger as an issue best met through voluntary and charitable action. This was made possible by conservative analysis, which oversimplified the relationship of the state to charitable, voluntary, and private sector organizations across time. Ignoring interdependencies between public and private welfare provision allowed conservatives to argue for not just cutting food welfare benefits, but removing them entirely from anyone not deemed "truly needy." Food and hunger, like poverty itself, allow us to understand the shift in social provision between the 1960s and the 1980s. Through this analysis of food assistance programs, I identify key moments in the transition from an impulse for expansive social spending, embodied by the Great Society, to an acceptance of narrower boundaries of public social provision.

## **Literature Review**

This project speaks to and revises scholarship in three main areas: food policy, the public/private welfare state, and the so-called "rightward turn" in social policy. My dissertation brings these literatures together to add texture to our understanding of the

public/private welfare state, while illustrating the ways in which public provision became increasingly contested. This study reveals the different mechanisms employed to privatize food assistance and the changing framing of a right to food aid.

### *Food Policy*

This dissertation contributes to the burgeoning field of food history, paying particular attention to the history of food welfare programs. The earliest, often journalistic, histories of food welfare examine food programs through an activist lens with the goal of creating policy action. In the late 1960s, Nick Kotz and Judith Segal published books critical of the food stamp program, uncovering the paradox of poverty and hunger amidst plenty. They illustrated how, even with a national food stamp program in place, millions of Americans could not access adequate food.<sup>19</sup>

Following these activist histories are policy histories of commodity and food stamp programs. Janet Poppendieck's *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat*, published in 1986, argued for the conservative nature of the New Deal through an analysis of agricultural supports and early consumer food programs. Poppendieck argued that the existence of government stockpiles of surplus crops did not ensure public food distribution. Instead, federal food assistance to the poor came only after overcoming barriers posed by institutions, ideology, and interest groups in the 1930s.<sup>20</sup> Congress eventually decided to distribute this surplus; however, food assistance remained predicated on agricultural surplus until the 1970s.

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<sup>19</sup> Both Kotz and Segal argue the interests of agricultural producers are at the center of food assistance programs, not the needs of the poor. Nick Kotz *Let Them Eat Promises: The Politics of Hunger in America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969) and Judith Segal, *Food for the Hungry: The Reluctant Society*, Policy Studies in Employment and Welfare No. 4 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970).

<sup>20</sup> Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat*.

In the next phase of works on food policy, political scientists focused on the legislative path to policy action, using the history of food stamps to test specific theories about policy development. Jeffrey Berry explored the power dynamics between the USDA and Congress in program rulemaking, while Ronald F. King revealed the entanglement of budget politics with discussions of welfare.<sup>21</sup> Historian Sam Rosenfeld used the food stamp program as a place to identify and trace the process of log-rolling legislation through Congress.<sup>22</sup> Political scientist Ardith Maney took a wider view than these single-program studies, examining the full range of food welfare programs beginning with debates over enactment in the 1940s and 1950s through to program functions in the early 1980s.<sup>23</sup> She traced legislative and administrative changes across the largest food assistance programs – food stamps, school meals, and WIC. These legislative and administrative histories are excellent at uncovering the contentious political process and key institutional actors, including the interplay between business and government.

Other approaches brought in client and recipient experiences of food assistance programs. Michael Lipsky and Marc A. Thibodeau’s 1988 article, “Feeding the Hungry with Surplus Commodities,” focuses on the impact of surplus commodity distribution on

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<sup>21</sup> Studies of food stamps as an income maintenance program, as a lens into administrative rule-making, and a way to study the politics of welfare budgeting. See Maurice Macdonald *Food, Stamps, and Income Maintenance*, IRP Poverty Policy Analysis Series, (London: Academic Press, 1977); Jeffrey M. Berry, *Feeding Hungry People: Rulemaking in the Food Stamp Program* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984) and Ronald Frederick King, *Budgeting Entitlements: The Politics of Food Stamps* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Sam Rosenfeld, “Fed by Reform: Congressional Politics, Partisan Change, and the Food Stamp Program, 1961–1981,” *Journal of Policy History* 22, no. 04 (2010): 474-507.

<sup>23</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry After All These Years*.

recipients and the emergency feeding system.<sup>24</sup> Sue Levine took a similar consumer focus in *School Lunch Politics*, where she traces the development of school lunch in the U.S. from the late nineteenth-century through the early 1970s.<sup>25</sup> Journalistic works chronicling emergency feeding organizations provide important program histories of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as insights into changing consumer needs at this time.<sup>26</sup>

Outside of accounts of food welfare, scholars of the cultural turn generated social histories of food that inform this dissertation. A key work in this tradition is Harvey Levenstein's *Paradox of Plenty*.<sup>27</sup> Levenstein engaged changing U.S. food culture, highlighting intersections with food and agricultural production and policy as well as political economy. More recently, scholars have used food as a lens to discuss different meanings of social citizenship.<sup>28</sup> Another strand of this scholarship created the framework to

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Lipsky and Marc A. Thibodeau, "Feeding the Hungry with Surplus Commodities," *Political Science Quarterly* 103, no. 2 (July 1, 1988): 223–44.

<sup>25</sup> Levine, *School Lunch Politics*.

<sup>26</sup> Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York: Penguin Press, 1999); Sasha Abramsky, *Breadline U.S.A.: The Hidden Scandal of Hunger and How to Fix It* (Sausalito, CA.: PoliPointPress, 2009); Janet Poppendieck, *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*. See also Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> A big part of this is has been the emerging field within studies of food and social citizenship focusing on food and war. Scholars here pay particular attention to the way food policies affected and were affected by ideas of gender and race in times of scarcity. For examples, see Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Ina Zweiniger, Rachel Duffett, and Alain Drouard, eds., *Food and War in Twentieth Century Europe* (New York: Routledge (Ashgate), 2011); and Lizzie Collingham, *Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

understand how hunger became an issue around which to craft policy. James Vernon's *Hunger* tracks the changing meaning of hunger in Britain, pointing to key moments when hunger transformed from an inevitable part of the human condition to a problem to be combated with social policy.<sup>29</sup>

The most recent food histories combine attention to social citizenship with analyses of food welfare programs. In 2011, Rachel Moran argued that programs like food stamps subsidize producers within the market system, allowing for the creation of consumers within a class of people who otherwise could not purchase food. This created more citizen consumers while also meeting the needs of private for-profits (i.e. grocery stores and supermarkets).<sup>30</sup> Around the time of Moran's article, scholars of the grassroots War on Poverty extended attention to social citizenship, tracing how individuals and institutions outside of Congress pushed for change, particularly poor women who used food welfare programs.<sup>31</sup> This approach blended top-down and bottom-up histories of food assistance,

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<sup>29</sup> James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap, 2007). Another work that explores the emergence of hunger, but as a problem for international aid and development, is Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010). Cullather's book provides a clear overview of the development of the calorie and how measurement of food energy allowed for future measures of hunger.

<sup>30</sup> Rachel Louise Moran, "Consuming Relief: Food Stamps and the New Welfare of the New Deal," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 4 (March 1, 2011): 1001–22, doi:10.1093/jahist/jaq067.

<sup>31</sup> Two examples informed my thinking on this. First, see Laurie Green, "Saving Babies in Memphis," in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*, eds Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (Athens, Ga. and London: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 133-158. See also *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), in particular chapter 6, "Dragging Nevada Kicking and Screaming into the Twentieth Century." Green recounts how mothers, working with doctors, at a community health center began prescribing food for under- and malnourished infants and children, creating a forerunner to WIC. In Orleck's narrative, poor

incorporating the role of community organizations along with states in our federalized system of food assistance programs.

My dissertation contributes to the historiography of food policy by analyzing the debates of the 1970s and 1980s through the lens of a shifting public/private welfare state. Food welfare programs were not just cut back in the 1980s; instead, public/private provision of food welfare was reconfigured, undoing the 1930s New Alignment and later Great Society bargain whereby private actions extended and supplemented the welfare state. This new lens leads to a more complicated interpretation of food assistance programs than prior legislative and administrative histories. Instead of tracing the growth or decline in federal policies, I am interested in when and how partnerships with private organizations developed. In this way, I trace state development outside the confines of the state, an important element of studies of public/private welfare.

#### *Public/ Private Welfare State*

Analyzing food welfare programs with an attention to public/private interaction allows for new conclusions about the course of their development, as well as the development of social provision more broadly. Historians have long understood the welfare state as a mix of public and private action; my dissertation builds on this literature by providing insights into the variety of private interventions in food welfare programs. Acknowledging the long tradition of private actors providing social services, scholars began to pay closer attention to the shift during the 1970s to contracting out public service provision through private, non-profit, and for-profit organizations. Scholars including historian Peter Hall and political scientists Stephen Smith, Michael Lipsky, and Lester

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black mothers successfully lobbied the state legislature to get Nevada to provide food stamps to its citizens, the last state to join the food stamp program making it national in 1974.

Salamon theorized the relationships between the state and non-governmental and non-profit organizations.<sup>32</sup> Debates over this emerging arrangement and its impacts took off during 1980s while Reagan was in office.

These debates built on earlier historiographical developments, where scholars argued that the U.S. underwent a different kind of state development than European nations. American state development could only be understood by examining the relationship between public and private institutions, whether they were businesses, charitable or voluntary associations, or other kinds of non-governmental organizations.<sup>33</sup> This institutional turn led historians to, instead of seeing a weak 'stateless state,' theorize an associational state that grew through expanding state capacity as private actors undertook statist responsibilities.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Dobkin Hall, *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector and Other Essays on Philanthropy, Voluntarism, and Nonprofit Organizations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Steven Rathgeb Smith and Michael Lipsky, *Nonprofits for Hire: The Welfare State in the Age of Contracting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Lester M. Salamon, *Partners in Public Service: Government-Nonprofit Relations in the Modern Welfare State* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Early scholars described the U.S. as stateless, with a welfare system characterized as weak and incomplete in contrast to those in Europe and Scandinavia. This thinking came from the idea that there was a single path to state development, articulated most clearly by Weber. For Max Weber's definition of "modern bureaucracy," see *Economy and Society*, Vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 956-958. On welfare state typologies, see Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990). Esping-Andersen places the United States in the "liberal" welfare state category, along with the Canada and Australia, in contrast to more corporatist and social-democratic welfare regimes. The classic statement of the lack of a welfare state is in Werner Sombart's *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (White Plains, N.Y.: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976). See also Eric Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?," *History Workshop Journal* 17, no. 1 (1984): 57–80 and Alberto Alesina et al., *Why Doesn't the US Have a European-Style Welfare System?* (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2001), <http://papers.nber.org/papers/w8524>.

<sup>34</sup> Ellis Hawley's path-breaking article, "Herbert Hoover, the Commerce Secretariat, and the Vision of an 'Associative State,' 1921-1928," broke open studies of the public/ private



Scholars moved past the binary of a strong or weak state to theorize state development through processes outside of centralized state growth, revealing that the Gilded Age and the New Deal were not the only points of rise and fall in state capacity.<sup>35</sup> Instead, there existed a tradition of public and private partnerships from the founding to the present that needed to be understood to analyze the American state.

The next wave of scholarship rethought the public/private state by analyzing welfare capitalism, investigating why there are so many private actors involved in welfare provision in the United States compared to other Western nations. These works uncovered a long tradition of private actors providing services. A focus on new actors led to further decentering from the New Deal as a pivotal moment of social policy development to reveal what New Deal policies were built on and around.<sup>36</sup> These works also opened the door for

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character of the American state. During the New Era, a period many historians had characterized by a weak state and strong business associations, Hawley describes something different; a deepening of state ties to “cooperative institutions,” making a kind of “private government.” Ellis W. Hawley, “Herbert Hoover, Commerce Secretariat, and a Vision of the Associative State,” *Journal of American History*, 61 no. 1 (March 1974), 117.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); William Novak, *The People's Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Brian Balogh, *A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> A few scholars who reperiodize away from New Deal as ‘big bang’ in development of social policy include Sanford Jacoby, *Modern Manners: Welfare Capitalism since the New Deal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) and Marie Gottschalk, *The Shadow Welfare State: Labor, Business, and the Politics of Health Care in the United States* (Ithaca N.Y: ILR Press, 2000); Jacob S. Hacker, *The Divided Welfare State: The Battle over Public and Private Social Benefits in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Jennifer Klein, *For All These Rights: Business, Labor and the Shaping of America's Public-Private Welfare State* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2003). Each of these works highlights the role employers and/or organized labor played in the construction of a private welfare state.

studies of the “submerged state.” By demonstrating how private welfare was provided through employee health and pension benefits, scholars turned their attention to the ways in which the state itself provides benefits to non-poor citizens, in particular through the tax code.<sup>37</sup>

Around the same moment the literature expanded on welfare capitalism, scholars interested in the public/private welfare state began to theorize relationships between the state and non-governmental and non-profit organizations. This sectoral analysis deepened scholar’s understanding of the interconnections between the “third sector” and government.<sup>38</sup> The earliest works about this topic corrected what their authors characterized as long-standing myths about the U.S. nonprofit sector. Peter Hall began tracking the non-profit sector during the 1970s when, as he describes, the sector started to do something distinctive. Hall saw a preference in relying on the private sector, arguing that **“in retrospect, it seems quite clear that the American welfare state, rather than involving the elaboration of a vast bureaucracy [...] encouraged the development of a private infrastructure to**

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<sup>37</sup> Christopher Howard, *The Hidden Welfare State: Tax Expenditures and Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997) and Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State : How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* Chicago Studies in American Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> There is a segment of this literature that does not so much point to interconnections between non-profits and government, and instead argues a growing welfare state crowded out long-standing civic, charitable, and voluntary institutions. See, for example, David T. Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890-1967* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) in line with Marvin N. Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway Press, 1992). Both works argue local, community self-help is better situated to meet welfare needs (and more compassionate) than state assistance. Other scholars are more critical of this, see Jason Kaufman, *For the Common Good?: American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003). Kaufman argues fraternal and voluntary organizations of the late nineteenth-century reinforced homogeneity and were a reaction to immigration and other social changes.

**implement its purposes.”**<sup>39</sup> Government policies beginning in the 1950s pushed for private sector social welfare growth directly by providing grants and contracts and indirectly by structuring incentives for private participation. **Other works** described a new era of welfare provision through the rapid expansion of government contracting out.<sup>40</sup> Like Hall, these scholars described the late twentieth-century as a moment of real change in social service provision. Other scholars described a non-profit sector that was at best compromised by professionalization and an adherence to a more statist agenda, and at worst was co-opted and made unaccountable to the people.<sup>41</sup> The sectoral analysis uncovers the direct linkages between public and private organizations, showing the long tradition of these partnerships as well as the ways the nature of these relationships changed in the late twentieth-century.

One subset of the sectoral analysis deserving special attention are works that discuss public and private welfare provision in connection to the market. Both Lester Salamon and Michael Katz commented on the increasing market orientation in welfare provision beginning in the 1980s.<sup>42</sup> Highlighting specific case studies, the essays in Elisabeth S.

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<sup>39</sup> Hall, *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector*, 63.

<sup>40</sup> See for example, Smith and Lipsky, *Nonprofits for Hire* and Salamon, *Partners in Public Service*.

<sup>41</sup> Jennifer R. Wolch, *The Shadow State: Government and Voluntary Sector in Transition* (New York: Foundation Center, 1990); Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003); M. Bryna Sanger *The Welfare Marketplace: Privatization and Welfare Reform* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); Mike Raco, *State-Led Privatisation and the Demise of the Democratic State: Welfare Reform and Localism in an Era of Regulatory Capitalism* (Surrey, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> During the decade, they describe that an increasing proportion of nonprofit income came from fees and sales, while welfare provision by for-profit firms also accelerated. See Lester Salamon, “The Marketization of Welfare: Changing Nonprofit and For-Profit Roles in the American Welfare State,” *Social Service Review* (March 1993): 16-39; and Michael Katz,

Clemens and Doug Guthrie in *Politics and Partnerships*, as well as Andrew Morris's monograph, *The Limits of Voluntarism*, historicize different kinds of non-profit organizations and their relationship to the market and the state.<sup>43</sup> These works highlight the entanglement of private welfare provision with the market throughout the twentieth century, while also pointing to a shift in the character of the relationship by the 1980s.

In the existing work on food welfare, many scholars highlight program growth during the 1970s as contentious, but no one has yet pointed to the ways politicians opened avenues for private sector interventions as part of these debates. This allows for a better understanding of how more radical changes in food provision during the 1980s were enacted. I draw specifically on scholars who use a sectoral analysis to understand public/private social provision. My study of food welfare programs follows a similar trajectory, pointing to the increasing growth and embeddedness of private food provision as public programs grew throughout the 1970s. And like scholars who study the submerged state, non-profit leaders worried about the independence of the sector. However, the sheer volume of need often sidelined these concerns. In addition, my analysis of food welfare programs highlights interconnections of private provision and the market, following the increasing market orientation of food welfare and in particular the shift during the 1980s. While market-oriented policies were developed during the 1970s, politicians used them more forcefully by the 1980s, a shift I illustrate within school lunch and emergency feeding programs. This

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“The Independent Sector, the Market, and the State,” in *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American Welfare State* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 137-170.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew J. F. Morris, *The Limits of Voluntarism: Charity and Welfare from the New Deal through the Great Society* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Elisabeth Stephanie Clemens and Doug Guthrie, eds., *Politics and Partnerships: The Role of Voluntary Associations in America's Political Past and Present* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

study of public/private food welfare provision highlights how the contestation of the 1970s channeled action towards private avenues, creating the conditions for limiting a right to food assistance in the 1980s.

### *Late Twentieth-Century Rise of the Right*

This dissertation engages with a broad literature describing a conservative turn in American social, cultural, political, and economic life in the late twentieth century, particularly looking at how ideas about shrinking the welfare state played out in the area of food policy. In the late 1990s, scholars began to take the resurgence of conservatism since the early- to mid-twentieth-century seriously.<sup>44</sup> Some characterize the rightward shift as a conservative social, cultural, and political backlash to 1960s rights consciousness and social programs of the War on Poverty and Great Society. However, later scholars argued that the success of the conservative movement was due to activism and organizing at the grassroots level.<sup>45</sup> This grassroots approach supports an interpretation of the Republican Party as a party of ideas, something my analysis of food welfare programs supports.

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<sup>44</sup> Early debates in this historiography raised the issue of the role of race in the turn right. For the racial interpretation see, Thomas Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992). For accounts that go beyond race, see Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996) and Bruce Schulman, *The 1970s: Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001). I have more work to do incorporating literature on the racialization of welfare, part of the field inspired by Jill Quadagno's *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>45</sup> Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) and Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). These works were complemented by scholars who turned their attention to grassroots approaches to the rise of the Right, pointing to suburbia in both the Sunbelt and the South. See Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the*

Following these developments in the literature, historians began to pay attention to the transformation in political economy during the seventies, when the U.S. “traded factories for finance.” Judith Stein’s *Pivotal Decade* argues that conservatism on its own was not powerful enough to break down opposition; instead, it was the challenges facing post-war liberalism (and its failures) that created space for conservative ideas to penetrate government.<sup>46</sup> Stein’s argument of the shift Right as a pragmatic reaction to the failures of liberalism highlights a key debate in studies of conservatism. Scholars wrestle with defining the rise of the Right somewhere on a continuum between pragmatic and ideological. I argue that changes that weakened public food assistance were first a pragmatic reaction to a slumping economy during the 1970s. Food welfare programs grew to meet the needs of those facing economic hardship, but this growth then reinforced negative ideas about food welfare. Further, as Monica Prasad argued, institutions in addition to ideas were a key piece of the rightward turn. In *The Politics of Free Markets*, Prasad highlights the ways institutions structure the incentives of actors and generate feedback effects. It is her attention to

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*New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Matt Lassiter, *Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010); Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010); and Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

institutions that allows Prasad to account for differential neoliberal development across the four countries she analyzes.<sup>47</sup>

The final variant of histories on the rise of the Right demonstrates the closing off of more progressive welfare visions.<sup>48</sup> Historians such as Annelise Orleck and Felicia Kornbluh made a case for the power of a welfare right's movement, uncovering how grassroots activists - often women of color - fought for adequate benefits and demanded rights to equal citizenship.<sup>49</sup> This dissertation uses these sources as a lens to understand the contest between liberal and conservative ideas about welfare during the 1970s and 1980s. While these works do not easily fit into the historiography of the rise of conservatism, the authors describe how the rise of conservative politicians and governments foreclosed more liberal welfare policy outcomes during these decades, providing another perspective on the consolidation of the Right in the United States.

Kornbluh traces the rise and fall of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). While it emerged out of the Civil Rights Movement and second-wave feminism in the mid-1960s, she argues that by 1974, the organization had “collapsed.”<sup>50</sup> Liberal politicians in the 1960s accommodated the welfare rights movement, but Kornbluh argues

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<sup>47</sup> Monica Prasad, *The Politics of Free Markets: The Rise of Neoliberal Economic Policies in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> These books are sometimes categorized as part of the literature on the Grassroots War on Poverty.

<sup>49</sup> Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005) and Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> Kornbluh, *Battle for Welfare Rights*, 7.

that the electoral realignment towards conservatism by 1970 was a reaction, in part, to poor people's demands for citizenship rights. Marisa Chappell takes this analysis one step further in *The War on Welfare*. She highlights how the turn to conservative thinking around welfare policy was drawn in important ways from liberals.<sup>51</sup> The right's animosity to welfare, because it undermined male breadwinner families and made people dependent, actually drew from many liberal arguments about how to make welfare better, debates which emerged during discussion of a minimum income and other forms of welfare reform.

The literature on the rise of the Right informs how I characterize a conservative shift in food welfare beginning in the 1970s. Food welfare programs transitioned through and between a politics of expansion, austerity, and disempowerment. Changes in food welfare shifted from being driven by what politicians described as pragmatic cuts necessary to balance the budget to ideological demands to shrink public food provision. Put another way, this project tracks the changing perception of government intervention, as it transforms from a positive to negative force in feeding the hungry. By the 1980s, conservative politicians argued hunger should be met through market-based interventions, transforming food as a public good into a consumer choice.

This dissertation helps to reconceptualize the transformation of social policy in the 1970s and 1980s, making three interventions. While the story is often one of privatization, this framing is too simplistic. First, the 1980s are notable for the many varieties of privatizing the state that took place, in particular making welfare subject to market forces. Further, while welfare reform during the 1980s is often framed as government retreat from service provision and pushing services onto the private sector, here I trace a story of government actively

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<sup>51</sup> Marisa Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).



partnering with both nonprofit providers and for-profit producers to make the ‘privatization’ of food provision possible. Scholars have extensively treated the shift to contracting out in welfare service provision. For example, Andrew Morris deftly treats the shift in Depression era charity from providing material support to services, like family counseling.<sup>52</sup> In the context of food programs, there was contracting out in school cafeterias. But food policy also provides a lens into other kinds of privatization, including the growing role of non-profit emergency feeding organizations as well as the role of private food producers in shaping food assistance. Both non-profit charities as well as for-profit businesses were enlisted by the state to meet social welfare needs.

Second, food welfare allows for a more thorough interrogation of how market mechanisms become integrated into welfare provision. According to Milo Perkins, a framer of the first food stamp program, food stamps were a political success because of their connection to the market. Perkins credited the success of food stamps to the fact that conservatives appreciated people “going through the regular channels of trade” and not relying on “government machinery” to bring food to people.<sup>53</sup> While allowing consumers to take part in regular markets for food was a hallmark of the food stamp program in the 1930s, marketizing food assistance during the 1980s excluded certain citizens from the class of consumer.<sup>54</sup> For example, “competitive foods” available in school lunch rooms, often

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<sup>52</sup> See Smith and Lipsky, *Nonprofits for Hire* and Morris, *The Limits of Voluntarism* on contracting out for family services.

<sup>53</sup> H.R. Rep. No. 94-1460, *Food Stamp Act of 1976: Report Together with Supplemental Views, Dissenting Views on H.R. 13613*, at 407-408 (1976).

<sup>54</sup> For discussions of membership and citizenship that inform this discussion, see T.H. Marshall, “Citizenship and Social Class,” in *Class, Citizenship, and Social Development: Essays by T.H. Marshall*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), 65-122.

supplied via private contractor, excluded poor children as only students with cash in hand could purchase competitive foods. An even more marked example is the creation of a market for “seconds” through an emerging network of food banks. Unwanted overproduction from farming and food manufacturing found an “efficient” use, providing tax subsidies for business and income for farmers, while also feeding hungry consumers.

Third, this dissertation positions the 1970s as a “pivotal decade” for food welfare policy, building on recent historical accounts of the 1970s as a pivotal decade more broadly.<sup>55</sup> I argue that the Reagan administration does not represent a clean break from the past but instead the culmination of a more gradual opening up of conservative policy avenues, many of which emerged in the 1970s. By the time Reagan was elected President, much of the intellectual and ideological groundwork to cut social welfare spending on food assistance was laid by the more “liberal” administrations through their “pragmatic” cuts of the 1970s and even earlier. In this way, my dissertation complements many other works that describe changing public/private welfare norms in that they reperiodize the “common narrative” of welfare state development.

## **Chapter Summaries**

In telling this story about the history of shifting public/private boundaries of food welfare, the dissertation is divided into five body chapters and a short epilogue. Chapter One examines how hunger became a top domestic policy problem by the end of the 1960s,

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For a study of the intersections of consumption and citizenship, see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

<sup>55</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Stein, *Pivotal Decade*.

contributing to the literature on the re-emergence of hunger. In particular, the chapter focuses on debates during the 1940s and 1950s surrounding the existence of hunger in the United States. While some legislators, in particular Southern Democrats in Congress, denied the existence of hunger in the country, a hunger coalition emerged to counter these claims, criticizing limited federal commodity assistance. Liberal – often urban – representatives, news media, and civil rights and anti-poverty activists brought episodic attention to hunger beginning in the late-1950s, resulting in a pilot food stamp program in 1961, and national authorization for food stamps in 1964. The chapter demonstrates how, by 1968, these actors had formed a coalition, catapulting hunger to be a pressing domestic policy problem. Grassroots activists, galvanized by the civil rights movement, demanded the federal government do more than supply food stamps to some. They called for legislators to end hunger as a human right. This chapter provides critical context for later chapters, introducing and situating competing conceptualizations of the hunger problem (and relevant interest groups) and demonstrating how an understanding of hunger rooted in domestic poverty became the dominant frame of the hunger problem by the end of the 1960s. But, attention to hunger quickly transformed as programs grew faster than anyone anticipated.

Chapters Two and Three uncover political efforts to contain the hunger problem in the midst of massive increases in public food welfare expenditures of the 1970s. Chapter Two opens with the early Nixon administration approach to hunger. Growing out of the activism of 1968, the public presented the Nixon administration with expansive, rights-based claims demanding an end to hunger by ending poverty now. Nixon initially appeared to respond to these demands, making a sweeping statement about ending hunger in the United States and proposing a basic income program – the Family Assistance Plan (FAP). Instead of

ending hunger, this chapter argues the Nixon administration sought ways to manage and contain the hunger issue. The chapter illustrates the growing divide between anti-hunger advocates and the Nixon administration, viewed through an analysis of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health, held in December 1969. The Nixon administration did not renounce public action, but began to erect boundaries around public responsibility. Demonstrating this, Nixon immediately dismissed the Conference's proposed solution to end hunger: an adequate minimum income far greater than the level set by the FAP. Further, the chapter outlines a shift in the reconfiguration of public/private responses to hunger, with Nixon calling for partnerships with the food industry to promote nutrition education, among other areas.

Chapter Three follows expanding food welfare programs in an era of budget austerity. During the 1970s, public food welfare budgets grew at an unprecedented pace thanks to expansionary measures built into food programs in reaction to a stagnating economy. Nevertheless, as the chapter outlines, the 1970s serve as a 'pivotal decade' for food assistance where programs became subject to increasing debate and threats of cuts. The chapter argues entitlement-driven program growth became a liability as the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations employed the politics and language of austerity to rein in food program spending, but with key differences in tone between administrations. Attempts to control spending were largely unsuccessful due to the strength of a food welfare coalition. Even so, the chapter closes with a discussion of the lasting impact these debates had on the language of food welfare, tracing early concerns with fraud and abuse.

Chapters Four and Five focus on a new phase in public food provision, one in which the politics of austerity gave way to disentanglement, eliminating the notion of a basic right to

federal food welfare, and social welfare more generally. Chapter Four examines the Reagan administration's moves to disentitle food welfare recipients by undermining the principle of public provision altogether, forcing a reconfiguration of private sector responsibilities.

During the 1960s and 1970s, public contracts and grants for service provision grew as public food welfare spending increased. There existed an entitlement to at least some food assistance. By the 1980s, hunger had been recategorized as a temporary emergency with provision to be met through a network of local and national charity, engaging with the for-profit sector. Following cuts to social service grants and declines in donations due to the recession, private charitable and voluntary organizations required increased engagement with for-profit providers and a shift in food assistance itself, from a public good to a consumer choice.

Chapter Five historicizes the food bank, a recent innovation that serves as the institutional embodiment of the politics of disentanglement in food welfare. The food bank was the result of a reconfigured public/private sector of food and social provision, perfectly illustrating what happens when a right to food assistance is discredited. The elements of disentanglement discussed in the last chapter are present here: food banking provides food on an ad hoc, emergency basis without any right or entitlement and also relies on market principles and for-profit engagement to obtain sufficient donations to distribute nation-wide. The chapter shows that food banks created a secondary market for food, providing industry and government "seconds" to the poor, while generating revenue for for-profit industry – both food manufacturers and farmers who benefited from tax and government subsidies respectively. However, the food bank reveals another aspect of Reagan-era disentanglement. A large public subsidy supported the network, in the form of surplus commodities supplied by

the USDA. In contrast to food stamps and other food programs, this subsidy was hidden from public view.

The dissertation then concludes with a short epilogue about the unique framing of hunger in the United States. Two events in 1996 highlight how the U.S. continued to step back from a right to food assistance. The first was President Bill Clinton's signing of welfare reform, which included implications for food assistance, and the second the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, where the U.S. refused to sign onto a declaration guaranteeing a right to food.<sup>56</sup> The federal government never fully embraced a right to food assistance, even at the peak of attention to hunger at the end of the 1960s. Through uncovering the longer history of debates on the public/private framing of domestic hunger, this dissertation creates a framework to situate this failure to commit to a public right to food aid.

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<sup>56</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Report of the World Food Summit* (Rome: FAO, 1997). American delegates repeated this action in 2002 and 2009. See Peter Rosset, "U.S. Opposes Right to Food at World Summit," Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, July 3, 2002 (blog post), <https://www.iatp.org/news/us-opposes-right-to-food-at-world-summit> and Nick Squires, "UN food summit 'fails before it begins'" November 12, 2009, *The Telegraph*, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/6554952/UN-food-summit-fails-before-it-begins.html>.

## Chapter One

### Framing Hunger: The Politics of Domestic Food Assistance, 1943-1968

In both the 1930s and the 1960s, hunger was identified as a pressing, public problem. In the 1930s, mass unemployment, bread lines, and public protest propelled hunger to a priority on the domestic agenda. Private charity could not meet rapidly rising need, while at the same time growing government-owned crop surpluses led to comments of “breadlines knee-deep in wheat.”<sup>1</sup> Public attention on want amidst plenty pushed Congress to enact the first federal food relief program in 1932. By the late 1960s, hunger was once again recognized as a top domestic policy problem, marking another “paradox of plenty.” In contrast to the large farm surpluses of the 1930s, however, the “plenty” of the 1960s resulted from the general material abundance of American life. For scholars, these two decades represent critical junctures in the history of hunger as a social problem in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Not only were they moments when hunger was debated at length in political circles, but they

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Poppendieck uses this as part of the title for her book on the institutionalization of food assistance and farm supports during the 1930s. Janet Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> For works that discuss hunger from the 1930s through the 1960s, see Ardith Maney, *Still Hungry After All these Years* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989); Jeffrey M. Berry, *Feeding Hungry People: Rulemaking in the Food Stamp Program* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984); Ronald Frederick King, *Budgeting Entitlements: The Politics of Food Stamps* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000); Sue Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America’s Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Peter K. Eisinger, *Toward an End to Hunger in America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1998); Harvey Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

were also peak moments of public concern about hunger where citizens demanded public intervention.

This chapter traces the changing framing of hunger between these two junctures. From the end of the first food stamp program in 1943 to hunger's re-emergence as a top policy problem by 1968, calls for public food assistance programs waned but did not disappear. I identify three phases in the reframing of hunger, part of the process that led to the "rediscovery" of hunger by the 1960s. First, in the immediate post-war period, competing hunger constituencies vied to control the narrative of hunger. Next, a wave of publicity from politicians and the media sparked the public's interest in hunger. Lastly, grass roots activism galvanized by the civil rights and other anti-poverty movements led to demands to end hunger at home by enacting a right to food assistance. These three phases of action are not neatly divided; there was interplay and overlap that created the conditions for the "rediscovery" of hunger by 1961. And by 1968, the framing of hunger had transformed. Debates around the various dimensions of hunger gave way to demands for expansive public intervention to solve hunger in America.

### **Competing Understandings of Hunger: Underdevelopment, Inadequate Purchasing Power, and Domestic Poverty, 1943-1961**

To understand the emergence of hunger as an issue by 1961 requires exploring the people and forces that worked to put it there. There is no one event, survey, or example that brought hunger to the attention of the public. Instead, there were cadres of people, not necessarily unified nor yet in conversation with one another, who reformulated hunger within different political, economic, and global contexts.



Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, there were three approaches to defining and deploying hunger as a problem. The first focused on underdevelopment overseas. ‘Developing’ nations inability to feed their citizens could be remedied through foreign aid. On the home front, the farm bloc saw hunger as a problem of underconsumption. Farmers were supplying more than enough food to feed the country, but the demand side was lacking. Lastly, a coalition of legislators – members of Congress, the Conference of Mayors, and other local politicians – linked domestic poverty and hunger together. Between 1943 and 1961, viewing hunger as a problem of underdevelopment or inadequate demand became intertwined with concerns of hunger as a problem of domestic poverty at home.

#### *Foreign Aid and Hunger as Underdevelopment*

During the summer of 1947, the National Broadcasting Company launched a new radio series, “The Third Horseman.” This program, airing at 9 p.m. on Fridays, explored what the *New York Times* called “the most fundamental of all problems” facing the post-war world, “the food situation.” While American listeners might be complaining about rising food prices at home, they were not counted among the “many if not most peoples of the world” struggling to merely stay alive because they could not get enough to eat.<sup>3</sup> Americans saw hunger as a public and political issue during the 1940s and 1950s, but one that had gone global in unprecedented ways. Following U.S. victory in WWII, hunger transformed into an experience of people outside the nation’s borders making hunger at home hard to conceptualize.

Prior to WWII, food aid had been a recurring piece of the American global mission. Early twentieth-century food aid was a space for charitable action. But by the 1940s and

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<sup>3</sup> Jack Gould, “Programs in Review: NBC Offers Documentary Series on Food – Ginny Simms Joins CBS Show,” *New York Times*, August 24, 1947.

1950s development had become a statist project. Relative affluence in the U.S. after the war shifted attention on poverty and hunger from home to overseas. As Nick Cullather explains in his work on development in Asia, the United States was poised with the answers to solve hunger. Scientific expertise in plant breeding and other horticultural innovation positioned Americans as experts in “feeding the hungry and reviving barren lands.”<sup>4</sup> Early on, foundations including the Ford Foundation along with universities tested development programs. They were adopted by the likes of the State Department and other governmental units, to the tune of \$20 billion invested in Asia between 1950 and 1971.<sup>5</sup> And the U.S. was not alone in this endeavor; global governing bodies took up the mantle of hunger. The newly minted United Nations first sub-ministry, the Food and Agriculture Organization founded in 1945, was committed to providing the world’s people with adequate nutrition.<sup>6</sup> Other global governance organizations, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, opened development branches that used food donations for state development projects. A culture of practice around food and development emerged after WWII, where the West provided food to the East, making it part of the Cold War battle for hearts, minds, and stomachs.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> See Amy L. S. Staples, *The Birth of Development: How the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization, and World Health Organization Changed the World, 1945-1965* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006), 76.

<sup>7</sup> Sue Levine, “‘The Moral Challenge of Abundance’: Humanitarianism and the Rise of the Food Aid Complex after World War II,” (paper, UCSB Center for Work, Labor, and Democracy, Santa Barbara, CA, October 16, 2015).

In the context of the Cold War, hunger became “a danger to international stability.”<sup>8</sup> Through this lens, the ‘developed’ world had a duty to mitigate hunger in order to ensure global peace and order. Public relations and policy reinforced the idea of America as the well-fed, breadbasket for the world. But the impetus for foreign aid also sprang from a need to quickly draw down “enormous and costly” government-owned stocks of surplus food.<sup>9</sup> The program saved USDA agricultural storage costs, which at the time cost nearly a million dollars per day and totaled almost a half billion dollars annually by 1954.<sup>10</sup> Passed in 1954, Congress combined earlier surplus agricultural disposal programs in the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act, more commonly known as Public Law (P.L.) 480 or the Food for Peace program. While President Eisenhower rejected the idea of re-enacting food stamps at home, he supported increased foreign food aid, signing P.L. 480 on July 10, 1954. P.L. 480 became popular as a program that let off pressure from growing domestic surpluses and was politically well regarded.<sup>11</sup> In addition to state assistance overseas, charitable foreign food aid became increasingly visible post-WWII. The secular charity, CARE, sent packages of surplus army and agricultural goods to Europe. Notably, they stamped “Donated by the USA” on their boxes, reinforcing the notion that the United States was a land of plenty.<sup>12</sup> Far from there being problems of hunger at home, the sheer might of U.S. agricultural production required selling off or donating tons of U.S.-grown agricultural goods globally. Mitigating

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<sup>8</sup> Cullather, *The Hungry World*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Barry Riley, “The Marshall Plan Era,” *The Political History of American Food Aid: An Uneasy Benevolence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 168.

<sup>10</sup> Cullather, *The Hungry World*, 142.

<sup>11</sup> Staples, *Birth of Development*, 98.

<sup>12</sup> Levine, “‘The Moral Challenge of Abundance’”, 10-11.

world hunger had become a key part of foreign aid and development in the Cold War context.

*Underconsumption: The Farm Bloc's Framing of Hunger*

The end of World War II brought significant changes to the structure of farm and food welfare policy in the U.S. WWII marked a period of explosive growth in agricultural productive capacity, while the first food stamp program closed in 1943 leaving commodity distribution as the only source of food assistance.<sup>13</sup> Post-war farms, with greater productive capacity, played a central role in the imagining of hunger. On average, farm incomes rose 156% during the war due to technological advances that allowed U.S. farmers to supply food to the world.<sup>14</sup> But with the close of the war, the U.S. no longer needed to supply troops and allied forces globally. While lowering production and limiting supply could raise farm prices, members of the farm bloc focused on maintaining farm incomes in other ways. In their view, surplus production was not the problem. Consumers' inadequate purchasing power was.

Agricultural surpluses were a relatively recent phenomenon in U.S. domestic policy. Beginning in the 1920s, as agricultural historian Virgil Dean asserts, "the notion that farmers should produce at something less than their full capacity was sacrilege to many."<sup>15</sup> The USDA famously authorized the slaughter of thousands of young hogs to maintain pork prices during the early Depression, leading to public outrage. Many people commented that they could have put the destroyed "surpluses" to good use, feeding themselves and their

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<sup>13</sup> That is, aside from the school meal program. However, school lunch remained limited in reach through the late 1950s.

<sup>14</sup> Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013 [2011]), 75, 78.

<sup>15</sup> Virgil Dean, *An Opportunity Lost: The Truman Administration and the Farm Policy Debate* (Columbia, MO and London: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 6.

families.<sup>16</sup> Instead of surplus being the problem in itself, farm interests transformed surplus into a problem of the market.

Farm overproduction was not a problem the U.S. was equipped to think about in the postwar period, even as improvements in farm technology and crop science boosted agricultural yields year in and year out. Instead of finding fault with overproduction, policy efforts focused on expanded marketing as the solution. Instead of reducing the food supply by limiting acreage, an influential agricultural economist, Rainier Schiekele, wrote, “it would be wise to explore the possibilities of inducing an expansion on the demand side.”<sup>17</sup> Farm bloc interests highlighted time and again that underconsumption was the key issue. However, finding politically viable outlets for surplus products remained challenging.

While the USDA discontinued food stamps in 1943, Agriculture continued commodity distribution through the 1940s. Then in 1946, Congress enacted a new program to dispose of surplus through domestic channels: the National School Lunch Program. Historian of the school lunch program, Sue Levine, discusses the uneasy coalition that passed the bill. Child welfare advocates had long wanted to improve American diets. Working with farm interests and southern Democrats in Congress, school lunch proponents and the farm bloc came together to pass a school meal program.<sup>18</sup> However, Levine goes on to note the program only passed *because* of its direct connection to surplus disposal. Farm interests had a larger say in program structure than the child welfare advocates and nutritionists who had long advocated for an expanded lunch program. Sen. Richard B. Russell (D-LA), who the

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<sup>16</sup> Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat*, 136.

<sup>17</sup> Rainer Schiekele, “Programs for Maintaining Food Demand,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 29, no. 1 (1947): 325, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1232971>.

<sup>18</sup> Levine, *School Lunch Politics*, 69.

NSLP is named after, said he would vote to disband the school lunch program if it were not connected to the “disposition of surpluses.”<sup>19</sup> Making use of agricultural abundance was as important as feeding children, and this proved a potent coalition. Farm interests appreciated the guaranteed outlet for surpluses and child nutrition advocates supported the mission of improving American diets. By the 1950s, school lunch had become a bipartisan issue with appropriations increasing every year of the decade.<sup>20</sup>

However, other legislators proposed a different solution to “underconsumption” as a way to solve the problems of farm surplus and domestic hunger. Senator George Aiken (R-VT), chairman of the Senate Agriculture and Forestry Committee, along with Senator Robert LaFollette (R-WI) were early voices for the reintroduction of some kind of food stamp program following the demise in 1943 of the first stamp plan. In 1944, just one year after shuttering the first food stamp program, Aiken and LaFollette proposed legislation for a “food-allotment plan.” This would replace farm subsidies with support for consumer purchases. Both Senators represented dairy states and hoped to increase returns to farmers through a food assistance program.<sup>21</sup> Beyond this, they highlighted two reasons to introduce

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<sup>19</sup> 79<sup>th</sup> Cong. Rec. 92:2 (1493), quoted in Levine, *School Lunch Politics*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> However, the program did not serve children evenly. Throughout the 1950s, only half of schools operated a USDA lunch program, the majority in the South and Southwest and with greater coverage in rural than urban areas. For example, in Louisiana, 74% of schools participated while only 5% of schools in Philadelphia had a program. Levine, *School Lunch Politics*, 94.

<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that dairy, while considered a basic commodity and supported under the Agricultural Adjustment Act, stayed mostly outside of this support framework since most dairy did not travel across state lines, i.e. dairy farmers did not receive the same kinds of price supports that other staple-crop farmers did. Supreme Court rulings in the 1930s found that the Federal government could regulate interstate trade, but not trade within states, leaving states to set much of the regulatory policy around dairy production. See Eric M. Erba and Andrew M. Novakovic, “The Evolution of Milk Pricing and Government Intervention in

the food allotment program: to respond to changing national demographics and to ensure wartime nutritional adequacy.

The rural to urban shift at mid-century changed the way legislators approached farm policy. By 1940 farm employment had dipped to 17% of the population, down from almost 50% in 1920. To some savvy members of Congress, this meant farm programs needed to demonstrate their service to urban consumers, too.<sup>22</sup> The food allotment plan was an attempt to link the needs of urban consumers with farm legislation, therefore making farm policy relevant to the non-rural population. Beyond responding to demographic shifts, Aiken and LaFollette aimed to boost morale, health, and wartime efficiency by ensuring people from every income bracket had the “means of obtaining sufficient food for an adequate diet.”<sup>23</sup> Aiken went on to say, “in these days of high wages, high prices, and large profits... we are likely to get the impression that everyone is well off.” He went on, clarifying, “millions of our American citizens do not have an income sufficient to enable them to maintain their health.” Illustrating this, Aiken noted veterans of past wars received an average pension of \$40 per month.<sup>24</sup>

The food allotment plan would equalize food costs across the country, and return an adequate income to farmers wholly through the market. This would be done by eliminating all agricultural subsidies – \$1.5 billion in total – and replacing them with \$500 million for the

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Dairy Markets,” Cornell Program on Dairy Markets and Policy, (Ithaca, NY: Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, Cornell University, February N.D., 6.

<sup>22</sup> Dean, *Opportunity Lost*, 3-6 and Maney, *Still Hungry*, 158n1.

<sup>23</sup> Cong. Rec. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., February 10 1944, 1541.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 1543.

allotment plan. Any family making under \$1600 per year would receive stamps at a uniform rate.<sup>25</sup> Unsurprisingly, the farm bloc was not keen to see the allotment plan implemented.

The radical proposal to eliminate agricultural subsidies was quickly voted down. Southern Senators wanted to see subsidies maintained and immediately rebuked the allotment plan. Sen. Ellender (D-LA) had inserted into the *Congressional Record* an editorial from a leading New Orleans paper arguing the “antisubsidy” members of Congress had failed to take the inflationary nature of this program into account. Food prices would likely advance since farm production would no longer be supported by subsidy. There was a chance the plan would “do more injury to low-income families” and price inflation in other goods “would cancel the value of a few stamps.”<sup>26</sup> While Aiken proposed supporting consumers’ food purchases through coupons to low-income Americans, Ellender’s rebuttal illustrates the desire of other legislators to maintain supports for food producers.<sup>27</sup> Instead of the stark

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<sup>25</sup> The allotment program would be very similar in structure to the first FSP, where food dealers registered with the USDA to become eligible to accept food stamps, however in this iteration the food allotment program would be run out of the War Food Administration.

<sup>26</sup> Cong. Rec. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., February 10 1944, A672. Sen. Ellender inserted an op-ed, “Poor Substitute,” from *New Orleans Times-Picayune* into the record. The author tried to argue the allotment plan did not take regional differences in living conditions and costs into account, making it an unsuitable program for the country.

<sup>27</sup> High post-war parity prices illustrate legislative branch support for farmers. Fearing an agricultural recession similar to the one experienced after the end of WWI, USDA crop supports put in place during the 1930s remained in place during the postwar period, and were much higher than pre-war levels. Before the war, farmers could expect a guarantee of 50-75% of the going price for supported crops. The practice of parity pricing ensured farmers would maintain adequate purchasing power to repay loans and meet other expenses. However through the war and until 1949, agricultural supports were pushed up to 90% of parity to incentivize increased production. Congress lowered these only slightly with the Agricultural Act of 1949, mandating parity prices of at least 85% through 1954. See Wayne D. Rasmussen, Gladys L. Baker, and James S. Ward, *A Short History of Agricultural Adjustment, 1933-1975*; ERS, USDA, Agricultural Information Bulletin No. 391, (Washington, D.C., GP), 1976), 9-11.



opposition between consumers and producers posed here by Aiken, which ensured its defeat in Congress, later food welfare policy proposals presented the co-existent problems of agricultural surplus and hunger. Solving both problems with a program that served both interests proved more popular with Congress. That being said, at first a solution to both hunger and surplus favored farm concerns over the needs of poor consumers.

The farm bloc's power to shape legislation is evident in the tools that supported, and subsidized, ever-increasing farm outputs. Agricultural economist J. R. Pearman commented on the problem increasing stores of government-owned surplus commodities posed to the farm sector while echoing earlier voices on the absurdity of curbing production. In his article, "New Approaches to Agricultural Policy," Pearman implored:

That food is needed in the United States and other parts of the world has not been given sufficient recognition. Actually, American agricultural productive capacity could play a very constructive role in the solution of world problems. Post World War II population in the world has grown much faster than agricultural output. The food is needed in the world and more attention should be given to the solving of the problem of distribution.<sup>28</sup>

Pearman added that subsidies to start further distributions would be "temporary, or at the worst, a justifiable burden" in the process of ensuring all demand for food was met.<sup>29</sup>

Foreign aid remained an important frame through which legislators and agricultural economists understood hunger. But by the late 1950s it was increasingly difficult to deny the need for more food assistance on the home front.

Aiken's failed attempt at a food allotment plan marks the beginning of fifteen years of legislative debate over a food stamp program, one that quickly became embedded in the

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<sup>28</sup> J. R. Pearman, "New Approaches to Agricultural Policy," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 17, no. 1 (1957), 37.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

larger problem of surplus. Enactment of the school lunch program in 1946 created an outlet for surplus that would benefit children. Following this, select legislators sought ways to expand the benefits of surplus to other domestic consumers. The coming together of farm interests and legislators interested in hunger anticipates the beginning of an enduring, if uneasy, coalition committed to solving the dual problem of agricultural surplus and inadequate access to food. Working in this tradition, one woman made re-enacting a food stamp program the centerpiece of her legislative career.

### *Hunger as a Problem of Poverty*

Leonor Sullivan, the first Congresswoman elected in Missouri in 1953, is heralded with keeping the idea of a FSP alive in Congress throughout the 1950s.<sup>30</sup> She explained how she came to food aid on the campaign trail and early in her House career:

Late in 1953 and early in 1954, when we were already in a recession, even though the Government reports and statistics on unemployment hadn't confirmed it yet, I became deeply concerned by the accounts of under-nourishment among many schoolchildren in St. Louis at about the same time the main concern in Washington seemed to be the unmanageable surpluses of food. The more I thought about this contradiction, the more indignant I became.<sup>31</sup>

Surplus agriculture was expensive to store and did not keep forever. For Sullivan, it was outrageous that this surplus was not put to use feeding people at home before it spoiled. In a solution to the twin problems of under-nourishment and surplus, Sullivan submitted her first food stamp bill to the House Agriculture Committee in February 1954, just one month into

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<sup>30</sup> Sam Rosenfeld, "Fed by Reform: Congressional Politics, Partisan Change, and the Food Stamp Program, 1961–1981," *Journal of Policy History* 22, no. 04 (2010): 478, doi:10.1017/S0898030610000230; Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 23–24, 31–34; Maney, *Still Hungry after All These Years*, 21–23, 25–26. It is also interesting to note that women, who were integral as home economists in bringing a focus on childhood nutrition to the early program, later had their efforts championed by an early Congresswoman.

<sup>31</sup> 104 Cong. Rec. 6612 (daily ed. April 16, 1958) (statement of Rep. Sullivan).

her term in office. However, as a very junior Representative, her early legislative efforts were “buried unceremoniously” in committee.<sup>32</sup> This quick dismissal did not deter her, and between 1954 and 1959 she introduced six versions of her food stamp bill, each almost identical in form to her first attempt but attached to different pieces of legislation in an attempt to secure passage.

Shortly following Sullivan’s introduction of food stamp legislation in 1954, a spate of legislators made statements on the floor of Congress calling to make use of surplus agriculture at home. The first was Sen. Guy Gillette (D-IA). He wrote to the Secretaries of Agriculture, Labor, and HEW in early February to request staff assistance in designing legislation for a program to better distribute surplus agricultural goods to those in need at home.<sup>33</sup> The Department of Labor responded that they were ready “to cooperate with [Gillette] in every possible way” and they assigned a staff member to assist. At the USDA, Secretary Ezra Taft Benson replied to Gillette that his department was similarly concerned with finding “constructive uses” for surplus. Distributing government-owned food would bring down high storage costs, too.<sup>34</sup> For another Congressman, Rep. Homer D. Angell (R-OR), he found it “ill-advised” that surplus products in storage deteriorated or spoiled before being put to use feeding people at home, continuing “there are millions of worthy citizens in the United States... who are living on a meager income and in many cases insufficient to meet their minimum needs for health and comfort.”<sup>35</sup> In addition, Rep. Samuel W. Yorty (D-

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<sup>32</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> 100 Cong. Rec. 2630 (daily ed. March 4, 1954) (statement of Rep. Gillette).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Storage costs averaged around \$15 million per month in 1954.

<sup>35</sup> 100 Cong. Rec. 3673 (daily ed. March 22, 1954) (statement of Rep. Angell).

CA) addressed Congress on hunger in early March 1954 after the *Los Angeles Times* reported the children of migrant farm workers were starving in the fields.<sup>36</sup> With Labor and the USDA on board along with calls from multiple members of Congress, it seemed there was a growing consensus on the need to create a more robust domestic food welfare program.

Foreign food aid created a foil against which legislators could highlight domestic hunger. Even Agriculture Secretary Benson nodded to this issue in response to Rep. Gillette's March 1954 letter, stating at the USDA "we are in complete agreement with the principle expressed in your letter that maximum use of such [designated surplus] foods should be made in meeting the need of some of our citizens for improved diets before wide-scale dispositions are made for foreign relief purposes."<sup>37</sup> National voluntary organizations echoed this idea. The legislative director for the General Federation of Women's Clubs responded to Gillette's letter asserting "charity should begin at home" instead of the current situation "when we are giving millions to other nations when we have hundreds of thousands ... unable to have proper nourishment."<sup>38</sup> By pointing out that food put to use for foreign aid purposes was needed within the United States, the framing of hunger transformed to include needy, domestic consumers.

However, legislators disagreed which needy, domestic consumers should be served by a revised FSP. Gillette believed that a food stamp program would primarily benefit the unemployed and elderly receiving inadequate pensions, the same group Sen. Aiken had

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<sup>36</sup> 100 Cong. Rec. A2195 (March 22, 1954) (statement of Rep. Yorty).

<sup>37</sup> 100 Cong. Rec. 2630 (daily ed. March 4, 1954) (letter submitted to the Record by Rep. Gillette).

<sup>38</sup> 100 Cong. Rec. 2631 (daily ed. March 4, 1954) (letter submitted to the Record by Rep. Gillette).

highlighted ten years earlier in his food allotment plan. Representative Samuel W. Yorty of California focused on the youth. In his formulation, the starving children of migrant farmworkers made prime food program beneficiaries. He submitted a *Los Angeles Times* article, “Hoard the Surplus – Starve the Children,” into the Congressional Record. The article described, “the sight of American children starving in the shadow of overflowing warehouses is a sad commentary on our system of distribution...”<sup>39</sup> For Angell, people categorically eligible for disability programs as part of Social Security along with ADC recipients made an ideal constituency for a food programs, “It seems indefensible that this Government with its outstanding productive facilities and capacity should permit these worthy citizens to be in want for the very surplus products they need and which are held in storage by the Federal Government.”<sup>40</sup> These variations in definitions of deservingness point to different framings of hunger as a public problem.

Sullivan’s legislation included the most capacious categories for potential FSP benefits. She believed stamps should be mailed to all families who met state criteria for public assistance, as well as to people in need of such assistance but ineligible because of legal technicalities, for example those unable to meet residency requirements.<sup>41</sup> She reasoned that by adding food stamps to public assistance already available to the poor, the program would increase farm incomes and reach those without the income to purchase enough to

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<sup>39</sup> 100 Cong. Rec. A2195 (March 22, 1954) (news article submitted into the Record by Rep. Yorty).

<sup>40</sup> 100 Cong. Rec. 3673 (daily ed. March 22, 1954) (statement of Rep. Angell).

<sup>41</sup> This is drawn from Virginia Irwin, “She Wants to Outlaw Hunger in United States – St. Louis Congresswoman Leonor Sullivan Pressing Bill for Food Stamp Plan to Aid the Needy,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 20, 1956.

eat.<sup>42</sup> In each case, legislators had begun to identify hunger at home and a need for increased domestic distribution. This highlighted the inadequacies of the existing commodity program and put pressure on Congress and the USDA to find new paths for domestic agricultural surplus distribution. However, Congress and Eisenhower focused on expanding foreign food aid and development funds with passage of P.L. 480 in July 1954. Nevertheless, Rep. Sullivan continued to press for a domestic food welfare program that was equally equipped to tackle agricultural surplus.

Rep. Sullivan framed her 1956 introduction of a FS bill as a way to make use of surplus, by putting food into the hands of welfare recipients. Instead of cutting back acreage to maintain farm incomes, her food stamp plan would serve people in need, while also being of “great aid to the farmer” by reducing price-depressing surpluses. Food stamps would save the cost of payments incentivizing farmers to take land out of production. Further, she argued that the cost would be more than offset by the plan’s positive economic effect on both the farm and grocery industry.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, no government department, in particular the USDA, wanted to add the cost of further surplus distribution to its budget. It seemed movement on a food stamp program would be deadlocked for the foreseeable future.

Then, two events in the latter 1950s created opportunities for study and debate of a food stamp program. In late 1956, pressure from Representative Sullivan and other voices in Congress pushed Agriculture Secretary Benson to set up a food stamp plan Committee within

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<sup>42</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry*, 159n2. Amendments to the 1956 Agricultural Act directed the Secretary of Agriculture to report to Congress an analysis of the food stamp program as a means of surplus food disposal. U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Chronology and Brief Description of Federal Food Assistance Legislation, 1935-1983*, by Jean Y. Jones, 84-693 EPW (1984), 5.

<sup>43</sup> Irwin, “She Wants to Outlaw Hunger in United States.”

the USDA specifically to respond to Congressional inquiries about food stamp plans.<sup>44</sup> This committee formalized and legitimized knowledge about a food stamp program, drawing on long-time staffers who had worked on the first food stamp plan.<sup>45</sup> While the USDA's food stamp committee would not prove immediately responsive to Congressional inquiries, its creation marks a wearing down of the USDA that had long been unfriendly to expanding food assistance. Shortly following this commitment by the USDA, Sullivan got the attention of the Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Harold Cooley (D-NC). Cooley committed to hold hearings on all domestic food assistance proposals then before Congress.<sup>46</sup>

#### *Food Stamps in the 85<sup>th</sup> and 86<sup>th</sup> Congress*

During the 85<sup>th</sup> and 86<sup>th</sup> Congresses (1958-1959), legislators submitted at least nine bills to expand domestic food assistance. Following through on a promise made to Rep. Sullivan, Rep. Cooley, Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, held hearings on all FSP proposals before Congress during the summer of 1959.<sup>47</sup> Tracing the nuances of different food stamp bills before Congress allows for an analysis of arguments for and against a revitalized food stamp plan. This highlights what would later become touchstones in FSP debates after program enactment.

The drafters of the eight almost identical FS bills, seemingly modeled on Sullivan's 1954 legislation, all sought ways to transfer surplus commodities to the needy through

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<sup>44</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry*, 26.

<sup>45</sup> The committee included Howard P. Davis, Sam Vanneman, and Isabelle Kelley. Both Davis and Vanneman were involved in the first food stamp program. Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 25.

<sup>46</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry*, 22.

<sup>47</sup> There were nine bills then before the House proposing to reintroduce a FSP, outlined in H. Rep. No. 907, at 24 (1959), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924013850163>.

commercial outlets.<sup>48</sup> However, the form of proposed food transfers varied across proposals, becoming more prescriptive over time. At issue was the way surplus food would be integrated into the normal food market. Retailers wanted to ensure food stamps would not interfere with the “normal channels of trade” and displace regular purchases. The first FSP bill before the House included the provision that the Secretary of Agriculture would “distribute surplus food through the normal channels of trade.”<sup>49</sup> However, grocers questioned the mechanics of such a system; how would they keep separate inventories for commercial and government stocks? In response to these questions, the next two bills further specified that the surplus food would come “in packaged or other convenient form on the local level through normal channels of trade.”<sup>50</sup> This still left room for interpretation in who would do the packaging. Sullivan’s proposal and the four bills introduced after hers pushed for food available with food stamps to come “in commercially packaged form,” but only “preferably” delivered through normal channels of trade.<sup>51</sup> While these shifts in language seem slight, they set the degree to which food stamp recipients would be able to participate in the regular food retail experience.

The only alternative approach to food assistance included in these hearings came from Rep. Eugene Silers (R) of Kentucky. He advocated for an America-first reorientation of foreign aid. Silers’ plan did not include stamps; he instead proposed bolstering commodity

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<sup>48</sup> Each bill included a \$1 billion appropriation per year for these purposes, and requested a study to identify how to enact the bill within 6 months of passage. They also all included a clause that any food distributions would be in addition to existing welfare benefits families received, if any.

<sup>49</sup> H.R. 247, 86<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1959), Sec. 2 (3).

<sup>50</sup> H.R. 778, 86<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1959), Sec. 2 (3).

<sup>51</sup> H.R. 1329, 86<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1959), Sec. 2 (3).



distribution by setting a required spending level on purchases from the USDA for domestic distribution, \$50 million in 1959 and \$100 million for 1960. This was far lower than the \$1 billion requested in other bills. Silers' legislation would amend the 1949 Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act, which governed foreign aid, instead of the 1935 Agricultural Adjustment Act that all the other plans sought to amend. The key amendment required that any food product available for aid overseas be first offered to states and localities in the U.S. The other food stamp bills up for debate made no connection to foreign aid, but Silers bill explicitly stated that domestic consumers had a right to foods that were already offered overseas.

Held in late July 1959, the FSP hearings quickly became heated. As the first witness, Congresswomen Sullivan opened with an impassioned statement against administrators in the USDA. She described the current commodity distribution plan as “a scandal – a crime against humanity.” Indicting the current Secretary of Agriculture, Ezra Benson, she continued “I don't care how fine, how pious and decent, Mr. Benson and his aides may be in their personal lives, in this program they are participating in a cruel and inhumane thing...”<sup>52</sup> Sullivan wanted, in not very gentle language, to remind Benson that he had continuing authority to start a FSP at any point. Under Section 32 of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the Secretary of Agriculture had wide discretion in how to make use of surplus outside normal channels of trade, leaving open the possibility of unilaterally re-introducing a food

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<sup>52</sup> *Food Stamp Plans: Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture on H.R. 247, H.R. 778, H.R. 1329, H.R. 1359, H.R. 2792, H.R. 2915, H.R. 2936, H.R. 3130, and H.R. 5191, Before the House Agriculture Committee, 86<sup>th</sup> Cong. 11 (1959),* <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951d035487985>. Her testimony also provides insights into the ways opponents stopped food welfare legislation during prior Congresses. For example, a prior version of her food stamp bill had passed the House during a roll call vote on August 18, 1958 (196 to 187). However, the bill did not pass as it was considered under suspension of the rules requiring a two-thirds majority vote.

stamp program. However, Benson made clear that he wanted Congress to authorize a food stamp program instead of doing so through his executive authority. Shortly, Congress did act.

Of the nine bills under discussion, one made it out of committee and to a successful vote: H.R. 1359, sponsored by the one and only Leonor Sullivan. In a report accompanying H.R. 1359, House Agriculture Chairman Cooley assured his reader, in theory Secretary Benson, that previous secretaries had used Section 32 authority from the AAA to create various domestic food distribution schemes, and that the plan proposed here would be much less complex than the earlier program from 1939-1943. Cooley also reiterated the need for a food stamp program; he cited the recessions of 1953-54 and 1957-59, and the high unemployment following, as indicative that many were unable to afford enough to eat. The report highlighted 7 million people currently received public assistance, and potentially millions more were needy but barred from accessing this aid due to residence, age, or work requirements.<sup>53</sup> While direct commodity distribution to the states had been expanded in the wake of the recessions of the 1950s, only one-third of counties and one-third of public assistance cases were receiving any benefits at all. Further, some of the counties hardest hit by the recent recession had no commodity program at all. In fact, there were no distributions in Cooley's home state of North Carolina. But before Congress passed the final version of the food stamp bill, the Department of Agriculture undermined future implementation in two ways: failing to provide adequate cost estimates and making the case food stamps jeopardized other welfare benefits.

First, the Department of Agriculture was unwilling to share data necessary to plan a food stamp program. In the report on H.R. 1359, the Cooley described the House Agriculture

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 2-5.

committee had “made repeated efforts over the past several years to obtain from the Department of Agriculture reasonably accurate estimates of the added costs which would be involved in a food stamp program... but the Department has failed to provide such figures.”<sup>54</sup> This was surprising since in 1957 Congress mandated the USDA set up an internal study committee on a FSP to respond to inquiries such as this one. Instead, the committee received only crude estimates of program costs. The Department estimated that an effective food stamp program would need to provide at least \$100 worth of additional food per person per year to everyone participating with no justification for this figure. Based on 1956 data showing 6 million people received public assistance, the Department simply multiplied this number by the cost per person to put the program cost at \$600 million. The Committee Report contested this was “a figure pulled out of thin air,” especially since most of the food to be distributed via stamps used in grocery stores “was food already owned and paid for by the Federal Government.”<sup>55</sup> Without better data from the USDA, it would be challenging to forecast both need and cost for the food stamp plan.

The Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, Elliot L. Richardson, brought up a second roadblock to a food stamp plan when responding to Sullivan’s bill. Richardson believed operation of a food stamp plan would lead states to lower their public assistance benefits. Since food stamps would be denominated in dollars, he argued state legislatures would “quite probably” use this information when calculating public assistance payments, in effect reducing the total monetary value granted to individuals.<sup>56</sup> Congresswoman Sullivan

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 26.

included a provision in her bill, which all other FS bills copied, that food stamps would be in addition to and not in place of current public assistance payments.

Behind this argument was another drawback of a food stamp plan for the Department of Agriculture, not that the program would provide fewer benefits to the poor, but that it could add costs for the USDA. Aside from shipping costs to one location in each state, the commodity program was in effect free at the Federal level since it distributed commodities already owned by the government. No department or authority was willing to shoulder the cost of expanding the nation's food welfare system.

Congress passed H.R. 1359 as an amendment to reauthorization of P.L. 480, but with a key caveat. The bill did not require the USDA to start a FSP. Instead, it granted Secretary Benson the authority to start the program if he saw fit. As Jeffrey Berry put it, "since nothing had changed Secretary Benson's mind, he exercised his option to do nothing."<sup>57</sup> Still, another chronicler of USDA anti-hunger programs highlights how even this represented a win. Ardith Maney emphasized Sullivan had "almost singlehandedly" kept hunger on the agenda in the House "by perfecting a legislative strategy linking food stamp legislation to whatever agriculture bill was handy."<sup>58</sup> Shortly, events on the campaign trail of 1960 would change the trajectory of food stamps by highlighting the need for increased food assistance. In this environment, arguments against expanding the program due to increasing costs became less persuasive. While proponents of expanded public food assistance referred to and remained connected to other understandings of hunger, the connection between domestic poverty and

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<sup>57</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry*, 23.

hunger became more tightly linked adding legitimacy to finding a solution for domestic hunger.

### **Hunger Becomes a Public Issue, 1960-1964**

Senator John F. Kennedy ran on a strong anti-poverty platform during the 1960 Presidential campaign, informed by tours through areas hit hard by economic decline. One such place was MacDowell County, the poorest county in West Virginia. Appalled at the conditions, he promised to send help if elected.<sup>59</sup> Showing how personally he took this visit, there are accounts of Kennedy saying to an aide, “just imagine kids who never drink milk.”<sup>60</sup> Far from an outlier, MacDowell County exposed that there were countless communities in rural and urban America where citizens were going hungry throughout the 1940s and 1950s.

Kennedy used hunger to bolster his credentials on agricultural policy during his campaign. As a member of the New England urban elite, Kennedy needed to build policy credibility in the farm arena for his presidential run. He had recently seen a report pointing to the inadequacies of the current surplus commodity distribution system, primarily the lack of variety of foods available and the ill-effects this had on nutrition.<sup>61</sup> Using hunger as an opening wedge into farm policy, Kennedy linked increased food assistance with higher farm

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<sup>59</sup> Trip Gabriel, “Fifty Years Into the War on Poverty: Hardship Hits Back,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1960* (New York: Pocket Books, 1961), 127 quoted in Edward R. Schmitt, *President of the Other America: Robert Kennedy and the Politics of Poverty* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 20.

<sup>61</sup> Wayne D Rasmussen, Gladys L Baker, and Ward, *A Short History of Agricultural Adjustment, 1933-75* (Washington: Economic Research Service, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1976), 14.

incomes. In the process of campaigning and visiting places like MacDowell County, he was able to deepen his involvement in and understanding of farm policy issues.<sup>62</sup> Presidential candidate JFK stumped on food welfare as a way to demonstrate his willingness to help the poor as well as to shore up his credibility as a candidate who understood the problems of the farm sector. The release of a CBS documentary in November 1960 further cemented the need for action on food welfare.

The 1960 documentary, *Harvest of Shame*, brought the plight of the hundreds of thousands of farm workers into America's living rooms. Aired the day after Thanksgiving, it showed how migrant farmworkers, the people who had made Americans' Thanksgiving feasts possible, were unable to feed themselves and their families. In this "advocacy documentary" producer David Lowe contrasted migrants' living and working conditions against statements from lobbyists, growers, and government officials who explained away farm worker exploitation.<sup>63</sup> In one example, a farmer employing migrant workers blamed grocery retailers for the poor working conditions his laborers faced.<sup>64</sup> Edward R. Murrow narrated the program, ending with a plea that viewers at home take responsibility for the problem. He concluded the feature, saying "the people you have seen have the strength to harvest your fruit and vegetables. They do not have the strength to influence legislation. Maybe we do."<sup>65</sup> This pioneering documentary gave many Americans a glimpse of the

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<sup>62</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry*, 25.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Niemi, *History in the Media: Film and Television*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 323.

<sup>64</sup> *Harvest of Shame*, produced by David Lowe, featuring Edward R. Murrow, aired November 25, 1960, CBS.

<sup>65</sup> *Harvest of Shame*.

poverty that existed in the nation's midst, poverty rarely reported on during the 1950s. Two months after this documentary aired, and following his successful election bid, President Kennedy took action on food welfare.

Kennedy used his first Executive Order as President to direct the Secretary of Agriculture to expand distribution of food to the needy.<sup>66</sup> In his order, he described his desire to “expand and improve” the current commodity program and set up a pilot-FSP with the hopes it would be operational by June of that year. Notably, farm concerns were addressed in this statement. Kennedy added, “farm income has been in a period of decline, and a strengthening of farm prices is desirable.”<sup>67</sup> Food stamps would bolster food purchases, increasing farm incomes at the same time. Appealing to the farm bloc helped Kennedy ensure success in his pilot food programs. Additionally, Kennedy's use of an executive order demonstrates another choice to ensure food welfare worked. He witnessed legislative attempts for a food stamp program flounder during his years in Congress; therefore, he had to take executive action to get a program started..

The pilot FSP program rolled out rapidly thanks to existing staff within the USDA who were primed to enact any food stamp changes. Frederick Waugh had worked in President Roosevelt's USDA and overseen the design and implementation of the original food stamp plan with Secretary of Agriculture Wallace in the late 1930s. Waugh, the resident expert on food stamps, was part of a “kind of government-in-exile that had existed within the

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<sup>66</sup> John F. Kennedy, “Executive Order 10914 of January 21, 1961, Providing for an Expanded Program of Food Distribution to Needy Families,” The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58853>. Surprisingly, JFK did not use the authorization granted in the amendments Congresswoman Sullivan passed in 1959, but used the authority of Section 32 to immediately expand the program.

<sup>67</sup> Kennedy, “Executive Order 10914.”

USDA during the 1940s and 1950s,” where he served on the Food Stamp Study Committee created within the USDA in 1959.<sup>68</sup> Knowledge from Waugh and his colleagues made it possible to provide Secretary Orville Freeman a detailed food stamp plan in just a few weeks. By June 1961, the USDA had the pilot programs up and running with several states accepting stamps to be used in supermarkets based on the New Deal-era program.<sup>69</sup>

While the program began quickly, it is worth emphasizing the food stamp pilot was beset by slow, incremental growth. Memory of the first FSP at the USDA ensured slow expansion; the initial pilot served only eight counties. According to program administrators in the Food Distribution Division within the USDA, the group responsible for getting the Kennedy pilot program running in a matter of just a few months, the 1939-43 program was “too hastily conceived and too quickly expanded to national scope, abuses abounded and the regulations proved almost unenforceable.”<sup>70</sup> For these reasons, the 1961 pilot grew slowly while administrators consistently under spent their budget allocation. The program was allotted \$150 million from 1961-1964, but the Food Distribution Division staff spent out less than half that over the three years, just \$70 million.<sup>71</sup>

Many in D.C. believed the food stamp plan was a better alternative to commodity distribution. It allowed consumers to purchase food through normal channels and provided them far more choice than was available in a commodity package. However, low FSP

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<sup>68</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry*, 27.

<sup>69</sup> “A History of SNAP,” Snap to Health: A virtual town hall on SNAP (food stamps) and nutrition in the United States, *The Aetna Foundation*, <http://www.snaptohealth.org/snap/the-history-of-snap/>.

<sup>70</sup> Joe Western, “Food Stamp Program, Tested 3 Years, Shifts to National Scope Under New Law,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 1964.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*



participation rates in new food stamp counties demonstrated an important problem in transitioning to the new program. Counties could not operate both a commodity program and a food stamp program, except in rare exceptions granted by the USDA. When counties switched over from what was widely seen as the inadequate commodity program to the food stamp program, participation rates plummeted. For example, during the first month of food stamp operations in St. Louis in June 1961, only 1,000 of the estimated 50,000 eligible families participated. This was a particular blow since St. Louis was the home district of Leonor Sullivan, the biggest food stamp champion.

The problem was the purchase price. Program rules required families to pay the purchase price in full up front for a month's worth of stamps. This proved an insurmountable barrier to many families. The practice of requiring cash payments for stamps was a holdover from the earlier FSP of 1939-43; home economists believed food stamps should supplement 'normal expenditures' on food.<sup>72</sup> USDA administrators included this provision to ensure food stamps increased absolute demand for food instead of merely substituting stamps for cash. Therefore, the program excluded those who made no 'normal expenditures' because they lacked access to cash.<sup>73</sup> The small size of the pilot program coupled with USDA insistence to maintain the purchase requirement meant food stamps had a limited reach. But growing awareness of poverty gave food stamp proponents leverage for their work.

The expansion of a food stamp program and acknowledgement of the need it met was mirrored in increasing journalistic coverage of poverty in the United States. Michael Harrington's 1962 book, *The Other America*, cracked open this story for the broad, reading

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<sup>72</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 31.

<sup>73</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 30.

public. According to historian Edward Schmitt, “one finds it hard to overestimate” the influence Harrington made in the “framing of the poverty problem in the 1960s.”<sup>74</sup> In the midst of mass affluence, Harrington contended 40 to 50 million citizens lived socially and economically separate lives from the mainstream. This was a world of little opportunity where hunger and other deprivations were rampant.<sup>75</sup> While Harrington noted Americans were not starving as in poor nations elsewhere in the world, they were still hungry. Hunger could be harder to identify, as well, hiding hunger veiled behind “slacks and white shirts” or a “stylishly cut dress” made possible by a mass production society.<sup>76</sup>

Lore suggests Walter Heller, head of President Kennedy’s CEA, passed along Harrington’s book to the President and that this reading launched the administration’s thinking on domestic poverty. Following Kennedy’s assassination, Heller briefed Lyndon Johnson on a vague anti-poverty program, which Johnson took on as his own. Only six weeks after Kennedy’s assassination, President Johnson declared an “unconditional war on poverty in America.”<sup>77</sup> The War on Poverty did include expanding authority for food welfare, but this expansion was in many ways a hollow victory. Food stamps grew slowly

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<sup>74</sup> Schmitt, *President of the Other America*, 4.

<sup>75</sup> See Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 147-151 on how Galbraith’s *Affluent Society* (1958) framed poverty as unchangeable even by economic growth (tool policymakers wanted to use to fix it at the time) and how Harrington’s *The Other America* (1962) described the impoverished as living in a separate “underworld.”

<sup>76</sup> Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1962), 2, 5.

<sup>77</sup> Maurice Isserman, *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), 208-9.

from 1964 through 1968 and maintained the purchase price, keeping the program out of reach of many.

*Food Stamps and the War on Poverty*

Unlike earlier moments of expanding the welfare state, such as the Great Depression, the War on Poverty grew out of a moment of affluence. Johnson described many Americans “today enjoy the highest standard of living in the history of mankind. But for nearly a fifth of our fellow citizens, this is a hollow achievement.”<sup>78</sup> One way Johnson’s War on Poverty sought to help the poor was to turn the pilot food stamp program into one with national authority. In doing this, President Johnson’s signing the 1964 Food Stamp Act was both a watershed moment in national food welfare policy and the embodiment of incremental, moderate reform.

By the time Johnson took office, food stamps were available in 43 project areas and served 400,000 people.<sup>79</sup> Johnson described the pilot program had “raised the diets of low-income families substantially,” while also “immeasurably improving the volume of retail food sales.”<sup>80</sup> To this point, one study of the pilot program in Detroit found stamp recipients were buying foods returning 25% more income to farmers.<sup>81</sup> In short, the program was successful because it met the needs of many interests. It allowed the poor to purchase food

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<sup>78</sup> Martha J. Bailey and Sheldon Danziger, eds., *Legacies of the War on Poverty*, The National Poverty Center Series on Poverty and Public Policy (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013), 3.

<sup>79</sup> Project areas usually mapped closely on to counties, but not exactly.

<sup>80</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks Upon Signing the Food Stamp Act,” August 31, 1964, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26472>.

<sup>81</sup> Western, “Food Stamp Program, Tested 3 Years, Shifts to National Scope Under New Law.”

they could not otherwise afford, supported grocers and other food retailers by increasing sales volume, and lastly supported farm income by increasing food sales overall.

This link to farm incomes and interests was imperative to passage of the FSA as part of the farm bill in 1964. Many legislators, in particular Southern Democrats, did not support food stamps. It was only through “log-rolling” votes over commodity price supports, in particular for tobacco subsidies, with votes for the Food Stamp bill that President Johnson was able to get the Food Stamp Act of 1964 through Congress.<sup>82</sup> On March 6, the farm bill passed the first hurdle and was voted out of the Senate, 55-35. President Johnson called his press secretary, Pierre Salinger, with instructions to get a statement out, “... let’s just express the hope that the House will promptly consider the food stamp bill and the farm bill too... they won’t take up this [farm] bill unless we pass food stamp [sic].”<sup>83</sup> Johnson, following discussion with Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman, realized a declining farm population meant there was not enough support in the House to pass commodity measures without urban supporters.<sup>84</sup> Urban legislators needed something added to the mix, and food

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<sup>82</sup> For an excellent overview of the Congressional proceedings around the Food Stamp Program, from its fits and starts in the 1950s through passage and amendments in the 1960s and 1970s, see Rosenfeld, “Fed by Reform”; see also Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 34; Randall B. Ripley and Frederic N. Cleaveland, “Legislative Bargaining and the Food Stamp Act, 1964,” in *Congress and Urban Problems: A Casebook on the Legislative Process* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1969), 281–300; and Maney, *Still Hungry*, 56-57 which goes beyond the standard “horse-trading” debate and describes the special role Secretary Freeman played in shepherding this legislation through Congress.

<sup>83</sup> “Lyndon Johnson and Pierre Salinger on 6 March 1964,” Tape WH6403.03, Citation #2370, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–), <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/9040316>.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson and Freeman discussed this in a call a few days later while the House tried to get a rule to discuss the farm bill. “Lyndon Johnson and Orville Freeman on 10 March 1964,” Tape WH6403.08, Citation #2451, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–), <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/9050036>.

stamps were the solution.<sup>85</sup> Through bundling commodity supports for wheat, cotton, and a small tobacco research bill with food stamps, the farm bill gained support from Southern Democrats who wanted to see commodity subsidies pass, while urban Northern Representatives from both parties voted for the farm bill due to the inclusion of food stamps.

President Johnson signed the Food Stamp Act (FSA) into law on August 31, 1964.<sup>86</sup> With passage of the Food Stamp Act, individual benefits increased significantly and could be used on most anything available in grocery stores. Johnson remarked upon signing the bill that it represented, “a realistic and responsible step toward the fuller and wiser use of our agricultural abundance.... wed[ding] the best of the humanitarian instincts of the American people with the best of the free enterprise system.”<sup>87</sup> USDA administrators declared the pilot program a success, therefore the newly passed FSA did not break significantly in rules or administration from its predecessor. The biggest shift was the allocation of more funds to expand the program.<sup>88</sup> The Act symbolized the first steps in creating a right to food assistance; national authority allowed for programs in any county that desired one. However, its path to enactment also committed the FSA to a course of slow growth, hampered by cautious USDA staffers.

Perhaps because the program remained so similar to its earlier pilot version, there was very little print news coverage of the implementation of the 1964 FSA. Johnson called the

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<sup>85</sup> Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat*, 321.

<sup>86</sup> Rosenfeld, “Fed By Reform.”

<sup>87</sup> Johnson, "Remarks Upon Signing the Food Stamp Act."

<sup>88</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 35.

food stamp program “one of our most valuable weapons for the war on poverty.”<sup>89</sup> However, it stood apart from the broader portfolio of War on Poverty programs and was tinged with ideas of poor relief instead of empowerment. Additionally, the FSA was signed less than two weeks after Johnson unveiled the Office of Economic Opportunity on August 20. It is also possible the press did not cover the expansion of the FSP in 1964 because they saw it as inconsequential. The program served less than half a million people during the summer of 1964, while the commodity food program reached more than six million. These factors together indicate that national authority for food stamps did not create sweeping changes in food welfare in the United States.

The FSP had three major shortcomings. First, food stamps did not fulfill all nutritional needs of recipients. Instead, the program legislation described that it provided “low-income households with *an opportunity to more nearly obtain* a nutritionally adequate diet through the issuance of stamps having a greater value than their normal expenditures for food.”<sup>90</sup> Second, counties were not required to participate in the program, and funding levels through 1968 made it impossible to enact anywhere near universal coverage. Only 367,000 people benefitted from the program in 1964. Third, the newly enacted program maintained the purchase requirement, consistent across earlier iterations of food stamps in 1939 and 1961. Families had to pay what the USDA determined to be their “normal” monthly food expenditure in cash at the beginning of the month to receive their stamps. After paying in the

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<sup>89</sup> Johnson, “Remarks Upon Signing the Food Stamp Act.”

<sup>90</sup> Memo, Edward M. Shulman to the Secretary (of Agriculture), “Food Stamp Program and Commodity Distribution Program,” January 21, 1969; Folder WE 10-4 Executive; Box 60; White House Subject Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Italics are my own.

“purchase price,” families would then get back coupons valued in excess of the cash purchase price. This “bonus” amount varied based upon family size and income.

The purchase price represented a particular vision of the food stamp program, a holdover from the original framing by USDA home economists in the 1930s. The required buy-in demonstrated the commitment to self-help administrators saw in the program, with the lowest purchase price set at \$2 per person per month.<sup>91</sup> However, even \$2 presented a burden to families who operated with little to no cash income. The Department of Agriculture’s insistence that recipients pay into the program kept it from benefitting people most in need of assistance. USDA administrators and economists maintained their “rational actor” belief until the early 1970s, finding no fault with the purchase requirement even when reports showed that food stamp participation rates were consistently 30 to 60 percent lower than earlier commodity programs in the same areas.<sup>92</sup> The practice of cautious growth, evident in the earlier pilot program, continued during the first three-year period of the 1964 food stamp program.

Mechanisms to encourage low spending were built into the legislation’s discretionary budgeting, only reinforcing efforts to tamp down program growth. 1964 program legislation included caps on the amount of funds that Congress could allocate, setting a maximum amount each fiscal year for the program’s three-year authorization.<sup>93</sup> The FSA authorized \$75 million for FY 1965, \$100 million for FY 1966, and \$200 million during FY 1967. However, Congress appropriated only \$60 million of the \$75 million allowed during the first

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<sup>91</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 30.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>93</sup> King, *Budgeting Entitlements*, 43.

year.<sup>94</sup> Under-spending ensured there would only be low number of counties participating. In the summer of 1965 during the rollout of the permanent FSP, 116 new project areas were brought on, including Washington, D.C.<sup>95</sup> By 1966, this number had only increased to 324 project areas even though there was a long waiting list of county officials who wanted to implement the FSP in their jurisdiction.<sup>96</sup> Following the transition to a permanent program in 1964, budget rules coupled with USDA administrator's conservative approach to growth meant food stamps would not immediately come to serve millions more Americans.

While the program grew slowly and was administered using the same regulations as the pilot program, 1964 legislation did change the foods that could be purchased using stamps. Food stamps in both the 1939 and 1961 programs could only be used to purchase domestically produced goods. The 1964 program added imported foods like coffee, tea, bananas, and cocoa.<sup>97</sup> This marks a shift away, however slight, from solely linking the program to U.S. agricultural supports. While the link to the farm bloc and farm bill would remain strong for decades to come, food welfare was becoming a distinct function of the USDA, not always tied directly to the politics of domestic agricultural surplus.

While 1964 is heralded as the first year of the modern FSP, the program really had more in common with prior pilots than legislation in place today. President Johnson enacted

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 49-50. Additionally, some members of Congress sought to limit the funds the program could use, writing into appropriation legislation that only Section 32 funds (limited customs revenues) could support the food stamp plan. Others, including Congresswoman Sullivan, argued for using general funds so the program could grow more freely.

<sup>95</sup> "Food Stamp Plan Adopted in Capital," *New York Times*, June 2, 1965.

<sup>96</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 36-37.

<sup>97</sup> Western, "Food Stamp Program, Tested 3 Years, Shifts to National Scope Under New Law."



the FSP in 1964 as part of his larger Great Society and War on Poverty legislative agendas meant to eradicate the roots of poverty; it seems making sure people have enough to eat would be an important part of that strategy. In reality, the food stamp program was a small, marginal effort at the edges of this sweeping agenda, one more focused on imparting skills and education to the poor. As Johnson often said, his programs were to provide “a hand up, not a hand out.” Perhaps food stamps were too much of a handout to fit into this ideology. However, slow program growth inspired public reaction, eventually pushing food aid to be an important priority on the domestic policy agenda.

### **Slow Food Program Growth, 1964-68**

Beginning in 1965, civil rights groups publicized the limitations of the food stamp program in the press. Unlike the episodic attention on hunger during the late 1950s and early 1960s, by the mid-1960s food programs and hunger policy were becoming a regular item in the news cycle. In December of 1965, the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) spoke out against food stamp policies that kept the program out of reach from those in need, in particular black Southerners. The two organizations “assailed Southern county officials for refusing to participate in the food programs.” The groups also attacked Department of Agriculture regulations that allowed county governing boards to veto joining food programs, either stamps or commodity distribution, over the desires of their constituents.<sup>98</sup> Local control of these programs was premised on the fact that there were some local costs to be borne. County administrators used this issue to keep from starting a program, stating they were reluctant to

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<sup>98</sup> Gene Roberts, “Lagging Food Aid in South Scored,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1965.

join since they had to cover certification as well as administrative costs. However, civil rights action highlighted how this provision provided counties that did want to participate a race-neutral “out.”

Julian Bond of SNCC was quoted in the *New York Times* saying that many white farmers opposed food programs because, “if people can get free food, they won’t work.”<sup>99</sup> To overcome the burden of local costs in administering the commodity program, Secretary Freeman asked Sargent Shriver, head of the OEO, for funds to cover local start up costs in November 1965. By December 1965, Freeman had secured funds from the OEO for a 6-month pilot program in Mississippi.<sup>100</sup> The OEO pilot program pushed food program adoption across much of Mississippi making the state an outlier in the South. OEO funds for commodity programs were eventually expanded outside Mississippi, which increased interest in commodity programs in some areas, but failed to expand provision in others. Without the financial argument to hide behind, it became clear administrators who did not want a food program in their county were most likely reticent to provide aid to black residents.

County veto power coupled with the practice of counties voluntarily opting-in led to wide variation in the availability of food programs in the South, even with OEO start-up funds available. SNCC and SCLC found that only 57% of the 1,100 counties in the region participated in either the commodity or FSP. Mississippi stood out for its high rate of participation, 75 of its 82 counties offered either food stamps or commodity distribution, while only three counties of 46 in South Carolina had a food stamp program, and there was

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<sup>99</sup> Roberts, “Lagging Food Aid in South Scored.”

<sup>100</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry*, 78.

not a single food program operating in North Carolina.<sup>101</sup> Even with Mississippi's almost universal coverage by a food welfare program, when Congressman Joseph Resnick (D-NY), toured the state in 1966 he found stark hunger and deprivation, noting the "desperation point of ... starving Negroes." Resnick tried to alert key officials in Washington upon his return, but his attempts failed.<sup>102</sup> Food programs were obviously not reaching everyone in need.

### *Hunger Returns to Congress*

Inaction in Washington on hunger, for example the failure of Resnick to get a reaction after his Mississippi tour, did not hold for long. Civil rights groups such as SNCC and welfare rights groups, including the newly incorporated National Welfare Rights Organization, channeled information to members of Congress that pushed them to explore the problem of hunger, especially looking at conditions in southern states. Two key issues emerged as Congress delved into the problem of hunger and existing food welfare programs. First was the problem of food program availability, highlighted by the SNCC/ SCLC investigation. Food stamps and commodities were not available everywhere, and often not in areas with the most need. Second, was the issue of the purchase price. Increasingly, anti-hunger advocates made clear the purchase price was a real barrier to participation. Set at \$2 per person per month for families with no income, this was an impossible hurdle for many who would be prime beneficiaries of the program.

With the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act up for renewal in 1967, the "poverty" subcommittee (the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty) chaired by Joseph Clark (D-PA) and including Robert F. Kennedy (D-NY), planned field hearings to

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<sup>101</sup> Roberts, "Lagging Food Aid in South Scored."

<sup>102</sup> Robert Sherrill, "It Isn't True that Nobody Starves in America," *New York Times*, June 4, 1967.

investigate the effectiveness of War on Poverty programs.<sup>103</sup> Their first stop was scheduled for the Mississippi Delta in April of 1967. After the opening day of hearings, where Unita Blackwell of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party stated that free food stamps and commodities were a necessity, another local civil rights activist, Amzie Moore, suggested the committee members visit a nearby community.<sup>104</sup> Senators Kennedy and Clark visited the township of Cleveland, Mississippi on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1967 with the press in tow. There they saw poverty and hunger beyond their imagination. Pantries with nothing but a jar of peanut butter, families who ate only one meal per day, and accounts of a monotonous diet of surplus commodities including flour, lard, and peas.

Kennedy's presence on the hunger tour brought increased media attention. Following the committee tour closely, the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post* all published accounts of the "hunger emergency."<sup>105</sup> Each paper covered instances of families without cash income, noting they were unable to afford access to the program. A historian of Robert Kennedy noted following this 1967 visit to the Delta, hunger emerged as a political issue, one "distinct in its gravity from the political debate over the management of the War on Poverty."<sup>106</sup> But finding suitable courses of action to combat hunger was challenging, in particular due to the continued dearth of data on the subject.

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<sup>103</sup> Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 147.

<sup>104</sup> Schmitt, *President of the Other America*, 178.

<sup>105</sup> Joseph A. Loftus, "Johnson is Asked to Rush Food Aid: 9 Senators Cite Mississippi Hunger and Malnutrition," *New York Times*, April 30, 1967; "Senators Ask Emergency 'Delta' Food," *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973); Washington, D.C.*, April 30, 1967; Don Irwin, "Senators Visit Poor in Rural Mississippi," *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 1967.

<sup>106</sup> Schmitt, *President of the Other America*, 177-179. Quote p. 179.

In an attempt to gather medically sound data, and inspired by the poverty subcommittee's Delta tour, Leslie Dunbar of the Field Foundation sent four doctors to examine children's health and nutrition at Head Start centers in Mississippi over Memorial Day Weekend in 1967. The team reported back similar findings to the Congressional visit, but this time with medical authority, something one would think members of Congress would be interested to hear about. The doctors described, "'malnutrition' is not quite what we found." Conditions were much worse, and the children they saw were, "weak, in pain, sick; their lives are being shortened ... They are suffering from hunger and disease and directly or indirectly they are dying from them – which is exactly what 'starvation' means."<sup>107</sup> However, unlike the large press reaction to Kennedy's visit only two months prior, the Field Foundation doctors were unable to sway Department of Agriculture and OEO leaders. Their tour garnered a few newspaper columns, but little immediate public reaction. Only after asking Senator Kennedy for help in getting their message out did the doctors testify before the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty in July of 1967. Testimony from the Field Foundation doctors, coupled with the Poverty Subcommittee's earlier Delta tour, helped Senator Kennedy secure funding for a national nutrition survey within a larger health bill and pushed Congress to pass \$10 million in emergency food aid to the Mississippi Delta.<sup>108</sup> Data from a revamped national nutrition survey would satisfy demands from Congress and the USDA to better understand the scope of hunger at home.

Additionally, after the two "hunger tours" during the summer of 1967, the USDA took steps to ease access to food stamps without relying on Congress. Secretary Freeman

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<sup>107</sup> Nan Robertson, "Severe Hunger Found in Mississippi," *New York Times*, June 16, 1967.

<sup>108</sup> Schmitt, *President of the Other America*, 181-82.

administratively lowered the purchase requirement of the FSP.<sup>109</sup> The purchase price was lowered from \$2 to \$.50 per person per month, but this was still due as a single cash payment at the beginning of the month. In light of the problem the purchase price posed to the very poor in accessing food programs, select members of Congress along with anti-poverty groups put continued pressure on the USDA to do away with, or at least further decrease, the purchase requirement. One major critique came from the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty. In their September 1967 report, the commission recommended dropping the purchase requirement for food stamps for the poorest families, expanding the program immediately to all counties in the nation, and phasing out direct food distributions.<sup>110</sup> The report also questioned the amount of local control authorities could exercise, "it has been noted that by refusing to adopt food stamp and commodity distribution programs public officials in some counties are systematically starving Negroes into moving into other areas."<sup>111</sup> As highlighted by the SNCC investigation in 1965, the purchase price and local control of food program rolls presented special problems in the South. Low cash income of many black families as well as poor working whites excluded them from food stamps, while there was virtually no oversight of local food program administration. This left

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<sup>109</sup> An administrative decision during enactment of the 1964 FSA maintained the purchase requirement, even after food stamps had been offered for free to some during the 1939-1943 program and during the last year of the Kennedy pilot, from 1963-64. Memo; Marian Wright to Congressman Ogden Reid, "Re: Key Issues Remaining with the Dept of Agriculture," June 22, 1968; Folder 487 – OA #2923 [Poor People's Campaign – second phase]; Box 61; White House Central Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Egil Krogh; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. See also Maney, *Still Hungry After All These Years*, 90.

<sup>110</sup> *The People Left Behind: A Report by the President's National Commission on Rural Poverty* ED 016 543 (Washington D.C.: G.P.O, September 1967), 90.

<sup>111</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, September 4, 1967, quoted in "The People Left Behind: A Report," 36, 1967.

local administrators wide discretion over who could benefit from the food stamp or commodity programs.

Between 1964 and 1968 hunger attracted increasing attention on the domestic political agenda. Polls carried out by Gallup across the 1960s asked people what was the most important problem facing the nation. In 1961, foreign policy concerns topped the list, with respondents ranking fears of the USSR and Cuba as the most pressing.<sup>112</sup> However, by April 1964 domestic concerns appeared, with civil rights capturing 42% of responses.<sup>113</sup> Poverty, unemployment, and the cost of living also began to appear and gain a share of responses. In 1968 foreign policy topped the list again with a plurality of Americans citing Vietnam as the biggest threat. However poverty and the cost of living had increased from less than 5% to 15% of responses.<sup>114</sup> Influencing public opinion, civil rights organizations and welfare rights campaigns highlighted shortcomings of the food stamp program. In particular, they demonstrated existing food programs were grossly inadequate to meet what was becoming acknowledged as a huge amount of need. These problems, aired through protest, Congressional hearings, and other forms, created the conditions for hunger to become a central issue in domestic policy debates by 1968.

### **1968: The Poor People's Campaign and *Hunger in America***

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<sup>112</sup> Gallup Poll (AIPO), May 1961, USGALLUP.61-644.R003A; Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, accessed via iPOLL.

<sup>113</sup> Gallup Poll (AIPO), April 1964, USGALLUP.689.Q02A; Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, accessed via iPOLL.

<sup>114</sup> Gallup Poll (AIPO), January 1968, USGALLUP.756.Q007; Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, accessed via iPOLL.

1968 marks a high point of activism on hunger. High profile news pieces as well as Congressional tours and hearings brought hunger to the attention of the nation. Kicking this campaign into higher gear were two events that sparked wide-ranging reactions from the public and policymakers alike. During May and June of 1968, the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) occupied the mall in D.C. This campaign encompassed welfare concerns beyond hunger, however food programs and a focus on the USDA figured prominently in their actions. In the midst of the PPC action, CBS aired the documentary *Hunger in America* as part of its CBS Reports Series. Both of these efforts pointed to the failings of public food programs in their current form and made the case for spending more federal funds to combat hunger. Reactions to these two events highlight the gulf between anti-hunger advocates goals for food program change and the collective administrative, executive, and legislative will to act.

Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned and organized the PPC in the months before his death. This multiracial coalition pushed for broader economic and social rights, based on the idea that all people should have what they need to live in order to “set poverty on the road to extinction.” The campaign was to bring thousands of poor people from around the country, from all walks of life and all races, to make demands of officials in Washington during the summer of 1968. Following their arrival, they would camp on the Mall until their demands were met. After King's assassination on April 4<sup>th</sup>, Rev. Ralph Abernathy led the Poor People's movement. In advance of the planned marches on Washington, D.C., Abernathy brought the Committee of 100 to meet with public officials and demand action. The Committee of 100 was comprised of one-third PPC steering committee members, and two-thirds poor people. If their demands were met, Abernathy claimed he would call the PPC off.



The Committee met with heads at each federal department on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, and May 1<sup>st</sup> 1968, and their first stop was at the Department of Agriculture.<sup>115</sup>

Reverend Abernathy along with the geographically and racially diverse Committee of 100 read a list of demands to Secretary Freeman and his staff on the morning of April 28<sup>th</sup>. They demanded that the Secretary of Agriculture extend food stamps or commodity programs to the poorest 1000 counties without one, and also demanded free food stamps to ensure everyone who needed food assistance, even those without access to cash, could benefit from the program. Beyond programmatic changes to food distribution, the campaign made pointed demands for farm worker rights. A representative from New York described the plight of farm workers as, “workers who have been stripped of their every right as human beings, who have been exempted from all the great social and economic legislation in the past 30years [sic], stripped of their every right, including their right to improve their conditions by collective bargaining and who have been consigned to a life of hell on the earth that they cultivate.”<sup>116</sup> They alleged the department constructed a power structure “by design” favoring big agricultural interests and southern racists over farm workers and food program recipients. At the core of their demands was a desire for this to be reversed, for USDA programs to focus on serving the poor while being stewards for the environment at the expense of big agriculture.

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<sup>115</sup> Gordon K. Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition & the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960-1974* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 129-130.

<sup>116</sup> Transcript, “Rev. Abernathy and the Poor People’s Campaign meet with USDA Officials,” April 28<sup>th</sup> 1968; Farm Program 8-1-2 “Poor People’s Campaign;” General Correspondence, 1906-1976; Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, Record Group 16; National Archives at College Park, MD.

The conversation then turned to individual experiences with food programs, and in particular the ways program administration hindered access to food. Participants in the USDA meeting from the Mississippi Delta noted that Secretary Freeman himself had visited their district two years before, where constituents demanded an expansion of the school meal program. However, discretion for this program remained in the hands of local school officials and had yet to be extended to black schools in the region. A white Appalachian asked why of his five children, only one was made eligible for free school meals while the other four went without. A resident of Tallahassee County, Tennessee, questioned local administrative procedures for food stamps, in particular why last year's income determined his food stamp eligibility in the current year, when his situation had changed significantly in the interim.<sup>117</sup> In each of these examples, local discretion and administration of food programs meant that many of the poor who the program targeted were not eligible for and could not benefit from programs designed to serve them.

This meeting highlights the central role civil rights organizing occupied in demanding action on the "hunger problem." While civil rights activists helped point Congressional leaders in the right direction at early points, by 1968 the SCLC's multi-racial Poor People's Campaign brought together all the media depictions of hunger, along with testimony from Americans across the country, to demand the USDA do more to help the poor. The list of specific policy demands given to the Department of Agriculture and other departments were meant to serve as a final chance for official action that could stave off the march planned to

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

begin in mid-May. As expected, these demands were not met and the SCLC went ahead with their March on Washington.<sup>118</sup>

For six weeks in May and June 1968, 2,500 people camped out on the Mall to bring attention to poverty. The first caravans arrived on May 12<sup>th</sup>, just in time for a Mother's Day march led by Coretta Scott King and with support from local chapters of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). On May 13<sup>th</sup>, ceremonies kicked off with Abernathy driving the first stake in "Resurrection City," the site of the PPC's tent encampment.<sup>119</sup> Marches coupled with sit-ins of departmental offices brought attention to poverty in the United States, including glimpses of what hunger meant for those that suffered from it.

A salient example of how the Poor People's Campaign and hunger intersected can be seen in the photo below from Washington, D.C. in May 1968. Members of the local chapter of National Welfare Rights Organization joined with demonstrators of the PPC to march. As is evident from the posters in the photo, many marchers framed their poverty in terms of hunger. Aside from the banner and small NWRO pennants, the only other signs visible at the front of the march read, "Our children go to bed hungry, and get up hungry, and don't even know nothing in between." As Marissa Chappell describes in her work on welfare mothers' activism, this is a common strategy of making demands on behalf of a more sympathetic constituency: children.<sup>120</sup> The welfare mothers here couched their demands for economic rights behind the language of their children's nutritional need. The fact that these were the

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<sup>118</sup> Mantler, *Power to the Poor*, 130.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>120</sup> Marisa Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

only signs aside from the NWRO banner also shows that hunger was a very important part of the anti-poverty campaign.



W.H. Spradley, May 13, 1968 (National Park Service, Department of Interior); Box 8, Jack Reinert Photograph Collection, George Mason University Special Collections.

In the midst of this demonstration, CBS aired the documentary *Hunger in America*. It would be hard to overestimate the impact this documentary had on the visibility of hunger as an issue, especially in an age where network television was watched by a majority of the country. One contemporary chronicler noted "... the best evidence for Michael Harrington's 'invisibility' thesis on American poverty – better than any evidence assembled by Harrington himself – is the fact to so few literate Americans knew anything about hunger before the *Hunger Report* and a network television documentary [CBS' *Hunger in America*] based upon

it.”<sup>121</sup> In an age of affluence for many, hunger was invisible to most before May of 1968, but this documentary brought it into the spotlight.

Aired on May 21, 1968, millions of Americans tuned in to watch to Charles Kurault narrate the plight of families in four impoverished regions of the United States: a family of tenant farmers in Virginia, sharecroppers in Alabama, a Mexican-American family in San Antonio, and residents of an Indian Reservation in Arizona. The documentary drew on statistics from the earlier *Hunger, U.S.A.* report, published in April 1968 by the Citizen’s Crusade Against Poverty. This report identified that one out every five Americans had ‘poor’ diets as defined by the USDA.<sup>122</sup> The report asserted that 10-14 million Americans were still severely underfed, likely because 300 of the poorest counties in the U.S. operated no food assistance programs of any kind. *Hunger in America* brought this reality to millions of people in their own living rooms.

*Hunger in America* presented mass affluence coexisting with hunger, visually depicting poverty amidst plenty.<sup>123</sup> After showing a starving baby in the ‘barrio’ of San Antonio, the documentary cut to tourists enjoying local cuisine at the San Antonio World’s Fair. In Virginia, the film contrasts Loudon County’s estates and prize stables, only 25 miles from Washington, D.C., with dwellings of poor white tenant farmers living in the same

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<sup>121</sup> Martin Brofenbrenner, “A Working Library on Riots and Hunger: A Review Article,” *The Journal of Human Resources* 4, no. 3 (Summer 1969), 383. The *Hunger Report* referenced here is the 1968 report *Hunger, U.S.A.* published by the labor-backed the Citizen’s Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition. Citizens Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States, *Hunger U.S.A.*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

<sup>122</sup> Citizens’ Board of Inquiry, *Hunger U.S.A.*, 82. Cited in William T. Boehm, Paul E. Nelson, and Kathryn A. Longen, *Progress Toward Eliminating Hunger in America*, AER No. 446, (Washington D.C.: G.P.O, 1980).

<sup>123</sup> *Hunger in America*, produced by Martin Carr and Don Hewitt, featuring Charles Kurault, aired May 21, 1968, CBS.

county.<sup>124</sup> This exploded away the idea of invisible poverty in the U.S., and showed the way poverty and affluence co-existed. It was not an experience of an ‘other’ America. While now more geographically concentrated in urban centers and rural areas, there could be no doubt that there was hunger amidst affluence. Producers Martin Carr and Don Hewitt won a Peabody Award for their representations of hunger and poverty. While data on hunger and malnutrition remained sparse, images of children with bloated stomachs moved the compass on hunger in a way statistics could not.

Seizing on the opportunity for action, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota sponsored a study committee on hunger the day after the program aired. Introduced on the floor of the Senate on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1968, Senate Resolution 281 created the Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs. In light of accounts of rampant hunger this committee sought to find out why people did not receive food they were eligible for.<sup>125</sup> While it was a select committee, meaning it only had reporting power and not the authority to sponsor legislation, the creation of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human needs demonstrates the way hunger was brought to the forefront of the domestic policy agenda in 1968, with representation in the nation’s highest legislative body. However, chairs of both the House and Senate Agriculture Committees, who oversaw surplus commodity distribution programs and the administration of Food Stamps, were uninterested in pursuing the hunger issue, even after the publicity garnered following *Hunger in America*.

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<sup>124</sup> Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 150.

<sup>125</sup> “Statement by Sen. McGovern at Press Conference Preceding 1<sup>st</sup> Series of Committee Hearings,” December 16, 1968; Notice of Hearings 12/17-19/69, p.3; Box 1, Press Releases 90-91<sup>st</sup> Congress; Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry: Select Committee on Nutrition; Record Group 46, Records of the U.S. Senate; National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

Beyond Congress, the Poor People's Campaign used *Hunger in America* to foreground their 1968 march in Washington, D.C. On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, the day after *Hunger in America* aired, Reverend Abernathy led the Poor People's March from "Resurrection City" directly to the steps of the Department of Agriculture on Capitol Hill. With the nation tuned in to hunger following the documentary, this was the perfect moment to make broad demands on the Agriculture Department to feed more people.<sup>126</sup> When they arrived, the marchers demanded surplus distribution provide more varied foods in greater quantities and a lower cost, more accessible food stamp program.<sup>127</sup> For one, they argued starting food programs in the 1,000 neediest counties in the country could end the existence of "hunger counties."<sup>128</sup> Marchers demanded free stamps for those with no income and a rescaling of the purchase price and bonus coupon allotments so families would spend no more than 30% of their total monthly income on stamps. They also demanded equity in stamps based on family size instead of the variable amount of stamps allotted corresponding with the value paid in to the program.

But most egregious to Poor People's March participants were the millions of dollars in Section 32 funds returned to the Treasury each year that could have been spent on the food stamp program.<sup>129</sup> When first drafted in the 1930s this meant specifically U.S. produced food

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<sup>126</sup> These effective publicity tactics were pioneered during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, astute observation on how to use the media and television for maximum impact.

<sup>127</sup> Harvey Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 148.

<sup>128</sup> Outlined in Citizens Board of Inquiry, *Hunger U.S.A.*

<sup>129</sup> Section 32 funds are tariff revenues from agricultural imports. 30% of these total funds are deposited into an account explicitly for the use of finding ways outside "normal business

goods, but this had relaxed a bit by the mid-1960s. The fact any of this money was being returned to the Treasury, instead of funding expansions to the FSP or other food programs, was an outrage to welfare advocates. Wright and the Poor People's Campaign asked that Secretary Freeman do two things with Section 32 funds instead of returning them to the Treasury. First, improve the quality and quantity of food available under the commodity distribution program. Second, start an emergency food program in the 256 counties without a program or in areas where the existing program failed to reach a large number of the poor.<sup>130</sup> While these demands were not met in the time frame the PPC identified, they provide a sense of the intensity of the hunger battle in the midst of the 1968 legislative campaign season.

In the span of a decade, hunger had transformed from a fringe policy issue to the center of the domestic agenda. In 1958, there was no food stamp program, no media exposés on hunger, and no Congressional committee dedicated to the nutrition of Americans. By 1968, this had all changed. The visibility brought by the PPC coupled with the CBS documentary put hunger in view of everyday Americans, not just those suffering from poverty themselves.

## **Conclusion**

During Congressional debates over restarting a food stamp program in 1958 and 1959, domestic food assistance only appeared on the policy agenda thanks to its direct links to agricultural surplus. Food stamps' role in surplus disposal made the program politically viable. Even so, expanding food welfare faced significant opposition to the point that a sitting

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channels" to get food to people who would not otherwise be able to access it. Letter, Wright to Reid, "Key Issues," Nixon Library.

<sup>130</sup> Letter, Wright to Reid, "Key Issues," Nixon Library.



President ignored Congressional authority and denied restarting a food stamp program.

Compare this moment to another less than a decade later. In 1968, a nascent hunger lobby made demands for an adequate, nutritionally sound food stamp program as a human right, irrespective of the existence of surplus agriculture. The framing of hunger shifted to focus squarely on domestic hunger stemming from poverty. Between 1959 and 1968, food welfare programs went national, but not universal. Activists used these program's inadequacies to highlight unmet food needs, and made a case for even greater federal intervention in food welfare. By the late 1960s hunger was again recognized as a robust, yet contested, public issue, with a broad, although internally conflicted, constituency of public/private interests. At first, the next administration appeared to take the hunger problem seriously, only to later use these internal tensions to manage, and contain, expansive hunger demands.

## Chapter Two

### Managing the “Hunger Bandwagon”: The Nixon Administration and Food Welfare

Four months after being sworn into office, President Richard Nixon became the first and only president to pledge to end hunger in America. In a special address to Congress in May 1969, Nixon declared, “the moment is at hand to put an end to hunger in America itself. For all time.”<sup>1</sup> Later that year in December, Nixon expanded on his claim to end hunger, “Speaking for this administration, I not only accept the responsibility – I claim the responsibility.”<sup>2</sup> Nothing like this Presidential claim to end hunger had been stated before, and no President has made this pronouncement since. He seemed to bear his pronouncement out, based on the growth of food welfare programs during his time in office. Between 1969 and 1974, the two major food welfare programs in the U.S. grew at an astounding pace. The food stamp program expanded from serving 2.8 to 12.8 million people between 1969 and 1974 while the school lunch program grew, albeit more modestly, increasing service from 19.4 million to 24.6 million children over the same period. Overall, federal nutrition programs grew from a little under \$1 billion in annual spending in 1968 to \$4.5 billion by

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Nixon, “Special Message to the Congress Recommending a Program to End Hunger in America,” May 6, 1969, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2038>.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Nixon, “Opening Remarks at the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health,” Dec 2, 1969, as printed in *Action Report* (The National Council on Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States), Vol. 1 No. 5, December 1969, 13; Papers of the Maryland Conference on Social Welfare, Series I, Box 13, folder no. 4; University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

1974.<sup>3</sup> Through this lens, and according to many scholars of the food stamp program, Nixon, not Johnson, was the true driving force behind the expansion of food welfare programs.<sup>4</sup>

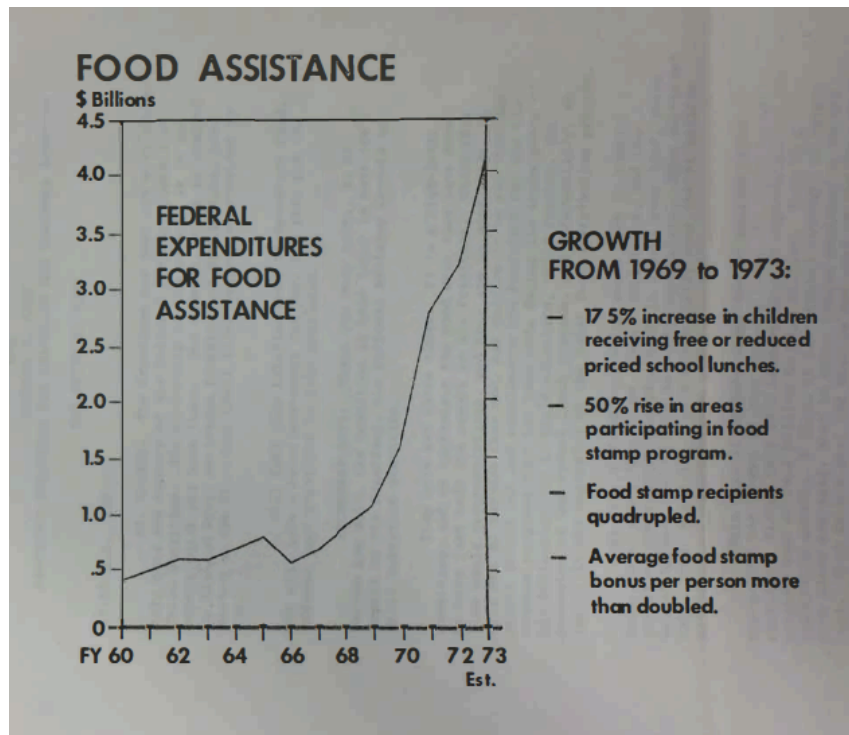
At first glance, and based on figures like the one below, it appears the Nixon administration was moving towards a universal food welfare program. Behind the figures, the reality of the Nixon administration's approach to public food assistance is more complicated. I argue anti-hunger activists and the public broadly presented the Nixon administration with expansive, rights-based claims to end hunger now by ending poverty. A guaranteed annual income could solve hunger and poverty in one stroke, with a right to food assistance supplementing this effort. But the Nixon administration proved wary of sweeping change.

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<sup>3</sup> 1968 data comes from a letter held by the Nixon Library. R. B. Choate to John C. Whitaker, January 8 1969; Box 17, Folder Health – Hunger and Malnutrition 3-1 (2) [3 of 3], Box 17, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: John R. Price Papers; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Total spending for each program in 1969 was as follows: commodity program (\$150 million), food stamps (\$185 million), school lunch (\$450 million), school breakfast (\$9 million), and a school milk subsidy (\$104 million). 1974 data on food stamps and school meal participation drawn from USDA official statistics. See USDA, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Costs,” updated September 6, 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNAPsummary-9.pdf>. USDA, “National School Lunch Program: Participation and Lunches Served,” updated March 8, 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/slsummar.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Some historians of welfare have gone so far as to call Nixon the last Social Democrat, pointing in particular to expansion in the food stamp program by 1974. See for example Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 122. Marissa Chappell also discusses the expansion of the FSP under Nixon, but highlights that these gains were directed more towards the working poor than mothers on AFDC. Marissa Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 107. See also Ronald F. King, *Budgeting Entitlements: The Politics of Food Stamps* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 54. “The new Republican administration of Richard Nixon was far more sympathetic to nutrition issues and more willing to advance costly policy initiative than the outgoing Democratic administration of Lyndon Johnson.”

While Nixon's proposed welfare reform through the Family Assistance Plan and promise to end hunger seem like calls for sweeping federal change, the reality was more limited.



Graph accompanying "National Advisory Council on Child Nutrition Annual Report Fact Sheet," March 17, 1972; Folder HE 3-1 Executive, Box 13, White House Subject File; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

The first part of this chapter explores how Nixon positioned himself early in his first term. 1969 marks a year of opportunity, with Nixon's proclamation to end hunger and a massive White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health. Instead, as the rest of this chapter outlines, Nixon stepped back from his expansive promises to focus on managing the hunger issue. His administration was unwilling to attend to problems of poverty, which lay at the root of hunger, instead, ensuring people's basic nutritional needs were met. Although he gave members of the "hunger lobby" opportunities to describe the problem, he refused to act on their demands. The scope, and projected cost, to truly end hunger led Nixon to focus on containing the hunger issue instead.

## **Nixon: Architect of Universal Welfare?**

Nixon's first year in office was, at least initially, a hopeful moment for anti-hunger advocates. He welcomed advisors from within the hunger lobby and promised to make hunger and poverty central policy issues. The Nixon campaign brought on Robert B. Choate Jr. as an advisor on hunger during the transition. Choate had hunger bona fides as a member of the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty who assisted drafting "Hunger, U.S.A.," the report that informed the 1968 CBS documentary *Hunger in America*. Three announcements early in Nixon's term gave further reason for optimism on his anti-hunger and anti-poverty program. First, on May 6<sup>th</sup>, Nixon made a special address to Congress on the problem of hunger. Then on June 11<sup>th</sup>, he followed up on a specific point of that address announcing his first White House conference on the subject of food, nutrition, and health. Nixon made another astute appointment, bringing in Harvard Nutrition Professor, Jean Mayer. Mayer had served as the chairman of the National Council on Hunger and Malnutrition, an organization that was openly hostile to Nixon's welfare reform agenda.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these visible efforts to study and combat hunger and malnutrition, Nixon made a surprising announcement about his approach to welfare more broadly. On August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1969 he announced his administration's Family Assistance Plan. Nixon advocated for huge increases in spending on food programs coupled with a basic minimum income, two proposals that could be part of a solution to end hunger.

### *Constructing a Hunger Agenda*

During the summer of 1968, it was not just activists who were talking about hunger. The Republican Party Platform, delivered on August 9, 1968, acknowledged the problem in

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<sup>5</sup> Harvey A. Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 155.

saying, “recent studies indicate that many Americans suffer from malnutrition.”<sup>6</sup> While not a sweeping statement on hunger caused by poverty, public pressure had pushed the Republican Party to include a mention of malnutrition in their platform. The statement continued, saying the current system of “fragmentation” in anti-hunger efforts hindered solving the problem. Their solution was not increased public spending on food welfare. Rather, Republicans proposed a “unified federal food distribution program” working with the states and “innovative” private enterprise.<sup>7</sup> The re-enactment of a food stamp program in 1964, although small in scope, was a signal of greater public intervention, where the federal government bore the whole cost of the program. In contrast to this example of public expenditures, the Republican platform highlighted how innovation in the private sector would ensure the poor had access to a balanced diet. The drafters of the platform focused on providing welfare services efficiently, not increasing services through greater federal outlays.

Candidate Nixon hewed to his party’s line and campaigned against increasing federal spending, especially in social and welfare programs. He made this clear in spring 1968 when he came out against major anti-poverty spending. In a mid-May 1968 response to the Freedom Budget proposed by the Poor People’s Campaign, Nixon stated, “the economic crisis of 1968 has ruled out any massive new transfusion of funds to the poor.”<sup>8</sup> President Nixon was not going to guarantee freedom from want, in line with what the Poor People’s Campaign and other rights-based groups demanded. Instead, Nixon promised to meet the

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<sup>6</sup> “Republican Party Platform of 1968,” The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273407>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Freedom Budget Opposed by Nixon,” May 15, 1968, *New York Times*.

basic nutritional needs of the poor. Even so, the political visibility of the hunger issue meant the Nixon camp needed to pay special attention to how the public perceived his approach.

Bringing R. B. Choate Jr. on as an advisor was an astute political move on the part of Nixon's advisors. Appointing an individual with impressive credentials as a hunger lobbyist eased public scrutiny. Choate was an outspoken "hunger lobbyist" and consumer advocate and had consulted with HEW during the Johnson Administration on a national nutrition survey.<sup>9</sup> He was also Republican, explaining his access to the Nixon White House. Choate is most famous for pouring out boxes of cereal during a Senate Commerce Committee hearing in 1970, drawing attention to the empty nutritional value of most breakfast cereals.<sup>10</sup> Choate was also very invested in voluntarism and private partnerships, a focus he would bring to his anti-hunger work in the Nixon administration.

Shortly following the election, Choate had some words of warning for Nixon's team on the hunger problem. Nixon had tasked Choate with devising a "total reform" of the system of food assistance.<sup>11</sup> In a memo outlining the food needs of the nation's poor, Choate declared "the following opportunities (or crises) will confront President Nixon in the first 60 days of his Administration." The first would be the release in January 1969 of data from the first four states in the ten-state nutrition survey, "the results in Texas, Louisiana, Kentucky and New York will be appalling. The medical and nutrition profession will be shocked..."

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<sup>9</sup> Adam Bernstein, "Robert B Choate, 84, Dies; Played Crucial Role in Changing U.S. Eating Habits," *The Washington Post*, May 10, 2009; Elaine Woo, "Robert B. Choate dies at 84; consumer advocate pushed for healthier cereals," *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 2009; "Lives Lived: Robert Choate Jr.," *The Union*, May 29, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 192. This garnered him praise from consummate consumer advocate, Ralph Nader, see Woo, "Robert B. Choate dies at 84."

<sup>11</sup> Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 150.

He also cautioned that both sides of the hunger debate were going to become increasingly vocal. In Congress, many members remained unconvinced of the gravity of hunger in the United States. Choate believed the House Appropriations Committee would announce hearings on “hunger fraud,” saying that claims of hunger had been exaggerated. On the other hand, Senator McGovern’s Select Committee would continue to bring professional documentation to link poor health outcomes and “poverty-induced hunger.”<sup>12</sup> In response to these and other possible problems, Choate offered the following suggested responses:

Mr. Nixon announces in an early national message that he is appointing a Special Assistant to the President for coordination and redirection of public food programs to meet the mal-nutrition and undernutrition health needs of the abject poor... Administrative reform is promised. [...] Mr. Nixon announces a White House Conference on both the malnutrition implications of an underfed population and on the private sector-public sector cooperative responsibilities to improve the delivery system of food for the poor. He would stress the role for the private sector.<sup>13</sup>

While civil and welfare rights activists were arguing for freedom from want and hunger as a basic condition of citizenship, Choate framed another way for the Nixon administration to respond. The federal government would ensure the basic nutritional needs of the poor were met, without any claim to stop people from being hungry or malnourished in the first place.

Choate’s suggestions to appoint a Special Assistant to the President as well as convene a food and nutrition focused conference came to fruition early in Nixon’s term. However, Choate provided other suggestions that were ignored. He suggested Nixon declare an “emergency condition” for families with very low incomes, defined as under \$600 per

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<sup>12</sup> Memo, Robert B. Choate, “Mr. Nixon and the food needs of the Nation’s poor;” November 1968; Folder Health Hunger and Malnutrition 3-1 (2) [3 of 3], Box 17, Staff Member and Office Files: John R. Price Papers; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>13</sup> Choate, “Mr. Nixon and the food needs of the Nation’s poor,” Nixon Library. Emphasis in the original.



year, and in counties where more than 10 percent of families met this definition. This emergency designation would allow USDA and HEW to institute emergency food and health outreach services, something “LBJ was on the brink of” several times, but he “ignored his advisors and chose not to move.”<sup>14</sup> Choate argued that this kind of inaction on the part of LBJ had led to political stasis on hunger and malnutrition by late 1968. Many other voices called for Nixon to declare a hunger emergency, but he never did. Declaring an emergency condition would have meant accepting that poverty, not just hunger and malnutrition, was a problem requiring federal intervention, something Nixon’s administration refused to acknowledge during his time in office.

### *Nixon Enters Office*

Nixon entered office in January 1969. In his first four months, he did not make any public pronouncements on the hunger problem, but his staff worked hard in the Executive Office Building to formulate a plan. This is evidenced by study committees of both the Council for Urban Affairs (CUA) and Council of Economic Advisers (CEA). Further frantic memos and fact-finding by assistants to the President testify to the administration’s focus on hunger. In particular, there was a flurry of activity from staff working with Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Nixon’s Assistant Director of Domestic Policy and Urban Affairs. All of these efforts contributed to Nixon’s May 6<sup>th</sup> Special Address to Congress, and shaped the food conference that would take place in December of his first year in office.

Three days after his swearing in, Nixon established the Urban Affairs Council, involving all of his cabinet Secretaries in formulating and implementing a national urban

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

policy.<sup>15</sup> Within a week of establishing the council, Nixon directed that ten committees be formed to study specific issues, then report back to the full council. The Food and Nutrition Committee, chaired by Secretary of Agriculture Clifford Hardin along with Secretary Robert Finch of HEW and Secretary of Commerce Maurice Stans, was established to study malnutrition broadly and first met on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1969.<sup>16</sup> The committee could have approached hunger in a few different ways. During the transition to office, Choate identified three factors making hunger and malnutrition policy difficult to enact.<sup>17</sup> First, food programs were administered out of a Department that focused on farming. Perhaps the committee could have looked at how different departments would solve hunger. Second, there was no clear-cut national mandate to act, no framework to understand action taken towards ending hunger as part of a broader solution. Without a national strategy, Choate argued localities did not want to take part, especially since they bore administrative costs.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the committee could establish a concrete, national strategy to end hunger. Lastly, Choate identified the health of the poor was obviously low, but there was no scientific consensus as to whether food was the primary factor. Without clear, causal links between poor nutrition and the health outcomes of low-income people, Choate believed policymakers could not justify a need for

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Nixon, "Statement on Signing Executive Order Establishing the Council for Urban Affairs," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/240454>.

<sup>16</sup> Memo, "History of the President's Message on Hunger and Malnutrition," May 7, 1969; Folder Health – Hunger and Malnutrition 3-1 (2) [2 of 3], Box 17, Staff Member and Office Files: John R. Price Papers; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>17</sup> Letter, R. B. Choate to John C. Whitaker, January 8 1969; Folder Health – Hunger and Malnutrition 3-1 (2) [3 of 3], Box 17, Staff Member and Office Files: John R. Price Papers; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>18</sup> Many counties used this justification as to why they would not or could not start a FSP or take part in commodity distribution, where they had to pay transportation and storage costs.

expanded or new nutrition policies and program. A nutrition survey or other fact-finding could have clarified the links between poverty and hunger. Interestingly, the Food Committee of the CUA specified that they focused their study solely on “poverty related malnutrition,” explaining this choice by saying the problem of insufficient diets in the general population was a lower order concern. As this choice illustrates, early in Nixon’s term linking hunger and poverty was not off limits.

Christopher DeMuth, a staff assistant to the President working in urban affairs, hammered home the dimensions of the hunger issue more broadly. As Choate had predicted, DeMuth described the findings of the Public Health Service ten-state nutrition survey as “incredible.” Reported in a hearing to the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs in late January, the study found that 15 percent of all children observed had stunted growth due to poor diets and a further four percent had rickets. 30 percent of all children were anemic, and while the number fell to 13 percent when including adults, the level of anemia was to such a degree as to require immediate prescription of an iron compound.<sup>19</sup> DeMuth went on saying that, “I have received numerous phone calls from the press,” perhaps underscoring “I” to note that the press was interested in him, a lowly official, for answers on hunger. DeMuth relayed the continued gravity of the “hunger problem,” succinctly warning Moynihan, “if we do not construct a major program to alleviate hunger, the President is going to get hurt badly.”<sup>20</sup> The findings of the Urban Affairs Council study confirmed this

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<sup>19</sup> Leslie A. Arnow, *Food Power: A Doctor’s Guide to Commonsense Nutrition* (Chicago: Nelson Hall Co., 1972), 17.

<sup>20</sup> Memo, Christopher DeMuth to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, February 11, 1969; Folder HE 3-1 Executive, Box 13, White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

instinct. After meeting three more times in early March, they submitted their report to the broader Council on March 17, 1969.<sup>21</sup>

Similar to study committees before, the Urban Affairs food committee identified that the dimensions of poverty-related malnutrition were undefined at the present time. However, writing this finding in all capital letters, “SUCH KNOWLEDGE AS WE DO HAVE INDICATES THAT MALNUTRITION AMONG THE POOR IS IN FACT A SERIOUS PROBLEM.”<sup>22</sup> After explaining the background of food programs and hunger since the early 1960s, they provided specific recommendations in each area of food program operations, some of which included budgetary suggestions.<sup>23</sup> The FSP comprised the majority of proposed new outlays in their report.

The committee mirrored many groups recommendations, advocating for a big uptick in federal outlays. They agreed with earlier studies demanding to drop the purchase price for families with an income below \$50 per month, ensure stamps cost no more than 30 percent of monthly income, and guarantee a great enough stamp value to purchase an adequate diet.<sup>24</sup> If adopted immediately by July 1, 1969, FY 1970 costs for the FSP would be \$1 billion. This stood in contrast to the \$380 million currently appropriated for FY 1970. By 1973, total cost

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<sup>21</sup> “History of the President’s Message on Hunger and Malnutrition,” May 7, 1969; Box 17, Staff Member and Office Files: John R. Price Papers; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>22</sup> “Report of the Committee of the Urban Affairs Council on Food and Nutrition,” March 17, 1969, 1; Folder HE 3-1 Executive, Box 13, White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>23</sup> Recommendations were broken out across the following areas: FSP, commodity program, Special Supplemental Food Program, Child Nutrition (mostly school lunch), the role of private business, volunteers, a national food/ malnutrition survey, and avenues for nutrition research and education.

<sup>24</sup> As written at the time, the FSP served to “supplement normal food expenditures.”

for the FSP would be \$2.5 billion per year, or more than \$1.7 billion over currently planned expenditures. They also suggested \$100 million be added for the Special Supplemental Food Program (now WIC) and \$5 million for a comprehensive national nutrition survey along with an education and research campaign.<sup>25</sup> While their report hedged on these spending increases, noting they had not considered the priority of these programs compared to the needs of other domestic programs, it is clear that they saw a need for huge increases in federal food welfare outlays. Beyond increases in public expenditures, the report called to create an industry advisory committee of the heads of major food processing and distribution companies to strategize ways to educate consumers about proper nutrition through advertising.<sup>26</sup> In responding to the report, Dr. Arnold E. Schaefer, a HEW employee responsible for the ten-state nutrition survey, explicitly added, “malnutrition is a widespread and extremely serious problem in this country.”<sup>27</sup> The food committee’s study of “poverty related malnutrition” resulted in a proposal to dramatically increase food welfare spending.

A peak in public attention had pushed Nixon to study hunger. A staffer noted, “there is real promise in the newly-emerged recognition that malnutrition is a national problem against which this administration can launch a major effort with real pay off.”<sup>28</sup> Whether the

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<sup>25</sup> “Report of the Committee of the Urban Affairs Council on Food and Nutrition;” 9, 15, 23-24; Nixon Library.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-22.

<sup>27</sup> Memo, Christopher DeMuth to Moynihan, March 27, 1969; Folder HE 3 Executive, Box 13, White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>28</sup> Memo, Andy Rome to Pat Moynihan; “Comments on Suggested Nutrition Programs and Their Financing,” March 13, 1969; Folder Health – Hunger and Malnutrition 3-1 (2) [2 of 3], Box 17, Staff Member and Office Files: John R. Price Papers; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

pay off was in decreasing hunger or gaining political capital is unclear, and Nixon stepped back claims before “pay off” occurred. The recommendations of the food committee came under attack from two of Nixon’s trusted advisers even though the study findings had the support of the Secretaries of Agriculture, HEW, and Commerce. Arthur Burns, working on domestic affairs, and Budget Director Robert Mayo both believed the CUA proposal went too far. When asked directly by the President about the cost of having a food stamp program in all counties in the country, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Lyng put the cost at \$3.5 to \$4 billion, ten times more than was currently budgeted for the program. For conservatives like Burns and Mayo on Nixon’s staff, this level of increased expenditure was unthinkable. After hearing these budget numbers, and the opinions of Burns and Mayo, the President declined to make a firm decision on his vision for a food stamp program.<sup>29</sup> Instead of a problem amenable to tinkering around the edges, ending hunger would require bigger budget outlays than the Administration was willing to spend.

A White House memo notes Nixon was “generally favorable, though non-committal” to the report’s sweeping recommendations. In order to appear strong on the issue, Nixon asked Secretary of Agriculture Hardin to signal to the press that Nixon’s administration would lead the “first comprehensive program” to attack malnutrition, but he forbade Hardin to publicly put a price tag on the effort.<sup>30</sup> Although the food committee had identified target figures, Nixon was far from ready to commit to them.

Six weeks after hearing the findings from the CUA Food Committee report, Nixon announced a more limited expansion to food welfare programs. In consultation with USDA

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<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey M. Berry, *Feeding Hungry People: Rulemaking in the Food Stamp Program* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 61.

<sup>30</sup> “History of the President’s Message on Hunger and Malnutrition,” Nixon Library.

Secretary Hardin and Donald Rumsfeld, then head of the OEO, the White House committed a mere \$270 million in increases to food programs for FY 1970.<sup>31</sup> This was significantly less than the almost \$1 billion suggested by the food subcommittee in their report six weeks prior. Additionally, this was not going to be new spending, “the Federal budget is very tight and will continue to be stringent for several years, so finances for an enlarged ‘food’ program will come hard.”<sup>32</sup> Instead of new spending, John Ehrlichman proposed a variety of ways to shift funds into a Nixon initiative on hunger by making strategic cuts in “present low priority programs” within the USDA and moving those savings into the FSP.

As an alternative to creating new line items for food programs, money was to be “reprogrammed from elsewhere in the budget.”<sup>33</sup> Ehrlichman found \$200 million for this effort by postponing agricultural research programs and canceling what he termed “marginal” efforts.<sup>34</sup> In addition, Ehrlichman all but eliminated the special milk program, cutting spending from \$104 million to \$7 million.<sup>35</sup> On top of these cuts, the administration allocated \$36 million to strengthen the OEO Emergency Food Program. All told, the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Memo, Andy Rome to Pat Moynihan, “Comments on Suggested Nutrition Programs and Their Financing,” March 13, 1969; Folder Health – Hunger and Malnutrition 3-1 (2) [2 of 3], Box 17, Staff Member and Office Files: John R. Price Papers; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>33</sup> “History of the President’s Message on Hunger and Malnutrition,” Nixon Library.

<sup>34</sup> These included halving a support to purchase limestone to replenish soil, and postponing construction on forest service roads and trails.

<sup>35</sup> This provided low-cost milk to elementary school students during lunch and subsidized middle-class children’s milk purchases.

administration claimed they had made a \$333 million Nixon food initiative.<sup>36</sup> \$1 billion in suggested new funding in mid-March had become \$36 million in approved additional expenditures for the next FY by May. Staffers were conscious the administration needed to appear to take hunger seriously, but hesitant to commit adequate funding to change the status quo.

Part of this reticence to act can be explained by the two poles of thought on the hunger problem. For some, the federal hunger budget was already sufficient, while for others nothing short of absolute freedom from hunger would do. Representative of the first pole was Representative Jamie Whitten (D-MS). Whitten was the long-serving chairman of the Agriculture Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, placing him in a position with control over the purse strings of the USDA.<sup>37</sup> A Southern Democrat, Representative Whitten was particularly unfriendly to food welfare, and his position in Congress meant his opinion on this mattered. DeMuth asserted, “the desires and intentions of the Secretary of Agriculture are of little consequence in developing an effective food program.” Instead, he identified Congress as the locus of power over agricultural decisions, “USDA staffers consider Jamie Whitten to be their boss far more than whoever is the current occupant of the Secretaries Office.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Part of the OEO Emergency Food and Medical Services Program transported “poor people to commodity distribution centers to pick up free food.” Draft Report, “A Nixon Initiative on Hunger,” April 14, 1969; Folder HE 3-1 Executive, Box 13, White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>37</sup> He became chairman of the Agriculture Subcommittee in 1949, and Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee in 1979, a position he held until 1993.

<sup>38</sup> Memo, Christopher DeMuth to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, February 11, 1969; Folder HE 3-1 Executive, Box 13, White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.



On the other side was the congressional work of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs. The administration believed they would never be able to please this camp regardless of how far their food programs went. Many anti-hunger activists, according to Nixon staff, had pie-in-the-sky aspirations for food programs. Staff thought the USDA could maybe run an effective food program, however, “no Department could run a program to the satisfaction of some of our critics. But the issues of hunger and malnutrition are already pressing hard upon us.”<sup>39</sup> Making change that satisfied everyone would be impossible.

#### *Private Partners in Ending Hunger*

In this environment, Nixon aides began in earnest to explore the varieties of ways to engage with private partners in the fight against hunger. Individuals from food production and distribution companies wrote in with specific suggestions outlining ways they could help the administration meet American nutritional needs. For example, the chairman of the National Restaurant Association wrote to President Nixon after hearing about the proposed national nutrition conference. He offered his organization’s expertise to improve diets of the poor by advising on catering programs. The chairman noted food service companies “have experience, expertise, and equipment which can contribute to the solution of the problem.”<sup>40</sup> Private industry had the skills to assist government to feed the poor efficiently, and organizations like the National Restaurant Association just needed an opportunity to help.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Letter, Rear Admiral Ira H. Nunn to Richard Nixon, March 28, 1969; Folder HE 3-1 Executive, Box 13, White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

Nixon had John Ehrlichman personally reach out to the head of the Office of Emergency Preparedness, retired Brigadier General George A. Lincoln. The President wanted to know if there were any “substantial stockpiles” of preserved foods in shelters that could not be kept indefinitely, presumably to repurpose to feed the hungry. Lincoln responded that civil defense shelters were stocked with survival biscuits. These biscuits provided a 700-calorie “survival ration” to “sustain life under the most austere emergency conditions.”<sup>41</sup> The General noted they would be unacceptable as a peacetime ration. While Nixon here showed an interest in using publicly owned foods, this exchange also demonstrates the degree to which he missed the mark on understanding the dimensions of the problem. Survival biscuits were not going to end hunger in the United States, but they could ensure basic food needs were met.

Close Nixon advisor John Ehrlichman felt similarly about supplying in-kind food aid instead of cash or increased stamps. Early in Nixon’s Presidency, Ehrlichman advocated for maintaining the direct commodity distribution program. He believed the commodity food program was, “the best we have in actually getting food to hungry people. We know it hits the target.”<sup>42</sup> This stood in stark contrast to the opinion of advisor Robert Choate who noted since 1964, Congress and the USDA had “expressed a specific desire” to phase out direct

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<sup>41</sup> Memo, Brigadier General George A. Lincoln to John Ehrlichman, April 18, 1969; Folder Conference on Food and Nutrition, Box 74, White House Central Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Egil Krogh; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>42</sup> “A Nixon Initiative on Hunger,” 14 April 1969; Folder Conference on Food and Nutrition, Box 74, White House Central Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Egil Krogh; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

commodity distribution in favor of the food stamp program.<sup>43</sup> These two instances show how Nixon's administration was focused on getting food to the poor instead of working on the broader goal of increasing people's means to acquire food.

Speed was of the essence in crafting responses to hunger because the administration was increasingly playing defense. While staff found ways to "reprogram" funds and see if emergency rations could be put to use to feed the poor, the public outrage at inaction on hunger pressured Nixon. Senator McGovern and his Select Committee on Hunger were expected to propose a budget of a billion dollars or more for an attack on hunger, while southern Senators, to the alarm of Nixon staffers, were "getting on the hunger bandwagon." Among those joining the cause were Senators Herman Talmadge of Georgia, Fritz Hollings of South Carolina, and William B. Spong of Virginia. And to staff dismay, "Senator [Allen J.] Ellender of Louisiana seems about to get on" the bandwagon, too. In response to the politically charged climate on hunger, one staffer implored, "we must go on the offensive before we get bombed by these moves."<sup>44</sup> To combat senators jumping ship, and make a splash in the public eye, Nixon was about to announce his intentions to end hunger in America.

#### *May 6<sup>th</sup> Congressional Address*

On May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1969, Nixon shared with Congress, "an address recommending a plan to end hunger in America."<sup>45</sup> In this address, he became the first and only President to call for

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<sup>43</sup> Letter, R. B. Choate to John C. Whitaker, January 8 1969; Folder Health – Hunger and Malnutrition 3-1 (2) [3 of 3], Box 17, Staff Member and Office Files: John R. Price Papers; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>44</sup> "A Nixon Initiative on Hunger," Nixon Library.

<sup>45</sup> Nixon, "Recommending a Program to End Hunger in America."

an end to hunger in the United States, proposing significant increases in the federal budget commitment for food welfare. Both food and nutrition advisor R.B. Choate, Jr., along with the Urban Affairs food subcommittee advised the president to make an announcement to Congress unveiling his administration's recommendations on hunger and malnutrition.<sup>46</sup> Ignoring the comments of Mayo and Burns, Nixon committed to spending increases in line with the recommendations to which he had, a mere few weeks prior, been unwilling to accept.

Nixon used CUA and CEA findings to make this sweeping statement on hunger in the United States. His program included action items such as a \$1 billion increase in the food stamp program budget and a pilot program to supplement the diets of pre- and post-partum women, infants, and young children. Both of these changes were to go into effect early in 1970, after clearing the necessary legislative and administrative hurdles. Nixon also included the three main recommendations from the Urban Affairs committee to modify the FSP: abandoning the purchase price for the poorest families, ensuring no family paid more than 30% of their income for stamps, and allowing for enough stamps to purchase a "nutritionally complete diet." While these changes were not to go into effect until some time in 1970, he announced the immediate \$270 million on hunger and malnutrition reprogrammed from the current budget. With \$1.5 billion already authorized for FY 1970 food programs, this \$1 billion more would set FY 1970 spending at an unprecedented \$2.5 billion. This spending commitment was surprising, especially from a Republican President, but it speaks to the level of public pressure Nixon's administration faced to act on the hunger problem.

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<sup>46</sup> "Report of the Committee of the Urban Affairs Council on Food and Nutrition," March 17, 1969, 3; Folder HE 3-1 Executive, Box 13, White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

Aside from funding increases, Nixon also called for a new administrative unit to oversee food programs, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), and an expansion to the National Nutrition Survey. The creation of FNS elevated food welfare concerns within the USDA. Instead of operating out of disparate offices, food assistance programs would be administered centrally, under a new USDA undersecretary responsible for the division. Then, Nixon called on the Secretary of HEW to expand the National Nutrition Survey to provide “our first detailed description” of hunger and malnutrition in the United States.<sup>47</sup> No longer would politicians be able to declare the dimensions of hunger were unknown. Instead, a national nutrition survey would provide the data necessary to make the case for more robust food programs.

Although Nixon promised expansion, he also laid the groundwork for measures to contain an expansive food welfare system. Other parts of the address opened the door to voluntary and private measures to meet the nutritional needs of the poor, without addressing their poverty. Nixon made extensive comments on involving the private sector to expand access to food and increase nutritional outcomes.<sup>48</sup> He described early plans for the White House conference on food and nutrition, including the appointment of an even more outspoken member of the hunger lobby to run the conference, Dr. Jean Mayer. But this was part of Nixon’s strategy. Nixon set himself up to avoid critique from the ‘hunger militants’ by having the conference run by one of their own.

Hewing closely to the recommendation from Choate, Nixon described the conference as a way to explore public/ private partnerships to meet nutritional needs. Nixon described

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<sup>47</sup> Nixon, “Recommending a Program to End Hunger in America.”

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

the conference almost exclusively as an opportunity to learn from the private sector. He called on involving executives from the leading food processing and distribution companies to advise him on how to improve government food programs.<sup>49</sup> Beyond improving public programs, the conference was also designed to identify how the food market could be restructured to improve everyone's nutrition through educational advertising and packaging to advance good food habits. Private industry had a big role to play. Nixon appealed to other private actors as well. He advocated for a "greatly expanded role" for Community Action Agencies to deliver food stamps and commodity packages. In this formulation, Community Action Programs became agents of service delivery, not empowerment, a redefinition of their mission away from broader ideals such as freedom from want. The Nixon White House created openings for a range of private actors to address malnutrition and hunger, all while minimizing the underlying problem of poverty.

It was not long following the May 6<sup>th</sup> announcement that Nixon encountered barriers from within his White House to implement proposed food welfare changes. Chairman of the CEA, Paul W. McCracken, noted that even the \$1 billion increase in federal welfare spending for FY 1970 was not going to be enough to meet growing needs. Nixon had tasked the CEA to carry out a three-month study in early 1969 of hunger and existing federal food welfare programs, with the goal of reporting back on ways to get food to more people at the lowest cost possible. According to CEA estimates, a full-coverage food stamp program would cost closer to \$4 billion in FY 1970, mirroring the amount suggested by Assistant Secretary Lyng at an early CUA Food Committee meeting. McCracken went on to note that a 40 to 50 percent participation rate would put the FY 1970 FSP budget at \$2.5 billion, the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

amount Nixon cited in his address as the cost of all food programs. Even still, committing this to serve only food stamps would mean ending all other federal food programs.<sup>50</sup> Food program expenditures did grow to \$1.5 billion in 1970, but this was far short of the amount required to fund a full national rollout of the FSP.

In lieu of a truly national food welfare program, the USDA suggested new ways that private intervention could combat hunger. In May of 1969 the USDA's Consumer and Marketing Service released a booklet highlighting the ways volunteers could help fight hunger in the United States.<sup>51</sup> Its authors opened the pamphlet by empowering readers, "you and your neighbors have an important role in the campaign to end hunger and malnutrition." Neighbors could help others overcome barriers to access food services already in place, services that they were entitled to.<sup>52</sup> Some examples cited in the book were churches that set up a fund for the local welfare office to draw on to meet the purchase requirement if a family could not afford to pay it, or to provide outreach and serve as spokespeople for the program.<sup>53</sup> While public outlays for food programs were part of the strategy to end hunger, private charity and voluntarism had a role to play, too. Private involvement in feeding the

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<sup>50</sup> Memo, Paul W. McCracken to Richard Nixon, May 24, 1969; Folder WE 10-4 Executive, Box 60, White House Subject Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>51</sup> The two, non-complementary roles of the USDA in food welfare are highlighted in the Consumer and Marketing Service (CMS) department. On the one hand, it oversaw the food stamp, commodity distribution, and other food welfare programs while it was also responsible for creating domestic and international marketing opportunities for U.S. producers of food, fiber, and specialty crops. In 1972, CMS fully divided into the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), responsible for food welfare, and the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS).

<sup>52</sup> "You can help fight hunger in America... Food stamp handbook for volunteers," USDA Consumer and Marketing Service, May 1969; Mayor William Schaefer Papers; Folder "Food Stamp Program," Box 306; Baltimore City Archives.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 4-5.

poor was not a new development. However, the USDA pamphlet suggested private citizen efforts were a necessary piece of ending hunger and in a small way, foreshadowed a stepping back of public responsibility.

Just one month after his address to Congress, on June 11<sup>th</sup> Nixon appointed Harvard Nutrition Professor Jean Mayer as a Special Consultant to the president with primary responsibility for planning his first conference in office. This was the de facto announcement for the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health (notice the careful avoidance of the word hunger). When announcing the conference, the author of the announcement was careful to couch the future meeting in terms of malnutrition far more than poverty. Nixon described the nation had been “shocked as we have become more aware that millions of Americans are malnourished because they are too poor to purchase enough of the right kinds of foods.” But it was not just the poor who were malnourished, there were “many Americans” who had enough money to purchase a healthful diet, but for whatever reason did not. The conference would focus national attention and resources on the nation’s “remaining – and changing – nutrition problems.”<sup>54</sup> In the announcement, the emphasis on the private sector was less overt than Choate had suggested in January, or even than in Nixon’s May Congressional address when he first described the conference. However, in closing his remarks, Nixon described the Conference would prepare specific goals “for private industry, for Government policy, and for needed research.”<sup>55</sup> In the lead up to the conference, Nixon’s Administration increased contact with private industry in the sphere of food welfare and malnutrition.

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<sup>54</sup> *White House Conference on Food Nutrition and Health: Final Report* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1970), 5.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



The private sector was brought to bear in another way in Nixon's food welfare programs, in the form of the first appointee to head the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) within the USDA. FNS took over operation of the FSP, commodity distribution, and child nutrition programs from Consumer and Marketing Services. In late July, the Secretary of Agriculture announced the appointment of Edward J. Hekman to run the newly formed FNS division. Hekman had strong ties to the food industry. He was the former president of the United Biscuit Company (now Keebler Foods).<sup>56</sup> While he had testified before Congress earlier in the 1960s, arguing against legislation that would standardize food weights, Hekman had no other government experience or history of advocating for poor food consumers.<sup>57</sup> Carving out a space for welfare-focused programs within the USDA marks a shift towards greater attention on poverty, but the work experience of the division's head might not have inspired public confidence in his leadership on hunger.

Following the announcement of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health, the Nixon administration sought out new kinds of private interventions. This speaks to a more limited approach to solving hunger, one focused more narrowly on meeting nutritional needs. A *New York Times* account of the progress and obstacles facing the erasure of malnutrition in the United States described, "specially fabricated foods... that were originally slated for use abroad [were] being considered for domestic consumption."<sup>58</sup> Food science, engineering, and aid pioneered through foreign aid and development was set to

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<sup>56</sup> "Hunger Fight Chief Appointed," *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 1969.

<sup>57</sup> *Fair Packaging and Labeling Act of 1965, Hearings on H.R. 7534, May 3, Before the Comm. on Commerce, 89th Cong. 322 (1965)* (statement of Edward J. Hekman, President United Biscuit Co. of America).

<sup>58</sup> Jean Hewitt, "Progress – and Obstacles – in Erasing Malnutrition in U.S.," *New York Times*, November 11, 1969.

return home.<sup>59</sup> Along the lines of Nixon’s inquiry during the spring regarding ration biscuits, there were whispers in the anti-hunger community citing that Nixon wanted to introduce “complete foods,” like Monsanto’s CSM (a corn-soy-milk powder) to ensure adequate nutritional intake by people in the United States. However, concern emerged about the uptake of these modified foods. All the engineering in the world would not guarantee fortified foods would be consumed. This kind of solution would ensure nutritional needs were met, but not in a way that took into account anything beyond meeting basic needs. In proposing public provision of foods like CSM, the Nixon administration ignored broader debates about the stigmatizing effect of different kinds of food assistance and demands by anti-hunger activists to meet people’s needs in ways that were not demeaning.

Aside from the development model, major companies were also working on a portfolio of enriched products with government cooperation. For example, the Pillsbury Company was to carry out a pilot study of double enriched flour on Chicago’s South and West sides, with assistance from the Office of Economic Opportunity. Some companies planned to take this even further, in effect beginning their own welfare initiatives. For example, a representative of Quaker Oats “outlined a three-pronged attack on malnutrition that the company [was] working on: special and enriched foods, person-to-person education through classes in the ghettos and a minority-group T.V. personality to be the poor people’s Julia Child.”<sup>60</sup> None of these industry-led efforts addressed the inability of people to afford their products; instead, they focused on educating consumers to purchase more nutritionally

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<sup>59</sup> For accounts of U.S. foreign aid, see Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015) and Barry Riley, *The Political History of American Food Aid: An Uneasy Alliance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>60</sup> Hewitt, “Progress – and Obstacles – in Erasing Malnutrition in U.S.”

dense foods through educational advertising campaigns on a macro and micro scale. Turning to “domestic development” and consumer education via private actors delinked hunger from efforts to eradicate poverty, the root cause of hunger in the United States.

Other kinds of private efforts to get food to hungry Americans gained attention in the late 1960s, including campaigns linking hunger and malnutrition directly to poverty. Instead of focusing narrowly on nutritional deficiency, these efforts highlighted people’s absolute lack of access to food due to insufficient resources. They included the Black Panther Breakfast program, a before school breakfast program free to students in Oakland and a few other localities, along with a nascent food banking movement.<sup>61</sup> Radical black activism stood in stark contrast to the more conservative, communitarian roots of the food banking movement. However, both modes of private food assistance acknowledged that it was not just a few nutrients here and there that the poor were missing, but access to an adequate income to purchase food. These concerns were not on the administration’s agenda at the upcoming White House Conference, yet advocates of the poor would force them onto the program only to be silenced. But before explaining the fraught factionalism at the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health, it is necessary to introduce Nixon’s surprising move in welfare policy: a universal minimum income.

### **Universal Welfare?: FAP and its Relation to the FSP**

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<sup>61</sup> By 1969, the Black Panther Breakfast Program had 45 sites feeding a few thousand children daily, and some argue it served as the model and impetus for expanding federally funded nutrition programs to the poor. See Nik Heynen, “Bending the Bars of Empire from Every Ghetto for Survival: The Black Panther Party’s Radical Antihunger Politics of Social Reproduction and Scale,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (April, 2009): 406-422. For an early history of food banking, I referenced a corporate history of Second Harvest, “The History of Food Banking and Feeding America,” Version – March 29, 2013.

Beyond hopes for a more universal food stamp program, Nixon promised to enact the Family Assistance Plan (FAP). On August 8, 1969, in a televised address, Nixon outlined FAP, which would use federal funds to provide a minimum annual income for a family of four of \$1,600. Conservatives and liberals alike were dissatisfied with welfare and saw this negative income tax as a policy solution without bureaucracy.<sup>62</sup> FAP would expand the constituency of people receiving federal cash aid, and is indicative of how the Nixon administration did not totally shy away from federal responsibility to meet welfare needs, at least initially. However, the mode was part of a shift away from ending poverty towards meeting basic needs. FAP shared elements with the more limited approach to food welfare, part of Nixon's emerging strategy on hunger. Further, FAP's eventual failure in Congress was tied closely to the politics of food and hunger, ultimately closing the door on this mode of federal intervention.

Daniel Moynihan, working closely with HEW Secretary Finch, presented Nixon with the proposal for a "Family Security System" in April 1969. Finch and Moynihan argued a minimum income to all families would decrease inequity in the current welfare system. Single mothers, increasingly women of color, made up a growing proportion of welfare rolls. Moynihan described the problem of African-American family disintegration in his controversial 1965 *Report on the Negro Family*. He argued the AFDC benefit structure pushed would-be fathers out of the home, and created a black matriarchal society. FAP would replace AFDC, ending incentives for men to abandon their families (in Moynihan's

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<sup>62</sup> Michael B. Katz, *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American Welfare State* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 61.

formulation).<sup>63</sup> While paying a minimum of \$1,600 to a family of four with no one working, families with workers would be eligible for increased benefits. Families would keep the first portion of earned income, then 50 percent of income thereafter up to a cut off point around \$3,800 for a family of four. This ensured working families would be better off than the welfare poor. Further, providing an income supplement to poor *families* would shift the focus, or at least some media attention, away from women of color.<sup>64</sup> However, the majority of welfare recipients remained white, even as FAP was proposed.

Historians have focused on FAP as part of Nixon's "Southern Strategy," but have neglected to explore how the shifting politics of food welfare impacted this proposal. FAP was designed to appeal to the "forgotten" poor white working class, particularly in the South where it would have had a disproportionately positive impact on southerners. With the New Deal coalition in disarray, this group of voters was up for grabs. By talking about rewarding the working poor by placing a floor under their incomes, Nixon hoped to bring these traditionally Democratic voters into the Republican fold.<sup>65</sup> Nixon decided to move ahead with FAP over the opposition of almost all of his Cabinet members and high-ranking officials, aside from Moynihan and HEW Secretary Finch.<sup>66</sup> Nixon thought he had found a program that could strike a balance between conservative concerns over dependency, while

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<sup>63</sup> Chappell, *The War on Welfare*, 73.

<sup>64</sup> Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 145. If enacted, Kornbluh notes 70% of recipient families would be white.

<sup>65</sup> See Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, 122-3; see also Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, 137-8, 146; Chappell, *The War on Welfare*, 78.

<sup>66</sup> Kornbluh, 146.

still representing dignity for welfare recipients. But, beginning with his announcement of the program in August, FAP became a flashpoint for debates over welfare reform.

While FAP would raise the incomes of some, it had negative consequences for families from states with more comprehensive welfare. \$1,600 per year represented a lot of money to southern welfare recipients. FAP represented an increase in benefits for sixteen states, all of which were in the Deep South; however, it was a big cut elsewhere in the country. And for the NWRO, implementation of FAP would negate hard won gains in welfare benefits, including the cost-of-living increase that was mandated by the 1967 Social Security Amendments, a rollback of procedural safeguards, such as the right to a prompt response regarding a welfare application, and the implementation of work requirements.<sup>67</sup> In place of inadequate benefits and the erosion of due process, the NWRO advocated for a \$5,500 guaranteed income. This figure was drawn from the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates of the resources required for a family of four to live “at a minimum standard of health and decency.”<sup>68</sup>

Low cash benefit levels pushed the National Welfare Rights Organization to deny support for FAP, but so did problems integrating FAP with existing food assistance programs. Nixon had said nothing about food stamps during his address introducing his welfare reform plan, and food stamps were an ancillary concern to FAP planners. The working group met the day after Nixon’s address on FAP in John Ehrlichman’s office. They

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<sup>67</sup> Organized labor disliked the sub-minimum wage piece of the work requirement. Andrea Sachs, “Zap FAP: The National Welfare Rights Organization’s Assault on Nixon-Era Welfare Reform,” in *Speaking Out: Women, Poverty, and Public Policy*, eds. Katherine A. Rhoades and Anne Statham (Madison, Wisconsin: Proceedings of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Women’s Studies Conference, October 29-31, 1998) 28. See also Chappell, *The War on Welfare*, 94 for the NWRO critique of FAP.

<sup>68</sup> Sachs, “Zap FAP,” 28.

were heading to a press conference to answer questions about the proposed program. When asked if there would still be food stamps in FAP, Ehrlichman was adamant that food stamps would be cashed out and explicitly told the rest of the working group to say there would be no food stamps if the question came up.<sup>69</sup> Nick Kotz, author of *Let Them Eat Promises*, raised this exact question, “were food stamps being cashed out as part of FAP?” Richard Nathan, assistant director of the Bureau of Budget, replied parroting Ehrlichman’s response from earlier in the day that there would be no food stamps as families would receive the \$1,600 FAP benefit and state aid. The press went wild. The fear of cuts to food welfare as part of FAP became a key component of early anti-FAP activism.

Ending the FSP would make many families significantly worse off than they were under current state welfare and federal food aid. A HEW staffer noted concern over families losing food stamp eligibility once they joined FAP. Any decline in overall benefits “would conflict with the espoused principle” of FAP that the income of no family would be worse off under the new plan.<sup>70</sup> The NWRO made clear that food stamps would be necessary for a family of four with an annual income of only \$1,600. In mid-September of 1969, the *New York Times* reported that some would-be participants in the upcoming White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health had planned to boycott the conference if food stamp benefits were not reintroduced as part of FAP.<sup>71</sup> Moynihan, chief architect of FAP,

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<sup>69</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 66.

<sup>70</sup> Memo, Tom Joe to John G. Veneman, “Food Stamps and the Family Assistance Plan,” August 22, 1969; Folder 261-- OA #4302 [Conference on Food and Nutrition], Box 74, Staff Member and Office Files: Egil Krogh Papers; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>71</sup> James M. Naughton, “White House Food and Health Parley in Trouble,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1969.

jumped into action saying no one would *really* lose benefits.<sup>72</sup> In response to this, the executive secretary of the National Council on Hunger and Malnutrition dubbed FAP with no food stamps a “Family Deprivation Program.”<sup>73</sup> As soon as FAP was announced, the hunger lobby forced the administration to play defense.

Just two days after the *Times* story ran, Secretary of Agriculture Clifford Hardin testified before Congress clarifying the Nixon administration wanted to maintain the FSP alongside FAP, putting this position into the public record “for the first time.”<sup>74</sup> But this commitment had required significant energy behind the scenes. Dr. Jean Mayer, past chairman of the National Council on Hunger and Malnutrition and Special Assistant to the President in charge of planning the food conference “lobbied furiously” for restoring food stamps. While the White House initially rebuffed Mayer’s request, Mayer emphasized the upcoming conference would be a “fiasco” if nothing was done. The pressure tactics worked, “outcry from liberals – and some scurrying by Dr. Mayer – apparently caused the Administration to change its position.”<sup>75</sup> By indicating that families would still be eligible for up to \$1,200 per year in food stamp benefits, the Nixon administration averted the boycott of the conference by the poor and consumer groups. Yet the news piece continued, “the first major conference held by the Nixon White House... appears beset with serious problems.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 67.

<sup>73</sup> Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 155.

<sup>74</sup> Vincent J. Burke, “Food Stamp Plan to Stay, Officials Say,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 16, 1969.

<sup>75</sup> Naughton, “White House Food and Health Parley in Trouble.”

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*



Dr. Mayer had his work cut out for him balancing the demands of the Nixon White House on one side in contrast to consumer advocates and the poor on the other.

### **December 1969 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health**

One month after Nixon addressed Congress on hunger, he announced a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health, his first conference in office.<sup>77</sup> At first, the optics of the White House Conference made Nixon appear firm in his convictions to end hunger. The conference would focus on both hunger and malnutrition and their health implications, as well as “private sector-public sector cooperative responsibilities” in delivering food to the poor.<sup>78</sup> This conference has received little attention from historians and political scientists who study hunger and food welfare.<sup>79</sup> The conference was, I argue, the site of major contestation between executive staff priorities and the demands of the poor and consumer advocates. Debates at the conference highlight differences in the framing of hunger and divergences in the proper response, public or private, to the hunger problem.

#### *Planning the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health*

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<sup>77</sup> Richard Nixon, “Statement on the White House Conference of Food, Nutrition, and Health,” June 11, 1969, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2093>.

<sup>78</sup> Letter, R. B. Choate to John C. Whitaker, January 8 1969; Nixon Library.

<sup>79</sup> Political scientist Ardith Maney only mentions the conference in passing in her carefully researched study of the interplay between Congress and the President in food welfare, see Ardith Maney, *Still Hungry After All these Years* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 118. Jeffrey Berry, whose book *Feeding Hungry People* tracks administrative changes in food programs also only mentions the conference twice: its announcement during Nixon’s May 6<sup>th</sup> address and a sentence on the conflict between the FSP and FAP. See Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 62, 67. Harvey Levenstein’s *Paradox of Plenty* also discusses the conflict between FAP and FSP at the conference, but little else, see Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 155-6.

In charge of planning the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health, Jean Mayer envisioned a conference with a broad mandate. The conference would examine six themes: tools for dietary and nutritional evaluation, guidelines for nutrition among special groups, studies of food science, nutrition education, food retailing and distribution, and avenues for voluntary action.<sup>80</sup> Mayer noted that one of the primary tasks for the conference would be to determine how to identify hunger and malnutrition, citing a recent event where, when asked about hunger, the U.S. Surgeon General said he simply did not know the extent of the problem or if it existed at all in the United States.<sup>81</sup> While working to find a way to measure hunger, Mayer also devoted significant energy to insuring representation from the poor at the conference.

In line with his earlier work at the National Council on Hunger and Malnutrition, Mayer was adamant the poor be represented. Describing this, Mayer expressed, “I want all the people inside being constructive rather than outside waving banners and saying nothing is being done.”<sup>82</sup> However, this demand was challenging to implement. In the lead-up to the conference, reports surfaced that funding for the entire conference hadn’t been secured. Only \$250,000 from HEW was in hand, and Dr. Mayer estimated the conference costs to be closer to \$1 million. A large portion of this budget would provide transportation and research assistance for poor participants. Dr. Mayer sought funding from the USDA, but the department would only support the conference on the condition that they had control of the

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<sup>80</sup> John Herbers, “Nixon Aide Builds Nutrition Crusade,” *New York Times*, June 28, 1969.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

program, something Mayer was unwilling to allow.<sup>83</sup> He succeeded in bringing a few hundred representatives of the poor to attend, but they made up no more than 10 to 20 percent of the total representatives at the conference. Additionally, members of the poor disproportionately served on panels discussing voluntary action by various subsets of the population as opposed to serving on a broader subset of panels.

Planning of the conference was beset with other problems. Mayer came under fire from the Nixon administration for overstepping the bounds of his advising role. Mayer did not accord to the expectations set by his administration handlers. At an appearance on *Meet the Press* on November 23, 1969, shortly before the conference kicked off, Mayer announced the purpose of the conference was to advise the president and Congress on how best to eliminate hunger and malnutrition. However, Nixon's May 6, 1969 address noted his intent for the conference to advise the President, *not* Congress. In what appeared to be a minor slip-up, staffers remarked that Mayer did not understand "who [he] is working for and who [he] is to report to."<sup>84</sup> The tensions of Mayer's dual identity as a member of the hunger lobby and Nixon staffer became magnified once the conference was underway. Mayer came under attack for not hewing closely enough to Nixon administration ideas of the proper role of the conference, while also coming under fire from liberal anti-hunger advocates for not doing enough to end hunger.

*The Conference: December 2-5, 1969*

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<sup>83</sup> Naughton, "White House Food and Health Parley in Trouble." I don't have evidence of how Mayer secured the necessary funding to get representatives of the poor to the conference, or if he had to scale down his original plan due to funding constraints.

<sup>84</sup> Memo, Ken Cole to Ed Morgan, November 26, 1969; Folder Conference on Food and Nutrition, Box 74, White House Central Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Egil Krogh; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

The *Times* reported up until the day before proceedings began, the Conference “must have looked like a winner to the President.”<sup>85</sup> Calling for the conference reflected Nixon’s sincerity in dealing with hunger and malnutrition. Mayer assembled 3,000 participants including public officials, scientists, food industry executives, and community activists, serving on panels that would meet over three days. Of the delegates, fully half were consumer representatives (of business, civic, student, religious, and community-action groups). This marked the largest group of consumer advocates ever invited to a White House conference. Another block of attendees included a few hundred representatives of food producers and distributors, including chairmen of all the big food-manufacturing companies. More than 5,000 people attended the opening plenary address given by President Nixon on December 2, 1969.<sup>86</sup> The conference, according to Nixon, was to “set the seal of urgency on our national commitment to put an end to hunger and malnutrition due to poverty.”<sup>87</sup> Nixon restated his famous phrase from the May 6<sup>th</sup> address that the time was now to end hunger in the United States, taking this a step further by adding, “I not only accept the responsibility – I claim the responsibility.”<sup>88</sup> In contrast to this claim, the outcome of the conference discounted Nixon’s credentials as a hunger warrior.

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<sup>85</sup> Jack Rosenthal, “Much Angry Talk, Some Action, on Hunger,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1969.

<sup>86</sup> Laurie Green, “Saving Babies in Memphis,” in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*, eds Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (Athens, Ga. and London: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 138; Jean Mayer, “Letter of Transmittal,” December 24, 1969, in *White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health: Final Report*, 13.

<sup>87</sup> Mayer, “Letter of Transmittal,” 8.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

In Nixon's opening address, he made no indication that he would create new programs to deal with hunger as an emergency. The *New York Times* reported "the hunger warriors and the poor reacted with the weary desperate anger of those accustomed to disappointment."<sup>89</sup> Another account from the day following Nixon's plenary noted, "a major fight between many of the conference participants appeared to be in the making."<sup>90</sup> Many felt an adequate minimum income to alleviate poverty was the best way to end hunger, and should be the focus of the conference. For anti-hunger activists, an "excessive emphasis" on food industry and research distracted from the real aims of the conference.<sup>91</sup> At first, consumer representatives "seemed anxious to exploit their growing confidence and sophistication, but industry people were seemingly anxious to quiet them."<sup>92</sup> A staff writer from the *New York Times* noted that for food company representatives, their conference "was on nutrition – on the quality of food rather than the quantity."<sup>93</sup> At the outset, it appeared this would be a divided conference, with conflict between "activists and go-slowers."<sup>94</sup> One example of this can be seen in the different approaches to fortification of basic foodstuffs.

The fortification debate demonstrates the competing demands of the conference. An adequate minimum income was being discussed in the same setting as relaxing labeling

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<sup>89</sup> Rosenthal, "Much Angry Talk, Some Action, on Hunger."

<sup>90</sup> Spencer Rich, "Hunger Must End – Nixon," *Washington Post*, December 3, 1969.

<sup>91</sup> "Parley on Food to Open Amid Signs of Discord," *New York Times*, December 1, 1969.

<sup>92</sup> Nancy Gruchow, "Food Delegates Focus on Poor," *Science*, 166 no. 3911 (December 12, 1969), 1385.

<sup>93</sup> Sandra Blakeslee, "Food Parley Exposes a 'Trust Gap,'" *New York Times*, December 3, 1969.

<sup>94</sup> Gruchow, "Food Delegates Focus on Poor."

regulations when including L-Lysine in bread.<sup>95</sup> The jargon-laden debates among nutritionists and food scientists focused more narrowly on the wonders of science to solve hunger and malnutrition by fortifying foods. But consumer advocates pushed back against this. In the comments of one of the consumer task forces in reply to the food manufacturing and processing panel, consumer representatives noted their dismay at “the fortification of everything.” Fearing price competition between manufacturers claiming to offer the best-fortified foods, consumers noted “maximum limits of permissible fortification should be set by a scientific panel outside industry. Meaningless competition in unnecessary fortification should be condemned.”<sup>96</sup> What good would it do to provide 1,000 percent of the recommended daily amount of riboflavin in bread if it was impossible to absorb any of it?

This debate illustrates another problem that came up at the conference. A focus on lab science delegitimized other kinds of knowledge participants brought to the conference, for example the lived experience of the poor. In a reflection submitted to the report after the closing of the conference, a woman from one of the voluntary action panels included a short free-form poem with the line, “Scientific facts pouring from experts – drowning flooding the rooms – drowning the uneducated.”<sup>97</sup> Debates about fortification distracted from the question of hunger and undermined other kinds of knowledge about the hunger problem. Personal experience was not scientific enough to build policy around; however, the science of nutrition was and these panels had very concrete recommendations that the administration was willing to work with. For example, changing labeling requirements to include certain

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<sup>95</sup> *White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health*, 285. This would help the body absorb the protein that naturally occurred in bread.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

additives in food was an easily actionable item that the FDA could work to implement almost immediately, and at much lower cost than what hunger advocates continued to propose.

While there was a stark divide during certain panels where scientific terminology or industry jargon got in the way of people understanding each other, in the end these debates about fortification or other food science concerns became of minor concern to the conference as a whole. The White House appeared to underestimate “the passion and unanimity of the non-poor participants for action against hunger.”<sup>98</sup> The biggest conflict of the conference was not between the poor and food industry, though this was present in early panels. Instead, conflict emerged between conference-goers and the Nixon administration.

*Changing Tide: Conference Unites over \$5500 Minimum Income*

Following the second day of the conference, *The Chicago Tribune* reported that Dr. Mayer was losing his grip on the conference, in particular as demands from welfare rights activists for long-term solutions to poverty came into conflict with shorter-term, technocratic responses to hunger and malnutrition. A key panel, tasked with making recommendations on “systems of food delivery and of money for food” had voted “overwhelmingly” to recommend an income maintenance program at \$5,500 for a family of four. They included this recommendation in their panel report submitted in advance of the conference.<sup>99</sup> Three more panels endorsed this decision by the end of the first full day of the conference.<sup>100</sup> Delegates were not going to cleave to Nixon’s request to support a minimum income in line

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<sup>98</sup> Rosenthal, “Much Angry Talk, Some Action, on Hunger.”

<sup>99</sup> One other panel submitted this recommendation in advance of the conference, the subpanel representing the unique needs of the District of Columbia.

<sup>100</sup> Spencer Rich, “Hunger Must End – Nixon,” *Washington Post*, December 3, 1969.

with FAP. They wanted something more, a basic income for a family of four set at \$5,500 paid entirely by the federal government.

More and more panels were coming out in support of a higher minimum income as the best way to solve poverty related hunger and malnutrition. George Wiley and Johnnie Tillmon, leaders of the National Welfare Rights Organization, demanded a \$5,500-per-year guaranteed income in sessions they attended. But it was not just anti-poverty activists who supported this position. As the conference continued, more “non-poor” panels came out in support of this decision. For example, the panel covering long-term trends in food production and supply, chaired by the president of Campbell Soup Company, noted the necessity of a \$5,500 minimum income, asserting “adequate income levels are essential to a permanent solution of poverty-caused malnutrition.”<sup>101</sup> By the time the conference was about to close, 17 panels out of 26 total recommended some form of basic minimum income. A majority that did so – 10 of the 17 – set the minimum level of income at \$5,500 annually, as opposed to \$1,600 advocated by the Nixon administration.<sup>102</sup>

Business, industry, and labor representatives set up a special focus group in a central policy committee just before the conference closed. This committee laboriously developed a strong detailed statement of priorities – and then won approval for it by acclamation from the entire conference at a special plenary. Conference attendees accepted the following recommendations:

- (1) that the President be asked to declare a national hunger emergency;
- (2) that there be a guaranteed annual income of \$5,500 a year for a family of four;
- (3) that existing food-benefit programs be changed and expanded;
- (4) that all

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<sup>101</sup> *White House Conference: Final Report*, 102.

<sup>102</sup> “Hunger War: Second Try on a Conference,” *Science News*, 97 Vol. 2 (Jan 10, 1970): 37.



schoolchildren receive free breakfast and lunch; and (5) that food programs be transferred from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

This statement called for immediate emergency anti-hunger action by the president. The second priority, “almost astonishing considering the nonradical background of most participants, not only called for a guaranteed cash income for the poor, but specified \$5,500 as the minimum amount adequate.”<sup>103</sup> Conference participants rebuked the administration line on how to solve the problems of hunger and malnutrition. They surprised Nixon and his staff in demanding an adequate basic income set significantly higher than the level FAP promised to institute.

Dr. Jean Mayer saved the day in response to the unplanned vote on this much higher minimum income. First off, Mayer distanced the larger conference from this session by calling it “a private meeting” instead of a plenary.<sup>104</sup> Since it was not on the program, he could rename it and minimize the session however he liked. Additionally, he came up with a plan to help the Nixon administration save face on hunger without agreeing to the higher minimum income figure. When it looked like demands by the poor were going to overpower the Nixon administration position, he had the administration commit to three more items announced on the closing day of the meeting: Nixon announced that he would personally ensure food programs started in the 307 remaining counties without one, expedite implementation of a planned FSP benefit increase, and meet with leaders of the conference

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<sup>103</sup> Rosenthal, “Much Angry Talk, Some Action, on Hunger.”

<sup>104</sup> Leroy F. Aarons, “Activists Stir Conference on Income Plan,” *The Washington Post*, December 3, 1969.

following adjournment.<sup>105</sup> Dr. Mayer, in contrast to staff concerns early on that he did not understand his position, saved Nixon face at the conference by his “brilliant handling” of what at first appeared a catastrophic turn of events. However, many delegates did not think these assurances went far enough. When Nixon made the announcement of these three new measures on the final day of the meeting, conferees found the provisions “feeble and inadequate.”<sup>106</sup> The impromptu vote inspired all conference delegates, not just consumer advocates and the poor, to send a message to the president on how to end hunger and malnutrition.

Much to the dismay of Mayer and other Nixon aides, the conference had become a referendum on the Nixon administration’s inaction on poverty in general instead of an opportunity to gain control of the hunger narrative. Immediately, the administration took steps to ensure they would not have to make specific assurances on food programs while working to manage their reputation in the face of more radical ideas on solving poverty and hunger in the United States.

*Backpedaling from Demands: Nixon Closes the Conference*

It did not take long for Nixon’s administration to decide what ideas they would and, more importantly, would not, take into consideration when formulating food assistance policies. In an effort to regain control of the proceedings following the unsanctioned minimum income vote, Mayer had successfully pushed the president to include three more action items at the end of the conference. Aside from expanding food programs to the poorest counties without one and equalizing food stamp benefits, Nixon promised to meet with key

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<sup>105</sup> Rosenthal, “Much Angry Talk, Some Action, on Hunger.”

<sup>106</sup> Jack Rosenthal, “6 Hunger Parley Delegates Rebuked,” *New York Times*, December 5, 1969.

leaders who emerged during the conference. By agreeing to meet with some of the more radical participants, Nixon extended an olive branch to the “hunger lobby” who had been thus far disappointed in his proposed action items. The meeting would be an opportunity to discuss desired outcomes from the conference, and for the hunger lobbyists to inform the president of the need for rapid action on hunger and malnutrition.<sup>107</sup> But hopes for this meeting were quickly quashed. Mayer’s good intentions aside, as soon as the White House scheduled this meeting, others on Nixon’s staff worked to ensure it would have no bearing on administration actions around food welfare.

When briefing the president on this December 5 meeting, Ehrlichman prefaced the list of participants with a cautionary note that some representatives were “overtly hostile to the Administration.”<sup>108</sup> Aides assumed these representatives were going to ask for immediate, sweeping action on hunger, including a “crash measure” to end hunger before Christmas and setting \$5,500 as the minimum income for family assistance. In response to these demands, Ehrlichman recommended Nixon emphasize the necessity of giving the conference recommendations “careful and deliberate study.” Ehrlichman also suggested Nixon point out “this Administration did not invent hunger in the United States” and from his 22 years of experience in government, “crash programs” by the federal government were

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<sup>107</sup> The six participants were the president of the National Council of Negro Women, a member of United Presbyterian Women, a Catholic bishop, the regional Executive Director of the Mexican-American political action group La Raza, the President of the National Sharecroppers Fund, and a “political priest” (dubbed so by Ehrlichman) who was also Chair of the Department of Economics at Boston College. Memo; John D. Ehrlichman to Richard Nixon “Re: Meeting Friday, December 5, 12:15 P.M. with panel leaders from Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health;” December 5, 1969; Folder Conference on Food and Nutrition; Box 74; White House Central Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Egil Krogh; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

usually unsuccessful.<sup>109</sup> These comments demonstrate the White House already had their agenda in mind and were not going to take what they viewed as radical ideas into consideration.

Under the headline “6 Hunger Parley Delegates Rebuked,” the *New York Times* described Nixon’s response to the six representatives as “noncommittal.”<sup>110</sup> They were unable to persuade the president to declare a hunger emergency, and made no headway on a \$5,500 minimum income. In fact, they had not even been able to discuss these top two priorities. When reporting back to the remaining participants, the delegates said they had not been able to present the priority statement adopted the last day of the conference, including calling a hunger emergency and setting \$5,500 as the baseline of an income assistance program. One wonders what was actually discussed in this meeting, aside from the president providing reasons to not take immediate action. Summing up the mood at the end of the conference, the report of the meeting with the delegates and Nixon, “was thus the last in a series of disappointments for the ‘hunger lobby.’”<sup>111</sup>

Just a few days later during a December 8 press conference, Daniel Moynihan and President Nixon elaborated on the end of the conference and how it would inform executive action going forward. Moynihan was quick to dismiss the need for the president to declare a national “hunger and malnutrition emergency.” Instead, “the Administration would stand on its own hunger programs, [Nixon] said, because ‘we don’t need to get a national emergency;

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Gruchow, “Food Delegates Focus on Poor.”

<sup>111</sup> Rosenthal, “6 Hunger Parley Delegates Rebuked,” December 5, 1969.

we need to get food stamps into every county in America.”<sup>112</sup> Nixon continued that he would consider many of the conference’s recommendations, but he could not give “really sympathetic consideration” to the recommendation for a \$5,500 minimum annual income for a family of four. It would cost \$70 to \$80 billion in taxes, which he then argued would lead to “\$70 to \$80 billion in increased prices.” Invoking the specter of inflation, Nixon argued that he was unwilling to pass this cost off to consumers since he, as president, held “primary responsibility for the cost of living in this country.”<sup>113</sup> Linking welfare expenditures directly back to consumer prices vastly oversimplified the budgeting process. However, this practice of directly connecting discussions of welfare spending and budget deficits was part of what Ronald King calls the increasing “fiscalization of welfare.” Welfare debates at this moment were shifting from focusing on the adequacy of public expenditures, arguably a central point of Great Society spending, to question the availability of public resources and supposed impact on the deficit.<sup>114</sup> The level of need was not the main priority when setting welfare budgets; instead, the deciding factor came to be available revenues for welfare purposes.

After denouncing conference-goers demands, Nixon attempted to soften his statements at the press conference. While a \$5,500 minimum income was impossible, Nixon added “now, I do not say that to discredit the Conference.”<sup>115</sup> The press saw his administration’s actions through a different lens, “within four days of the end of the White House Conference,” the Nixon administration “had rejected publicly and almost out of hand

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<sup>112</sup> Tom Wicker, “In The Nation: Hunger, Money and Mr. Nixon,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1969.

<sup>113</sup> Richard Nixon, “The President's News Conference December 8, 1969,” The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/240343>.

<sup>114</sup> King, *Budgeting Entitlements*, 1-2.

<sup>115</sup> Nixon, “The President's News Conference December 8, 1969.”

the two principal recommendations of the conference.”<sup>116</sup> The more time that passed following the conference, the greater the distance the administration moved from the stated demands of conference delegates.

Mayer submitted the final report of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, & Health to the president in late December. In Mayer’s letter of transmittal, he clarified what he called the “joint statement” – the five recommendations made on the final day of the conference – was “presented for a vote to the Conference as a whole at the closing plenary session, not for specific approval of all points but for general expression of the groups on order of priorities.” In particular, Mayer stepped back from the \$5,500 per year minimum income explaining:

A very large part of the audience, while enthusiastically in favor of the concept of family assistance and desirous of seeing support at a realistic level permitting good nutrition as well as the acquisition of other necessities, was not willing to be committed to a single target figure, unrelated to geography, work incentives, and minimum wages, and unaccompanied by any order of magnitude or time of achievement.<sup>117</sup>

Hammering home the fact that this final vote was in no way binding, Mayer described it as having “symbolic significance only, representing essentially an endorsement of principles.”<sup>118</sup> All of these actions minimized the final recommendations of the conference, transforming them from a radical statement on a path to ending poverty into guidelines the administration could ignore.

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<sup>116</sup> Tom Wicker, “In The Nation: Hunger, Money and Mr. Nixon,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1969.

<sup>117</sup> Jean Mayer, “Letter of Transmittal,” December 24, 1969, *White House Conference on Food Nutrition and Health*, 15-16. Reference in “Hunger,” *Social Service Review*, 44 no. 1 (Mar. 1970), 77-78.

<sup>118</sup> Mayer, “Letter of Transmittal,” 16.

The results of the conference compare sharply to prior efforts to solve hunger, such as the Poor People's Campaign meeting with the USDA a year and half prior. Rights-based claims stemming from privileges of citizenship were replaced by a more narrow managerial focus from the Nixon White House. The recommendations of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health were filtered by Nixon staff, and repackaged in such a way that the administration did not have to change course from their original plans. Over the next year and a half, it became clear the conference had changed little. Instead, the conference served as a tool to manage hunger activists while crafting an acceptable response to the problem of unmet nutritional needs. The conflict with "the hunger lobby" weakened Nixon's public stature as a hunger warrior, influencing his administration's huge spending increases in food welfare programs during his remaining time in office. Food programs, primarily food stamps, did expand and benefit levels became more uniform. However, the Nixon administration continued to rebuff the demands of the hunger lobby, both at the grassroots and legislative levels. Nixon and his Cabinet committed themselves to an agenda focused on meeting basic nutritional needs, emphasizing the role of the private sector and volunteers to meet the needs of the hungry. Nixon's claim to take responsibility to "end hunger, for all time," did not bring about sweeping change. Behind the broad claim were thinly veiled half measures to deal with hunger and malnutrition in the U.S., measures which became increasingly clear in the months following the 1969 conference.

### **Outcomes of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health**

After the conference, the White House sprang into action on some fronts while halting progress in others. Almost immediately after the conference, administrative changes

equalized benefit levels. On December 18, 1969, the USDA released a new food stamp issuance schedule. In the past, poor families who paid in less received fewer stamps than higher income families of the same size who paid more for their stamps. On this new schedule, food stamps were standardized across family size regardless of how much a family contributed. The administrative changes marked another big shift for USDA food stamp administrators: stamps would not only supplement an adequate diet, but would provide enough money for families to purchase the “economy” level diet as defined by the USDA. However, everyone would still be required to pay some cash up front, regardless of how low their monthly income was. The purchase price was lowered to \$.50 per person in families with an income under \$30, down from \$2 per person prior. The purchase price also increased less quickly as a family’s income rose to ensure no family paid more than 30 percent of their income for stamps. Secretary of Agriculture Clifford Hardin called these three changes “a major breakthrough in family food assistance,” allowing the program to serve more people, “and serve them better.”<sup>119</sup>

These administrative changes had a huge impact on the reach of the food stamp program. FSP enrollments almost trebled in the 12 months after this announcement, growing from serving 3.6 million people in December of 1969 to 9.5 million by December 1970.<sup>120</sup> While these changes to the FSP expanded the program to provide benefits to millions more beneficiaries, the Nixon track record on other aspects of food welfare paints a less optimistic picture of his administration’s commitment to ending hunger and malnutrition. Increasing coverage of the food stamp program and its standardization nation-wide following the

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<sup>119</sup> *Report of the Secretary of Agriculture 1970: A New Direction* (Washington, DC: GPO, July 1971), 47.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*



conference conceals ways Nixon and his Cabinet reframed their interpretation of conference outcomes to fit a different approach to solving hunger and malnutrition. The administration pivoted away from dealing with hunger as a problem of poverty, an understanding of hunger that required large amounts of direct federal investment, to meeting minimum nutrition needs.

While enacting these administrative changes in the FSP, the Nixon White House was actively lobbying *against* a food stamp reform bill in the Senate and a child nutrition bill in the House. Nixon responded to a question alleging his administration's lobbying against these efforts saying, "I favor the approach that our administration has put before the Congress as being more responsible on both scores."<sup>121</sup> He had yet to receive the recommendations of the White House Conference, but said he would "consider their recommendations" on both of these issues. Given his response to meeting with conference representatives after the last day, his "consideration" of their recommendations would likely do little to change his administration's approach to solving hunger.

It took fully another year before Congress passed amendments to the Food Stamp Act, on December 21, 1970. The delay stemmed from the variety of bills before Congress, and debates over whether proposed reforms went too far or not far enough.<sup>122</sup> As passed, the 1971 amendments to the FSA of 1964 reaffirmed the administrative changes, codifying the lowest purchase price at \$.50 per person and ensuring no one paid more than 30 percent of their income for food stamps adequate to purchase the "economy" USDA diet. In addition, Congress added free food stamps for families with an income of under \$30 per month and

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<sup>121</sup> Nixon, The President's News Conference December 8, 1969.

<sup>122</sup> During the summer of 1969, there were 13 FSA amendment bills before Congress.

standardized eligibility criteria. Instead of using the same eligibility standards as state AFDC programs, the USDA was to set a uniform national income cut-off.<sup>123</sup> These changes made stamps more affordable and ensured equity in benefits nationally.

Two more provisions merit discussion for the way they divided and narrowed food stamp coverage. First, Congress added categorical eligibility for the elderly in the 1971 amendments. This allowed senior citizens to use stamps to purchase prepared meals from government or non-profit organizations.<sup>124</sup> As Ardith Maney notes, this “attested to Congress’ fondness” for categorical programs, and ultimately made food program administration more complicated.<sup>125</sup> In contrast to a minimum income, program functions splintered across various eligibility criteria, a practice that only became more common as the FSP grew. Second, the 1971 food stamp amendments included the first-ever introduction of work requirements into the FSP. Rep. William Poage (D-TX) introduced two FS bills in 1969, both seeking to add work requirements to the FSP. Poage wanted to include language that food stamp recipients be willing to search for jobs and accept any offers of employment as an eligibility requirement to receive stamps.<sup>126</sup> Senator Jacob K. Javits (D-NY), while generally in favor of other provisions of Poage’s bill, came out strongly against the work requirements in House Agriculture Committee Hearings. When asked what he thought of

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<sup>123</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 68.

<sup>124</sup> This included provisions of two earlier House bills. The first was introduced by Edward G. Biester Jr. (R-PA) to amend the FSA to authorize elderly persons to exchange FS for meals prepared by private non-profit organizations, introduced on October 16, 1969. Next, Spark M. Matsunaga (D-HI) also put forward a bill allowing the elderly to use food stamps for prepared meals. See Amendments to the Food Stamp Act of 1964, H.R. 14387, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong. (1969) and Amendments to the Food Stamp Act of 1964, H.R. 14401, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong. (1969).

<sup>125</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry*, 116.

<sup>126</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 71.

work requirements, he replied, “to relate the food stamp alone to a work quotient would be neither effective or efficient.” A broader manpower and welfare bill would better serve that need. Javits closed his discussion on the subject by saying, “I do not think we can be as simplistic as to say if you want to eat you have to work.”<sup>127</sup> However, work requirements remained part of the final bill. Categorical eligibility coupled with work requirements demonstrated a growing, less universalistic vision for the FSP, at precisely the moment program administrators standardized other aspects of the program. Food welfare programs expanded under Nixon, but they became separated from the root issue of poverty, instead aiming to provide nutritional assistance for categories of individuals including the elderly, and tying benefits to a willingness to work.

After the White House Conference, HEW and the Public Health Service also changed course on their research into hunger and malnutrition, moving away from studying malnutrition among the poor and instead researching malnutrition among the general population. Beginning in 1967, the Ten-State Nutrition Survey followed families primarily in the bottom quartile of income distribution. Given the small appropriation of \$5 million, the survey only examined a few thousand families. Survey results confirmed earlier generalizations that anywhere from ten to fifteen million people living in poverty were malnourished. It also suggested that outright hunger was not the biggest problem. Individuals were not suffering from severe protein or calorie deficiencies, but deficiencies in vitamins and minerals. Even so, this reflected problems of poverty, “when money for food is limited, the homemaker theoretically has two choices: she can buy too little food, but have a

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<sup>127</sup> *General Farm Program and Food Stamp Program (Food Stamps): Hearings before the House Comm. on Agriculture, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess. 794 (1969) (statement of Jacob Javits, Senator from New York).*

nutritionally balanced menu, or she can buy more pounds of food... People obviously choose the second alternative.”<sup>128</sup> This study was the “most comprehensive effort of its kind ever undertaken.”<sup>129</sup> Just as these findings were released, Congress made a case to change the focus of the survey to malnutrition among the general population, saying the unrepresentative sample of low-income Americans could not prove causality between poverty and hunger.<sup>130</sup> After just two years beset by funding cuts, delays, and controversy, the Ten-State Nutrition Survey ended in 1970. In 1971, the survey was replaced by a survey of the nutritional status of the “average American,” no longer focused on just the poor.<sup>131</sup>

The administration supported the turn away from studying hunger among the poor by pouring more resources into nutrition education for all. Charles “Bud” Wilkinson, special consultant to the president in charge of federal non-regulatory boards and commissions, reached out to the president of the Advertising Council in May 1970, proposing a partnership between government and the private sector in an “intensive campaign to improve the health status of all Americans through better nutrition.”<sup>132</sup> The focus on all Americans over the needs of the poorest again demonstrates the turn away from analyzing hunger as a problem of poverty and focusing on it as a general problem. The letter did go on to point out that there

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<sup>128</sup> Arnow, *Food Power*, 18.

<sup>129</sup> The health service collected data from 24,000 families (comprising 86,000 individuals). For more details on ten-state survey, see Green, “Saving Babies in Memphis”, 137.

<sup>130</sup> Peter K. Eisinger, *Toward an End to Hunger in America* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 25.

<sup>131</sup> Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 159.

<sup>132</sup> Letter, Charles B. Wilkinson to Robert P. Keim, May 14, 1970; Folder HE 3 Executive, Box 13, White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

were groups that may require special attention, specifically citing “vulnerable groups such as the poor,” but the thrust of the claim was to provide a persistent education campaign to “enable all Americans... to achieve a healthier, more enjoyable life.”<sup>133</sup> With a few exceptions for special cases, like the example of the poor, this campaign would not require a huge infusion of federal funds. Middle class families had enough money to buy nutritionally adequate food; they merely lacked the knowledge to do this. Implicitly, these decisions made knowledge, not poverty, the root cause of hunger and malnutrition.

At the same moment the Nixon White House was reaching out to the Advertising Council to improve nutritional outcomes for all Americans, various Cabinet secretaries restated their commitment to private sector voluntary initiatives to feed the poor. One assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture described the importance of pursuing voluntary efforts due to the president’s commitment to voluntarism, one shared by Secretary Romney at HUD.<sup>134</sup> Beyond Cabinet-level commitments extolling the benefits of voluntarism in solving social problems, an undersecretary at the USDA, Phillip Olsson, went on to explain that hunger among the poor was a tractable problem. It would be easy for everyday folks to get involved in ending hunger, “volunteer assistance for food programs is particularly appropriate because the business of feeding people is simple enough that every member of a Kiwanis Club or woman’s club can understand it.”<sup>135</sup> However, this simplification of the hunger problem belies the complicated ways voluntary organizations worked to respond to it.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Memo, Philip C. Olsson to John Price, “Volunteers and White House Conference follow up,” July 21, 1970; Folder White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health, Box 99, White House Central Files: Staff Member and Office Files: John Price; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

For example, an internal memorandum goes on to note that the USDA was going to need outside assistance getting volunteers to participate, and then went on to describe a few examples of volunteer groups helping to feed the hungry in their communities. In San Francisco, the Benefit Guild made posters describing the FSP, including information about application and certification procedures while the Lions Club in El Paso, Texas, set up a referral system where they would make appointments for potential food stamp families, ensure these families brought proper documentation, and even drive them to the certification office.<sup>136</sup> In Los Angeles, a coalition of businessmen, city officials, and private social service agencies came together to provide a mobile distribution vehicle to distribute food stamp coupons to families in their neighborhood. They went so far as purchasing an armored truck to ease access to food stamps. At this truck, individuals could cash checks, and then immediately use that cash to make their monthly food stamp coupon purchase, receiving their coupons immediately.<sup>137</sup> Unlike Olsson's assertion that "the business of feeding people is simple," community groups were organizing complicated logistics to create new ways for existing federal food programs to reach would-be recipients.

Lastly, the Nixon administration's lack of commitment to following through on the White House Conference can be seen in the minimal effort put into planning the follow-up conference. A little over one year after the meeting of over 3,000 delegates in a hotel in central D.C., seventy-five representatives met on February 5, 1971, in Williamsburg,

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<sup>136</sup> "What Volunteers Already Are Doing," Attachment (2) to memo, Philip C. Olsson to John Price, "Volunteers and White House Conference follow up," July 21, 1970; Folder White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health, Box 99, White House Central Files: Staff Member and Office Files: John Price; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

Virginia, to discuss progress and action on hunger and malnutrition. The panel chairmen and vice chairmen, the only members of the conference invited to the follow-up, came together to react to a 364-page report on how the government had implemented their recommendations.<sup>138</sup> Owing to the fact that only conference leaders attended, none of these representatives were members of the poor or hunger lobby. Attendees said they had received no support at all from the administration, and additionally, it had taken pressure from delegates to hold the follow-up conference at all.<sup>139</sup> Jack Rosenthal of the *New York Times*, who had covered the first conference, reported the second time around “many delegates, who said they were soured by the isolated site of the conference and the absence of representatives of the poor, concentrated sharp criticisms of what they said the Administration had failed to do in the fight against hunger.”<sup>140</sup> However, these critiques of the administration went nowhere.

By October 1972 FAP had failed in Congress, leaving the FSP as the de facto minimum income for many. As one chronicler of food stamps noted, “FAP had been killed, but not welfare reform. Welfare reform had been achieved through administrative changes in the FSP.”<sup>141</sup> FAP would have equalized welfare benefits across the country. In its absence, standardized eligibility criteria and uniform benefit levels in the FSP accomplished this same end, but only provided benefits to purchase food and not any other basic need. Further,

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<sup>138</sup> Morton Mintz, “Leaders of ’69 Hunger Conference Urge Nixon to Make New Efforts,” *Washington Post*, February 7, 1971.

<sup>139</sup> Jack Rosenthal, “Delegates to 2d White House Hunger Parley Attack President’s Program,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1971.

<sup>140</sup> Rosenthal, “Delegates to 2d White House Hunger Parley Attack President’s Program.”

<sup>141</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 67.

transformations in the approach to hunger and malnutrition meant the FSP was more vulnerable to political attack than FAP might have been. In the coming years, food welfare became more vulnerable to cuts due to increased competition for resources while public opinions of food welfare became more negative.

## **Conclusion**

Between 1969 and 1972, Nixon administration actions closed one track of expansive food reform possibilities and replaced this with a narrower alternative. In 1969, actors including the Poor People's Campaign and the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs defined hunger as an issue of poverty, demanding freedom from hunger as a right of citizenship. The Nixon administration shifted away from this expansive reform vision to "managing" hunger and malnutrition through targeted interventions, guaranteeing only basic nutritional needs were met. What's more, this shift occurred over public protest supporting a more expansive vision of food assistance and welfare reform. Debate at the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health demonstrated an adequate minimum income far higher than FAP was identified as a realistic goal. More importantly, it was necessary to end hunger. In refusing this proposal outright, Nixon begged to differ. Instead of ushering in "the end of hunger in America, for all time," Nixon's first term transformed, and narrowed, federal responsibility to solve the hunger problem.



## Chapter Three

### Setting Limits: The Hidden Politics of Federal Food Assistance in the 1970s

In 1973, a Congressional Research Service report outlined the imminent termination of commodity food distribution to needy families. In its place, a newly national food stamp program was set to go into effect. This changeover, the report noted, was due to the “greater overall appeal, adequacy, and efficiency” of food stamps.<sup>1</sup> Replacing commodity distribution with federally backed food stamps presaged to some the 1970s as a decade of continued food welfare expansion, and the end of a separate network of food for the poor. Changes earlier in the 1970s expanded program reach and equalized benefits, all backed by increasing public expenditures. For example, between 1970 and 1973 the food stamp program introduced national eligibility criteria and standardized bonus values, school lunch and breakfast expanded to more schools and students, and a pilot nutrition program for pregnant women and young children gained support. At the time, the end of commodity distribution served as yet another signal of the federal commitment to ending hunger in the U.S.

Throughout the 1970s, federal food and nutrition aid expanded to reach more people than ever. A food welfare constituency also became increasingly entrenched. This coalition signaled a loose, if somewhat begrudging, consensus on the federal responsibility to ensure people had access to food aid. Rising unemployment meant more Americans were eligible for food stamps while food price inflation squeezed family food budgets. Food welfare programs, in particular food stamps, served as a successful countercyclical program to feed

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Background on the Termination of the Food (Commodity) Distribution Program for Needy Families and Individuals*, by Joe Richardson, 73-195ED (1973), 1.

hungry Americans during tough economic times. However, I argue program growth during the 1970s hides the political challenges food programs faced. By the numbers, food welfare appeared to be on a stable, expansionary path throughout the 1970s. More expansive programs, thanks to entitlement budgeting and looser eligibility criteria coupled with economic recession, led to food program growth beyond imagination – and far beyond budget projections. Fissures emerged in the understanding of the nature and extent of public responsibility for relief from hunger, leaving behind the more capacious idea of freedom from want championed by hunger activists of the 1960s. Instead, food provision was highly contested terrain throughout the 1970s, with many debates playing out outside of the traditional legislative realm. This chapter demonstrates the 1970s were a pivotal decade for food welfare, one that saw a re-articulation of the public/ private boundaries of responsibility for what, at least to some, came to be seen as a basic right of social citizenship.

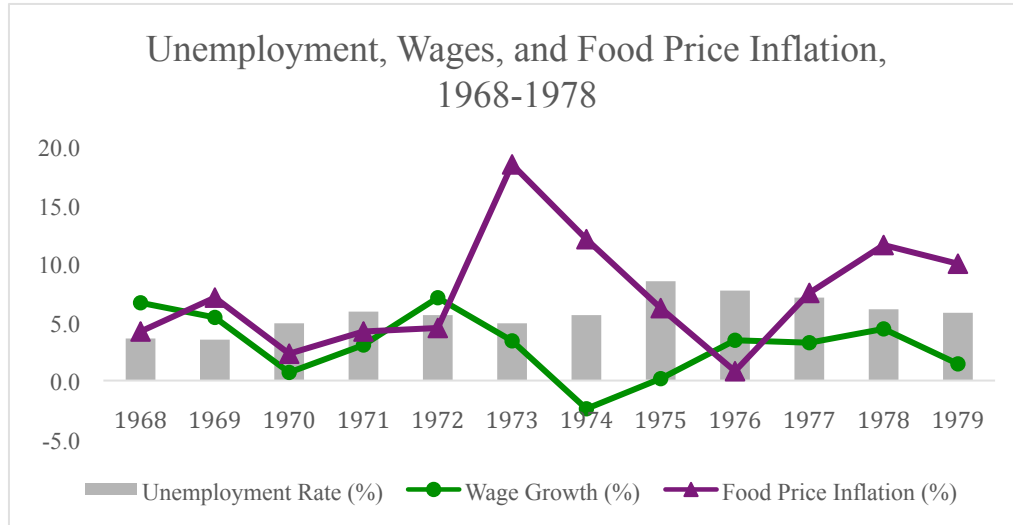
### **Food Welfare Expands in the Early 1970s**

Public food welfare programs grew throughout the 1970s to better meet the food and nutritional needs of Americans during an economically challenging decade. There were three main reasons for growth. The first was the continuing legacy of advocacy and activism of the 1960s. The same pressure that pushed Nixon to announce he would end hunger led to executive, administrative, and legislative changes in the FSP that came into effect for FY 1970 and later. Second, a food assistance coalition became further entrenched during the 1970s. The different understandings of hunger from the 1950s gelled into a mutually reinforcing food assistance constituency. Key in this was the relationship between rural and urban representatives in Congress: the farm bloc needed urban legislators to support farm

supports, while food stamp advocates needed farm support to pass legislation. But beyond this, increasing voices for poor consumers provided a counterweight to farm interests. These included the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, state and local welfare administrators who liked the federalized nature of food welfare programs, and a growing think tank network. Along with members of the poor who advocated for expanding public food assistance, these groups made up the hunger lobby. Groups like the Food Research Action Center (FRAC) and the Community Nutrition Institute (CNI) kept hunger in the news and used legalistic strategies to ensure people received benefits they were due. The third, and perhaps largest, factor contributing to program growth was the deteriorating U.S. economy. Stagnant wages, high unemployment, and rising food prices meant more people could not afford enough to eat.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Annual average wage growth is calculated from annual wage data collected by the Current Population Survey (CPS). I calculated the year-on-year percent change of the average annual wage based on the average annual income of all employees. Annualized unemployment rates are from Labor Force Statistics from the CPS, collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Food price inflation is a measure of the annual percent change in food costs, from December to December. Data is drawn from “CPS Population and Per Capita Money Income, All Races: 1967 to 2018,” U.S. Bureau of the Census, accessed September 10, 2019, <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/tables/time-series/historical-income-people/p01ar.xls>; “Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population, 1940s to date,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed September 10, 2019, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat01.pdf>; “Food Inflation in the United States, 1968-2019,” US Inflation Calculator, accessed September 10, 2019, <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/inflation/food-inflation-in-the-united-states/>.



Throughout the 1970s, anti-hunger legislators solidified the political position of food programs. With the failure of two minimum income programs during the decade, food welfare, and in particular food stamps, became the centerpiece of efforts to establish a uniform social safety net and a de facto welfare floor. The expansion of food stamps, school lunches, and a maternal and infant nutrition program demonstrate a consensus that the federal government had a responsibility to assist those who could not afford to purchase enough to eat.<sup>3</sup>

Congress passed four major pieces of child nutrition legislation in the first half of the decade, liberalizing eligibility while also working to strengthen federal control over child feeding programs.<sup>4</sup> Increased appropriations coupled with expanding eligibility explain the growth in program cost and uptick in participation. But the second story is seen in the final

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<sup>3</sup> One account of food program growth can be found in Ronald F. King, *Budgeting Entitlements: The Politics of Food Stamps*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 46. “The story regarding the creation of the food stamp program in the early 1960s, its rapid growth over the next decade, and its establishment as a central component in the repertoire of the U.S. welfare state has been told often, usually from the perspective of triumph of social justice over entrenched opposition and public apathy.”

<sup>4</sup> Ardith Maney, *Still Hungry After All these Years* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 117.

two rows of the table below. Between 1969 and 1975, the proportion of free- or reduced-price students as a percentage of total school lunch participants skyrocketed, from 15 percent to 40 percent.<sup>5</sup> The school lunch program became more responsive to the needs of poor students, evidenced by the growing proportion of students receiving their meal for free and the introduction of the reduced price category in 1971.

<b>School Lunch Expands</b>	<b>1969</b>	<b>1975</b>
# participating schools	74,900	88,900
Federal cash payments	\$203.8 million	\$1.3 billion
Total federal cost*	\$582.5 million	\$1.9 billion
Average daily participation	19.4 million	24.9 million
Free-Reduced Price - Paying♦	2.9-0-16.5m	9.4-0.6-14.9m
% Free/ RP of Total <sup>6</sup>	15.1%	40.3%

\*Includes SBP, special milk program, and cost of commodities

♦ Reduced price category not introduced until 1971

Aside from growth in public food welfare, federal partnerships with private contractors extended the reach of food assistance programs. For example, a USDA rule change allowed private contractors to provide school meals. In Nixon’s transition to office, hunger advisor Robert Choate suggested a targeted approach to expand school lunch in the face of slow program growth during the 1960s. Choate highlighted current rules that hampered school lunch expansion: “the USDA prohibition against for-profit catering to schools without cafeterias has prevented millions of depressed area students from gaining the

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<sup>5</sup> Table adapted and expanded from Janet Poppendieck, *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 64. Additional data from USDA, USDA, “Federal Cost of School Food Programs,” <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/cncost.pdf>; USDA, “National School Lunch Program: Participation and Lunches Served.”

<sup>6</sup> USDA, “National School Lunch Program: Participation and Lunches Served,” updated March 8, 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/slsummar.pdf>. NSLP. USDA, “National School Lunch Program: Participation and Lunches Served,” <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/slsummar.pdf>.

benefits of the school lunch program.”<sup>7</sup> The Senate Agriculture Committee supported this proposal for contractors to provide the standard Type A meal (meeting all nutrition guidelines), with companies “subject to all appropriate controls.”<sup>8</sup> The turn to contracting out was a way to extend the school lunch service, especially in poor, often older, schools in depressed urban and rural areas alike without proper kitchen equipment.<sup>9</sup> On April 1, 1970, USDA amendments to school lunch regulations allowed private food service and catering companies to provide school meals. This policy change, as a USDA publication trumpeted, encouraged “private business expertise to aid the school lunch program,” and was part of a larger “search for ideas to eliminate poverty-related hunger and malnutrition” in the country.<sup>10</sup> Public/ private partnerships could provide school lunch where the state alone could not.

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<sup>7</sup> Appendix B, “Hunger and Malnutrition Among the American Poor – Background Data for Constructive Action by the Nixon Administration,” 16; in Letter; R. B. Choate to John C. Whitaker, January 8 1969; Folder, Health Hunger and Malnutrition 3-1 (2) [1 of 3]; Box 17; Staff Member and Office Files: John R. Price Papers; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>8</sup> George McGovern, Javits, Yarborough, Hart, Percy, Cook, Walter Mondale, Edward Kennedy, and Pell to “Dear Senator,” February 20, 1970; Folder, School Lunch 1970, 91-92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., Box 6; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>9</sup> Commercialism in U.S. lunchrooms was nothing new, but formal contracting agreements were. At the outset of the program during the 1940s and 1950s, regulations made the service more business-like. The introduction of the food service concept required school lunch programs to hire a manager, while also employing someone with the know-how to handle accounting protocols for federal reimbursements, no easy task. See Sue Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America’s Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 95-98.

<sup>10</sup> “Hey Mom. It’s Going to Be Different,” *Food and Home Notes*, March 23, 1970, Office of Information, USDA; Maryland Children’s Committee Records; Series 1, Box 12, Folder 11, “Nutrition;” University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

Panelists at the 1969 White House Conference suggested further study into a nutrition program for the younger siblings of students receiving free and reduced-price school lunch. This resulted in a study, and later a program, to supplement the diets of pregnant women and their children.<sup>11</sup> The Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, commonly referred to by the acronym WIC, was designed to serve low-income women and their children, up to age 4, who were at health risk due to inadequate nutrition.<sup>12</sup> The program responded to studies that found children from lower income families were smaller (both in height and weight) and more likely to be iron-deficient anemic.<sup>13</sup> Senator Hubert Humphrey (D-MN) sponsored legislation for a two-year pilot within the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW). WIC quickly became an example of a program that met targets. Women who received nutritional benefits and education had babies with a higher birth weight, a sign of overall health. Results of the pilot study also showed WIC brought

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<sup>11</sup> Eileen Kennedy, “The WIC program: A classic example of where individuals do make a difference,” *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*, 40:6 (2001), 709. DOI: 10.1080/03670244.2001.9991679.

<sup>12</sup> As with much legislation, WIC as enacted in Congress was tested in the decade prior by the Memphis Action Program (MAP) – South, an effort begun by mostly black welfare mothers in Memphis and their allies in the pediatric unit of St. Jude’s Hospital. Laurie Green tells the story of MAP-South in “Saving Babies in Memphis,” in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*, eds. Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (Athens, Ga. and London: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 133-158.

<sup>13</sup> Anita L. Owen and George M. Owen, “Twenty Years of WIC: A Review of Some Effects of the Program,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, Vol. 97 (7) July 1997: 777-782, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-8223\(97\)00191-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-8223(97)00191-0).

down cases of anemia in young children.<sup>14</sup> WIC quickly grew popular with the public, easing the transition from pilot to permanent program in 1975.<sup>15</sup>

Another public food assistance accomplishment came in the form of successful bargains in the food welfare coalition around the food stamp program. The 1971 food stamp amendments expanded program reach and solidified the program's relationship to the farm bill. In extending food stamps for three more years, Congress timed the program's reauthorization with the farm bill reauthorization in 1974. Maintaining the link between farm and food welfare ensured food welfare programs had bargaining power in Congress. Legislators succeeded again with the 1977 Agricultural Act to keep food welfare on the same cycle. Except this time, senators maintained the same reauthorization cycle over White House opposition. The Carter administration proposed a two-year reauthorization for the FSP to allow for closer monitoring of the program and also to keep open the possibility of real welfare reform. Nonetheless, in a "Dear Colleague" letter, Senators McGovern, Dole, and Humphrey argued for the longer authorization. They used Carter's words against him: "President Carter has announced that welfare reform could not be enacted and implemented in less than four years – if it is enacted at all ...". If welfare reform was not going to take place for four years, the senators suggested "the food stamp program be extended for that [four year] period."<sup>16</sup> Keeping the FSP on the same authorization cycle as the rest of the farm

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<sup>14</sup> Owen and Owen, "Twenty Years of WIC," 777.

<sup>15</sup> After the program became permanent in 1975, benefits shifted from a commodity box to vouchers exchanged in grocery stores for limited items with high nutrient-density such as milk, peanut butter, and dried peas and beans.

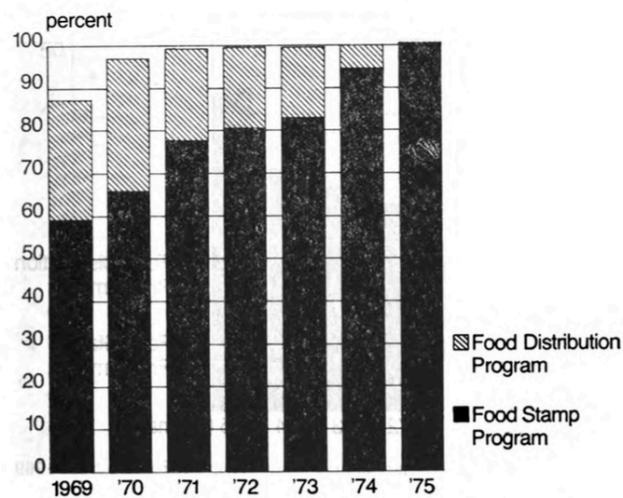
<sup>16</sup> George McGovern, Robert Dole, and Hubert Humphrey to "Dear Colleagues," May 23, 1977; Folder, "FS House-Senate Conf. 1977," Box 4, Records of the Senate Select



bill ensured its passage each year as it had become a key chip in compromises made between rural and urban congressional interests. Attached to the farm bill, it was highly unlikely food stamps would fail to be reauthorized.

Nationalizing the food stamp program was another factor in expansion, one belated outcome of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health. At the close of the conference in an effort to appease conference attendees, Nixon had promised to start a food program (either food stamps or commodities) in every county without one. The 1973 amendments to the food stamp act went a step further, requiring operation of a FSP in every county. By 1975, 100 percent of the population would have access to food stamps.

**Percent of Population in Areas Served by Food Assistance Programs**



As this chart illustrates, national implementation of food stamps signaled the end for direct commodity distribution, noted as the Food Distribution Program above.<sup>17</sup> While this program never entirely disappeared, by 1976, less than 80,000 people received commodities, mostly

Committee on Nutrition: Food Stamps; Records of the U.S. Senate Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>17</sup> Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, “Food Stamp Program (in accordance with S. Res. 58),” S. Misc. Doc. 54-735, at 7 (1975).

on reservations or in trust territories where direct distribution was preferred to the FSP.<sup>18</sup> In all other areas, stamps to be exchanged in grocery stores replaced the stigmatizing direct distribution of surplus commodities.

A second change in 1973 contributed to program growth over the next four years. Congress, with surprisingly little debate, removed the ceiling on permissible spending and provided for open-ended budget authority.<sup>19</sup> Up to this point, there had been an appropriation cap on FSP meaning enrollments if the program ran out of funds. In reality, whenever the FSP neared its budget cap, Congress passed supplemental appropriations to close the funding gap. However, funds to meet need beyond what was originally authorized were never guaranteed.

Then, starting in 1974, Congress no longer had the discretion to decide how much to spend on the food stamp program. In removing the budget cap, “the appropriations committees were obliged to provide funds adequate to ensure that all eligible households received their full allotment for food assistance.”<sup>20</sup> Under entitlement budgeting, which was in effect between FY 1974 and 1977, food stamp expenditures grew 90 percent, from just under \$3 billion to almost \$5.5 billion annually. As Ronald King in his analysis of budget politics of food stamps argues, the move to entitlement budgeting by Congress can be explained by a changed political climate “reflecting a conscious campaign by nutrition

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Lipsky and Marc A. Thibodeau, “Domestic Food Policy in the United States,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 15 no. 2 (Summer 1990), 322.

<sup>19</sup> Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, “Farm Program – Food Supply: Studies and Data on the Farm Program,” S. Rep. No. 98-351, at 25-26 (1983); Maney, *Still Hungry after All These Years*, 117, 124; King, *Budgeting Entitlements*, 57.

<sup>20</sup> King, *Budgeting Entitlements*, 65.

advocates.”<sup>21</sup> Beyond nutrition advocates, the change is also indicative of Democratic control of Congress. Pressure from McGovern’s Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs forced the Senate Agriculture Committee to bend to discretionary budget authority.<sup>22</sup> Following Watergate, more liberal politicians were elected to Congress. This large Democratic majority pushed for procedural changes that created major turnover in the composition and leadership of the committee system, transforming agriculture committees.<sup>23</sup> The more liberal wing of the Democratic Party made gains over conservative, Southern representatives who had long served as chairs of agricultural and appropriations committees. Due to the changing center of power within the Democratic Party, liberal and urban representatives were able to influence the shape of food stamps.

Compounded with entitlement budgeting, a flagging domestic economy guaranteed growth in public food welfare expenditures. The New Deal toolkit promoted growth and stability until the early 1970s, utilizing fiscal policy to combat unemployment and regulations to protect American industry.<sup>24</sup> But the well-being of the average American took a turn for the worse in the 1970s. *Time* magazine lamented, “Nobody is apt to look back on the 1970s as the good old days.”<sup>25</sup> Food inflation hit 18 percent in 1973, accompanied by

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Unidentified article, *Time Magazine*, quoted in Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 212.

rising unemployment. Between 1974 and 1975, unemployment rose from 5.5 to 8.9 percent.<sup>26</sup> Many Americans struggled to maintain their current standard of living in these changing economic conditions. When families fell behind, an increasing number turned to public food assistance. In New York City, more people applied for food stamps as inflation pushed up the cost of food. The Department of Social Welfare reported a sharp increase in non-public assistance food stamp applications during the summer of 1973. During the month of May, the department received 400 to 500 applications per week. By July, this had grown to 600 to 800 per week.<sup>27</sup> A *New York Times* reporter attributed this jump in applications to rising inflation, which pushed up the cost of living in general and food prices in particular. Further, food stamps were indexed to inflation. As inflation crept up, program costs would increase even without new participants. Adding in new participants who joined, costs ballooned beyond expectation.

Expanding access and greater funding coupled with the weak economy led to rapid public food program growth during the 1970s. Public spending for food assistance appeared to be an entrenched piece of welfare spending and indicative of a public commitment to providing for the hungry with a broad understanding of need. But counterintuitively, this period marks the beginning of the undoing over a consensus on federal responsibility to provide food welfare.

### **Administrative Debates I: Federal, State, and Local Responsibility**

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<sup>26</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 81-82.

<sup>27</sup> Judith Cummings, "Food Stamp Applications Are Rising with the Prices," *New York Times*, August 16, 1973.

In reaction to rapidly growing programs, state and local welfare departments sought to expand the scope of federal intervention in local food stamp administration. While food stamps were technically a fully federalized program, many localities struggled to keep up with growing demand, asking for supplemental administrative assistance. Second, rapid growth in the school lunch program, including providing lunches to greater numbers of students for free or at reduced price, led to executive attempts to block-grant child nutrition programs. Both instances illustrate resistance from the highest level of government to increase spending on public food assistance, with the goal of devolving costs and responsibility to states and localities.

#### *Local Administrative Assistance*

At the local level, many social welfare administrators appreciated the opening up of the food stamp program to more participants, especially as more Americans faced economic hardship. All food stamp costs were borne by the federal government. This included paying for the bonus value of stamps as well as all costs associated with printing, distributing, and processing of food stamps. Nevertheless, states and localities had to find ways to finance program administration. Social welfare departments struggled to keep up with the constant changes in the rules and formulas to determine eligibility and benefit entitlement. Further, given public pressure on the hunger issue, Congress often asked for these changes to be rolled out on tight time frames. Each new rule and regulation took resources locally to implement. While a “fully federal” program, localities began to ask for administrative assistance to keep up with growing demand and the pace of change in the food stamp program.

The 1971 amendments to the food stamp act demonstrate the breakneck pace at which states and localities had to comply with changing rules and regulations. States were given three weeks, between December 8, 1971 and January 1, 1972, to submit a plan demonstrating to the USDA that each food stamp jurisdiction would be able to implement the new regulations. This was simply impossible for many states. For example, within Baltimore city, which processed the majority of Maryland's food stamp cases, this quick change was out of the question. The director of Baltimore's Department of Social Services wrote to Mayor William Schaefer's office noting, "it would be literally impossible to do all of the machine computations and other necessary work... The completion of the necessary factors would take several months."<sup>28</sup> The law imposed so many new regulations that the city of Baltimore did not have enough computing power to determine new food stamp prices and bonus amounts. The city did secure an extension to implement the new program guidelines. Even so, Mayor Schaefer reached out to Maryland Senator Charles Mathias asking for federal financial assistance in administering the program within the city.

With program rules and eligibility criteria shifting almost annually, state and local welfare departments asked for federal intervention in administering the food stamp program. Schaefer explained under the liberalized food stamp regulations passed in 1971, food stamp enrollments in Baltimore had increased 400 percent since 1969 and "might include as much as 30% of the City's population under the new eligibility standards."<sup>29</sup> In spite of this, Schaefer was asking for increased federal assistance for a program Congress and the Nixon

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<sup>28</sup> Memo, Maurice A. Harmon to Mark Joseph, December 29, 1971; William Donald Schaefer Mayoral Papers, Folder, "Food Stamp Program," Box 31; Baltimore City Archives.

<sup>29</sup> Letter, William Donald Schaefer to Sen. Charles Mathias Jr., February, 16 1972; William Donald Schaefer Mayoral Papers, Folder, "Food Stamp Program," Box 31; Baltimore City Archives.

administration already defined as fully federalized. These early discussions over administrative complexity pitted the limits of the federal purse against an increasingly expansive food stamp program, but one that could not meet the intended need if local units were unable to operate the program at full capacity.

Difficulties in local program administration and decisions about matching funds illustrate early points of debate over food stamp program boundaries. While welfare recipients were categorically eligible for food stamps, non-welfare families, referred to as non-public assistance cases, required more work to certify. These families were subject to income, asset, and other tests in order to determine eligibility for the food stamp program. Camille B. Wheeler, district manager of the Hampden Social Service Center in Baltimore, responded to a request for food stamps from a non-public assistance applicant in March 1973. When explaining why her center was unable to process this new application for food stamps, she lamented:

... we have a waiting list for current Food Stamp applicants. As Mr. David Kramer explained, he is the only person in the Hampden Social Service Center with the responsibility for administering the Non-Public Assistance Food Stamp Program. Currently, he is assigned more than 700 cases and, as a result, is unable to carry additional ones. ... We regret deeply that such a drastic measure as the closing of intake had to be undertaken; however, there seems to be no other choice. We are aware that many needy individuals are being deprived of benefits due them under the law.<sup>30</sup>

Without increased administrative funds, local social service offices could not certify everyone eligible for food stamps. Stagflation had led to large increases in eligibility for non-public assistance individuals and families, but these cases were a lower priority in many social service offices than providing stamps to those who were categorically eligible. This led

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<sup>30</sup> Letter, Camille Wheeler to Marguerite Campbell, March 21, 1973; William Donald Schaefer Mayoral Papers, Folder, "Food Stamp Program," Box 306; Baltimore City Archives.

to congressional action, with a 1974 bill to amend the food stamp act proposing to cover 62.5 percent of local administrative costs. The provision passed; however, coverage was set at 50 percent of local costs. Even so, commentators on successful passage of the bill noted, “I am sure that the locals will agree that any fiscal relief, no matter how minute, will help in its effective administration of the Food Stamp Program.”<sup>31</sup>

Drawing attention to problems in program administration created a political opportunity to argue against public food welfare programs. In the eyes of a cadre of conservative politicians, the programs had already gotten too big and outgrown their original intentions. Reflecting this sentiment, both Presidents Nixon and Ford attempted to devolve spending and administration down to states and localities through block granting.

#### *Block Grants*

In 1973, the Nixon administration moved to block-grant child nutrition programs. Officials reasoned block-granting child nutrition programs would “hold down further escalation in program costs, bring together the disparate child nutrition programs, and shift part of the burden of program costs and administration to the states.”<sup>32</sup> Block grants provide a fixed amount of funding to states for a program area, leaving the states to decide how to allocate the funds across programs. Nixon’s child nutrition block grant would only cover subsidies and support for a child from a family below the poverty line. States would receive significantly less via a block grant than under existing, programmatic budgeting. At the local level, block granting would devastate child nutrition programs, namely school lunch.

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<sup>31</sup> Memo, Joyce T. Eaton to David T. Mason, “S. 3458 – Administrative Costs of Food Stamps,” 28 June 1974; William Donald Schaefer Mayoral Papers, Folder, “Food Stamp Program,” Box 31; Baltimore City Archives.

<sup>32</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry*, 122.



When considering the administration's block-grant legislation in 1974, longtime school lunch advocate Senator Carl Perkins (D-KY) wrote to a USDA official expressing his disapproval. Perkins explained, "eliminating the paying students is a most undesirable outcome, I think you will agree. It is counter to the declaration of policy of the National School Lunch Act, and it will undermine public support of the program in due time."<sup>33</sup> School districts were already strapped for cash. Without the small subsidy for students who paid full price, school lunch administrators let legislators know they would not be able to make up lost funds. A powerful Democratic majority led Congress to reject the proposal to block-grant child nutrition in 1974, instead passing legislation that preserved the range of child nutrition programs in their current form and increased appropriations. When Ford entered office in August 1974, he vetoed this bill.

President Gerald Ford brought an unyielding approach to welfare spending when he entered office. Ford was committed to a program of budget austerity, which he framed in reaction to the growth of the budget deficit. This commitment to austerity was so strong, Ford vetoed food programs aimed at children. His refusal to sign child nutrition legislation marks the first presidential veto of a piece of nutrition legislation.<sup>34</sup> While overridden by Congress, the veto was a turning point in food welfare legislation. School lunch, the largest program within child nutrition legislation and "America's favorite welfare program," could no longer skate by as an unquestioned public good. If school lunch was no longer safe, what about other forms of food provision?

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<sup>33</sup> Letter, Carl Perkins to Clayton Yeutter, March 7, 1974; Folder, "Farm Progs 8 (School Lunch Program) March 23- July 1974," Box 5843, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, Record Group 16; National Archives at College Park, MD.

<sup>34</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry*, 122.

Ford later proposed two iterations of his own child nutrition block grant. His insistence to block-grant demonstrates a commitment to cost cutting over the voices of many of his advisors, including his Secretary of Agriculture. Congress overrode the Nixon/ Ford block grant handily, demonstrating this mode of budgeting did not have widespread support. Instead, Ford's resolve to cut spending at any cost signals an early turn to basing food welfare policy on ideological politics.

In the Child Food Assistance Act of 1975, the Ford administration proposed its own block grant. Block granting would shrink the scope of federal responsibility, evident through proposed declines in federal contributions to child nutrition programs. After spending \$2.2 billion in FY 1975, child nutrition programs would receive \$1.6 billion through the block grant in FY 1976, a savings of \$600 million.<sup>35</sup> A decision memo for the president identified the implications for this shift, describing how block grant funding would alter perceptions of food welfare. Listed as a program advantage, a USDA official noted block granting would “accept as federal responsibility assistance to needy children, but reject federal responsibility for feeding all children.”<sup>36</sup> As with Nixon's proposal, no students over the federal poverty line would receive any benefit or subsidy for any child nutrition program. However, states would be “free to carry on” any programs for non-poor children using funds from non-USDA sources.<sup>37</sup> Child nutrition programs were already far from universal entitlements. Block

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Memo, J. Phil Campbell to Gerald Ford, February 24, 1975; Folder, Child Nutrition, Box 1, Norman E. Ross, Jr. Papers; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>37</sup> Memo, Stephen J. Hiemstra to Jim Bostic, February 7, 1975, “Briefing Book and Background Statement: The Child Food Assistance Act of 1975,” Folder, “School Lunch Program Jan. 1, 1975 to Feb. 28, 1977,” Box 6026, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, Record Group 16; National Archives at College Park, MD.

granting would introduce even wider variations across program functions as decision-making along with funding was devolved to states and localities.

Ford faced pushback from the USDA at his reintroduction of a child nutrition block grant. Richard Feltner, an assistant secretary in the USDA, supported the Nixon/ Ford block grant proposal in 1974, but times had changed. Feltner explained following the 1974 mid-term elections, the incoming Congress was “likely to want to extend benefits even beyond current levels.” He added that with inflation pushing up food costs, “this may not be the right time for this proposal.”<sup>38</sup> Acting Secretary of Agriculture J. Phil Campbell echoed Feltner’s concerns, expressing that the chances of passage in the Senate were slim to none. Campbell learned after meeting with key members of Congress, “overwhelming congressional opposition is a safe assumption.” Senator Talmadge (D-GA) reported to Campbell the proposal “might get 10 votes on the floor of the Senate.”<sup>39</sup> Beyond Congress, the legislation touched a nerve in the parents of children who paid full price for lunch.<sup>40</sup> They claimed without the subsidy for current paying students, their children would no longer be able to purchase lunch at school. Even the director of the Topeka, Kansas, School Food Service

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<sup>38</sup> Letter; Richard L. Feltner to Paul O’Neill, December 11, 1974; Folder, Child Nutrition; Box 1, Norman E. Ross, Jr. Papers; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>39</sup> Memo, J. Phil Campbell to Gerald Ford, 24 February 1975; Folder, Child Nutrition, Box 1, Norman E. Ross, Jr. Papers; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>40</sup> Schools were reimbursed for school lunches through a complicated system, divided between covering costs of some food purchased and matching funds at first, replaced by a small cash subsidy per meal after 1960. School districts received a 9-cent reimbursement per meal for food costs from the USDA and an additional 5-cent cash reimbursement per meal, not tied to the cost of food, see Gordon W. Gunderson, *The National School Lunch Program: Background and Development* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1971), 19. In 1962, Congress added “special assistance” funds for schools, providing extra reimbursement for free meals, at 15¢ per student instead of the suggested 5¢ reimbursement rate. See Thelma G. Flanagan, “School Food Services,” in *Education and the States: Nationwide Development Since 1900*, HEW Office of Education ED031467 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1969), 576.

wrote to his senator, Bob Dole, saying he would not be able to absorb the difference in school lunch costs for his two children if the block grant came into effect. His children would have to start bringing sandwiches from home.<sup>41</sup> In this Kansan's view, school lunch was a program designed for all children, not just the poor. Block grants that removed the subsidy for all but the poorest students pushed back against this understanding of the general benefit of child nutrition programs.

After the block grant gained no traction in Congress, a separate House-led Child Nutrition and School Lunch Bill came to Ford for his signature in October 1975. Alan Greenspan at the Council for Economic Advisers advised vetoing this bill, arguing that “nutrition programs have mushroomed in the last few years with little evidence of any compensating benefits.”<sup>42</sup> The bill included provisions liberalizing benefits, for example increasing eligibility for reduced price meals from 185 percent of the poverty line to 195 percent. This, Greenspan pointed out, would make 38 percent of all children eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Greenspan closed his letter admitting that “although it is difficult to be against child nutrition,” the outlays required to fund the current bill would put the program \$2 billion over budget targets.<sup>43</sup> Once again, President Ford vetoed child nutrition legislation.

President Ford explained his veto using the language of fairness, not the budgetary implications of the bill. He stated, “I simply do not believe that we should expand subsidies to families with incomes above the poverty level. Children of families living in poverty who

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<sup>41</sup> Letter, Richard P. Fealy to Bob Dole, March 13, 1975; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers-Constituent Relations, 1969-1996, Series 4, Box 217, Folder 26; Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

<sup>42</sup> Memo, Alan Greenspan to James Frey, September 26, 1975; Folder, Child Nutrition-1; Box 3, Spencer Johnson Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

need help raising their level of nutrition should receive that help.”<sup>44</sup> Again, representing the power of a liberal, Democratic majority in Congress, the bill passed over Ford’s veto, 397-18 in the House.<sup>45</sup> The bill included language broadening eligibility for reduced price lunch, but it also redefined the term “school” to mean many more institutions where children were present, created a separate Summer Food Service Program, established the Child Care Food Program for day care centers, made the School Breakfast Program permanent, and doubled WIC’s authorization.<sup>46</sup> Ford’s attempt to block-grant had backfired. Instead of reducing the number of programs, the law created new programs; instead of cutting costs, the law added expenditures. Nevertheless, the Ford administration attempted a final child nutrition block grant in 1976.

In trying to sway Congress, Richard Feltner noted the 1976 bill was similar in structure to the failed bill in 1975; however, it incorporated “new insights into the operation of such a program that we were able to gain through a year of careful review of the options available to us.”<sup>47</sup> However, from the rest of the testimony it is unclear what insights had been gained in the past year, as the 1975 and 1976 child nutrition block grant proposals

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<sup>44</sup> “Q+A Child Nutrition Bill,” October 9, 1975; Folder, Nutrition - Child Nutrition Act of 1976, Box 22, Sarah Massengale Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>45</sup> “Congress Overrides School Lunch Veto,” in *CQ Almanac 1975*, 31st ed., (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1976), 669-76, <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/cqal75-1211868>.

<sup>46</sup> Richard L. Feltner, Statement before the Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education, Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, June 24, 1976; Folder, Nutrition - Child Nutrition Act of 1975 (1), Box 22, Sarah Massengale Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

appear nearly identical. The 1976 administration block grant was rejected outright in Congress, and marked the end of Ford's credibility in food welfare.

Food welfare programs did not shrink during Ford's tenure; instead, they became more expensive. Nonetheless, Ford's attempts at cuts had lasting consequences on the framing of food welfare. Debates over responsibility for local administrative costs and block-granting food programs reveal early points of division in program operations. Even as programs grew throughout the 1970s, key questions over program devolution divided politicians.

## **Administrative Debates II: Federal Bureaucratic Battles**

Other points of conflict over program boundaries can be seen in debates at the national level within the USDA. I follow three federal, bureaucratic debates over food provision, including debates over the proper home for food welfare programs, the USDA's refusal to comply with legal injunctions, and its failure to implement new programs. All of these examples illustrate the contested territory public food provision occupied during the 1970s, making the decade a critical juncture in the development of these programs.

### *Reorganizing FNS*

During the late 1960s, there were competing arguments over which department should administer food welfare programs. Initial proposals from the anti-hunger lobby advocated moving food welfare to HEW. This, they argued, would rationalize program operations by placing food welfare within a department that handled welfare concerns. Nevertheless, these demands from the anti-hunger lobby quickly faded. By the mid-1970s, it was clear that reorganizing food programs outside of the USDA would no longer strengthen

program functions. At this moment, a different chorus altogether voiced desires to move the slate of nutrition programs out of the USDA. Conservative Governor Ronald Reagan, along with Presidents Nixon and Ford, advocated for this. I argue instead of anti-hunger activists who sought to strengthen food welfare in a move to HEW, these politicians saw an opportunity to weaken food welfare by removing it from the farm bill, and the protection of the farm bloc.

Voices inside Nixon's White House in 1969 advocated for moving food welfare programs due to the mismatch in program purpose with the rest of USDA programs. Food welfare was welfare, and should be administered with other assistance programs. Robert Choate, early advisor to Nixon on food welfare policy, advocated moving food assistance programs to HEW during Nixon's transition to office. While food programs were currently administered in the USDA, Choate believed the department paid primary attention to farmers, and had shown "increasingly little interest in poverty populations, be they farmers, food processors, or just rural residents."<sup>48</sup> Nixon aide Christopher DeMuth raised a similar point early in Nixon's first term, summarizing findings of many who studied hunger. DeMuth believed there was a consensus "that the desires and intentions of the Secretary of Agriculture are of little consequence in developing an effective food program. Of all the bureaucracies in Washington that of USDA may be the oldest and least concerned with the problems of poverty." DeMuth concluded the food stamp program "belongs in HEW for

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<sup>48</sup> Letter, R. B. Choate to John C. Whitaker, January 8, 1969; Folder, Health – Hunger and Malnutrition 3-1 (2) [3 of 3], Box 17, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: John R. Price Papers; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

reasons both of politics and logic (hunger is a welfare issue).”<sup>49</sup> In addition to forces within the White House pushing for program reorganization, voices within the “hunger lobby” advocated for transfer of food welfare to HEW.

Groups such as the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs as well as the drafters of the final report of Nixon’s White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health advocated moving Food and Nutrition Services within the USDA to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In April 1969, members of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs sent a memo to Nixon voicing their desire for Nixon to explore transferring food assistance programs from USDA to HEW to allow hunger to “be viewed in its total perspective as being a part of the problem of health, welfare, and education.”<sup>50</sup> The committee played on the urgency of the issue in 1969, something Nixon and his staff were conscious of. Transferring or delegating food welfare to HEW, the Select Committee noted, “would be a highly visible indication that the Administration is dedicated to eradicating malnutrition amounting to hunger in the United States, and it would also show that the President is aware – as he is – of the complexities and interrelationships between

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<sup>49</sup> Memo, Christopher DeMuth to Daniel P. Moynihan, February 11, 1969; Folder HE 3-1 Executive; Box 13; White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>50</sup> Letter, Minority Members Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs to Richard Nixon, April 2, 1969; Folder, Conference on Food and Nutrition, Box 74; White House Central Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Egil Krogh; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. In addition, the Panel on Federal and State Administrative Structure at the White House Conference on Food recommended the Secretary of HEW oversee food welfare policy coordination from a new Office of Nutrition. White House Conference on Food Nutrition and Health: Final Report (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1970), 18-20.



malnutrition, hunger and the health, welfare and education needs of the poor.”<sup>51</sup> Asserting hunger was a welfare issue was not a political liability in 1969. Much of the Great Society legislative agenda was still intact and the country was only in the early throes of the economy slowing down. But as welfare spending became more contentious, moving food stamps out of the Department of Agriculture and into HEW came to mean something different.

Only a few years later, moving food assistance programs to HEW no longer looked as positive. This transfer was once identified as a way to strengthen and rationalize food welfare, and a solution sought by anti-hunger advocates. By 1973, politicians who wanted to weaken the FSP suggested the program be transferred to HEW. Shortly before his resignation, Nixon and HEW Secretary Caspar Weinberger discussed this transfer. Weinberger agreed food stamps were “programmatically aligned” to existing HEW programs, but could not follow through on transferring functions with Nixon out of office.<sup>52</sup> Shortly, the Ford White House faced the same question of whether to transfer FNS to HEW. Roy Ash, director of the Office of Management and Budget, presented the president with three options: delay a decision until moving forward with the reorganization of HEW, transfer only food stamps to HEW, or transfer all FNS functions to HEW immediately. Ford selected the latter, and most radical, moving all food and nutrition programs to HEW.<sup>53</sup> Although the transfer never took place, the interest in moving FNS outside of the USDA

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<sup>51</sup> Letter, Minority Members Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs to Richard Nixon, April 2, 1969.

<sup>52</sup> Memo; Caspar Weinberger to Richard Nixon, February 28, 1974; Folder WE 10-4 Executive; Box 13; White House Central Files; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>53</sup> Memo; Roy L. Ash to Gerald Ford, 26 September 1974; Folder FG 20 Executive; Box 94; White House Central Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

shows a desire to treat food welfare more like welfare programs generally, an option that had transformed from being advocated by the hunger lobby to one they renounced.

Food assistance proponents realized separating FNS from the power of the USDA, the farm bloc, and Southern legislators who occupied key agricultural and appropriations committee seats in Congress would weaken food welfare programs. In their about-face to advocate for keeping programs within the USDA, food welfare proponents were willing to ignore the programmatic mismatch between the rest of USDA programs and food assistance, and FNS' second-class status within the department. In return, staying in the USDA ensured they would have the bargaining power to fund food welfare programs. In 1977, the Senate Select Committee explicitly went against the idea of transferring the FSP, recognizing that the food stamp program did not have enough political power as its own issue. In a report to Senator McGovern, a staffer summarized, "politically, I think it is unwise for either food stamps or the farm bill to come up separately."<sup>54</sup> Demands from anti-hunger groups to transfer food programs out of the USDA evaporated by the end of the decade, leaving farm and food welfare interests further entrenched. However, this did not translate to the Secretary of Agriculture supporting all food programs under his jurisdiction.<sup>55</sup>

#### *Activists and Congress Pushback*

The Secretaries of Agriculture under both Nixon and Ford were subject to countless lawsuits and court injunctions over administration of food assistance programs. Public

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<sup>54</sup> Memo; Kathleen Bishop and Marshall Matz to George McGovern, "Food Stamps – Title XII," August 1, 1977; Folder, FS House-Senate Conf. 1977, Box 4; Records of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition: Food Stamps; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives, Washington DC.

<sup>55</sup> And until 2001, it always was a "he" at the head of the USDA. There has still only been one female Secretary of Agriculture, Ann Veneman, under President George W. Bush from 2001-2005.

interest groups and think tanks, such as the Food Research Action Center (FRAC), sued the USDA when they failed to comply with program rules and regulations. In the examples that follow, the USDA ignored congressional intent and sought to rein in spending, demonstrating an unwillingness to administer food welfare programs as outlined in the law.

In 1972, Congress funded the WIC program for a two-year pilot period. WIC emerged as one of the specific recommendations of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health.<sup>56</sup> However, the USDA refused to implement the program. The Food Research Action Center (FRAC) brought a lawsuit to force implementation, but the battle for implementation took almost 18 months.<sup>57</sup> Lawyers for Agriculture argued WIC was duplicative, creating a second system of direct distribution of commodities already underway through the remaining commodity distribution program. Further, they argued the direct supplementation of diets was not likely to produce strong results.<sup>58</sup> After 18 months in court, the USDA lost the suit.

Under an injunction to implement the program, the Department of Agriculture hastily drafted regulations, neglecting to create a standard application form. This time, Agriculture officials used the law to their advantage. Potential beneficiaries and local social service offices did not know what information needed to be provided to enroll in WIC, and legally the USDA could claim that any application was incomplete since they had not clearly

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<sup>56</sup> Kennedy, "The WIC program," 709.

<sup>57</sup> Mitchell Rogovin, "Public Interest Law: The Next Horizon," *American Bar Association Journal* 63, No. 3 (March 1977), 337.

<sup>58</sup> Kennedy, "The WIC program," 709.

specified what was required.<sup>59</sup> In refusing to implement WIC in the first place, and then failing to supply an application, Department of Agriculture officials demonstrated their resistance to adding costs to food program budgets. In this case, their opposition came even after the funds had been allocated by Congress and a coalition of supporters from the White House Conference, as well as legislators on the Senate Select “Hunger Committee” backed the program.

Then again in 1976, the Ford administration was embroiled in legal proceedings over WIC. In March 1976, OMB director James Lynn briefed the president on an upcoming announcement of budget deferrals, noting the \$61 million deferral for Agriculture’s special supplemental food program (WIC) was likely to be controversial. Lynn continued that WIC was already the subject of a class action suit filed in March against the Department of Agriculture and OMB by a public interest law firm, and that “the publicity (CBS evening news, Washington Post article) surrounding the suit guarantees that the deferral will receive close inspection and probably unfavorable action in the Congress.”<sup>60</sup> While the reporting of deferrals to Congress was routine, WIC had become a flashpoint for political conflict.

The Senate Select Committee scheduled hearings for the end of March on the deferral of WIC funds. At the opening remarks, George McGovern began with a fiery statement: “once again, the Department of Agriculture is refusing to simply obey the law; refusing to spend all the funds that are supposed to be used for the WIC program in this or next fiscal

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<sup>59</sup> Press Release, “Hunger Committee Releases 150-page Staff Report: Cites Links between Poverty, Nutrition, and Infant Mortality,” January 21, 1974; Folder, “1/21/74 WIC Report Release,” Select Committee on Nutrition, Food Stamps; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>60</sup> Memo, James T. Lynn to Gerald Ford, “Twelfth 1976 Special Message under the Impoundment Control Act of 1974,” March 9, 1976; Folder, “WIC (Program for Women, Infants, and Children),” Box 12, Spencer Johnson Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

year ...”<sup>61</sup> McGovern continued, asserting the USDA was defying legal intent: “my guess is that today we’ll witness the Department’s familiar approach to the WIC program – legalisms, technicalities, deferral requests, evasions – anything but honest commitment to obey the law.”<sup>62</sup> And the USDA was not just breaking the law. It was ignoring the will of Congress. Congress passed the program unanimously, appropriating double the past expenditures and adding a three-year extension. A letter from the Sisters of Notre Dame in San Jose, California, pointed to the short but checkered record of the USDA on WIC:

It is the fourth time since 1973 that FRAC has successfully challenged in court the USDA’s administration of WIC. Isn’t it ironic that we make so much of ‘law and order’ for private citizens in this country; yet powerful bureaucracies within our own government are able to function in flagrant violation of democratic processes?... How many months and how much more red tape will it now take for the USDA to comply with the decision of the Court?<sup>63</sup>

Once again, the suit against the USDA was successful. At the end of August 1976, a court ordered the USDA to spend the remaining WIC funds it had earlier refused.<sup>64</sup> But the failure to spend this of its own accord demonstrates USDA intransigence to operate food welfare programs to their full capacity.

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<sup>61</sup> “WIC and commodity supplemental food programs hearing before the Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs of the United States Senate,” 94<sup>th</sup> Cong, Sess. 2, (Washington, DC: GPO, March 30, 1976), 1.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Sisters of Notre Dame (San Jose, California) to George McGovern, July 10, 1976; Folder, “Child Nutrition –WIC,” Select Committee on Nutrition, Food Stamps; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>64</sup> George McGovern to Sisters of Notre Dame (San Jose, California), August 24, 1976; Folder, “Child Nutrition –WIC,” Select Committee on Nutrition, Food Stamps; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

In 1974, Nixon's Secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz, faced a different legal suit filed by FRAC regarding the outreach provision of the FSP. Siding with the plaintiffs, the 1974 decision in *Butz v. Bennett* required Agriculture to implement an aggressive outreach program. In particular, the injunction clarified states had to do more than merely inform residents about the availability of food stamps, but were required to "take further steps to insure that those who are eligible actually apply for benefits and receive them promptly."<sup>65</sup> However, in early 1975 the Ford White House was looking for ways out of this legal requirement:

The President has placed top priority on the Domestic Council to find ways to tighten up on food stamps. Secretary Butz told the Vice President, Dick Dunham, and me yesterday that he is under court order to "advertise" the availability of food stamps for all who are eligible. Can you advise us as to whether anything could be done legally about this court order? Many thanks.<sup>66</sup>

Ken Lazarus responded to this memo, noting that there had been 20 such "outreach" cases in the last year alone. In response to the question, Lazarus concluded "it would not appear that any action can be taken to reduce this 'advertising' absent legislative action."<sup>67</sup> The USDA's reticence to follow this provision did not go unnoticed. In March 1975, the National Education Association (NEA) focused attention on the advertising provision of the FSP, coordinating a campaign designed to shame USDA officials into action.

The National Education Association undertook a publicity campaign to let teachers as well as community members know that they might qualify for the FSP. The association

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<sup>65</sup> Memo, Ken Lazarus to Jim Cannon, March 20, 1975; WE 10-4 Executive, White House Central Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>66</sup> Memo, Jim Cannon to Phil Buchen, March 7, 1975; WE 10-4 Executive, White House Central Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>67</sup> Memo, Ken Lazarus to Jim Cannon, March 20, 1975; WE 10-4 Executive, White House Central Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

wanted to draw attention to the fact that teachers were eligible for the FSP at all, highlighting how formerly middle-class, white-collar professionals now were paid so little as to be within the income threshold for food stamps. But that was not the only reason for the campaign. “A major reason for the low participation,” NEA informed its leaders, “has been that many states have ignored the federal mandate to operate effective ‘outreach’ programs ...”<sup>68</sup> This move was meant to shame the USDA into doing more outreach work. All the while, the USDA was looking for ways to avoid advertising the FSP widely.

Finally, another bureaucratic battle broke out when the Ford administration bypassed Congress, attempting to rewrite food program rules administratively. The Ford administration had expressed its willingness to work with Congress on food stamp reform, something Ford cited as sorely needed. During the summer of 1975, Ford announced the need to radically rethink food stamps. He argued the program had drifted away from its original intent: “What was originally designed as a program aimed at nutritional assistance to the poor and assistance to small farmers has now become in essence a program of income support.”<sup>69</sup> By returning to these more modest roots, Ford could rein in FSP spending.

At first, Ford tried to implement reform through Congress. On October 21, 1975, Senator Talmadge and Senator Buckley (R-NY) introduced the administration’s bill to the Senate.<sup>70</sup> Ford’s proposed rules echoed many of his administration’s earlier attempts to contain food welfare spending. He proposed a 30 percent standard purchase price and tough

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<sup>68</sup> “Apply for Food Stamps, NEA Urges Teachers and Others Hit by Inflation,” March 25, 1975; WE 10-4 Executive, White House Central Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>69</sup> Gerald Ford, Message to Congress, July 27 1975; Textual Files, Spencer Johnson, Box 4, Folder, “Food Stamps (2);” Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>70</sup> S. Res. 2537, 94<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1976).

work registration requirements, as well as other provisions designed to shrink participation and cut costs. However, by January 1976, the administration decided that Congress was not moving fast enough and in mid-February made public that they were planning to reform food stamps through regulatory changes.<sup>71</sup> President Ford wrote to Senator Talmadge highlighting the need to move more quickly than Congress allowed, “while statutory changes by the Congress would be the most desirable course of action, we can no longer afford to wait.”<sup>72</sup> Some legislators believed Ford wanted to reform the program through rulemaking for an additional reason: to appear strong on welfare reform while on the campaign trail.

Members of Congress who worked on food welfare were understandably upset when Ford announced this change in tack. Senator McGovern noted the curious timing of Ford’s remarks to reform food stamps through regulations:

To say that he [Ford] can no longer wait for the Congress to act, as the President has indicated, when the Senate Agriculture Committee is in the middle of a markup on food stamp reform legislation shows that Mr. Ford is more concerned about the New Hampshire primary next Tuesday than he is in meaningful reform of the program.<sup>73</sup>

The primary was four days away. The governor of Delaware wrote to President Ford arguing against reform through regulation. Instead, he argued the “solution to the Food Stamp problem cannot be achieved by rewriting federal regulations. In fact, one of the major problems in the administration of this or any other program is the constant change in federal

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<sup>71</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 89.

<sup>72</sup> Letter, Gerald Ford to Herman Talmadge, Feb 19, 1976; Senate Papers - Legislative Relations 1969-1996; Series 2, Box 18, Folder 5, “Committee on Agriculture + Forestry - Food Stamps, 1976;” Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

<sup>73</sup> Press Release, “McGovern hits Ford on Food Stamps,” February 20, 1976; Folder, “Markup – Ag Committee,” Box 8, Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.



regulations.”<sup>74</sup> Similar to the problems social workers brought up as the program grew during the early 1970s, constant rule changes made administering food stamps challenging. Further, making these changes without input from Congress was not a democratic course of action.

After Ford had revised the regulatory rules for the food stamp program, they were published for public comment. Once again, FRAC led the effort to file a lawsuit against the USDA citing the proposed FSP regulatory guidelines unlawful. Joining FRAC in the suit were 26 state attorneys general along with labor, civil rights, civic, and religious groups. Department of Agriculture officials, including Secretary Butz and Assistant Secretary Richard Feltner, worked with U.S. Attorney General Edward H. Levi to highlight talking points for the president to make a case for the executive rule changes. Levi emphasized the need for change in the FSP due to congressional inaction. But this had to be framed within a “positive rationale” for the necessity of changes, “both in terms of the truly needy people who are denied the benefits that they deserve as well as budgetary considerations.”<sup>75</sup> This framing was for naught. The judge sided with FRAC, citing the government had “exceeded its authority” in issuing regulations to reform the program, killing the regulations for the remainder of 1976 until they could go through Congress. As was the case with his vetoes of child nutrition legislation, Ford’s food stamp reform efforts were over. Nevertheless, his attacks on public food provision transformed the public perception of food welfare.

In each of these cases, the Ford administration wanted to change the structure and function of public food programs beyond the realm of acceptability according to most

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<sup>74</sup> Letter, Sherman W. Tribbitt to Gerald Ford, March 11, 1976; Folder, WE 10-4 Executive, White House Central Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>75</sup> Jim Cannon, “Meeting Outline May 27, 1976, 3:30 pm, Cabinet Room,” Folder, WE 10-4 Executive, White House Central Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

members of Congress and the judiciary. Executive attempts to reformulate food assistance were met by congressional obstruction or legal suits. Even so, these were only temporary setbacks. There was no major rollback in food welfare under Nixon or Ford. But, as goodwill for food assistance retreated, politicians were able to inject austerity measures across the portfolio of food welfare programs.

### **Austerity and Food Welfare**

By the mid-1970s, food stamps became a symbol of a runaway program. President Ford described the food stamp program as yet “another massive, multibillion-dollar program, almost uncontrolled and fully supported by Federal taxpayers.”<sup>76</sup> Illustrating this point, Ford noted that food stamps had grown from \$36 million in 1964 to \$7 billion in 1975. While food stamps expanded, Ford’s description highlights a huge shift in the way politicians and the public thought about food stamps. This explanation conveniently ignored how declining economic conditions were driving up program costs as much – if not more – than statutory expansion. Nevertheless, Ford, and later Carter’s, concern with ballooning spending in food welfare led both presidents to implement austerity measures in programs of public food provision, but based on different interpretations of austerity. Changing eligibility rules, reinstating budget caps, and pushing program costs back onto recipients saved money, while also placing boundaries around public responsibility.

### *Inflation, Austerity, and Private Food Assistance*

Rising inflation and unemployment left increasing numbers of Americans without access to adequate food, leading to rapid growth in food welfare rolls. Forecasts had not

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<sup>76</sup> Gerald Ford, Message to Congress, July 27, 1975; Folder, “Food Stamps (2),” Box 4, Spencer Johnson Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

predicted that poor economic conditions would bring so many new participants into the FSP, part of a longer history of consistently underestimating future program enrollments.<sup>77</sup> Estimates throughout the 1970s minimized forecast need in spite of increasing macroeconomic volatility.<sup>78</sup> No administration, or politician, wanted to predict an economic downturn. But underestimating program need, even in an era of entitlement budgeting for food stamps, had negative consequences. Instead of minimizing program debate, political scientist Ronald King argues that new budget rules contributed to intensified political debate over the FSP.<sup>79</sup> When Congress lost power to set budget authority for the FSP, public and political attention shifted away from program adequacy to debates over the budget's capacity to maintain growing enrollments.

In the contest between budget capacity and need in the food stamp program, capacity won out. The Ford administration ignored structural issues impacting food stamp programs and sought to hold down costs. At the same time, Ford's administration reacted to inflation generally, but was not attentive to how inflation affected people's ability to purchase adequate food. The Ford White House immediately sprang into action against inflation, what

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<sup>77</sup> The program was piloted and initially grew during a period of relative affluence. Between 1964 and 1971, the majority of growth in the program was explained through relaxing eligibility requirements, not from changes in the economy. Even so, Congress regularly made supplemental appropriations to fund the FSP at higher levels than anticipated. This problem was only compounded by inflation. Food stamp expenditure forecasts were based on overly rosy pictures of the future.

<sup>78</sup> King, *Budgeting Entitlements*, 67.

<sup>79</sup> King, "Caps On: Entitlement Budgeting and the Politics of Uncontrollable Food Stamp Spending, 1974-1977," in *Budgeting Entitlements*, 63-90.

Ford described as “our number one domestic problem.”<sup>80</sup> Ford held a Conference on Inflation in late September 1974, after holding smaller, sector-specific working groups in early September.<sup>81</sup> In his opening remarks at the conference, he echoed a sentiment shared by the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA). Ford declared that “Americans must increase their productive capacity,” although he acknowledged this would not be enough alone to end the “scourge of inflation.”<sup>82</sup> In contrast to the Nixon administration’s attempts to freeze food costs, increased productivity would solve the problem of food inflation by influencing supply-side factors. The CEA had recently briefed the president on economic growth to solve inflation. They asserted “increased productivity to meet surging domestic and foreign demand” would bring down food and other costs.<sup>83</sup> In a sense, this was the same ask Ford was making on individuals who could not purchase enough to eat in the face of food welfare cuts. By increasing their productivity to bring in more income, they, too, could meet their own demands

Without immediate increases in productivity, both individuals and community organizations that aided the poor sought out alternate solutions to inflation in the short term. The Maryland Food Committee (MFC) forwarded their concerns regarding people on fixed

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<sup>80</sup> Draft letter, August 30, 1974; Folder, “Agriculture and Food, 9/13/74: General,” Box 3, L. William Seidman Papers; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>81</sup> This included a meeting with food manufacturers and producers. Revised Program, “Agriculture and Food Conference on Inflation,” September 10, 1974; L. William Seidman Files, Folder, “Agriculture and Food, 9/13/74: General,” Box 3; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>82</sup> Gerald Ford, “Remarks Opening the Summit Conference on Inflation,” September 27, 1974, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255852>.

<sup>83</sup> Memo, Dennis H. Wood to Dean Burch, Roy Ash, Ken Cole, Bill Timmons, Bill Seidman, Gary Seevers, “Possible Reforms in USDA Food Assistance Programs,” September 23, 1974; Folder, “Alan Greenspan Files: Food (2),” Box 45, Council of Economic Advisers; Gerald R. Ford Library.

incomes to the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs. The MFC highlighted that as inflation rose, they and other private organizations alone would not be able to meet growing food needs in their state. In particular, the MFC was concerned about the last line of food assistance, the small network of emergency voluntary food centers. These organizations, run primarily by houses of worship or small non-profits, received funding from a hodgepodge of local sources. MFC funded 10 of 20 emergency food centers in Baltimore and surrounding counties. But unlike in years past, the FY 1975 funds for these 10 centers ran out in November, only four months into the fiscal year. This, they argued, demonstrated that the limited resources of the private sector could not support a 20 to 35 percent increase in the demand for food.<sup>84</sup> From the Maryland Food Committee's perspective, increased federal intervention in food assistance was the only feasible solution to meet growing need created by stagflation. While sensitive to inflation, the Ford administration did not respond to calls such as those from the MFC. Instead, by 1975 Ford and many in his Cabinet advocated for significant budget cuts across the whole portfolio of food assistance programs.

#### *Austerity in School Lunch*

Changes in the national school lunch program (NSLP) reduced federal subsidies to school lunch operations, in effect pushing costs onto local schools and privatizing parts of school lunch provision. In the face of budget austerity, private dollars from individual students would have to make up for cuts in public assistance in the school lunch program.

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<sup>84</sup> Maryland Food Stamp Coalition, "Maryland Food Stamp Facts," December 19, 1974; Select Committee on Nutrition, Food Stamps, Folder 75, FS Report, Box 8, Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

However, it was not long ago when school meal proponents had higher hopes for school lunch.

School lunch advocates held out hope for a universal school lunch throughout the late 1960s. These advocates imagined school lunch as an entitlement: students should be guaranteed a nutritious midday meal free of charge as a right of public education. But by the early 1970s, hopes for a universal free lunch seemed out of reach, requiring school lunch supporters to make the tough choice between continued advocacy for universal meals or a more targeted program to provide meals to the poor.<sup>85</sup> The South Dakota Director of the School Lunch Division expressed this in a letter to Senator McGovern: “it is my sincere opinion that free lunches for all school children, regardless of need, would be ideal. As matters stand, I am afraid that would be too big a jump and another step is needed first.”<sup>86</sup> School lunch proponents settled on a more limited approach, hoping that initially targeting benefits towards the poor would expand to cover free meals for all children. But as Sue Levine writes, “it was a vain hope.”<sup>87</sup> With a universal free school lunch dashed, Congress pushed to extend funds to meet the needs of poor children, accepting as part of the bargain that this would come at the price of continuing subsidies to paying students in the short term. But longer term, funding for paying students’ subsidies were not reinstated.

In 1970 and 1972, Congress expanded authority to provide school meals, especially at free- and reduced-price rates to poor children. While this legislation required that any student

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<sup>85</sup> Sue Levine describes this extensively. See Levine, *School Lunch Politics*, 132-135.

<sup>86</sup> Letter, Paul M. Marschalk to George McGovern, February 9, 1970; Folder, “School Lunch 1970,” 91-92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., Leg. Files, Box 6; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

<sup>87</sup> Levine, *School Lunch Politics*, 135.

who was eligible for a free lunch had access to one, the NSLP never received adequate appropriations to make this a reality. Beginning in 1973, funding became even more contentious with Nixon, and then Ford, pushing back to rein in spending on school lunch. To ensure the program served the neediest students first, Ford and Carter targeted school meal benefits to poor students by redirecting subsidies and supports away from children in the middle class. In so doing, budget austerity necessitated legislative experimentation.

In reaction to austerity budgeting, which lowered the eligibility criteria for free and reduced price meals, marketized interventions brought in new sources of revenue by way of private actors. In 1972, the National Soft Drink Association secured an amendment to the NSLP allowing competitive foods in schools. This amendment codified common practice, as vending machines had begun to appear on school campuses during the 1960s. The law was also part of an effort to regulate this practice.<sup>88</sup> However, the regulatory efforts largely failed. In the 1972 legislation, “competitive” foods only needed to meet “minimum nutritional standards.” In effect, only gum and hard candies were ineligible for sale. Further, the USDA attempted to remove this provision in 1977 to only allow federal school meal operations in school kitchens. They were unsuccessful.<sup>89</sup> Revenues from competitive foods and vending machines kept school lunch programs viable by providing cash for the system and

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<sup>88</sup> William Aspray, George Royer, Melissa G. Ocepek, “American School Lunch Policy: A History,” in *Formal and Informal Approaches to Food Policy*, SpringerBriefs in Food, Health, and Nutrition (Springer, 2014).

<sup>89</sup> “While policies pertaining to NSLP meals are determined at the federal level, states and local school districts have the authority to regulate the availability and nutritional quality of competitive foods, which are sold primarily through vending machines, a la carte vendors, school stores, and fund-raisers. The increase in the availability and variety of competitive foods over time has been facilitated by minimal federal nutritional regulation . . .” Andrea R. Woodward, “Reforming School Food: Structure, Agency, and the Meaning of Change,” (Ph.D. dissertation: Cornell University, 2011), 2.

subsidizing free and reduced price meals. These food sales also provided some of the only non-restricted funds principals had access to for arts, sports, and other enrichment programs. Even as they provided much needed revenue, these foods hurt the cause of school lunch. Sold in “competition” with the standard school lunch, they diverted purchases of school meals while dividing students. Only students with cash could purchase these new snack foods in the lunchroom as they were not subsidized. Further, the 1977 changes to rules around competitive foods devolved decision-making to state or local education authorities.<sup>90</sup> While national standards remained for a “standard” NSLP meal, devolving decision-making on competitive foods took away from the nutritional aims of school lunch.

Another regulatory change in school meals provided kitchens an opportunity to save money. Offer versus Serve (OVS) rolled out to high schools in the U.S. in 1977. This policy allowed students to accept only three of the five required meal components, at first as an attempt to reduce plate waste but also to allow schools to provide reimbursable meals at lower costs. Prior to this rule, the USDA reimbursed meals only if students ate all five of the required components to get the nutrients of a Type A meal.<sup>91</sup> This meant school meal programs had to offer foods that children would eat or else risk not being reimbursed for the meal.<sup>92</sup> But this can be seen as stepping back from the nutritional goals of school lunch. The

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<sup>90</sup> Woodward, “Reforming School Food,” 22.

<sup>91</sup> Here, “ate” means the students were served all components of the meal.

<sup>92</sup> “The statutory provision for OVS is found in Section 9(a)(3) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. OVS was extended to the School Breakfast Program (SBP) in 1985 in Section 4(e)(2) of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. The regulations on OVS for the NSLP are found at 7 CFR 210.10 and for the SBP at 7 CFR 220.8. See “Resource Guide: Offer Versus Serve in the School Nutrition Programs,” FNS and Team Nutrition USDA, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/OVS%20Resource%20Guide.pdf>.



regulation allowed children to choose from among meal components and only take the ones they planned to eat, meaning they would not receive the full nutritional value of the meal. And according to food service professionals, this marked the beginning of a period where the “business model began to permeate school food.”<sup>93</sup> Both competitive foods and OVS brought increased profits to school cafeterias, but they also privatized provision. Students were to subsidize more fully the cost of their meal and accept smaller portions given the retreat of public funds. These two changes in school meal legislation represent a larger step back from framing school lunch as an issue of public nutrition. Instead, meal service became more focused on allowing cafeterias the flexibility to bring in revenues in order to maintain their operations, regardless of any tradeoff in student nutrition that was required.

#### *Austerity and the Purchase Price*

The Ford administration proposed another austerity measure, raising the cost of the food stamp purchase price to create program savings. The CEA identified FSP costs as far outweighing program benefits and advised President Ford to restore the purchase to 30 percent of family income, creating \$650 million in savings.<sup>94</sup> This suggestion ignored the pitched debates just a few years prior when President Nixon acquiesced to anti-hunger advocates, lowering the maximum purchase requirement to 25 percent. And in reality, many families, especially large families, paid less than this. While experience with the program highlighted that any purchase price was a burden to many families, budget austerity

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<sup>93</sup> Poppendieck, *Free for All*, 67.

<sup>94</sup> Memo, Dennis H. Wood to Dean Burch, Roy Ash, Ken Cole, Bill Timmons, Bill Seidman, Gary Seevers, “Possible Reforms in USDA Food Assistance Programs,” September 23, 1974; Folder, “Alan Greenspan Files: Food (2),” Box 45, Council of Economic Advisers; Gerald R. Ford Library.

necessitated, according to the Ford administration, raising costs to consumers of the food stamp program.

Ford, goaded on by Secretary of Agriculture Butz, ignored allies close to him who pointed out that raising the purchase price and cutting strikers could unnecessarily raise the hackles of Democratic legislators and other powerful interest groups such as labor. Alan Greenspan, chairman of the CEA, had been unable to attend the September meeting where it was decided to set a standard purchase price at 30 percent. He cautioned Secretary Butz against supporting raising the purchase price to 30 percent, stating that “it is wrong to do this in light of the view reached at the Inflation Conference that the poor bear the major burden of inflation.” Greenspan instead proposed converting the \$4 billion in food stamps to cash aid on a one-year emergency basis.<sup>95</sup> He thought this could help the food inflation problem by diverting money away from food purchases, which drove up inflation, to be spent elsewhere in the economy. Even those who agreed with the general idea of the 30 percent purchase price realized it was unlikely to succeed in the current political climate. HEW Secretary Weinberger privately agreed with this cost saving measure. Nevertheless, he was pessimistic about the success of the initiative, fearing that congressional Democrats would deny them as additional ““cost cutting at the expense of the poor.””<sup>96</sup> This provision was part of Ford’s unsuccessful 1975/6 regulatory changes to the FSP, and did not come into effect after being challenged in court.

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<sup>95</sup> Memo, Alan Greenspan to Earl Butz, Dean Burch, Bill Timmons, Roy Ash, Ken Rush, Bill Seidman, “Idea for Mr. Rush’s Meeting on USDA Food Programs,” September 30, 1974; Folder, “Alan Greenspan Files: Food (2),” Box 45, Council of Economic Advisers; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>96</sup> Lawrence J. McAndrews, “No Time to Heal: Gerald Ford, 1974-1977,” in *The Presidents and the Poor* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 63.

*Unlikely Austerity: Ending the Purchase Requirement*

While Carter was committed to balancing the budget, his administration decided to avoid making cuts that would have them perceived as removing benefits at any cost in order to make savings. For Carter, Ford's attempts at outright cuts in food welfare programs served as a cautionary tale. Carter's Secretary of Agriculture, Bob Bergland, observed that Ford's "veto was overridden and his subsequent legislative proposals in the child nutrition area were studiously ignored even by members of his own party."<sup>97</sup> Ford had no qualms cutting food assistance, even over concerns from his own Secretary of Agriculture, whereas Carter proposed a more moderate approach. Carter was attentive to containing costs in food welfare programs, but it would be different than Ford's approach. Carter framed his proposals in terms of balancing the budget instead of making changes based on ideological commitment to shrinking the state. The idea of balanced budgets also came from an ideological perspective. However, Ford's positions on food stamp cuts were in opposition to some, and at times virtually all, of his Cabinet members. In contrast, the faith in balanced budgets Carter ascribed to was more widely shared by his staff and fellow politicians.

With this different frame in mind, the Carter administration worked to enact a change anti-hunger activists had been pushing for since passage of the Food Stamp Act in 1964: ending the purchase requirement. In 1977, President Carter declared his intent to end the purchase requirement in the FSP. Dubbed EPR, this change appeared to be an expansive shift. The poorest citizens with little cash on hand to purchase stamps could finally benefit

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<sup>97</sup> Memo, Bob Bergland to Stuart E. Eizenstat, October 30, 1978; Folder, Child Nutrition [1]; Box 2; Florence Prioleau's Files; Jimmy Carter Library.

from the program.<sup>98</sup> However, even EPR was rooted in austerity politics, creating boundaries around public responsibility. Ending the purchase requirement opened the food stamp program to lower-income families and individuals, but did so at the cost of families just over the poverty line. In exchange for EPR, 1977 legislation cut eligibility to millions and reinstated spending caps, ones that in retrospect Congress set unreasonably low.<sup>99</sup>

The administration bill, submitted to Congress on April 5, 1977, included the provision to end the purchase price. This change was forecast to increase FSP enrollments significantly. To balance out the cost of providing stamps to an estimated two million more people, the bill lowered benefits for many, going so far as to make some current recipients ineligible.<sup>100</sup> The income eligibility level dropped to the poverty line, lowering the income ceiling by \$1,000 for an individual to \$5,850, and for a family of four from \$14,000 down to \$9,500. These changes made 1.4 million people ineligible (8.6 percent of the total current participants), and somewhere between 3.4 and 4.8 million had their benefits decreased (30 percent or 39 percent of program participants).<sup>101</sup> Only by limiting eligibility could Carter justify ending the purchase requirement. Further, ending the purchase requirement effectively lowered food stamp benefits. Families had been required to pay their “normal” monthly expenditures for food up front in the form of the purchase price. With this compulsion gone,

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<sup>98</sup> “A Short History of SNAP,” accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap>.

<sup>99</sup> King, *Budgeting Entitlements*, 67; Maney, *Still Hungry*, 131.

<sup>100</sup> Nancy Hicks, “Carter Asks End of Requirement that the Poor Pay for Food Stamps,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1977.

<sup>101</sup> George McGovern, “1977 Food Stamp Bill,” N.D.; Folder, “S. 275 Senate Floor,” Box 4; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

EPR assumed families would still use this cash for food, but the reality was many spent this on more pressing needs. The rising costs of shelter, medical care, and utilities all outpaced inflation. Extra cash went toward these areas instead of toward food purchases.<sup>102</sup> While framed as an expansionary measure, the EPR represents another limit on the scope of public food aid.

President Carter was a fan of “zero-cost” budgeting, meaning any change in policy needed to be revenue neutral. His advisors reassured him food stamp costs would hold steady at \$5.4 billion when the purchase price was phased out.<sup>103</sup> Not all members of Congress were positive about this change. For some legislators, the cuts to offset ending the purchase price did not go far enough toward budget neutrality. Southern Democrats wanted to lower benefits while maintaining the purchase price, something they framed as keeping the program closer to its original intent and more cost-effective. Representative W.R. Poage (D-TX) urged “this proposal would destroy food stamps, and make this program just another government handout.”<sup>104</sup> Senator Talmadge proposed an alternative to the EPR, dubbed the “15-15 Compromise.” However, this was ignored as “a gimmick intended solely as a compromise which has no theoretical base.”<sup>105</sup> Food assistance was becoming more targeted at poorer

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<sup>102</sup> Beth Osborne Daponte and Shannon Bade, “How the Private Food Assistance Network Evolved: Interactions between Private Responses to Hunger,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 35, No. 4 (December 2006), 675.

<sup>103</sup> For a discussion of Carter and zero-cost budgeting, see Chappell, *The War on Welfare*, 186-187.

<sup>104</sup> Martin Tolchin, “House Backs Carter’s Plan for Free Food Stamps,” *New York Times*, July 28, 1977.

<sup>105</sup> “The ‘15-15 Compromise’ Should be Rejected in the Senate Agriculture Committee,” N.D.; Folder, “Ag. Committee Markup,” Box 4, Box 4; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. The “15-15 Compromise” would

recipients and providing lower benefits, serving as a sign of the times to come when helping only the “truly needy” would dominate discussions of welfare.

Tied in with debates about ending the purchase requirement were changes in budget rules. If Carter was serious about ending the purchase requirement, Representative Dawson Mathis (D-GA) argued this needed to be accompanied by the reintroduction of program spending caps. Spending caps would ensure that Congress, not program administrators and regulatory writers in the USDA, could control program expenditures.<sup>106</sup> It was also argued spending caps would smooth program functions in Congress.

The cap, set at \$5.8 billion for FY 1978, passed over criticism from the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition. This committee made two arguments against capping food stamps. First, other programs in the farm bill including most agricultural subsidies were not similarly capped, functioning instead as true entitlements. Why categorize food stamps differently? Second, they argued the FSP would no longer respond naturally to changes in the macroeconomy. Instead, Congress would have to step in and change appropriations.<sup>107</sup> The committee expanded on this, playing out a scenario where food stamps would not be able to serve everyone eligible:

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lower a recipient’s purchase price to 15 percent of net income and lower the bonus coupon value by 15 percent. “Under the EPR the provision of a nutritionally adequate diet through the coupon allotments was traded off so that people could receive their bonus food stamps for free. . . . Under the ‘15-15 compromise,’ however, recipients would get the worst of both parts of the trade-off: they would neither receive a nutritionally adequate diet through the coupon allotment nor would they obtain their coupon allotments for free.” See “EPR Versus the So-Called ‘15-15 Compromise’,” n.d.; Box 4; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>106</sup> King, *Budgeting Entitlements*, 81.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

What would happen if unemployment again rose and the food stamp rolls swelled? For every 1% increase in the unemployment rate food stamp participation increases 500,000-750,000. There is no commodity program in place any longer to serve as a back-up. ... If a cap is legislated, the administration could not simply come to the Congress for a supplemental appropriation as they do now. The authorization would also have to be amended and that could not be done for the present fiscal year due to the procedure of the Budget Act. The food stamp program is a counter-cyclical program that is immediately responsive to changes in economic conditions. The cap would completely destroy that feature of the program.<sup>108</sup>

In the absence of program reform allowing for appropriations up to the level of need, the FSP once again required supplemental appropriations to keep pace with growing demand.<sup>109</sup> The budget politics of uncapping and capping food stamp authorizations demonstrates the fragile nature of the food welfare and farm accord. While Congress had been willing to pass supplemental appropriations before the era of entitlement budgeting in the FSP, what would happen if food welfare legislators had to compete, instead of cooperate, with farm interests? It is unlikely both sides would be dealt outcomes they liked. Budget caps did not smooth functions around the FSP in Congress.

Budget caps made regular program operation precarious, giving power to those enforcing delays and creating an “opportunity for brinksmanship.”<sup>110</sup> The 1977 Food Stamp Act appropriated \$6.2 billion per year for FY 1980 and 1981. However, this was not enough to meet growing demand during the recession coupled with rising food costs. Instead of automatically increasing spending to meet need, “essential welfare benefits became hostage

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<sup>108</sup> Memo, Kathleen Bishop and Marshall Matz to George McGovern, “Food Stamps – Title XII,” August 1, 1977; Folder, “FS House-Senate Conf 1977,” Box 4, Box 4; Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>109</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry after All These Years*, 134.

<sup>110</sup> King, *Budgeting Entitlements*, 93.

to non-welfare purposes. ... The politics of ensuring a minimal diet to the deserving poor households was excessively complicated and food stamp allotments were sometimes inappropriately threatened.”<sup>111</sup> While the caps seemed necessary to regain control over the program budget, they also signaled a change in thinking about welfare spending. Food stamp expenditures once again became subject to what was politically possible, framed increasingly in terms of the available budget. By 1977, the FSP was subject to social spending in an age of limits.

### **Changing Terms of Debate: From “Error Rates” to Fraud and Abuse**

Efforts to change public food welfare were not an attempt to back away altogether from public food provision, but to put boundaries around public responsibility. Ford failed programmatically in enacting the majority of changes he proposed for food welfare programs. That is not to say his efforts had no impact. The idea of balancing the budget and conservative ideology led to a shift in language around food welfare programs, in particular for food stamps. And President Ford was not alone in making assertions about a food assistance system that had lost its way.

California Governor Ronald Reagan asserted the food stamp program had moved so far away from its original intention as to be unrecognizable. In his “Blueprint for National Welfare Reform,” he described food stamp regulations as being much more lax than other welfare programs leading students, single mothers, and striking workers to receive more than

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.



their fair share.<sup>112</sup> Reagan sent a copy of this report to President Ford, arguing the “incredible laxity in federal food stamp requirements” needed to be addressed at the national level. Further, Reagan echoed Ford on the point the food stamp program had far outgrown its original purpose.<sup>113</sup> Ford’s Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) agreed with this assessment.

According to the CEA, “Under existing legislation and current operating practices, USDA food assistance (welfare) programs have become excessively expensive in relation to the net additional nutritional benefits delivered to recipients.”<sup>114</sup> As discussed in the section prior, Ford’s CEA suggested raising the purchase price to save money on the FSP overall. The CEA’s suggestion to raise the purchase price, and Ford’s agreement, demonstrate resistance to the dynamics of expansion built into the revised FSP. Food stamps transformed from having “error rates” to being sites of widespread waste, fraud, and abuse, indicating changing opinions about the deservingness of food welfare recipients, and hence, the proper role for public food provision.

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<sup>112</sup> Ronald Reagan, “California’s Blueprint for National Welfare Reform: Proposals for the Nation’s Food Stamp and Aid to Families with Dependent Children Programs,” September 1974, Sacramento, CA; *i*.

<sup>113</sup> The program, Reagan described, was founded on “the assumption of the necessity to distribute *food surpluses*,” continuing on that these surpluses “no longer exist and probably never will again ...” Digitized letter, Governor Ronald Reagan to President Gerald R. Ford, “Welfare Reform,” December 20, 1974, Folder “Welfare Reform — Ronald Reagan Letter and Report,” Box 13, Richard B. Cheney Files; Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561608.pdf>.

<sup>114</sup> Memo, Dennis H. Wood to Dean Burch, Roy Ash, Ken Cole, Bill Timmons, Bill Seidman, and Gary SeEVERS, “Possible Reforms in USDA Food Assistance Programs,” September 23, 1974; Folder, “Alan Greenspan Files: Food (2),” Box 45, Council of Economic Advisers; Gerald R. Ford Library.

In the early 1970s, most observers described problems in the FSP as administrative shortcomings. Dubbed “error rates,” local or national administrators took the fall for any issues with the program. News clippings from *The Baltimore Sun* in December 1973 discussed the food stamp program’s error rate. One headline ran, “Group Doubts Error Rate in Welfare.” Another *Sun* headline read, “Trim welfare errors, Mandel warns.”<sup>115</sup> Even when critiquing the program, the author used the more neutral language of error rates. Referring to the error rate was not just the practice in Baltimore; Ford’s Council of Economic Advisers used this formulation, too, when discussing the food stamp program, “audits reveal high error rate (certifying ineligible and excessive bonus payments).”<sup>116</sup> In each of these cases, it was not individual food stamp recipients who were at fault. Instead, the problems stemmed from issues in food stamp program administration.

But this terminology shifted abruptly. By mid-decade, the food stamp program was cited as rife with waste and abuse. And instead of blaming administrators, reports blamed food stamp recipients for the majority of these ills. Shocked shoppers told stories of stamps being used to buy luxury items like lobster or to purchase ineligible goods, such as alcohol. This bad publicity contributed to negative attitudes about food stamps. Jeffrey Berry, in his legislative history of the FSP, notes “the press, which had been the hunger lobby’s most

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<sup>115</sup> “Trim welfare errors, Mandel warns,” December 5, 1973, *The Sun* and Sharon Dickerson, “Group Doubts Error Rate in Welfare,” December 1, 1973, *Evening Sun*; Folder, “Welfare 1973 December,” Box 67, Series 75, Record Group 48: Department of Housing and Community Development; Baltimore City Archives.

<sup>116</sup> Memo, Dennis H. Wood to Dean Burch, Roy Ash, Ken Cole, Bill Timmons, Bill Seidman, and Gary SeEVERS, “Possible Reforms in USDA Food Assistance Programs,” September 23, 1974; Folder, “Alan Greenspan Files: Food (2),” Box 45, Council of Economic Advisers; Gerald R. Ford Library.

potent resource, now became a powerful weapon in the hands of the opposition.”<sup>117</sup> Turning the blame away from the structure of the program onto individuals created an opening for attacks on food stamps, and changed the tone of conversation around food welfare generally.

Beginning in March 1975, local news outlets picked up increasing numbers of stories on food stamp fraud. The *Pittsburgh Press* ran, “One-Fourth Get Food Stamps Illegally, U.S. Survey Hints,” while the *San Diego Union* lamented program mismanagement in the article, “Fiscal Albatross: Food Stamp Waste Escalates.”<sup>118</sup> By the end of the year, *Newsweek* ran “Food Stamp Furor,” a story on mismanagement and other problems in the food stamp program. This piece noted that the economic squeeze on everyone was likely to blame for increased scrutiny on the FSP. The article’s author reported that “charges of abuse and fraud have also increased, and food stamps, as the most visible form of public aid, have incurred the special wrath of the hard-pressed middle class.”<sup>119</sup> While this part of the analysis was less negative than the two local news stories, the top of the *Newsweek* piece highlighted all the ways families with relatively high incomes could qualify for the food stamp program. Further, this story ran during the week of key food stamp committee hearings where Ford’s Cabinet members took an increasingly oppositional stance to the FSP. Discussions of fraud and abuse began to replace the more value-neutral language of error rates.

One particularly powerful critic of the FSP was William Simon, Ford’s Treasury Secretary. In testimony before the Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, he

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<sup>117</sup> Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 82.

<sup>118</sup> “One-Fourth,” *Pittsburgh Press*, March 2, 1975; “Fiscal Albatross,” *San Diego Union*, March 9, 1975; WE 10-4 Executive, White House Central Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>119</sup> “Food Stamp Furor,” *Newsweek*, October 20, 1975; Folder, WE 27 Executive, White House Central Files; Gerald R. Ford Library. The copy of this article in the Ford Library has stamped across the top in red block letters, “The President Has Seen.”

described all the ways “chiselers and con artists” could take advantage of lax procedures of the FSP, which he said “by its very nature, is prone to abuse.”<sup>120</sup> This shift in language signals the beginning of a new approach to food stamps. If the program was rife with fraud and abuse, then the nation had an obligation to tighten up the program and ensure only those truly in need received benefits. A letter from a constituent to Senator Dole echoed these concerns about food stamp recipients, asking that people using food stamps use separate checkout lines in the grocery store. This would “eliminate the close contact between those who approach the checkout counter with a baby on one hip, three more hanging on the dress tail, a cigarette in the mouth and a handful of food stamps.”<sup>121</sup> This demeaning representation was becoming more common by mid-decade. However, pro-food welfare groups balked at these assertions, trying to refute stereotypes of food stamp users with statistics.

The Maryland Food Committee responded to rising accounts of FSP abuse. “many people seem to be concerned about recipients driving up to supermarkets in Cadillacs and purchasing sirloin steaks, butter and other expensive fare and then returning to their palatial homes to devour their purchases, ripping off the government and hard-working taxpayers as they go. LET US SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT.” This column closed with key findings from a 1976 USDA study of the FSP, including characteristics of food stamp recipients. 78

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<sup>120</sup> Secretary of Treasury William Simon devotes 50+ pages to talk of food stamp fraud in testimony, including an annex of excerpts from selected fraud cases. These thirty, hand selected examples demonstrated the myriad ways the program could be abused. See: Annex to William E. Simon, Testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, October 21, 1975; Folder, “Welfare (1),” Box 12, Spencer Johnson Files; Gerald R. Ford Library.

<sup>121</sup> Letter, Anonymous to Robert J. Dole, October 28, 1975; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Constituent Relations, 1969-1996; Series 4, Folder 11, “Subject - Agriculture, Food Stamps, 1975-1976,” Box 229; Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

percent of recipients had no liquid assets, 81 percent lived below the poverty line, and more than half of food stamp recipients were clients under the age of 18.<sup>122</sup> In contrast to the stereotype of the welfare queen and food stamp cheat, data supported the picture that most food stamp recipients had incomes below the poverty line and a majority of people served were children. The press was no longer solely reporting this side of the story, though.

The lexical shift from error rates to fraud and abuse demonstrates how new ways of thinking about food stamps took hold by the mid-1970s, illustrating the political limits of food assistance enacted outside a strictly legislative process. As the news articles above illustrate, the media increasingly backed up conservative accounts of abuse in the food stamp program. These representations gave credence to narrowing ideas about the scope of public provision. By 1975, the window of opportunity to enact freedom from hunger had closed.

## **Conclusion**

The numbers make it appear that Nixon, Ford, and Carter were willing partners in plans to eradicate domestic hunger. However, this narrative of program growth hides a story of fierce contestation in all areas of food welfare. Battles over the scope and purpose of food welfare took place in Congress, but also outside the legislative process. Debates over food welfare, however hidden, had lasting impacts. Newly entrenched ideas and language transformed public food provision from a positive example of welfare spending to one of massive federal overreach, rife with fraud and abuse.

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<sup>122</sup> Maryland Food Committee, *Food and Poverty Notes*, Vol. II no. 1 (December 1977); William Donald Schaefer Mayoral Papers, Folder, "Food Stamp Program 1977," Box 306; Baltimore City Archives.

The 1970s were a pivotal decade for food welfare programs, one where the boundaries of public responsibility were redrawn. Within the span of just a few years the promise to end hunger for all transformed to a focus to serve only the “truly needy.” During this decade political and public opinion began to turn on the food stamp program, demonstrating that program growth does not equate to program stability. In emerging competition between demands for food program expansion and budget austerity, policies of the 1970s tended towards austerity. Administrations enacted austerity in differing degrees. The 1970s served as a “critical decade” where public responsibility to provide for the nutritional needs of the nation narrowed, part of the shift toward a very different public/private reconfiguration. Ford’s attempts at ideologically based policymaking, while unsuccessful, paved the way for future public cuts. During the 1980s, struggles over the politics of food welfare would become more radically ideological under the administration of President Ronald Reagan.

## Chapter Four

### “A triumph of ideology over evidence”: Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Disentitlement

On September 21, 1981, the *Chicago Tribune* published an article on proposed changes to the national school lunch program. Entitled “Mommy, what kind of plant does ketchup grow on?,” the article highlighted new school lunch nutrition guidelines drafted by the USDA under the Reagan administration.<sup>1</sup> Under the proposed regulations, different foods could “count” for traditional meal requirements; but it was the recategorization of ketchup as a vegetable that grabbed the public’s attention. A number of prominent periodicals, including the *Washington Post*, ran cover stories about the new policy, all lambasting the idea that ketchup could be counted as a vegetable.<sup>2</sup> Even the condiment scion, Republican Senator Henry J. Heinz the 3<sup>rd</sup>, weighed in on the issue on the Senate floor. According to Heinz, “under no circumstances could ketchup be considered a vegetable,” to which he added that he knew something about ketchup after working in the family business.<sup>3</sup> By September 26<sup>th</sup>, the USDA was forced to retract these proposed regulations after Reagan changed his tune, denouncing the proposed rules he had just a few days prior supported.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Phillips, “Du Jour: Mommy, what kind of plant does ketchup grow on?” *Chicago Tribune*, September 21, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Goodman, “Reagan’s Nouvelle Cuisine for Kids, *Washington Post*, September 15, 1981. This same piece ran in the *Los Angeles Times* under the title “Eat Less and Like It” on the same day. See also Tom Vesey, “School Lunches: Fewer Customers for Shrinking Fare: Paying More for Less,” *Washington Post*, September 17, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Albin Krebs Thomas, “Notes on People: A Senator Has the Last Word on Ketchup,” *New York Times*, September 26, 1981.

Although public outcry led to the disavowal of the USDA's 1981 school lunch rules, the ketchup debate opens up the broader conversation about public food provision during the Reagan era. The ketchup debate illustrates the lengths to which the Reagan administration was prepared to go to shrink food assistance programs, as well as the inconspicuous ways these changes were put into place. Rewriting regulatory rules, along with freezing inflation indexing, narrowing eligibility criteria, and mandating lower budget caps were just a few of the tactics the Reagan administration used to narrow the scope of food provision. And all of these changes created a new relationship between public and private sector provision, part of a broader politics of disentitlement. An opinion piece described the Reagan administration's approach to hunger as "a triumph of ideology over evidence."<sup>4</sup> What else could explain the declaration of ketchup as a vegetable? The Reagan administration sought to change not only the classification of ketchup as a vegetable, but the meaning of need and deservingness, shifting the question from *how* to provide public food aid to ask *if* it was necessary at all.

In this chapter and the next, the framing of hunger transforms from a national problem requiring robust public programs to a temporary emergency, ideal for private and charitable interventions. Conservative politicians redefined hunger as an individual failing, one that could be solved largely through an increased willingness to work. This reflects how Reagan-era changes in food welfare were different in kind, not just extent, from the decade prior. The politics of disentitlement went beyond austerity politics, forcing a reconfiguration of public/ private partnerships. Limits on public food welfare were not due to limits of the macroeconomy, which had characterized the austerity of the Ford, and to a lesser degree Carter, administration. Nevertheless, framing hunger as an individual problem belied the

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<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Samuels, "To Alleviate Hunger," *New York Times*, January 13, 1984.



reality of increasing need at a structural and systemic level. According to this new approach, the difference from lost public funds was to be made up by private charity, part of a larger, ideologically driven project delegitimizing a right to public food assistance. The rest of the chapter follows the four tools of disentanglement: budget cuts, administrative changes, legislative changes, and the reconfiguration of the private sector. Each of these tools had been used prior, but at a different scale and for different ends, marking a key difference between austerity and disentanglement.

### **The Politics of Disentanglement**

This chapter argues the Reagan administration marks a break with past efforts to cut food welfare spending. Presidential administrations of the 1970s opened the door to food welfare cuts, contributing to program instability. But instead of shrinking programs, the Reagan administration made changes in the fundamental nature of public food provision, supported by a legislature and judiciary more amenable to ideologically motivated attempts to shrink welfare budgets as well as the size of the federal state. Hunger was redefined as outside the scope of public responsibility for all but the poorest. And even then, the administration undermined the legitimacy of a right to food assistance, focusing on the responsibilities of citizens to do everything in their power to avoid welfare instead of their rights to public aid.

At first glance, the changes to food welfare programs in the 1980s map onto austerity politics of the decade prior. Budget cuts during the 1980s severely impacted the ability of poor individuals to purchase food and of the private sector to meet the needs of the hungry, just as under Nixon, Ford, and Carter during a decade of recession. However,

although the mode of change appeared similar, the Reagan administration did not merely extend or expand these cuts. Reagan highlighted the necessity of budget cuts to bring down the federal deficit. Instead, over his term, and contrary to the stated aims of austerity politics, the deficit *rose*.<sup>5</sup> Increased spending overall with targeted cuts to social programs demonstrates a different approach to welfare reform. Alice O'Connor describes Ronald Reagan's approach to welfare as "explicitly ideological," and "temporary, highly targeted, deliberately ungenerous to the able-bodied poor, and unafraid to weed out all 'chiselers' ...."<sup>6</sup> Reagan sought to enact fundamental change in the function of food welfare programs, and not only because food welfare programs had become too expensive.

The Reagan agenda became more than just a continuation of a trend toward austerity with its focus on minimizing rights. Reagan's dismissal of rights was reflected in increased reliance, at least rhetorically, on the private sector to meet social welfare needs. Reagan explained, "the truth is we've let government take away many things we once considered were really ours to do voluntarily..."<sup>7</sup> However, this formulation ignored the ways "private" and "charitable" action had grown dependent upon public subsidy. Peter Hall identifies, much to the chagrin of the New Right, the voluntary sector was not an alternative to the welfare state, but in fact was its creation. Anywhere from 30 to 60 percent of revenues in the voluntary sector came from government contracts following the 1967 Social Security

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State?: Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 154-155.

<sup>6</sup> Alice O'Connor, "The False Dawn of Poor Law Reform: Nixon, Carter, and the Quest for a Guaranteed Income," *Journal of Policy History* 10, no. 1 (1998), 124.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Program for Economic Recovery," September 24, 1981, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/92481d>.

Amendments.<sup>8</sup> The welfare state was not the vast bureaucracy it appeared to be. By 1980, federal and state contracts with nonprofit organizations made up a significant portion of all social service spending. Therefore, conservatives calling for a return to purely private welfare provision upset a longstanding symbiosis between public and private welfare provision.

It had been Reagan's intent all along to "free" Americans from the confines of overbearing national state and welfare programs that trapped beneficiaries in what conservative critics called a cycle of dependency. In "A Time for Choosing," his speech supporting Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign, Reagan critiqued federal intervention in social problems. On the jobs issue, Reagan declared, "for three decades, we have sought to solve the problems of unemployment through government planning, and the more the plans fail, the more the planners plan."<sup>9</sup> Next, he equated welfare to a false solution for social ills, "those who would trade our freedom for the soup kitchen of the welfare state have told us that they have a utopian solution of peace without victory."<sup>10</sup> In Reagan's formulation, welfare was the antithesis of freedom; instead, it bred dependency.

Related to ideas of freedom and dependency, Reagan focused on the deservingness of welfare recipients. In his Blueprint for Welfare Reform proposing changes to AFDC and the food stamp program, Reagan described how permissive programs channeled assistance to the undeserving. Welfare benefits conferred rights without, according to Reagan, asking for any responsibilities of citizenship. Food stamps for college students, he claimed, were a way

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Dobkin Hall, *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector and Other Essays on Philanthropy, Voluntarism, and Nonprofit Organizations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address on Behalf of Senator Barry Goldwater: 'A Time for Choosing'," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/276336>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

for adolescents to leave home without repercussion. In addition, food stamps forced “the government to abandon the neutral role it should play in labor-management disputes” by providing benefits to strikers during their first month on strike.<sup>11</sup> In these examples, a welfare program allowed students and strikers rights or freedoms, to be independent of their parents or disagree with their employer, instead of fulfilling their societal responsibilities to be good children and workers. Providing welfare to the undeserving had to end; Reagan remarked the “incredible laxity in federal food stamp requirements” needed to be addressed at the national level.<sup>12</sup> In a February 1981 joint address to Congress, Reagan promised “the food stamp program will be restored to its original purpose, to assist those without resources to purchase sufficient nutritional food.” This, he went on, could be done while cutting costs by “removing from eligibility those who are not in real need or who are abusing the program.”<sup>13</sup> This line of thinking redefined welfare not as a right of citizenship, but a benefit to be conferred only on the deserving.

Removing an entitlement to food assistance was made easier by the fact these programs were already far from an entitlement. Examples from the 1970s demonstrate even when expansive rules regarding eligibility or education provisions were written into law, public food assistance was far from serving everyone eligible. Limited local administrative funds meant even with adequate federal funding it would be impossible to certify everyone

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<sup>11</sup> Digitized Letter, Governor Ronald Reagan to President Gerald R. Ford, “Welfare Reform,” December 20, 1974; Folder “Welfare Reform — Ronald Reagan Letter and Report,” Box 13, Richard B. Cheney Files; Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561608.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Message to the Congress Transmitting the Proposed Package on the Program for Economic Recovery,” February 18, 1981, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/246570>; quoted in King, *Budgeting Entitlements*, 116.

eligible. At the national level, USDA administrators of food programs actively fought against the expansive element of food programs, for example Secretary of Agriculture Butz's attempt to negate the requirement to "adequately" advertise food stamps. School lunch serves as another example of the distance from current program operations and an entitlement. There was no statute requiring schools to take part in the National School Lunch Program, and due to costs to begin offering lunch, it was often the poorest schools and districts that did not opt in to participate. In contrast, in the UK beginning in 1944 there was a statutory requirement that all public schools provide meals. These meals were provided free to students based on national eligibility criteria, or charged a small fee that was set nationally and until the 1970s did not even cover the cost of ingredients.<sup>14</sup> U.S. food welfare programs provided benefits for some, and without any real requirement to meet the needs of all of the hungry.

The limited nature of a food welfare entitlement, combined with a conservative, ideological approach to welfare, changed the realm of the possible in public food assistance. The dichotomies of Reagan-era disentanglement, pitting rights against responsibilities and freedom in contrast to dependency, transformed deservingness. The shifting calculus of deservingness led to a smaller role for public intervention in food aid, leading to a radical reconfiguration of public and private interests in food welfare provision.

### **Budget Politics in the Service of Disentitlement:**

#### **The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981**

The Reagan administration used the budget as a tool to disentitle food welfare recipients. Cuts were not enacted through reform on a program-by-program basis. Instead,

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<sup>14</sup> Nan Berger, *The School Meals Service: From its Beginnings to the Present Day* (Plymouth, UK: Northcote House, 1990), 19.

Congress reformed welfare at the behest of the Reagan administration through the budget. The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) of 1981 served as the key mechanism to enact cuts in welfare expenditures. OBRA slashed federal antipoverty funds and restricted eligibility rules, ostensibly keeping only the “truly needy” on welfare rolls.<sup>15</sup> School lunch expenditures were slashed - especially for students from families above the poverty line, numerous small food programs were slated for elimination, and food stamp rolls *shrank* during the 1981-2 recession.<sup>16</sup> Expenditures in the FSP fell from \$11.2 to \$10.8 billion between 1981 and 1982 while average monthly participation in the FSP declined from a peak of 22.4 million in 1981 to 21.6 million by 1983. These figures were surprising in the context of rising unemployment. Unemployment rose from 6.5 percent to over 10 percent in these two years, marking the only time food stamps have not served as a countercyclical spending measure and grown to combat recession.<sup>17</sup> Reagan sought to sharply reduce budget outlays over the next five years, accomplished by large cutbacks in nondefense spending.

A congressional change during the 1970s instituted a new process of budget controls into the appropriations process. The Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974 created the Senate Budget Committee with the express purpose to provide enforcement for budget decisions. In Congress, appropriating money, where funds are actually disbursed to agencies, is carried out in a separate committee from one authorizing funds to be spent.

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<sup>15</sup> Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 242.

<sup>16</sup> Ardith Maney, *Still Hungry After All these Years* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 132-136.

<sup>17</sup> USDA, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Costs,” <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/SNAPsummary.pdf>; Mike Shedlock, “The Food Stamp Recession,” *Finance.townhall.com*, accessed April 14, 2014, [http://finance.townhall.com/columnists/mikeshedlock/2011/12/08/the\\_food\\_stamp\\_recession](http://finance.townhall.com/columnists/mikeshedlock/2011/12/08/the_food_stamp_recession)

The Budget Committee was to reconcile spending ceilings with revenue totals to ensure budget resolutions did not have unforeseen consequences on the deficit.<sup>18</sup> The Budget Committee “instructed” standing committees to report when any legislation or amendments would change the budget, and required these changes to not go beyond a prescribed spending cap. Omnibus budget reconciliation set these budget ceilings for standing committees through a concurrent resolution drafted by the Senate Committee on the Budget and passed by both houses of Congress. A resolution would lay out what spending different committees of Congress could authorize over a set period of time in order to meet budget deficit reduction targets, outlining how much each committee would have to cut from among their programs.

Congressional budget reconciliation was a relatively new legislative tool, but had been used prior to Reagan entering office. Under Carter, Congress enacted the 1980 budget reconciliation bill as an attempt to balance the 1981 budget. Carter’s OBRA outlined cuts on the order of \$5 billion, \$500 million of which was to come from programs of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry.<sup>19</sup> The majority of these savings, around \$400 million, were to come from changes in the school lunch program. Carter employed OBRA as an austerity measure explicitly to balance the budget. He described the 1980 budget as “lean and austere” and that it would “disappoint those who seek expanded federal efforts across the board.”<sup>20</sup> While the spending package included cuts to food welfare

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<sup>18</sup> Richard F Fenno, *The Emergence of a Senate Leader: Pete Domenici and the Reagan Budget* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1991), 51–2.

<sup>19</sup> Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1980, Pub. L. 96-499, 94 Stat. 3658 (1980).

<sup>20</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Budget Message to the Congress Transmitting the Fiscal Year 1980 Budget,” The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/249487>.

programs, few of these changes would permanently impact food welfare spending. For example, after decreasing spending in the school lunch program in 1981 to meet budget targets, OBRA of 1980 had a 9 percent escalator clause in place to bring spending back up in FY 1982.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the use of OBRA as a tool of austerity, and one that would restore some funding, the Reagan administration's use of OBRA changed the purpose of this tool. The *Congressional Quarterly* characterized Carter's use of reconciliation as "far more modest in scale and limited in purpose than Reagan's assault on federal spending."<sup>22</sup> Unlike Carter's \$5 billion in cuts, OBRA of 1981 required \$36.6 billion in budget cuts for FY 1982.<sup>23</sup> This came in slightly under the original proposal for \$41 billion in budget cuts outlined in the Reagan administration's budget announcement in February 1981. However, almost half of the total spending reductions, \$16 billion, were to come from programs aimed primarily at the poor.<sup>24</sup>

#### *OBRA 1981 and the Impact on Food Welfare*

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen J. Hiemstra, "The Impact of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981," *School Food Service Review* 6, no. 2 (1982), 78.

<sup>22</sup> "Fiscal 1982 Reconciliation Cuts: \$35.2 Billion," in *CQ Almanac 1981*, 37th ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1982), 256-66, <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/cqal81-1172403>.

<sup>23</sup> Robert D. Behn, "Cutback Budgeting," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 4, no. 2 (Winter, 1985), 163. The Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry oversees the farm bill, which includes most federal nutrition programs. Recommended cuts in budget outlays for this committee were \$1.9 billion for FY 1982, \$2.6 billion in 1983, and \$3 billion by FY 1984. From Ruth R. Harkin and Thomas R. Harkin, "'Roosevelt to Reagan' - Commodity Programs and the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981," *Drake Law Review* 31, no. 3 (1982): 509.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Behr and Spencer Rich, "Reagan Calls for \$41.4 Billion in Spending Cuts for Fiscal 1982," *Washington Post*, February 19, 1981.



OBRA required dramatic cuts in food welfare budgets in order to meet reduced budget targets. OBRA transformed eligibility requirements and spending across scores of welfare programs overnight. These changes were carried out at the level of “the devil in the details,” through technical changes which flew under the radar of most, but not individuals who were no longer entitled to food assistance. Ardith Maney notes making these changes through the budget was “not surprising” since “White House officials did not have enough political support in Congress to reshape social programs outright through the legislative process.”<sup>25</sup> Never mind these convoluted methods; OBRA had a devastating impact on the functions of food welfare programs.

### *Eligibility rules*

Changing eligibility criteria and more punitive policies pushed millions of formerly eligible food welfare beneficiaries off the rolls. Rules outlined in OBRA tightened eligibility requirements as a way to create cost savings in food welfare programs. The most straightforward option was to lower the income ceiling on eligibility. The gross income eligibility standard was set at 130 percent of the poverty line; prior to this there had been no national cutoff. This change in the income eligibility standard alone was predicted to knock 400,000 households from the program, saving \$275 million – or \$22 per person per month.<sup>26</sup> OBRA used other tools to limit eligibility indirectly. New rules lowered the earned income deduction and froze shelter deductions. In both cases, this meant more income could be counted in determining eligibility, making fewer people eligible. This change increased the

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<sup>25</sup> Maney, *Still Hungry*, 134.

<sup>26</sup> Food Research & Action Center, “Alert- Reagan Budget Cuts,” February 19, 1981; Records of the Center for Poverty Studies, Series I, Box 6A, Folder “FS Hist/ Fed Budget Cut Effects;” University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

effective “tax” on income. Small increases, or even no change at all, could remove eligibility, or shrink benefits substantially.

Broad categories of eligibility changed as well. Ending a decade of debate, OBRA categorically prohibited strikers from participating if they had not been eligible before the strike.<sup>27</sup> This closed the long-standing issue, as Reagan saw it, of the government not being a neutral arbiter in strike proceedings and actively helping strikers. All told, shifting eligibility rules meant an estimated 1 million participants – out of 20 million total – were no longer eligible for food stamps, and many of those that remained saw absolute benefit reductions. Further, OBRA cashed out the FSP in Puerto Rico entirely, turning the program into a block grant.<sup>28</sup> While this was done on a one-year, temporary basis, the findings from this legislative experiment were to inform potential future block granting of the program in the rest of the United States.

Beyond changing eligibility criteria, OBRA put in place new rules that rigged administrative errors and delays in favor of the federal administrators, keeping food stamps out of people’s pockets. First, the USDA began prorating the initial month’s allotment if a household was not enrolled for the entire month. If a family registered on the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month instead of the 1<sup>st</sup>, their benefits for the first month would be cut by one-third. Next, OBRA allowed states to recoup *accidental* overpayments by cutting the value of coupons in later allotments. Before this had been allowed in cases of fraud. However, now this practice

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<sup>27</sup> Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, Pub. L. 97-35, 95 Stat. 357 (1981), [http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pl\\_97-35.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pl_97-35.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Fraker Barbara Devaney, and Edward Cavin, "An Evaluation of the Effect of Cashing Out Food Stamps on Food Expenditures," *The American Economic Review* 76, no. 2 (1986): 230-34.

was allowed when it was *not* the fault of the recipient.<sup>29</sup> These two punitive measures rigged the administrative complexity of the food stamp program further out of favor from recipients, even when they were not at fault for certification delays or overpayments.

OBRA also imposed harsher penalties for illegal activity. It expanded reasons for disqualification from the program to include any action that violated a State statute and imposed tougher penalties for fraud and abuse.<sup>30</sup> After three strikes, families could be permanently and irrevocably terminated from the FSP. In every case, the benefit of the doubt now fell to state or federal administrators. The poor themselves would have to fight for benefit restoration in the case of being misjudged for fraud. In the balance between rights and responsibilities, harsher punishments emphasized the responsibilities of beneficiaries of food welfare programs, minimizing their related rights.

An entitlement to food receded further with the delinking of benefit levels from inflation. OBRA created savings in the FSP by slowing the rate of growth of coupon allotments. Through 1981, FS benefits had been “uprated” every six months. This meant coupon values would be adjusted to match changes in inflation twice per year.<sup>31</sup> To create savings, Congress stretched the period between inflation indexing.<sup>32</sup> Food stamps would only be uprated every 15 months until 1984, at which point they would be put back on a schedule

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<sup>29</sup> Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, Pub. L. 97-35, 95 Stat. 357 (1981), [http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pl\\_97-35.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pl_97-35.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Food stamp value determined by the cost of a basket of goods, known as the Thrifty Food Plan, not pegged to more general measure of consumer price index (CPI), which was used in calculating benefit values for many other welfare programs.

<sup>32</sup> Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State*, 118.

of annual updates.<sup>33</sup> In the interim, when food prices rose due to inflation, these changes would not be reflected in increased value of food stamps for long periods of time. While this created savings, it also compounded hardship. As food prices rose during the early 1980s, food stamp purchasing power declined and people reliant on stamps were left with relatively fewer benefits.

OBRA created significant savings in the school lunch program, as well. The Reagan administration promised public welfare cutbacks would not affect the “truly needy.” In a White House briefing, Reagan’s press secretary announced seven program areas that would be exempt from the administration’s cost-cutting measures. These included Social Security, Medicare, funds for the VA, and free school meals.<sup>34</sup> However, merely *not* cutting free meals ignored interdependencies between paid and free lunches.

OBRA lowered the subsidy paid to schools for meals purchased at full- and reduced-price, though not by as much as initial proposals outlined. The slight subsidy for paid meals kept more students who paid full-price in the program, who then subsidized free and reduced price meals. Ignoring this, the Reagan administration proposed a radical change, suggesting the USDA end all subsidies in cash and commodities to schools for families with incomes in excess of 185 percent of the federal poverty line, creating savings of close to \$1 billion (\$860 million).<sup>35</sup> However, Congress would hear nothing of this proposal. Members of Congress

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<sup>33</sup> USDA, “From Food Stamps to the Supplemental Nutrition Program: Legislative Timeline,” <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/timeline.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Howell Raines, “Reagan Won’t Cut 7 Social Programs that Aid 80 Million,” *New York Times*, Feb 11, 1981.

<sup>35</sup> “Child Nutrition Cutbacks Proposed by Reagan Administration, FY 198;” Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Legislative Relations, 1969-1996; Series 6, Box 132, Folder 6 "Nutrition - Bolton - Child Nutrition, 1981;" Senator Robert and Elizabeth Dole Congressional Library, Lawrence, KS.

argued, at the insistence of local school lunch administrators, complete elimination of general assistance would “cripple” school lunch programs. In 1981, schools were already subject to a 40 percent reduction in Federal assistance due to Carter’s 1980 OBRA. Further cuts to subsidies in costs for paying students would push the price of a meal up dramatically, leading to high dropout rates and the potential end of school meal service.<sup>36</sup>

Heeding the concerns of Congress, Reagan stepped back this demand, but still cut cash and commodity subsidies across school meals. Instead of the draconian removal of all subsidies for paying students, OBRA removed half of the subsidy for students from families with incomes above 185 percent of the poverty line. This fell from 20 cents to 10 cents, which was a big drop considering roughly 55 percent of school meals served were to students paying full price students. In the reduced price category, the cash subsidy dropped from 90 cents to 70 cents, accompanied by a slight uptick in free meal subsidy, from \$1.11 to \$1.13.<sup>37</sup> The commodity value supplied across all meals dropped by one-third, from 16 cents to 11 cents. With cuts to both the cash and commodity subsidy, schools were going to have to find ways to do more with less, and fast. As a result of the cutbacks in subsidies, between April 1981 and April 1982 federal spending on the school lunch program declined 15 percent.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Senators Robert Dole, Jesse Helms, Thad Cochran, S.I. Hayakawa, Paula Hawkins, Rudy Boschwitz, Mark Andrews, and Robert W. Jepsen to James Baker III, October 27, 1981; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Legislative Relations, 1969-1996; Folder 3 ””Nutrition-Bolton - School Lunch - Elimination of Subsidy to Paying Students, 1982,” Box 141; Senator Robert and Elizabeth Dole Congressional Library, Lawrence, KS. See also Marshall Matz, “Bye, School Lunches for the ‘Truly Needy’,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1981.

<sup>37</sup> Hiemstra, “The Impact of OBRA of 1981,” 75.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

Rule changes framed as minor alterations had major impacts on the participation rates for poor students. Eligibility cutoffs for reduced price lunch tightened slightly while income allowed expanded slightly for free meals.<sup>39</sup> While only trimming eligibility by 5 percent for reduced-price meals, changes in the deduction scheme adversely impacted free and reduced-price school lunch enrollments. The removal of deductions, in particular the hardship deduction, cut some families out of free meals even though their income had not changed at all.<sup>40</sup>

A larger impact on school lunch uptake came from the new requirement to include a valid Social Security number on school meal applications. The addition of a SSN – in theory – had no impact on eligibility. The Reagan administration initially pushed to require all districts to verify the eligibility for at minimum 10 percent of their applications for free- and reduced-price lunch. However, requiring this posed a problem for undocumented parents or families with incomes near the eligibility cut-offs. Eligibility checks turned inclusion of the SSN into a political act, potentially uncovering students or parents in the country without documentation. However, the administration made no provisions for implementation of these checks and did not even have estimates of the budget impact. Therefore, the language in the final bill merely “encouraged” state or local verification of income claimed.<sup>41</sup> In

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<sup>39</sup> The eligibility criteria for reduced-price lunch changed from 125-190 percent to 130-185 percent of the federal poverty line. The ceiling for free lunches was bumped to 130 percent of the FPL.

<sup>40</sup> Hiemstra, “The Impact of OBRA of 1981,” 74.

<sup>41</sup> “Child Nutrition Cutbacks Proposed by Reagan Administration in FY 82,” n.d.; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Legislative Relations, 1969-1996; Series 6, Box 132, Folder 6 “Nutrition – Bolton - Child Nutrition, 1981;” Robert and Elizabeth Dole Congressional Library, Lawrence, KS.

theory, this provision had no teeth as it would go unenforced, but a study undertaken in late 1982 challenged this assumption.

In December 1982, a study tested the impact of a few changes to the school lunch program, including the impact of requiring a SSN on applications. The report from Applied Systems Management opened with a statement of the applications' cost savings for the federal government. With reduced program eligibility, there were fewer applications to process.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, the author highlighted uncertainty around the impacts of these new requirements. While the application form including a SSN lowered costs, it was impossible to determine whether these lower costs came from preventing fraud and abuse, or were due to creating barriers stopping otherwise eligible applicants from applying.<sup>43</sup> Requiring a SSN coupled with the fear of income verification led to 7 percent decline in free meal participation between 1981 and 1982.<sup>44</sup>

After being the vehicle for a variety of cuts and measures to limit eligibility, OBRA itself became the reason for future budget conservatism. OBRA, and the budget targets it necessitated, delinked the funding of food welfare programs from changing levels of need based on the broader economy. Welfare spending became contentious not just because

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<sup>42</sup> Applied Management Sciences, Inc., "Income Verification Pilot Project: Phase I: Findings on School Meal Program Participation and Legislative Impact, 1981-1982," December 1, 1982, ii; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Legislative Relations, 1969-1996; Series 6, Box 125, Folder ,3 "Food - Bolton - Nutrition, 1979-1984 [1 of 6];" Robert and Elizabeth Dole Congressional Library, Lawrence, KS.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, iv.

<sup>44</sup> Hiemstra, "Impact of OBRA of 1981," 77.

programs were seen as less beneficial, but as a consequence of being more painful to fund.<sup>45</sup>

Jeffrey Berry, whose work on the FSP came out in 1984, forecast, "... budget deficits projected for coming years will continue to put pressure on large welfare programs like food stamps."<sup>46</sup> Administration officials described these changes, explaining they were simply trying to direct public assistance "toward those who are in need, and not provide it to families with more affluence that don't really need it."<sup>47</sup> OBRA of 1981 changed the realm of the possible. No longer was the basic question of need at the forefront of politicians' minds. Instead, the question became what size of programs government could afford to finance given budget constraints.

*1981 Legislation: The Agriculture and Food Act and Food Stamp Amendments*

Beyond OBRA, cuts in key pieces of legislation governing food welfare programs served as tools in the project of disentanglement. The Food Stamp Act became more punitive, highlighting what citizens owed their government. This followed the shift in language from the 1970s, which moved the onus of responsibility from food stamp administrators onto individuals. The 1981 amendments to the FSA ensured that penalties for fraud, including

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<sup>45</sup> Monica Prasad, *The Politics of Free Markets: The Rise of Neoliberal Economic Policies in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 13. She also discusses the role of the Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA) of 1981, which cut middle-class taxes and was another factor limiting public revenues. Supply-side economics prescribed tax cuts as a way to boost private investment in the economy that would "trickle down" to benefit the rest of society. ERTA made tax code more regressive; the poor were in effect paying for welfare services through their taxes.

<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey M. Berry, *Feeding Hungry People: Rulemaking in the Food Stamp Program* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 151.

<sup>47</sup> Steven R. Weisman, "Reagan Abandons Proposal to Pare School Nutrition," *The New York Times*, September 26, 1981.



finer of up to \$10,000 and up to five years in prison, remained in force until 1985.<sup>48</sup> New food stamp rules imposed harsher punishments on recipients while letting administrators off the hook for any errors. Legislators maintained enforcement mechanisms without guaranteeing funds for the program's future, demonstrating how a right to food was subsumed by the proposed limits of the budget.

Changes in the 1981 Farm Bill and 1981 Food Stamp Act impacted the operation of the food stamp program. Deft use of parliamentary tactics broke apart the farm and food welfare coalition within the farm bill, leaving anti-hunger advocates with less bargaining power in Congress. The 1981 Agriculture and Food Act severed the link between the farm and food lobby that had worked so well in passing legislation that pleased both farm and food welfare legislators in the 1977 Food and Agriculture Act. Unlike the 1977 Act, which reauthorized the food stamp program for four years along with many of the farm provisions in the bill, the 1981 Act only reauthorized the FSP for one year, FY 1982 at \$11.3 billion, meaning welfare advocates and the anti-hunger lobby would have to go it alone in the reauthorization and reappropriation process for funding from 1983 through 1985.<sup>49</sup> This change shattered the 1970s food welfare coalition, which had reached a loose, if begrudging, consensus on the necessity of public food assistance.

### **Uncoupling Public/ Private Food Welfare**

At the same moment that the farm and food welfare coalition broke apart in Congress, conservative forces worked to reshape the voluntary nonprofit sector. Nonprofits had become entwined in the statist project of food provision through funds from federal grants, contracts

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<sup>48</sup> Agriculture and Food Act of 1981, Pub. L. 97-98, 95 Stat. 1213. See section 1334.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. See sec. 1331.

for emergency service provision, and distribution of surplus commodities. Peter Hall described an alternative mode of state development with private organizations, “rather than involving the elaboration of a vast bureaucracy concerned with delivering cultural, educational, health, and social services,” the American welfare state “encouraged the development of a private infrastructure to implement its purposes.”<sup>50</sup> The politics of disentanglement meant these partnerships between private organizations and public supports would be radically restructured, but not without contest and resistance from agencies on the ground. Frontline service providers protested, saying they were left to meet growing need in reaction to the variety of cuts enacted through OBRA and other legislation with fewer resources. These service organizations did not want to become a pawn in the politics of disentanglement. In addition to providing services and food to people in need, the voluntary nonprofit sector weighed whether, and to what degree, they could divert resources to make a case for public provision.

This section explores two different ways private sector actors transformed as public programs shrank. I first trace how emergency pantries reacted to a growing hunger emergency from the late 1970s into the early 1980s. Next, I describe a different kind of private intervention in school meals prompted by the withdrawal of public funds. Regulations allowed, and even encouraged, for-profit businesses to enter school lunchrooms. Both kinds of private action demonstrate a restructuring around the role of nongovernmental organizations in public/ private partnerships.

### *Stretched Emergency Services*

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<sup>50</sup> Hall, *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector*, 62-3.

During the 1970s, emergency service provision expanded along with worsening economic conditions. In Baltimore as in most cities, emergency feeding centers, including churches along with community and homeless shelters, provided grocery bags with a few days' supply of food to individuals and families in desperate need. The Maryland Food Committee (MFC) involved itself in supporting and coordinating these centers by the mid-1970s.<sup>51</sup> Along with emergency assistance, a large focus of the MFC was to frame feeding the hungry as a public responsibility. They recognized the inherent risk "in funding a 'social Band-Aid,'" even when the quick fix was as desperately needed as emergency food. They feared that by helping provide this service, "it [was] possible to mask the real causes of the problem."<sup>52</sup>

The emergency food center coalition, coordinated by the MFC and the Health and Welfare Council of Baltimore, brought together private food distribution centers in Baltimore city along with the city Emergency Services team within the Department of Social Services. The coalition aimed to coordinate efforts and work with the city and state to define the role of these centers. From the outset, the MFC maintained responsibility for feeding the hungry fell to the public sector. During the 1970s, they were very vocal on this point, highlighting public need while also acknowledging a fully state or federally financed anti-hunger program was likely out of reach. So, the MFC lobbied for the next best thing: public funds for private provision. In September 1975, the state of Maryland made private Emergency Centers

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<sup>51</sup> The MFC began in 1969, emerging out of a task force on hunger in the mayor's office, morphing into an interfaith working group on hunger in the city of Baltimore and its surroundings.

<sup>52</sup> "The Maryland Food Committee, Inc., Fifth Annual Report," June 1974; Maryland Conference of Social Welfare Records; Series 6, Box 1, Folder "Maryland Food Committee;" University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

eligible for Purchase of Service Agreements under Title XX of the Social Security Act, providing block grants to social service providers.<sup>53</sup> This infusion of public funds to centers providing emergency services would “guarantee centers a supply of food and would provide some jobs in low-income neighborhoods.”<sup>54</sup> Emergency food services were clearly a partnership between public funding sources and private agencies in Baltimore. However, this alignment between public and private organizations was in flux.

In a city-wide food drive leading up to the holidays in 1975, the MFC expressed reticence at reinforcing the idea that food provision was the duty of the private sector. The organization had formed with the mandate to create systemic change in food provision through legislative and political action. They did not want to be pigeonholed as an organization that only ran food drives, distracting from the structural issues at the root of hunger. When the food drive was proposed to the MFC in October 1975, they emphasized the importance of sending both a political and charitable message, “MFC’s role is to make

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<sup>53</sup> Maryland Food Committee, “Executive Director’s Report,” September 10, 1975; Maryland Conference of Social Welfare Records; Series 6, Box 1, Folder “Maryland Food Committee;” University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives. The 1967 Social Security Amendments reintroduced purchase of service agreements with voluntary organizations, meaning federal and state governments could contract out welfare services through private agencies, providing up to 75 percent matching funds for social services. There was no cap on the amount the federal government would match; and as word circulated among social service providers of their availability, spending on Title IV-A grants grew from \$354 million in 1969 to \$1.69 billion by 1972. In 1972, matching funds for social services were folded into the federal Title XX program. See Andrew J. F Morris, *The Limits of Voluntarism: Charity and Welfare from the New Deal through the Great Society* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 198-199 and Lester M. Salamon, *Partners in Public Service: Government-Nonprofit Relations in the Modern Welfare State* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 70.

<sup>54</sup> Maryland Food Committee, “Executive Director’s Report,” September 10, 1975; Maryland Conference of Social Welfare Records; Series 6, Box 1, Folder, “Maryland Food Committee;” University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

clear that the drive is necessary because the State does not provide adequately – welfare grants are too low and insufficient funds are provided for emergency services.”<sup>55</sup> In the minutes for the following board meeting, some questioned participating in this drive at all, citing concerns that “this drive may be seen as supporting the concept that responsibility for emergency food lies with the private sector – when in fact it belongs with the proper government agencies.”<sup>56</sup>

A 1976 MFC grant application noted that the provision of emergency services, including food, clothing, and housing, was “a tangled mess delivered in bits and pieces by the Department of Social Services, voluntary agencies, ethnic organizations, churches, and others,” going on to say that “there is no clear policy of whether the public or voluntary agencies are the first line of defense.”<sup>57</sup> The stress on these emergency services mounted during the 1970s. A 1977 study in Baltimore City showed that 180,000 people sought emergency food assistance at some point during the year.<sup>58</sup> While need increased, the MFC reflected attitudes that solving hunger was a public problem, not to be shunted onto the private sector which did not have the capacity to meet rising demand.

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<sup>55</sup> Maryland Food Committee, “Minutes,” October 15, 1975; Maryland Conference of Social Welfare Records; Series 6, Box 1, Folder “Maryland Food Committee;” University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> “Preliminary Proposal for Emergency Services Project for Baltimore City by Maryland Conference of Social Concern,” 1976; Maryland Conference of Social Welfare Records; Series 6, Box 1, Folder, “Goldseker Foundation;” University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>58</sup> Andrea Pawlyna, “Food donations ‘banked’ for needy,” *The Baltimore Sun*, November 23, 1980. And this occurred at a time when the population of Baltimore was a little over 800,000, meaning more than 1 in 5 residents relied on emergency food at least once during the year.

Food prices were increasing more quickly than other sectors of the economy. In 1978, food prices rose at an annual percentage rate of 16.4 percent, far higher than consumer price index at 9.3 percent (which had also accelerated from the previous year).<sup>59</sup> Reflecting this, in September 1978 a Gallup Poll found more than three-quarters of Americans believed inflation and the high cost of living was the biggest problem facing the country.<sup>60</sup> In 1979, food prices continued to rise while non-food costs, especially for shelter and utilities, grew more quickly than expected.<sup>61</sup> On the West Coast, the Seattle Coalition of Food Banks described how rising need from food stamp cutbacks in January 1979 translated into double the number of families seeking emergency food. Twenty emergency feeding centers in the city were working to coordinate their efforts and share data. To increase capacity and better coordinate among emergency food centers in the region, the coalition requested funds for two additional staff people in a 1980 community services block grant application, with the hope of getting emergency food to 20,000 families per month. Additional staffers were necessary, according to the application, given the crisis conditions in the region. The application noted there were “enormous numbers of clients, lack of sufficient community donations to purchase food, lack of consistent food resources, and lack of staff to be able to adequately

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<sup>59</sup> W. Carl Biven, *Jimmy Carter's Economy: Policy in an Age of Limits* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 134–135.

<sup>60</sup> Gallup Poll (AIPO), September 1978, USGALLUP.1111.Q03F; Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, accessed via iPOLL.

<sup>61</sup> Food prices had increased 20.7 percent since 1977. Statement of Jim Williams, Deputy USDA Secretary, before Subcommittee on Domestic Marketing, Consumer Relations, and Nutrition, Committee on Agriculture, U.S. House of Representatives,” n.d.; Folder “Food Stamps – Implementing Reform,” Box 34, Christopher Edley Files; Carter Presidential Library.

provide the service of ‘food delivery.’”<sup>62</sup> Worsening economic conditions were compounded by cutbacks to food welfare.

The need for emergency food and services continued to grow nationally through the early 1980s. The press recounted tales of “heat or eat,” where people had to choose between paying heating bills or having money to buy food, or making the equally difficult decisions between food and medicine.<sup>63</sup> All of this put strain on the private, emergency food sector. While there were no overall statistics on emergency food assistance, there was a consensus that “the ability of the nation’s loosely structured system of private food banks to cope with it, will come under more and more scrutiny in the coming months.”<sup>64</sup> Across the nation, emergency food providers demanded Reagan do something about the situation, but with little reaction. Richard Wood, director of an Illinois church group with an emergency feeding arm, took aim directly at the administration for their “fallacious” assumption that the private sector could stretch its dollars to provide more food in the face of public cutbacks.<sup>65</sup>

With welfare and food stamp benefits cut, food banks and pantries across the country saw an uptick in demand throughout 1981. This was noticeable in Chicago after October 1,

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<sup>62</sup> “1980 Block Grant Program Plan: Food Resources Network;” Folder 3, Department of Community Development, Community Development Block Grant Project Records, 1971-1988, Box 29, Record Series 1605-02; Seattle Municipal Archives.

<sup>63</sup> For example, see Ann D. Kirkwood, “Heat or Eat Dilemma Spreading in West: Statewide Groups Springing Up to Fight What Is Called Rising Hunger Problem,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 1980; B. H. Fussell, “Of Farms, Hunger and Poverty,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1979; Vertis Thompson, “Poor Can’t Afford Both Medicine and Food,” *The Skanner*, November 12, 1980; and Leslie Berkman, “Portrait of the Smith Family ...: ... and the 183,000 Others Who Have One Thing in Common--Poverty amidst Orange County’s Affluence,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1980.

<sup>64</sup> Scott Austin, “Nightmare for Southland’s Urban Poor: Government Gnaws at Assistance for Those Needing Aid,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 1981.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

1981, the day the OBRA budget rules were put into effect, coupled with rising costs for natural gas.<sup>66</sup> The Chicago Food Depository, the clearinghouse for many pantries in the greater Chicago area, had increased its distribution 80 percent year in the year from 1980 to 1981, distributing 250,000 pound of food a month.<sup>67</sup> Dire straits did not leave these organizations with the resources, either time or money, to push back against cuts. While public cuts were critiqued from within food banks and emergency service organizations, there was not enough public pushback to overturn Reagan's food welfare cuts. Instead, conservative rhetoric celebrated the private sector's potential to meet the nation's needs, all the while undoing public/private partnerships that had extended the reach of food provision through the last decade.

#### *Private Business Intervenes in School Lunchrooms*

In school lunchrooms, a different kind of private intervention succeeded with for-profit businesses making successful inroads into school lunchrooms. As public funds evaporated in school cafeterias later in the decade, private businesses profited from new systems of cafeteria organization and relaxed regulations around offering competitive foods. Treating the lunchroom as any other marketplace, politicians shrank the reach of a public entitlement to healthy food for students. To do this, the Reagan administration used two existing tools in new ways. Competitive foods and offer-versus-serve (OVS) entered school lunch rooms in the 1970s. School lunch administrators interpreted these policies as offering ways to maintain school lunch operations in a challenging budget climate. Then, Reagan used these policies for a new purpose as part of the politics of disentanglement. No longer were

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<sup>66</sup> Larry Green, "More Urban Poor Joining Food Queues," *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1981.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*



they part of a response to a slumping economy, keeping lunchrooms afloat. Instead, they were required to meet the cost savings imposed by OBRA on the school meal service.

The 1972 provision allowing competitive foods into the cafeteria opened the door to for-profit business operations in school lunchrooms. Meant to regulate the widespread practice of schools using vending machines as a source of revenue, the act had deeper implications. As Sue Levine notes in her history of school lunch, “although the amendment received little attention at the time the consequences were far-reaching.”<sup>68</sup> Shrinking budgets forced greater sales of revenue-producing foods. With declining federal subsidies to cover the cost of making a school lunch, cafeterias were forced to rely on the proceeds from snack foods sold in competition with the standard lunch. Forcing school lunch programs to subsidize themselves marked a shift in the stated goals of the program, from providing a nutritious meal to instead supplying schoolchildren access to snacks and treating them as consumers with choice in the lunchroom.

Traditional school lunches came into competition with other food retailers, often as part of arrangements where the school could bring in fees from outside caterers coming to campus. These ranged from corner stores to food trucks to more traditional fast-food restaurants. *Fast Service* magazine notes, “The opportunities for fast-food restaurants to capture part of the school lunch business have never been better.”<sup>69</sup> McDonald’s was making inroads in school lunchrooms in 1983. Marshall Matz, counsel to ASFSA, had a letter hand-delivered to Secretary of Agriculture John Block about the opening of a McDonald’s in a

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<sup>68</sup> Sue Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America’s Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 144.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Phillips, “Du Jour: Mommy, what kind of plant does ketchup grow on?,” *Chicago Tribune*, 21 September 1981.

Fort Lauderdale high school cafeteria. For a lump sum of \$600,000 per year paid to the school (Matz called this a “token” amount), the franchise would keep the remainder of its profits, serving nothing different than their normal fast food fare:

From a policy perspective, the consequences of McDonald's action could be most serious. Currently, the profit from a la carte sales is used to subsidize the free and reduced price meals that are served to poor children. . . . If McDonald's is allowed to take the profit from the a la carte line and return it to their stockholders it is not going to be available to support the non-profit school food service.<sup>70</sup>

Further, he added there was already one McDonald’s up and running in a school cafeteria.

To accommodate changing expectations in taste, school cooks had to change their offerings to entice students to purchase a meal while also offering meals more economically. This led to a reliance on cheap foods that appealed to children’s palates, such as pizza and fries, in order to compete with foods now on site at school that did not have to meet any nutrition requirements. This created a new market for profit-making foods in school lunchrooms. The advertisements in a school food service magazine are telling. With the tagline, “Your high profit desserts from Readi-Bake,” the ad promised cakes with a consistent taste, uniform size, accurate case counts, and, when “combine[d] with your attractive pricing, you’re sure to bake yourself a profit.”<sup>71</sup> The irony, or perhaps it is not irony at all, is as children were offered a choice between a school lunch that met minimum nutritional standards and competitive foods not subject to these rules, the standard school

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<sup>70</sup> Letter, Marshall Matz to John R. Block, December 14, 1983; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Legislative Relations, 1969-1996; Series 6, Box 135, Folder 3 “Issues 1985;” Robert and Elizabeth Dole Congressional Library, Lawrence, KS.

<sup>71</sup> *School Food Service Journal*, Publication of the American School Food Service Association (October 1983): 71-73; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Legislative Relations, 1969-1996; Series 6, Box 135, Folder 1 “Kansas School Food Service Association, 1984;” Robert and Elizabeth Dole Congressional Library, Lawrence, KS.

lunch transformed into the fast food that school lunch proponents had tried to keep out of cafeterias. Competitive foods became a tool disempowering students from a nutritious school meal as the practice of selling snacks and fast food changed the character of the standard school lunch.

In addition to expanding competitive foods, USDA administrators rolled out existing rules more broadly allowing schools to save money. “Offer versus serve” (OVS) allowed students to decline food they did not want to eat. A school lunch is composed of five items; under OVS students only had to take three of five for the school to still receive its reimbursement.<sup>72</sup> Effectively, this change allowed for a less nutritious meal to still meet the requirements of a standard USDA lunch. This could save cafeterias money by allowing them to serve less food without relying on changing the underlying nutrition requirements that had been a no-go politically. The program was designed for use in high schools and began in 1977. But reflecting the willingness of the Reagan administration to use existing legislation in new ways, new legislation allowed for OVS at the junior and elementary school levels as well. While not an outside business intervention, the move to OVS at all levels of cafeterias was necessitated by increasingly marketized notions of school meals. And according to food service professionals, this marked the beginning of a period where the “business model began to permeate school food.”<sup>73</sup> Students were consumers, consumers who could now make a choice about their lunch, even if that meant selecting fries and a hamburger over healthier

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<sup>72</sup> “The statutory provision for OVS is found in Section 9(a)(3) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. OVS was extended to the School Breakfast Program (SBP) in 1985 in Section 4(e)(2) of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. The regulations on OVS for the NSLP are found at 7 CFR 210.10 and for the SBP at 7 CFR 220.8.” (From “Resource Guide: Offer Versus Serve in the School Nutrition Programs,” Team Nutrition USDA.)

<sup>73</sup> Janet Poppendieck, *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 67.

fare. Presented as a move to empowerment by the food industry, offering competitive foods and limiting the required elements of a meal children needed to take negatively impacted the nutritional goals of the school lunch program. Treating children as consumers transformed school lunch away from ensuring “the health and well-being of the nation’s schoolchildren” into just another marketplace for making private profits.<sup>74</sup>

Decreasing the subsidy to school cafeterias, in cash and commodities, for lunch was intended as a measure to bring market forces into the school lunchroom. However, this move toward an efficient market undermined public support for the program. As a result of these changes, buy-in from families who had once paid full price for a school meal waned, and the standing of school lunch declined. Paying children continued to drop out of the system leaving dwindling funds to subsidize free- or reduced-price students’ meals. School food needed to make money to continue to exist. “School food is a business and should operate like one” quickly became the mantra of many school food systems.<sup>75</sup> It became necessary for school kitchen balances to break even by whatever means necessary, including relying on profits from unhealthy food sold in competition against school meals. Increasingly, the USDA school lunch was becoming a last resort for poor students, while children with cash could purchase more appetizing (though likely less nutritious) fare elsewhere in their cafeteria.

Cutbacks in public subsidies for both emergency food provision and school lunch made food assistance increasingly dependent on market forces, forces that did little to ensure the poor had access to an adequate diet. Increased reliance on the market is but one of the

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<sup>74</sup> National School Lunch Act, Pub. L. 79-396, 60 Stat. 230 (1946). See Section 2.

<sup>75</sup> Poppendieck, *Free for All*, 73.

ways Reagan-era policies undid the old configuration of public/ private partnerships.

Through the 1970s, many facets of private food assistance were identified as a *complement* to existing public food aid; by 1980 they began to *substitute* for cutbacks in public food assistance. The introduction of market forces was met with moves to further delegitimize public food assistance programs. Reagan's White House Task Force on Food Assistance continued the work delegitimizing a right to food assistance through its members' inability to reach consensus on the existence of hunger as an issue at all.

### **The White House Task Force on Food Assistance Reifies the end of Entitlement**

During the mid-1970s, language around food welfare shifted from discussing error rates to fraud and abuse, turning to highlight abuses by individuals. By the 1980s, the language of fraud and abuse had taken hold, allowing for a negative frame around public food welfare. Yes, there was significant, critical coverage accompanying the rise in hunger in the late 1970s and early 1980s as recession took hold and Congress slashed the budgets of food stamps and school meals. However, there was also increasing coverage that questioned the extent of hunger in America as the Reagan administration lent legitimacy to the idea that accounts of hunger were overblown. Reagan was quoted as being "perplexed" by accounts of hunger, while advisors in his administration went further, saying on the record that claims of widespread hunger were fictitious. Analyzing the 1983 White House Task Force on Food Assistance, from its inception through release of their recommendations, illustrates how the administration delegitimized hunger as a public issue.

Negative media coverage of food programs became more common during the Reagan administration, even as accounts of hunger rose. Responding to one such incident, Senator

Bob Dole wrote a forceful letter to NBC following a segment aired on NBC Nightly News on September 1, 1981. Writing to the vice president of NBC News, Dole claimed NBC had only represented one side of the facts in a story on rampant abuse in the FSP. NBC presented one example of fraud, where USDA employees had stolen food stamp booklets from the agency mailroom. Dole looked into this case and found that the incident had happened years ago, and no such cases had been reported more recently. But what most concerned Dole was the inclusion in the segment of a Florida fraud investigator, Moe Atwater. Atwater asserted as much as \$4.5 billion to \$5 billion in food stamps were illegally trafficked before being redeemed. Dole countered that this view, that fraud was this rampant, was “shared by few, if any, responsible officials in the field of food stamp administration.”<sup>76</sup> While Dole did not comment on this, the timing of the segment was rather suspect, as well. It seems more than coincidental that a program so negative of food stamps aired the same day OBRA went into effect, thus slashing food stamp and school meal budgets.

While negative accounts became more common, coverage critical of the administration eventually put Reagan on offensive around hunger issues. The Food Research and Action Center released a damning report in early 1983. This report correlated lower birth weights and higher infant mortality rates with cuts the year prior in the Women, Infants, and Children Program, also known as WIC.<sup>77</sup> The administration shot back that the study was

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<sup>76</sup> Letter, Robert J. Dole to Sid Davis, September 3, 1981; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Legislative Relations, 1969-1996; Series 6, Box 146, Folder 7 “Welfare - Bolton – Food Stamp Fraud, 1981 [1 of 3];” Robert and Elizabeth Dole Congressional Library, Lawrence, KS.

<sup>77</sup> Kenneth A. Noble, “Are Program Cuts Linked to Increased Infant Deaths?” *The New York Times*, February 13, 1983; Folder “Hunger (4 of 4)” box OA 9594, Robert Carleson Files; Ronald Reagan Library. See also USDA, “Part 251- The Emergency Food Assistance,”

biased and in actuality, families were receiving greater benefits overall. But they neglected to point out that this was only true because average family incomes had declined, raising the average monthly benefits.

Then, on July 19, 1983, the *New York Times* ran a story on the front page above the fold, “US Hunger on the Rise Despite Swelling of Food Surpluses.” This piece pointed to the burgeoning stores of government owned dairy products spoiling in storage while millions of Americans were unable to get enough to eat.<sup>78</sup> Special Assistant to Reagan for Policy Development Bob Carleson immediately circulated a memo pushing the administration to react: “Recently, numerous media accounts have highlighted instances of hunger in America. . . . A continuing play-out of this issue could badly damage the president, possibly in a more profound way than the unemployment problem has.”<sup>79</sup> This memo even circulated affixed with a red sticker, noting that it was a top priority for the administration. While the administration tried to piece together a response, Carleson worked to get data about hunger from government agencies. He noted the USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services did not have sufficient data to answer if hunger existed and could not rebut the claims of the *Times*.<sup>80</sup> Lack of data would become an ongoing theme in administration responses to hunger, and serve as political cover for the issue.

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Program, 2011, [http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2011\\_Part251\\_0.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2011_Part251_0.pdf) (site discontinued).

<sup>78</sup> Robert Pear, “U.S. Hunger on the Rise Despite Swelling of Food Surpluses,” *The New York Times*, July 19, 1983.

<sup>79</sup> Memo, Robert V. Carleson and Kevin R. Hopkins to Edwin Meese, July 20, 1983; Folder “Hunger (3 of 4)” box OA 9594, Robert Carleson Files; Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>80</sup> In the margin notes on this report, another staffer noted, “This is inadequate! See 7/19/83] *NYTimes* ‘US Hunger on the Rise.’” Memo, “Hunger in America,” Edwin L.

The day after the *New York Times* story ran, Carleson started piecing together the administration's response. The administration settled on a task force to investigate the problem, but it was clear from the outset that this body would not conduct a fair assessment of the issue. From its composition to its meeting practices, the White House Task Force on Food Assistance legitimized a certain kind of knowledge about hunger that happened to align with the Reagan administration's approach to the problem.

Reagan initially described the study group as a "bipartisan, no holds barred" hunger task force, appointing Edwin Meese III to run the inquiry. Robert Pear, who covered the hunger beat for the *New York Times* beginning in 1981, called President Reagan's interest in hunger "at the very least, a dramatic change in emphasis for an administration that has been voicing alarm about the 'explosive' growth and abuse of food assistance programs."<sup>81</sup> Reagan's attention on hunger came on the heels of other study efforts. Think tanks like the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) and the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), along with the U.S. Conference of Mayors and other non-profits put together reports on the state of voluntary and emergency food aid in the leadup to the formal announcement of Reagan's task force in 1983.<sup>82</sup> All of these reports spoke of a massive

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Harper to Robert V. Carleson, July 19, 1983; Folder "Hunger (3 of 4)," Box OA 9594, Robert Carleson Files; Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Pear, "Reagan Hunger Call," *New York Times*, August 5, 1983.

<sup>82</sup> See Kathryn Porter Bishop, *Soup Lines and Food Baskets: A Survey of Increased Participation in Emergency Food Programs* (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1983); Lilia M. Reyes and United States Conference of Mayors, *Responses to Urban Hunger: Public-Private Efforts to Provide Emergency Food Assistance in America's Cities*, (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Mayors, 1983); United States Conference of Mayors, *Hunger in American Cities: Eight Case Studies*, (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Mayors, 1983); and Food Research & Action Center, and



increase in need, paying particular attention to the growth of voluntary and charitable food provision and its inability to meet rising need.

While negative publicity may have forced Reagan's hand into creating the Task Force on Food Assistance, during an election year no less, it did not mean he was going to cave to the anti-hunger lobby and their reports. The memo trail indicates the hunger task force was somewhat haphazardly thrown together, but always with an eye to protecting the image of the administration. In the immediate aftermath of the *New York Times* story on July 19, a handwritten memo circulated on the 20<sup>th</sup> outlining provisional committee membership. However, a totally different list was on a typed memo given to the full White House staff later that day.<sup>83</sup> *Newsweek* went so far as to conjecture that the task force was merely a way to manage "a campaign vulnerability" during an election year.<sup>84</sup> This entrance into the hunger mêlée was a careful, calculated political project.<sup>85</sup> On August 2, President Reagan released a public memo to Edwin Meese announcing his intent to put together a task force on food assistance. While noting a deep concern about the extent of hunger, he also belied his skepticism by declaring, "I admit to being perplexed" by increasing accounts of hunger.<sup>86</sup>

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National Anti-Hunger Coalition, *Hunger in the Eighties: A Primer* (Washington, DC: Food Research & Action Center, 1984).

<sup>83</sup> Radio Address Draft, Edwin L. Harper to Harry Hopkins and the White House Staff, "Presidential Radio Address: Hunger Task Force," July 30, 1983; Folder "Hunger (3 of 4)," Box OA 9594, Robert Carleson Files; Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>84</sup> "The Hunger Commission's Near Miss," *Newsweek*, August 15, 1983, 15.

<sup>85</sup> Memo, President Ronald Reagan to Edwin Meese III, "Hunger Task Force," August 2, 1983; Folder "Hunger (2 of 4)," Box OA 9594, Robert Carleson Files; Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>86</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Memorandum on Establishing a Task Force on Food Assistance," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262917>.

Another signal of the administration equivocating on hunger can be seen through changing language. Through July 30, the administration called this working group the “Hunger Task Force,” but by the time the task force was announced publicly on August 2, it had been renamed as the more benign task force on “Food Assistance.”<sup>87</sup>

Meese, who was in charge of organizing the task force, worked closely with Senator Jesse Helms while excluding other politicians who had long careers working on hunger. Senator Dole had taken up the mantle of hunger after George McGovern lost his seat in the 1980 Senate elections. Therefore, it surprised Dole to first learn about the task force from a television announcement.<sup>88</sup> Once he knew about the task force, he was still being boxed out. Christina Bolton, his staffer on food welfare, noted the administration was set to announce task force members in mid-August. “I am getting a little concerned about the maneuvering behind the scenes on this task force. Senator Helms’ staff appears to have been doing a lot of work on your behalf.”<sup>89</sup>

Just before the full announcement of the Task Force on September 8, Christina Bolton reported that based on her understanding of task force members, their background and ideology made it “quite clear” that there was a “definite political bias built into the panel.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Radio Address Draft, Edwin L. Harper to Harry Hopkins and the White House Staff, “Presidential Radio Address: Hunger Task Force,” July 30, 1983; Folder “Hunger (3 of 4),” Box OA 9594, Robert Carleson Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>88</sup> “The Hunger Commission’s Near Miss,” *Newsweek*, August 15, 1983, 15.

<sup>89</sup> Memo, Christina Bolton to Robert J. Dole, “Update on White House Task Force on Hunger,” August 12, 1983; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Constituent Relations, 1969-1996; Series 1, Box 49, Folder 6, “White House Task Force on Hunger - July 1983 - January 1984 (1 of 2),” Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

<sup>90</sup> Memo, Christina Bolton to Robert J. Dole, “Update on White House Commission on Food Assistance,” September 2, 1983; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Constituent Relations,

The September 8 announcement cemented this. Brief biographies of appointees to the task force make this political bent clear. Reagan appointed J. Clayburn La Force Jr., chair of the task force on Food Assistance. Acting dean of UCLA's Anderson School of Management from 1978-1993, La Force was also an adjunct scholar with the Heritage Foundation and member of the Mont Pelerin Society.<sup>91</sup> The administration also appointed Midge Decter, a Trustee of the Heritage Foundation.<sup>92</sup> The neoconservative, free market affiliations continued with the appointment of former Governor of Massachusetts Edward J. King, a very conservative Democrat who had recently lost in the Massachusetts primary to Michael Dukakis, and Kenneth Clarkson, director of the Law and Economics Center at the University of Miami. There were three more industry insiders, a senior vice president of a chemical conglomerate, the chairman of the board of a Sunbelt bank, and the director of government relations for a pavement preservation company.<sup>93</sup> Of the thirteen total members, only two came from backgrounds dealing with hunger and malnutrition directly; George G. Graham, M.D., a Johns Hopkins University doctor specializing in childhood malnutrition, and Betsy Brian Rollins, director for the St. Philip's Community Kitchen in Durham, North Carolina.<sup>94</sup>

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1969-1996; Series 1, Box 49, Folder 6 "White House Task Force on Hunger - July 1983 - January 1984 (1 of 2);" Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Pear, "U.S. Hunger on the Rise Despite Swelling of Food Surpluses," *New York Times*, July 19, 1983.

<sup>92</sup> Decter also served as executive director of the anti-communist think tank Committee for the Free World, disbanded after the fall of the Berlin wall. "Midge Decter," The Heritage Foundation, accessed June 2, 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/staff/midge-decter>.

<sup>93</sup> United States and President's Task Force on Food Assistance, *Report of the President's Task Force on Food Assistance* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1984).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, iii-iv.

The final member had experience working with those in poverty, Dr. John Perkins, founder of a housing counseling agency in Jackson, Mississippi.

In addition to the political bias of task force members, there emerged questions around how much actual study this task force carried out. The task force followed unconventional procedures in gathering information for their study and conferring with one another. Between September 8, 1983 when announced, and January 9, 1984 when the report was transmitted to Reagan, the task force never met in full. Instead, members were brought to Washington independently to express their views to staff. FRAC believed they did this to avoid public disclosure requirements. Had there been a quorum of members, they would have been subject to a law that would require them to transact business in public. There were seven public hearings as part of task force fact-finding, but only a few included an opportunity for open, public testimony. These hearings were poorly attended by task force members; fewer than half attended half of the meetings.<sup>95</sup> One member, when asked how they were to put together recommendations after the final, and only full, meeting of the panel was canceled, told Robert Pear, “Your guess is as good as mine.”<sup>96</sup> Further, members also only had one day to review the final report before it was made public.<sup>97</sup> These practices did not inspire much hope that the findings of the task force would differ significantly from current administration positions on hunger and food welfare.

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<sup>95</sup> “Hunger and the Media,” Food Research & Action Center, May 1984, 14.

<sup>96</sup> Robert Pear, “Hunger Panel Cancels Final Meeting,” *New York Times*, December 13, 1983.

<sup>97</sup> “Hunger and the Media,” Food Research & Action Center, May 1984, 14-15.

The results of the Task Force were unsurprising. Released January 9, 1984, they found no evidence to back up claims of rampant hunger in America, citing a dearth of data.<sup>98</sup> Much like officials within the Reagan administration, the task force found no conclusive evidence of hunger in the U.S. and made no recommendations to increase public outlays for food assistance programs. There was not a hunger crisis because the data did not exist to support this conclusion. This was yet another example of the administration defining liberal policy analysis as unscientific knowledge, not to be trusted. The task force report championed the services of private food assistance through soup kitchens, food banks, and food pantries, which served as “models of compassion and efficiency.”<sup>99</sup> The Food Stamp Program, they reasoned, could not possibly meet the diverse client needs of the hungry; therefore, more efforts needed to be made through private, localized responses. They also suggested block-granting the FSP, or at least providing states with more authority and discretion in administering the program while at the same time increasing penalties for fraud and abuse, something the task force declared a rampant issue.<sup>100</sup> All told, these recommendations closely mirrored existing Reagan administration policies on food welfare.

Coverage of the report was light. Of 18 newspapers surveyed by FRAC on coverage of the Task Force report, only six gave page one coverage to the results when released.<sup>101</sup> Of these, only some included substantive coverage aside from quotes of report findings. Instead

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<sup>98</sup> *Report of the President’s Task Force on Food Assistance*, xv.

<sup>99</sup> *Report of the President’s Task Force on Food Assistance*, 29.

<sup>100</sup> Two years earlier, it was mandated that all stores display a sign with information on how to report abuses they saw in the FSP. Agriculture Act of 1981. See Title XIII, Section 1314 amending Section 9(c) of the FSA of 1977).

<sup>101</sup> “Hunger and the Media,” Food Research & Action Center, May 1984, 16.

of coming out in reporting, critical voices came out in opinion pieces. “What blind luck!” explained a sarcastic opinion piece upon the release of the report. The task force recommendations “distinctly resemble President Reagan’s earlier proposals for block grant distribution of food and nutrition programs.”<sup>102</sup> Another opinion piece called the report a “triumph of ideology over evidence.”<sup>103</sup> More broadly, the coverage, or lack thereof, speaks to a marked shift around hunger as a public issue. While the press was integral to bringing hunger to the attention of the nation during the 1960s, by 1983 it had become part of minimizing the issue.

In late January, a nutrition subcommittee reviewed the Food Assistance Task Force report, pointing out the farce of its findings. Leon Panetta, chairman of the Subcommittee on Domestic Marketing, Consumer Relations, and Nutrition, stated after warmly welcoming the members of the task force, “The report states that there is no evidence of rampant hunger. It also states that the impact of hunger cannot be measured. The report states that food assistance programs are adequate, but that people are hungry. The report draws conclusions where there is no evidence, and no conclusions where there is evidence.”<sup>104</sup> At the same hearing, Senator Edward Kennedy lambasted the report, “to put it plainly, the Task Force report is a cruel joke on millions of our fellow citizens who continue to endure an

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<sup>102</sup> Unattributed article in the *Miami Herald*, quoted in “Hunger and the Media,” Food Research & Action Center, May 1984, 20.

<sup>103</sup> Dorothy Samuels, “To Alleviate Hunger,” *New York Times*, January 13, 1984.

<sup>104</sup> U.S. Congress. Joint Hearing before the Committee on Agriculture: Subcommittee on Domestic Marketing, Consumer Relations and Nutrition; Committee of Education and Labor, House of Representatives: Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education; and the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry U.S. Senate: Subcommittee on Nutrition. *Review the Report of President’s Task Force on Food Assistance*. 98<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., January 26, 1984, 3.

unacceptable and unfair burden of poverty, hunger, and deprivation in this wealthy, well-fed and privileged land.”<sup>105</sup> Both Panetta and Kennedy talked around the obvious bias in the makeup of task force members. While in the past this might have incited ongoing public backlash, it barely made ripples in 1984. Hunger had been delegitimized as a problem worthy of public attention. Instead of pouring funds into public programs, the Reagan administration along with the Task Force report recommended turning to the private sector. Be it for-profit or not, the private sector was seen as more than a complement for public provision and was forced to substitute for cutbacks, albeit inadequately, in public food welfare programs.

## **Conclusion**

The Reagan administration transformed the public/ private food welfare landscape by minimizing a public right to food, both rhetorically and in reality. Eligibility rules, administrative guidelines, and the budget were all tools in the larger politics of disentanglement. OBRA and the Food Stamp Act included more stringent eligibility criteria. Administrative rules cut funds to the school lunch program. Budget caps divorced from reality transformed definitions of need into what was possible given budget constraints. Cuts to federal grants meant private organizations were unable to provide the same levels of emergency food services. Responding to sea changes in food assistance programs in the United States, the White House Task Force on Food Assistance sealed the Reagan administration’s decision to defund and disentitle public food programs. All together, these changes demonstrate how hunger was defanged as a political issue. The next chapter

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<sup>105</sup> Statement of Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Joint Congressional Oversight Hearings on the President's Task Force on Food Assistance, 26 January 1984. Series 6: Legislative Relations, Box 126, Folder 2, “Food - Bolton - Nutrition, 1979-1984 [6 of 6],” Robert J. Dole Senate Papers- Legislative Relations, 1969-1996, Dole Library.

examines the results of the politics of disentanglement seen through a new institution: the food bank. Food banks could only exist in an environment where there was not a right to food, embodying the end of a public commitment to food provision.



## Chapter Five

### **“Throwaway food reaching the needy”: Food Banks, Market Rules, and Public/Private Food Welfare Reconfigured**

A 1979 headline proclaimed “throwaway food reaching the needy.”<sup>1</sup> While the headline conjures up images of food salvaged from the trash, the piece actually describes a new practice in charitable food distribution very different from rummaging through rubbish. Reporting on the activity of the Maryland Food Bank (MFB) a few months after its doors opened, the article described how the food bank drew on the untapped potential of the local food industry to provide for the hungry. There were a litany of reasons why food could not be marketed to consumers through normal channels; mismarked or damaged packages, day-old bakery goods, even overly firm potatoes in canned potato salad kept perfectly good food out of grocery stores. What’s more, most of this food had until recently been going to landfills. A 1976 General Accounting Office (GAO) report cited 137 millions pounds of otherwise edible food were thrown out every year in the United States. The development of the food bank was helping to solve the problem of food industry waste on a national scale, while also distributing food directly to the needy. However, in contrast to normal channels of voluntary food distribution, the author differentiated food banks, highlighting “the non-profit organization does not bill itself as a charity, but as a service to smart businessmen.”<sup>2</sup> Ironically, this statement encapsulated a truth even its author did not intend.

Food banks became an entrenched part of the post-entitlement food welfare landscape, one that required engagement with market principles and for-profit institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Riede, ““Throwaway food reaching the need,” *The Star*, November 8, 1979; Maryland Food Bank Records; Series 7, Box 5, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

With a right to public food welfare deconstructed in federal food welfare programs, food bank leaders responded to hunger in the only way they could: as a temporary emergency, to be met on an ad hoc basis. Far from springing up only to help dispose of food manufacturing overages and grocery surplus, this chapter explores how food banks grew in reaction to a rising need for food assistance, as the public commitment to federal food aid continued to come under attack. In providing industry and government “seconds” to the poor, food banks created a secondary market for food, while generating revenue for for-profit industry. I argue that food banks transformed the way Americans thought about hunger for two reasons. First, food banks obscured how public intervention (and funding) was key to expanding and sustaining the network, making it appear a more “private” solution to hunger than it was in reality. And second, food banks naturalized thinking about food welfare in terms of markets. The needs of the hungry were now subject to supply and demand. In an environment where more visible public subsidies to food stamps and WIC were under attack, this seemed increasingly like the only way to meet the food needs of hungry Americans. As the opening newspaper headline illustrates, food banks were very much a “service to smart businessmen,” while incidentally serving the needs of the poor. Without an entitlement to food welfare, leftovers and “throwaways” were the best the poor could hope for in an increasingly marketized system for food assistance.

### **The Origins of Food Banking**

The first food bank emerged in the United States in 1967. It was not until the 1970s, however, that the concept became widespread, well before conservative Republicans took to work reframing American ideas of welfare and charity. While food banking did emerge from

religious origins, its spread was not due to purely private, charitable action. Food banks within America's Second Harvest - the network whose growth I trace in this chapter - relied heavily on federal subsidies from sources like the Community Services Agency (CSA), as well as federal and state work training funds and indirect supports like the tax code. Food banking exists *because of* public subsidies, and the sector grew as the hunger problem grew throughout the 1970s, taking off in the 1980s when agricultural abundance coincided with deepening hunger.

Before the early 1970s, there was no such thing as a food bank in the more contemporary sense. Communities have had localized systems of getting food to the hungry in various capacities for as long as people have been hungry. During the 1930s, private breadlines and soup kitchens abounded, while charitable organizations worked to provide food for the hungry. Churches and other community organizations may have had a small food pantry to hand out a few days supply of groceries to a family in emergency need, while a homeless shelter could operate a soup kitchen to ensure clients have at least one hot meal a day. Nonetheless, these local organizations did not match the distributive capacity of the modern food bank.

There were also large-scale distributions of food, notably during the Depression, but I argue this differed in character scope from modern food banks. Second Harvest, the network of food banks that emerged in the 1970s, is characterized by national distributive capacity. Local, direct food assistance during the 1930s varied regionally. In New York and Illinois, dairy farmers distributed surplus milk while in the West and Rocky Mountain states, farmers allowed the unemployed to pick surplus crops out of the fields. According to Janet Poppendieck, in the 1930s, "all across the nation, farmers arrived at welfare departments and

charitable societies with truckloads of unsaleable produce for those in need.”<sup>3</sup> While local donations matter for food banks, food banks within Second Harvest have a built-in network to trade for goods from around the country.

A second differentiating factor between Depression-era food assistance and modern food banks is that these organizations have a very different clientele. Food banks do not give food directly to individuals, as was the practice in food pantries, soup kitchens, or breadlines. Instead, food banks operate as central clearinghouses. Each food bank - usually covering a region, such as a large metro area - provides food and other aid to hundreds of smaller non-profits in the communities where they are based, which then provide this food to their clients. Individual food banks collect donations in-kind from nearby grocers, produce gleaned from local fields, and local manufacturing surplus, along with cash donations from the community.

In addition, Second Harvest carried out national fund drives, set standard policies for the network, and worked with national food manufacturers to secure and distribute large donations.<sup>4</sup> The ubiquity and scale of food banks today makes it easy to forget their relatively recent invention – the coordinating network for food banks, Feeding America (Second Harvest until 2009) ranked as the second largest charity in 2018 in the nation with revenue of \$2.7 billion, coming in behind only the United Way.<sup>5</sup> However, at Second Harvest’s

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<sup>3</sup> Janet Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 55.

<sup>4</sup> One notable example of this was the “cookie wars” of the 1980s, where the big biscuit manufacturers tried to market soft cookies in the U.S. and this effort failed. Second Harvest received tractor-trailers full of unsaleable soft cookies to distribute across its network. Bill Ewing, phone call with author, July 22, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> The \$2.7 billion includes cash and in-kind donations. William P. Barrett, “The Largest U.S. Charities for 2018,” *Forbes*, December 11, 2018, accessed 8 June 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/lists/top-charities/#67f10a5a5f50>. In an earlier article, Barrett describes the methodology of this top 100 list, noting the biggest factor in *Forbes* ranking is the amount of private donations received, including gifts-in-kind. Food donated to Second

beginning, there were no hopes for national expansion or lofty goals to be among the largest charities in the nation.

John van Hengel founded St. Mary's Clearinghouse, arguably the world's first food bank, in Phoenix, Arizona in 1967. After ten years with St. Mary's, van Hengel founded Second Harvest to help spread the concept of food banks to new communities. A corporate history from Second Harvest published in 2013 lays out a linear path from St. Mary's to founding the food bank network. While this corporate history is a valuable source for its comprehensive account of the development of the organization, it also represents a selective memory of the operations, highlighting evidence that conforms to contemporary understandings of what a food bank is and how it operates. By focusing on these selective omissions, this section presents a more complete picture of the roots of Second Harvest.

The Second Harvest narrative begins with background on the network's founder, John van Hengel. Dubbed the "Godfather of food banking," van Hengel found his calling to feed the hungry later in life, triggered by a spiritual awakening. Following a divorce, he left his career in advertising in Los Angeles and moved around the country working odd jobs, including a stint at a rock quarry where he was fired for fighting. He settled in Phoenix, Arizona in 1962. Van Hengel was attracted to the city by the Cursillo movement of Catholicism, which was gaining attention among Mexican-American Catholics at the time.<sup>6</sup> Catholic Cursillos – or "little courses" – began in Majorca, Spain in the mid-1940s, as

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Harvest counts toward this metric. Other measures of the organization's "efficiency," i.e. how much of the donations go directly towards the organization's mission, are included in calculating the Forbes list. William P. Barrett, "Largest-Charities Methodology: Size, Then Financial Efficiency," November 8, 2012, accessed 26 July 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williambarrett/2012/11/08/largest-charities-methodology-size-then-financial-efficiency/#32267b436d2e>.

<sup>6</sup> Second Harvest, "The History of Food Banking and Feeding America," Version – March 29, 2013, 1.

intensive 3-day retreats designed to attract men back to the faith, creating a safe space for male emotionality where participants could cultivate “a personal relationship with Jesus and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> *Cursillistas*, the name for individuals who “made” a Cursillo weekend, are invited to discover their individual potential, and become them more active in their church and community.<sup>8</sup> In an ethnography of first, second, and third-generation Mexican-American *cursillistas*, participants described a sense of urgency to turn their experiences into something good for their community.<sup>9</sup> The Second Harvest narrative notes van Hengel’s connection to the Cursillo movement as a way to link him to a Catholic parish that supported his early work. However, it is likely this embodied approach to religion, where participants retraced the steps of Christ’s final days, inspired van Hengel’s work on the embodied experience of hunger in Pheonix.

At first, John van Hengel drove the bus and coached sports with priests at St. Mary’s Basilica in Phoenix.<sup>10</sup> In 1965, he began working in their charity dining room, the St. Vincent de Paul Soup Kitchen.<sup>11</sup> To bring more fresh food into this kitchen and other soup kitchens in the city, van Hengel gleaned local fruit from around the Phoenix area. “Using an old milk truck, an old flatbed truck and a team of volunteers,” he began picking citrus at private

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<sup>7</sup> Kristy Nabhan-Warren, “‘Blooming Where We’re Planted’: Mexican-descent Catholics Living Out ‘Cursillo De Cristiandad’,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 28, no. 4 (2010): 99-100.

<sup>8</sup> Kristy Nabhan-Warren, *The Cursillo Movement in America*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: UNC Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Nabhan-Warren, “‘Blooming Where We’re Planted’,” 109.

<sup>10</sup> “John van Hengel; Created 1<sup>st</sup> U.S. Food Bank,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 12, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Sargent Shriver, who ran the OEO from 1964-1968, recounted how volunteering in a St. Vincent de Paul Society soup kitchen in Chicago shaped some of his ideas about poverty. He described this society as “a group of lay people in the Catholic Church which takes a special interest in the problems of poor people.” Transcript, R. Sargent Shriver interview 1 by Michael L. Gillette, August 20, 1980; LBJ Library Oral Histories, LBJ Presidential Library, <https://www.discoverljb.org/item/oh-shrivers-19800820-1-05-24>.

homes and delivered it to inner-city missions, but he found the system inefficient. To streamline the distribution process, van Hengel began to look for a centralized location where agencies could come and pick up food instead of relying on deliveries.<sup>12</sup> After making enquiries among nonprofits in Phoenix for a space to use for his food salvage operations, he got a call from St. Mary's.

Parishioners of St. Mary's Church acquired an abandoned bakery, willing the space to van Hengel and providing a \$3,000 loan for a telephone, utilities, and conversion of a bake room to a walk in cooler.<sup>13</sup> According to Second Harvest, at this point the food bank - or as van Hengel dubbed it, the "clearinghouse" - was born. When *Food Engineering* included an article on food banking in 1979, the article suggested that the distribution system at St. Mary's was unique. Titled "Food Banks... a new concept," the author described St. Mary's as a "prototype" for later food banks. These food banks employed "new and more-efficient" ways to feed the poor, growing rapidly from a concept that was just a few years old.<sup>14</sup>

Like modern food banks, St. Mary's did not primarily give food to individuals. Instead, St. Mary's acted as an intermediary between a wide range of local charities and the food industry, both locally and regionally. As an intermediary, St. Mary's could take in larger donations than a small food pantry, and could cultivate relationships with grocery stores and local farmers to bring in food that was useable, if not up to quality for commercial channels. By 1968, van Hengel was undertaking grocery salvage in Phoenix, Tucson, Flagstaff, Prescott, and Yuma. And no offering was too small, too large, or too niche. St. Mary's took

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<sup>12</sup> "The History of Food Banking and Feeding America," Version – March 29, 2013, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Dean, "A Second Harvest," *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Kevin J. Hannigan, "Food Banks... a new concept," *Food Engineering* (July 1979): 74-75; Maryland Food Bank Records; Series 7, Box 5, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

in 5,000 live chickens and 500 cases of anchovies. Van Hengel even found ways to secure donations through the judicial system. “In a unique agreement with a friendly judge,” St. Mary’s came into 539,000 gallons of milk, part of a sentence “against local dairies convicted of price fixing.”<sup>15</sup> These partnerships with local grocers and the food industry presaged the role of for-profit food manufacturers and retailers as sources of donations for Second Harvest.

In its first full year of operation, St. Mary’s distributed 275,000 pounds of food to community organizations. The change in name from clearinghouse to food bank took place the next year in 1968. There is a tidy story to explain the name change, told in the Second Harvest narrative as well as newspaper articles from the time. While possibly apocryphal, the story reveals how Second Harvest wanted to frame its origins. In the story, a young mother of ten told van Hengel her secret about how she kept her family fed. She stopped daily at the garbage bins behind a local grocery store, finding items such as still frozen food, day old bread, and loose carrots.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the unnamed woman told van Hengel, “there should be a place, kind of like a bank, where you can go for food, where people make donations and other people can take it out.”<sup>17</sup> Thus van Hengel renamed the distribution warehouse “St. Mary’s Food Bank.” From this point, the Second Harvest narrative traces a direct line from St. Mary’s Food Bank to the growing national network. However, creating a network of food banks involved public intervention, including support by the federal Community Services Agency and federal grant funding, at first over protest from Second Harvest’s founder.

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Dean, “A Second Harvest,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid; Second Harvest, “The History of Food Banking and Feeding America,” 1.

<sup>17</sup> Second Harvest, “The History of Food Banking and Feeding America,” 1-2.



At the outset of Second Harvest, van Hengel was adamant that the food bank should remain independent of public grants and cooperative in nature. Refusing government funds ensured St. Mary's would maintain autonomy over its function, and not be subject to rules from outside the organization. Reflecting on the birth of food banking in a piece for the first issue of his magazine, *The Clearinghouse*, John van Hengel emphasized his desire for food banks to remain separate from statist programs.<sup>18</sup> Van Hengel also did not want to step on the toes of existing charities, so he made it clear the food bank only sought donations in kind, eschewing cash donations. Even so, unsolicited cash donations quickly paid back the \$3,000 loan from St. Mary's. Further, in 1975 and unbeknownst to van Hengel, a friend in Phoenix who worked for the Community Services Agency (CSA) wrote a \$52,000 grant to provide St. Mary's with increased operating funds for the next year as well as seed money to start consulting to get other food banks started. This funding came directly from the federal government, something van Hengel resisted.<sup>19</sup> Van Hengel recounted that the board flat-out refused the grant "because of the paperwork involved and the possibility that we would lose the autonomy and freedom of development that was proving successful."<sup>20</sup> The board believed the community's charitable impulse would continue to provide adequate support for their operations.

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<sup>18</sup> "Food Banking – Its Roots," *The Clearinghouse "Thoughts for Food" From Foodbanking, Inc.* I, no. 1 (Jan 1986): 2; Maryland Food Bank Records; Series II, Box 2, Folder "General 1987-1989", University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>19</sup> The CSA replaced the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1974 after two years of uncertainty over the future of poverty programs within the OEO. In creating the CSA, some OEO programs moved to HEW, with further transfer possible after March, 1975. "Community Services Agency Replaces OEO," in *CQ Almanac 1974*, 30th ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1975), 495-503. <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/cqal74-1221125>.

<sup>20</sup> "Food Banking – Its Roots."

The CSA, however, was persistent. When a second CSA grant was approved for \$45,892, van Hengel and the board obliged, especially when the agency threatened to start their own program to instruct would-be food banks about how to get off the ground. In response, and on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1976, van Hengel left St. Mary's and incorporated Second Harvest, a name drawn from the biblical story of Ruth.<sup>21</sup> Shortly after, van Hengel opened a small office on North 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in Phoenix, as well as the nation's first Second Harvest food bank. Following this, Second Harvest opened branches in Pasadena, San Diego, San Jose, Concord, Portland (OR), and Seattle.<sup>22</sup>

The Second Harvest corporate history notes that a second CSA grant of \$100,000 in 1977 helped boost the network from five to eighteen food banks by 1979. Perhaps this jump in membership can also be attributed to a three-day workshop held in late February 1979, when van Hengel explained food bank operations to representatives from twenty-seven states. Van Hengel emphasized the obvious benefits to charities which received donations from food banks, but also the way food banking served food processors.<sup>23</sup> After describing the 1977 CSA grant, the Second Harvest history shifts course to recount van Hengel's outreach to solicit donations from the 'Big Three' food manufacturers – Kraft, Beatrice Foods, and CPC North America – a fact that reinforced the connections to for-profit food industry.<sup>24</sup> Accepting food donations at the industry level meant scaling up operations from

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<sup>21</sup> "John van Hengel; Created 1<sup>st</sup> U.S. Food Bank," *Chicago Tribune*, October 12, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> "Food Banking – Its Roots." Another news article describes this expansion, where van Hengel described "it all just fell into place." The article notes St. Mary's "inspired" the Grandview Food Bank in Pasadena. Next were food banks in San Diego, San Joes, and Concord, followed by Portland and Seattle. Account in Paul Dean, "A Second Harvest," *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Hannigan "Food Banks... a new concept," 74-75.

<sup>24</sup> Second Harvest, "The History of Food Banking and Feeding America," 2.

local grocery salvage to collecting and distributing tractor-trailers worth of ‘seconds’ from manufacturing.

Van Hengel founded Second Harvest on a desire to make use of what he saw as needless waste in the system of food production and distribution and with a commitment to do this independently and charitably. Van Hengel negotiated to secure erstwhile waste from food manufacturing as donations, accepting mismarked or short weighted packages of processed foods along with failed product lines or flavors.<sup>25</sup> Beyond describing a new and growing source of donations, this turn to focusing on the food industry marks a self-conscious move on the part of Second Harvest to highlight the role of private industry in the network. Much like van Hengel’s sentiments in his initial refusal of CSA funds, it seems that Second Harvest’s biographer was uncomfortable describing the reliance of the organization on public funds. The remainder of this corporate history does not mention any other direct government grants that made the continued expansion of the food bank network possible.<sup>26</sup> But evidence gleaned from newspapers and food bank records supports the assertion that Second Harvest and individual food banks relied heavily on public funds to first to open their doors, and later to maintain operations.

### **Public Grants and Private Donations: Second Harvest Expands**

Without the existence of federal grants, the food bank network that exists today would not exist. Many early member food banks of Second Harvest got off the ground owing

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Dean, “A Second Harvest,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1992.

<sup>26</sup> The corporate history *does* describe the donation of surplus government commodities, dairy in the early 1980s, TEFAP commodities beginning in 1983, and “Operation Desert Share” MRE donations in the early 1990s. But there are no other references to grants. Neither are there any mentions of this public funding on Feeding America’s “Our History” page, see <https://www.feedingamerica.org/about-us/our-history>, accessed April 14, 2016.

to CSA grants and other public funds to cover job training and salaries. For example, when the Orange County Food Bank opened its doors in December of 1977, it relied on a mix of volunteers, county funding for staff salaries, as well as grant from Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) to bring on lower-skilled workers.<sup>27</sup> CETA was a federal jobs program, enacted in 1973. Chicago only opened its food bank when the city Department of Human Services partnered with local anti-hunger organizations to write a proposal for a CSA grant. At the end of 1978, the city received \$47,500 in CSA funding to launch the Chicago Food Depository.<sup>28</sup> The grant covered salaries for two full-time staff and one part-time secretary. Orange County and Chicago were not outliers. Public funds were necessary to launch food banks in the Second Harvest Network. The rest of this section will focus on one food bank in particular - the Maryland Food Bank (MFB) – which, I argue, provides richly detailed insights into the general development of food banking in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The Maryland Food Bank (MFB) was the first food bank on the East Coast and one of the first eighteen food banks under the Second Harvest network in 1979. The food bank in Maryland was typical of Second Harvest food banks, so much so that MFB was described as being modeled after St. Mary's in Phoenix.<sup>29</sup> Like St. Mary's and the other food banks that opened by 1979, residents in the local community built up an informal food distribution

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<sup>27</sup> Lael Morgan, "Needy Bank on Free Food," *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1980.

<sup>28</sup> "Agency to start a 'food bank,'" *Chicago Tribune*, December 7, 1978.

<sup>29</sup> Hannigan "Food Banks... a new concept."

network. Baltimore, like many other cities with early food bank founding dates, was a city hard hit by recession during the 1970s.<sup>30</sup>

The MFB opened following more than ten years of work around hunger in the region, with Ann Miller at the helm. Miller worked in the Baltimore Health Department's day care division when she became interested in hunger among the poor in the late 1960s.<sup>31</sup> She served on the Mayor's Task Force on Nutrition and then, along with a few other women from the task force, founded an inter-faith working group on hunger during the summer of 1969, entitled the Maryland Food Committee.<sup>32</sup> This organization coordinated emergency food provision throughout the 1970s, and was instrumental in opening the food bank.

Incorporation of the MFB immediately increased the distributive capacity of private food welfare in Maryland. As part of a network with the capacity to handle bulk donations,

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<sup>30</sup> Seattle is another example of a similar pattern. During the late 1960s, the Ecumenical Metropolitan Ministry (EMM) founded to help with problems of the poor and disadvantaged. With the Boeing layoffs of 60,000 workers between 1970 and 1971, hunger became the most pressing need in the community. Organizations such as "Neighbors in Need," an OEO funded emergency food program, sprung up to meet this need, but the organization lost its funding in 1976. With collapse of other food organizations, EMM opened Northwest Second Harvest, its only program once it shed other functions. See "History," Northwest Harvest, accessed August 6, 2019, <https://www.northwestharvest.org/history>. See also "Food Resources Network: Community Development Block Grant Evaluation," Seattle Department of Human Resources, May 1980; Document #9881, Seattle Municipal Archives. Another common factor in the founding of food banks were their earlier religious incarnations. St. Mary's came from Catholic roots, while the food banking in Seattle grew out of Ecumenical Metropolitan Ministries. See Catherine M. Anthony, "Food Banks," *Visitor* (May 3, 1981): 4-5; Maryland Food Bank Records; Series 7, Box 5, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>31</sup> Frederick N. Rasmussen, "Ann Miller, Md. Food Bank founder," *The Baltimore Sun*, July 19, 2013, accessed February 22, 2016, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/obituaries/bs-md-ob-ann-miller-20130719-story.html>.

<sup>32</sup> "The Maryland FOOD Committee was incorporated. It is progressing well." This note appeared in "Baltimore Task Force on Nutrition: Minutes of the Ninth Meeting," July 9, 1969; Maryland Conference of Social Welfare Records; Series 1, Box 13, Folder 1, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

the MFB allowed agencies to take larger donations than they could manage on their own.<sup>33</sup> Joining Second Harvest gave the MFB the opportunity to share any surplus donated to them, to benefit from large donations to other network food banks, and to receive technical, logistical, and administrative assistance from people with a decade of experience in the “clearinghouse” model. Perhaps Ann Miller attended the food bank how-to workshop led by van Hengel earlier in 1979, or maybe she received information from Second Harvest once MFB decided to incorporate. Maybe Second Harvest helped the MFB identify a suitable site for its first warehouse (pictured below). Being part of the Second Harvest put network food banks in an advantageous position. Staff at new food banks could draw on the expertise of those who had founded food banks before them and receive technical assistance from Second Harvest’s headquarters. Operating a food bank required knowledge of tax law and health and safety regulations as well as logistics and supply chains.



Site of the first warehouse of the Maryland Food Bank. Undated photograph; Records of the Maryland Food Bank; Series 7, Box 5, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

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<sup>33</sup> Hannigan “Food Banks... a new concept.”

In line with earlier food banks, the Maryland Food Bank got off the ground thanks to a combination of public and private money. An Urban Services grant provided \$48,000 to purchase equipment, including a walk-in freezer, refrigerator, and a truck while support from the Presbyterian Church of Baltimore covered rent, utilities, and building maintenance.<sup>34</sup> The biggest need was for staff. As the Maryland Food Committee planned for the food bank with community partners, it was “expected that CETA workers would be available.”<sup>35</sup> The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) of 1973 was a national jobs bill that provided 12-24 months of full-time work, plus job training, to build employment skills. This was only one of a few public work programs. The proposed 1979 budget for the food bank included projections for two CETA workers, two work incentives network (WIN) employees, and ten maintenance and repair jobs financed by the youth employment plan (YEP). However, proposed cuts in Carter’s 1980 budget created uncertainty, and when the food bank opened, only one CETA position received funding and there was no money allocated to hire additional staff.<sup>36</sup> But minutes from a MFB board meeting reveal that more CETA staff members were hired for 1979-1980. As one board member of the food bank noted in late 1980, “the success of the food bank is due in no small measure to the efforts of CETA workers who have come to the food bank on CETA financed jobs and have worked

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid; and Andrea Pawlyna, “Food donations ‘banked’ for needy,” *The Baltimore Sun*, November 23, 1980.

<sup>35</sup> Maryland Food Bank, “Budget 1979, Proposed;” Maryland Food Bank Records; Series 2, Box 1, Folder “Board General 1979-83,” University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives..

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

positively and effectively to perform all the tasks asked of them.”<sup>37</sup> The productivity of these low-paid workers was often remarked on, and in fact was a requirement for food banks to flourish.

While Second Harvest’s official history makes no mention of federal support after 1980, their 1981 Annual Report noted “as in the past,” the organization was “funded primarily” by the federal Community Services Administration. The annual budget showed that Second Harvest’s operating budget for 1981 was a little over \$480,000 with \$450,000 of their funding coming from a CSA grant. Despite van Hengel’s aversion to relying on public support, Second Harvest relied almost totally on public funds for its operation budget. Maybe this had something to do with van Hengel’s abrupt departure from Second Harvest in 1981. A CSA-investigation found van Hengel had mismanaged public funds, and would only fund the organization again after he had been removed from his position.<sup>38</sup> Van Hengel was simultaneously under investigation by the FBI for having a conflict of interest, but at the same time, accused the board of “caving in to food-industry pressures...”<sup>39</sup> After van Hengel vowed to not return to the corporation, Jack Ramsey replaced him as Executive Director. Second Harvest received a \$400,000 CSA grant for the next year, but was left scrambling

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<sup>37</sup> Irv Rubenstein, “Letter to the Editor: The Food Bank,” *The Baltimore Sun*, December 13, 1980.

<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey H. Birnbaum “Bitter Harvest: Charity That Delivers Surplus Food to Needy Is Split by Accusations,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 25, 1982.

<sup>39</sup> Birnbaum, “Bitter Harvest;” Patricia Sullivan, “John van Hengel Dies at 83; Founded 1<sup>st</sup> Food Bank in 1967,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 2005. I have found no information on the nature of the disagreement with van Hengel and the board of Second Harvest, nor any more details on the FBI investigation.



with the closing of the CSA by the Reagan administration in 1982.<sup>40</sup> In all, the CSA provided \$1.4 million in grants to Second Harvest between 1976 and 1983.<sup>41</sup>

### *Private Industry Surplus and Second Harvest*

In addition to public subsidies, food manufacturing donations were key in the development and institutionalization of a food bank network. The industry provided a ready source of donations, but also benefitted themselves from these new institutions. The food industry was routinely throwing away one hundred tons of food each year, and half of what was discarded was edible.<sup>42</sup> Once food manufacturers realized the tax benefits of food donations, food began to pour into Second Harvest network.<sup>43</sup>

Food banks created an external push factor for the food industry to donate their surplus goods by providing a safe outlet for surplus that they were assured would not be resold. However, an internal pull factor also contributed to corporate donations. After Second Harvest incorporated in 1976, changes in the tax code later that year provided a greater incentive for grocery stores and the food industry to donate items to food banks rather than destroy them. Before these changes, when a company chose to dispose of usable but damaged food, they would only be able to deduct the wholesale cost. Under the Tax Reform

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<sup>40</sup> “Second Harvest National Foodbank Network: 1981 Annual Report;” Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Legislative, Box 142, Folder 3, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

<sup>41</sup> Birnbaum “Bitter Harvest.”

<sup>42</sup> Sandy Adams, “Waste not, want not,” *Booster Weekly*, April 18, 1984; Maryland Food Bank Records; Series 7, Box 5, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>43</sup> Saying that, the mechanism for acquiring corporate donations is not entirely clear from the source material. To understand the mechanics of food banking in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I rely on primary source material found in the papers of the Maryland Food Bank and newspaper/ magazine accounts. Bill Ewing, head of MFB in the mid-1980s, also served on the Board of Second Harvest, meaning I likely have more materials from Second Harvest. But without an archive of Second Harvest, or access to papers of someone from Second Harvest, it is challenging to reconstruct how corporate donations worked.

Act of 1976, corporations could deduct not only the wholesale value of the donated food, but also half of what the retail mark-up would have been from their tax liability. Congress tightened the tax code in 1969 to ensure people and corporations in high marginal tax brackets did not abuse charitable write-offs. Under the tax code prior to 1969, it was possible to donate to items to charity and make claims based on inflated values, allowing individuals and corporations to claim a greater tax write-off than the value of the item. While the change in the tax code did eliminate abuse, it also resulted in declines in donations to charities, in particular charities that relied on in-kind donations of clothing, food, medical equipment, and other supplies.<sup>44</sup> In reversing the rule and allowing write-offs of half of the appreciated value, donating the food to a nonprofit organization began to make financial sense. And to provide even greater incentive, the company could write off any handling costs and overhead as well.<sup>45</sup> Together, these two tax provisions translated to companies being able to write-off about 20% of the mark-up in addition to the value of the food.<sup>46</sup> Immediately, corporations began donating their erstwhile waste to Second Harvest food banks.

Industry surplus was the bread and butter of food banks in the 1970s. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* describes the opening of the Orange County Food Bank. In December of 1977, the food bank “opened its doors with 1,000 cases of nearly outdated potato chips donated by Laura Scudder’s as its only deposit.”<sup>47</sup> The Maryland Food Bank outlined its policies, describing what kinds of “seconds” made it into a food bank. The food bank

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<sup>44</sup> Joint Committee on Taxation, *General Explanation of the Tax Reform Act of 1976*, 94th Cong., 2 sess. (Washington, D.C.; G.P.O., 1976), 672.

<sup>45</sup> Lael Morgan, “Needy Bank on Free Food,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1980.

<sup>46</sup> Marianne Bernhard, “A Food Bank for the Hungry Here,” *Washington Post*, April 14, 1980.

<sup>47</sup> Lael Morgan, “Needy Bank on Free Food,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1980.

accepted “salvageable” food products, such as day-old bakery products, items with broken packaging, “seconds in produce,” and mistakes from manufacturing.<sup>48</sup> While personal donations as well as cash brought some goods into food banks, industry surplus allowed them to supply large numbers of charities in their region.

Donations did not descend from on high, but were cultivated by food bank staff. From the outset, the MFB employed a marketing manager. Bill Ewing served in the role when the food bank opened, contacting producers to recruit them to participate in the MFB. He told *The Star* six months after the food bank opened its doors that this was an easy sell. Citing the 1976 changes to the tax code, Ewing noted that “companies are willing because of the tax break and the knowledge that the food is going directly to the poor.” But the sheer number of food producers posed a problem for Mr. Ewing. After four months on the job, he said he had contacted less than 1% of local food producers.<sup>49</sup>

The size and networked nature of Second Harvest allowed it to make use of large industry donations by sharing between affiliates. There were two ways this sharing worked: from individual food banks up through the network, and via Second Harvest’s national office down to individual food banks. When a Second Harvest food bank received a perishable item it could not make use of - say 400 gallons mayonnaise as the Orange County food bank received - it could barter these perishable items for other food with counterpart food banks across the country.<sup>50</sup> Another example of this sharing comes from the Maryland Food Bank. In October of 1981, Bill Ewing shared the news with the *Baltimore Sun* that the MFB had

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<sup>48</sup> “1981 Fact Sheet: The Maryland Food Bank, Inc.,” Maryland Food Bank Records; Series 7, Box 5, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>49</sup> Riede, ““Throwaway food reaching the needy;” Maryland Food Bank Records.

<sup>50</sup> Lael Morgan, “Needy Bank on Free Food,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1980.

just received a donation of 100,000 pounds of Golden Delicious apples, sent by an anonymous grower in Washington State. The apples were shared with nearby food banks in Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia, who chipped in to cover the \$2,400 bill to ship the apples across the country. Much of the shipping was donated by train lines, and what was not was met by donations from area industry, including gifts from the local gas and telephone companies, and from Maryland National Bank. Ewing noted that all he had to do was to pick up the phone to ask about funds to cover the shipping costs, and local business were more than happy to help in any way they could.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to sharing and trading among affiliate food banks, Second Harvest at the national level handled large-scale donations that then were then distributed out to member food banks. As a 1992 article described, Second Harvest finds “a taste for every oddity: 60,000 pounds of apples rejected as undersized, 200 semi-loads of grapefruit juice that was turning green, a million marshmallow bunnies that didn’t sell at Easter, and 6,000 pounds of frozen eels that became slimy grist for seafood lasagna.”<sup>52</sup> After agreeing to take on these massive donations came the work of sorting logistics. The American Trucking Association in 1982 took it upon itself to conduct a survey of motor carriers to see which of them would be willing to truck food to food banks in their regions, either for free or at a reduced rate. A carrier in Maryland, Preston Trucking Co., it was reported, was already working with the Maryland Food Bank to transport a half trailer load of food weekly from the main food bank to a new satellite operation in Salisbury, Maryland. As Bill Ewing noted, “it’s goodness on

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<sup>51</sup> David Michael Ettlin, “Maryland Food Bank given sweet gift: boxcar of apples,” *The Sun*, October 19, 1981; Maryland Food Bank Records; Series 7, Box 5, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Dean, “A Second Harvest,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1992.

the part of the people that makes this program a success.”<sup>53</sup> In relying on charity from the food industry, transportation companies, and volunteers, food banks transformed food assistance from a right to a gift, something that food bank presidents’ understood and attempted to push back against.

Food bank directors recognized voluntary distribution was not a permanent solution to hunger. “We know the food bank cannot solve the ills of the hungry in D.C.,” said Capital Area Community Food Bank director Richard Stack, adding “we’re not going to take the place of federal feeding programs... You might say we’re more like a band-aid’ to the community.”<sup>54</sup> However, this band-aid was on the brink of another transformation. No longer confined to local salvage and corporate overages, Second Harvest was about to get into the business of government surplus.

### **Government Surplus and the Food Banking Network**

In the early 1980s, two new programs routed government owned surplus to emergency feeding organizations, including the growing number of food banks in the Second Harvest network. First, and reacting to growing stores of dairy products, Ronald Reagan signed an executive order creating the Special Dairy Distribution Program in December 1981. This program distributed butter, American process cheddar cheese, and powdered milk to food banks. In addition, Congress passed the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) in early 1983. At first, this program seemed like an ideal and novel way to

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<sup>53</sup> Barbara Kinney, “Hauling for Food Banks, Carriers Harvest Good Will,” *Transport Topics*, 7 June 1982; Maryland Food Bank Records; Series 2, Box 2, Folder “General (1987-1989),” University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>54</sup> Marianne Bernhard, “A Food Bank for the Hungry Here,” *Washington Post*, April 14, 1980.

make use of surplus food by providing it to those most in need. However, commodity distribution was nothing new in the United States.

Dairy distributions and TEFAP marked a return to earlier modes of commodity distribution, but they were also a significant break with past practice. These two surplus disposal programs harkened back to an earlier era of inadequate and unequal food aid, returning to the Commodity Food Distribution Program that had been all but disbanded in 1974. A legislative mandate required every county participate in the food stamp program by 1974. Switching to the food stamp program would solve perennial problems associated with distributing commodities, including problems in administration, storage, and distribution.<sup>55</sup> Further, the FSP allowed people to shop in the grocery store like everyone else, without the stigma of going through separate channels. Reverting back to assistance through commodity distribution represents how the poor were disintitiled from food welfare programs.

Instead of publicly backed food stamps, where individuals were treated mostly as consumers in a normal market, the turn to commodity distribution shunted consumers into a secondary market where they became the outlet for food no one else would buy. Nevertheless, just as public funds backed food stamps, public subsidies supported government surplus distributions through charity. What changed was that the subsidy was no longer linked to an entitlement, or even visible to the public. By hiding public subsidy in charitable organizations, the entity of the food bank legitimized a disintitlement to other forms of public food assistance. While it appeared that food was being distributed wholly on a charitable and voluntary basis, the reality could not have been further from the truth.

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<sup>55</sup> U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Background on the Termination of the Food (Commodity) Distribution Program for Needy Families and Individuals*, by Joe Richardson, 73-195ED (1973), 3.

### *The Special Dairy Distribution Program*

Beginning in December 1981, Congress routed millions of pounds of surplus butter and cheese to the voluntary food sector. While envisioned as a one-time distribution to draw down growing government stores, enactment of federal dairy distributions became the first stage in a new relationship between government and private food welfare providers.

Through 1980 and 1981, the Commodity Credit Corporation of the USDA bought up millions of pounds of butter, powdered milk, and American processed cheddar in an increasingly slack market for dairy products. There were two reasons for this decline in demand; first, the increasing relative price of U.S. dairy on the global market, and second, shifting consumer preferences. After a boom in American agricultural exports during the early 1970s, increasing global food production coupled with the rising relative cost of the dollar made for a smaller export market for American farm goods. Dairy products commanded particularly high support prices, meaning that the minimum price they could be sold at market was high. This made U.S. produced dairy more expensive to consumers. At the same moment, research on the impact of fats in milk and cheese led to declining dairy consumption.<sup>56</sup> This confluence of factors during the late 1970s and early 1980s led to soaring stocks of surplus dairy.

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<sup>56</sup> The form of farm supports has varied since commodity supports began in 1933. At first, supported crops only included basic field crops, like feed grains, cotton, rice, and peanuts. In 1948, a dairy title was added to the Farm Bill. At first, these supports took the form of price supports and production controls. But following WWII, income supports replaced these. Congress began making direct payments to farmers to make up the difference between a low market price and some 'target price' set in the farm bill. The dairy lobby in particular has remained very vocal about this target price, also called parity, requesting since the 1940s that it be set at 100% of cost to guarantee the don't lose money. Congress has often ended up setting dairy supports at 80-90% parity, much to the chagrin of farmers. See David Rapp, *How the U.S. Got Into Agriculture and Why It Can't Get Out* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1988), 10-14.

Growing stores of surplus dairy posed two problems; first, in sheer volume, and second, from the special storage conditions they required. Total dairy inventories climbed from 705 million pounds in 1979 to 2 billion pounds by 1981.<sup>57</sup> In 1979, the Government spent \$1.3 billion to purchase, transport, and store dairy products.<sup>58</sup> And unlike other price-supported crops, such as wheat, these surpluses were expensive to store because they required refrigeration. Storage costs alone averaged \$11 million annually from 1977-1980, but had risen to \$24 million for the first nine months of 1981.<sup>59</sup> By the end of 1981, over 560 million pounds of cheese had already been consigned to warehouses. And even when properly stored, they had a far shorter shelf life than other agricultural products. The special requirements of dairy and volume that was stored in USDA facilities led the agency to test new programs to bring down surpluses.

To test a new method of drawing down surplus, the Agricultural Act of 1980 authorized a special nutrition project to provide agricultural commodities to food banks for emergency food boxes. The Secretary of Agriculture had wide latitude in spending the \$356,000 appropriated for the program. During the early phase of the demonstration project, the Secretary individually approved applications from area food banks and determined which crops were in surplus to provide to them.<sup>60</sup> In November 1981, three Second Harvest

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<sup>57</sup> “Ending Inventories of Dairy Products, FY 1979-1983 (through first quarter),” 1983; Panetta Administration Papers; File 2, Box 483, Panetta Institute for Public Policy.

<sup>58</sup> “As Big Dairy Surplus Grows, so Do U.S. Wishes to Shed It,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1981.

<sup>59</sup> Henry Eschwege to Don J. Pease, “Storage Cost Data on CCC-Owned Dairy Commodities (CED-81-157),” September 18, 1981, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Agricultural Act of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-494, Stat. 2570 (1980). See Section 211 for information on this special nutrition project and demonstration.



affiliated food banks piloted a dairy distribution program.<sup>61</sup> Their success led to nation-wide dairy distributions through the emergency feeding sector.

Reagan announced an immediate expansion of the dairy pilot just before Christmas. In an executive order signed December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1981, Reagan authorized the distribution of thirty million pounds of government owned cheese to the needy. Reagan pushed for cheese to be distributed by charitable and non-profit organizations, creating a new configuration of public and private organizations that took part in food assistance. The cheese was to be distributed from the Commodity Credit Corporation to the states through nonprofit organizations, such as soup kitchens and food banks.<sup>62</sup> After the successful pilot program, most network food banks in Second Harvest took part in the Special Dairy Distribution Program (SDDP).<sup>63</sup> With cheese still pouring into government storehouses in early 1982, Reagan announced another seventy million pounds of cheese to be distributed that February.

While a success from the standpoint of drawing down surplus stores, problems cropped up almost immediately for cheese processors, poor consumers, and food banks. A central feature of the surplus dairy distribution was government packaged, five-pound bricks of Pasteurized Process American Cheddar.<sup>64</sup> To make sure consumers knew how to best use

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<sup>61</sup> “Second Harvest National Foodbank Network: 1981 Annual Report”; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Legislative, Box 142, Folder 3, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

<sup>62</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Statement about Distribution of the Cheese Inventory of the Commodity Credit Corporation,” Dec. 22, 1981, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/122281c>.

<sup>63</sup> “Second Harvest National Foodbank Network: 1981 Annual Report”; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers - Legislative, Box 142, Folder 3, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

<sup>64</sup> Under the supplemental distribution, the MFB received 2,478 additional five-pound blocks of cheese at no cost. W. Kenneth Shifflett to Ann Miller, February 3, 1982; Maryland

the cheese, the USDA circulated information sheets with facts about pasteurized American cheese. This information suggested eating the cheese at room temperature, and if cooking, to cook at low temperatures to avoid the cheese from “becoming rubbery and stringy.”<sup>65</sup> The Maryland Food Bank worked to provide ideas for what to do with what was otherwise an unwieldy commodity. Along with the blocks of cheese distributed under the SDDP, the food bank gave out recipe cards for cheese loaf and tomato and cheese soup.<sup>66</sup> Even so, finding use for five-pounds of cheese, potentially when a family was without refrigeration capabilities, required some inventiveness. Further, the cheese posed adverse health implications for people with problems such as high cholesterol.

In a Congressional hearing reflecting on the dairy distribution program, Sister Marilyn Therese Rudy of St. Joseph Center in Venice, California drew attention to the problems of distributing high fat dairy products:

We participate in the federal processed cheese and butter surplus program. We would ask that the Federal government not use the poor to alleviate its conscience. It appears that the surplus program so far has not been established to help people’s nutrition but rather to cover an embarrassing governmental secret. The cost of keeping the subsidized products stored opened the door to distribute this surplus. However, the cheese has cause blood pressure problems for senior citizens. We need nutritional food for each person, old and young... We ask for quality food.<sup>67</sup>

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Food Bank Records; Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>65</sup> Untitled Pamphlet, Maryland State Department of Education, Educational Support Services Branch, Food Distribution Section, 17; Maryland Food Bank Records; Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>66</sup> “Facts About Pasteurized Process American Cheese;” Maryland Food Bank Records; Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>67</sup> Testimony, Sister Marilyn Therese Rudy, C.S.J., Hearing on the Issues of Hunger and Malnutrition, April 30, 1983; Panetta Administration Papers; File 2, Box 483, Panetta Institute for Public Policy.

As this testimony highlights, cheese was not a suitable staple in everyone's diet. The MFB guidance on how to use government cheese cautioned "if you are on a low-fat or low-salt diet, you may want to limit the amount of process cheese you eat in a day."<sup>68</sup>

In addition to posing problems for consumers, the Special Dairy Distribution Program upset cheese processors. In early 1982, the Reagan administration announced it was going to slow the rate of dairy distributed under the SDDP, as dairy producers claimed free butter and cheese was disrupting commercial sales. Going back to the first USDA farm supports, legislation required that free distributions not "disrupt regular channels of trade." Robert F. Anderson, Executive Director of the National Cheese Institute, testified before the Senate Agriculture Committee about how "giveaways" of government cheese were disrupting the commercial-cheese market. He described how the voluntary food network was not equipped to ensure only the "truly needy" receive free cheese. But the bigger issue for the cheese industry was the volume of cheese distributed. Between December 1981 and April 1982, the SDDP gave away the equivalent of 50% of all American processed cheese that they expected to be purchased in the same period. Anderson asked for the immediate reform of cheese distributions.<sup>69</sup> While a "disruption in the regular channels of trade" was viewed as a problem when analyzing the impact on food producers and suppliers, this same logic did not apply to consumers.

Removing consumers from the regular channels of trade was an inherent part of food banks. Food bank recipients could not participate in normal markets for food, and were left to

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<sup>68</sup> "Facts About Pasteurized Process American Cheese;" Maryland Food Bank Records; Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>69</sup> Testimony before the S. Agriculture Comm., Robert F. Anderson, July 12, 1983; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers- Legislative Relations, 1969-1996; Series 6, Box 136, Folder 7, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

rely on an uncertain supply of surplus. Ann Miller from the MFB described this drawback in late 1980, noting that “the Maryland Food Bank can never guarantee that it will have certain foods on hand” and that “hamburger buns may arrive today and tonic water tomorrow.”<sup>70</sup> In this divided food economy, food from food banks became a symbol of poverty, and nothing more so than the five-pound bricks of government cheese. Any concern for equity and avoiding stigma that surfaced in earlier forums such as the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health in 1969 were long forgotten by the time of dairy distributions in 1981 and 1982.

Beyond stigmatizing consumers and disempowering them from more adequate assistance, the dairy distribution also posed problems for food banks. One food bank director reported that dairy distribution had been a success *in spite of* government, arguing “the costs to these organizations has been tremendous... For the administration to suggest that no money need be available for distribution is ludicrous and self-serving.” “It always costs to give something away,” he added.<sup>71</sup> The Second Harvest network found the logistics of the dairy distribution “less than satisfactory from several standpoints” for another reason. The quality and coverage of distribution varied widely from state to state.<sup>72</sup> While some states, like Maryland, had a strong food bank that had the reach to supply 95% of soup kitchens in the state, there were other states without a Second Harvest network bank, where there was no organization with the know-how or expertise to make use of programs like the subsidized dairy giveaway.

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<sup>70</sup> Andrea Pawlyna, “Food donations ‘banked’ for needy,” *The Baltimore Sun*, November 23, 1980.

<sup>71</sup> *Emergency Food Assistance and Commodity Distribution Act of 1983*, 99th Cong., (1983) (statement of Barbara Baker, director of the Greater Philadelphia Food Bank).

<sup>72</sup> Letter, Jack Ramsey to Christina Bolton, January 13, 1983; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers- Legislative Relations, 1969-1996; Series 6, Box 142, Folder 1, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

Government dairy distribution provided a perfect solution to surpluses of USDA products but with little thought to the adequacy of products for poor consumers, the costs entailed by charities, or the unevenness of this distribution. This willful ignorance of the needs and demands of consumers demonstrates how little the Reagan administration thought of a right to food assistance.

Due to these kind of organizational and logistical hurdles, many smaller organizations were unable to scrape together the funds or manpower to utilize SDDP, all while dairy surpluses were growing more rapidly than government storehouses could manage. As late as September of 1984, there were still one billion pounds of dairy in government storage.<sup>73</sup> However, the ultimate goal of the Reagan administration was to do away with future surplus all together.

The volatility of agricultural policy wreaked havoc on programs reliant on surplus, and seemed particularly in flux under the Reagan/ Block agricultural program. The Reagan administration was pushing hard to do away with crop supports entirely. Secretary of Agriculture, John R. Block, believed that the market mechanism would be the best way to ensure returns to farmers. With the 1981 Farm Bill in the works, Reagan and Block lobbied hard to lower farm price supports and eventually draw down stores, negating the need for a surplus distribution program. Chief architect, agricultural economist Don Paarlberg, noted that ending subsidies and making the farm economy more market-oriented “may be painful and unpopular, but it is necessary and will prove beneficial.”<sup>74</sup> Unsurprisingly, farmers

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<sup>73</sup> *Effective Uses of Agricultural Abundance for Hunger Relief: Hearing Before the Select Committee on Hunger*, 98<sup>th</sup> Cong. 71 (1984) (statement of Michael Lipsky, Professor Political Science, MIT).

<sup>74</sup> Jonathan Harsch, “Reagan Farm Bill Gets Cold Shoulder from US Farmers,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 14, 1981, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1981/1214/121460.html>.

rebuked the Reagan proposal to end subsidies. “Agriculture suddenly became the fastest-growing item in the federal budget,” while the President and Congress slashed “nearly every other domestic spending program.”<sup>75</sup> The global agricultural market remained unfavorable to U.S. farm exports, requiring continued domestic outlets for surplus. With food banks marked as an easy outlet, Congress and agricultural producers expanded commodity distribution beyond dairy to include a broader array of farm goods. However, with the potential end of surplus always on the horizon, food banks never knew if or when this system of government distribution would end.

#### *The Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program*

Despite its many shortcomings, the SDDP succeeded in drawing down government stores and making a media splash about the administration doing something about hunger. Between December 1981 and July 1983, the government distributed over \$1 billion worth of surplus commodities (including 700 million pounds of dairy), more than offsetting the roughly \$500 million in cuts to the food stamp program during the same period.<sup>76</sup> Congress was willing to allocate billions of dollars to buying up surplus agriculture commodities, in effect welfare for farmers, but not for poor consumers. The dairy distributions substituted public subsidies for consumers with supports for farmers, only secondarily providing agricultural surplus to the hungry.

Shortly thereafter, Congress set its sights on a larger distribution program. To codify a more permanent solution to growing levels of government owned commodities coupled

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<sup>75</sup> Rapp, *How the U.S. Got into Agriculture*, 15. By 1986, farm programs were the third largest benefit program in the government's domestic arsenal, next to Social Security and Medicare.

<sup>76</sup> Press Release, Secretary of Agriculture John R. Block, “Additional Surplus Commodities to Be Made Available,” August 2, 1983; folder “Hunger (2 of 4),” box OA 9594, Robert Carleson Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

with persistent hunger, Senator Bob Dole (R-KS) proposed the Domestic Commodity Distribution and Food Assistance Bill (S. 17) on the first day of the legislative session in 1983. The bill proposed to make surplus commodities available to food banks, soup kitchens, churches, and other nonprofit charitable organizations. The legislation came in at a very low cost, especially considering that the food was already paid for. The Congressional Budget Office cost estimates for this program were also modest. If the Act went into effect in July, program costs for 1983 would be only \$61 million, rising to \$103 million in 1984.<sup>77</sup> Only distribution to a central state warehouse, as well as some matching funds for administration, needed to be covered.

In addition, this bill aimed to prohibit states, which were responsible for distributing commodities to eligible organizations, from charging administrative costs to charitable organizations. Under the SDDP, up to half of states charged administrative fees. Sweetening the deal for charitable food providers, Dole's legislation included a provision for the federal government to pick up 50% of the charities' administrative costs.<sup>78</sup>

In advance of proposing this legislation, Senator Dole held hearings before the Nutrition Subcommittee in early February 1983. In addition, he was in touch with charitable food providers even earlier. Jack Ramsey, executive director of Second Harvest, voiced concern about this program. Ramsey, along with other Second Harvest food bank directors, was worried that increasing commodity distribution would "pave the way" for additional

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<sup>77</sup> Memo, Mary Ann Curtin to John Gordley and Christina Bolton, "CBO Findings on S.17," March 2, 1983; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers- Legislative Relations, 1969-1996; Series 6, Box 135, Folder 7, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

<sup>78</sup> Letter, Robert J. Dole to "Dear Colleague," "S. 17," February 17, 1983; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers- Legislative Relations, 1969-1996; Series 6, Box 135, Folder 6, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

cutbacks in the food stamp program. While Senator Dole was quite clear that that was not his intention, Ramsey feared, “there are others in the Senate who could well take advantage of Senator Dole’s good intentions and use the increased commodities as an argument to win additional cuts in the food stamp program – a program already crippled in terms of intended effectiveness.”<sup>79</sup> Other food bank heads also worried about this implication of expanding food banking.

While hesitant, Second Harvest felt it necessary to take part in the development of commodity legislation.<sup>80</sup> Leaders of the food bank network believed more robust public provision, through food stamps or WIC, could do far more to solve hunger than handing out free groceries. With commodity legislation was “imminent,” Second Harvest aimed to make clear the problems inherent in expanding commodity distribution. At the center of their concerns were issues of equity, fairness, and justice. Second Harvest highlighted there was no existing, *adequate* mechanism to distribute huge quantities of commodities, clarifying “disbursements from the tailgates of National Guard trucks, and long lines circulating around distribution outlets such as churches are not a basis on which to develop federal

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<sup>79</sup> Jack Ramsey to Christina Bolton, January 13, 1983; Robert J. Dole Senate Papers-Legislative Relations, 1969-1996; Series 6, Box 142, Folder 1, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

<sup>80</sup> At first Second Harvest relied on food bank heads from the D.C. area, Barbara Baker Temple and Rick Stack, to analyze draft legislation, monitor bills, and testify, working closely with Senator Dole as he proposed different iterations of commodity legislation. Stack ran the Capitol Area Food Bank. Temple ran the Greater Philadelphia Food Bank. By mid-February, this became too burdensome for the two appointees who also had to run their respective food banks. The Board of Second Harvest hired a lobbyist from Winston & Strawn to represent the network in the Capitol. Memo, Debbie Oswalt to Second Harvest Board of Directors, “Update on Distribution of USDA Commodities,” March 2, 1983; Maryland Food Bank Records, Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.



legislation.”<sup>81</sup> Whatever legislation emerged needed to provide sufficient support for these large distributions. But even more important than this, government commodity distribution was not to replace food entitlements:

There needs to be language in the legislation which specifies that commodities are not a reasonable basis for feeding the nation’s hungry, and that they are not an alternative to existing entitlement programs such as WIC and food stamps... Congressional leadership must recognize that any further curtailment of the entitlement program will only create longer lines of hungry individuals and families, will further tax the inadequate resources of the nonprofit sector, and will nullify any relief that we hope will be accomplished by the current legislative efforts.<sup>82</sup>

The Board of directors captured the catch-22 of Second Harvest. They could not turn down surplus commodities in the face of ever growing need and would be part of this short-term solution. However, leaders in Second Harvest did not believe an influx of surplus commodities was a just solution to hunger in the United States.

Even with these words of caution, the idea for an expanded commodity distribution gained popularity in Congress, and the majority of Senator Dole’s commodity distribution bill was folded into the Emergency Jobs Bill (P.L. 98-8) in early March. Congress enacted the Emergency Jobs Bill in March 1983.<sup>83</sup> Title III of this legislation, the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Act (TEFAA), created the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) authorizing \$50 million in distribution and administration costs

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<sup>81</sup> USDA Liason [sic] Committee [of Second Harvest], “Principal points to communicated to the Congress regarding the development of legislative response to the problem of hunger in America today,” February 28, 1983; Maryland Food Bank Records, Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>82</sup> USDA Liason [sic] Committee [of Second Harvest], “Principal points to communicated to the Congress regarding the development of legislative response to the problem of hunger in America today,” February 28, 1983; Maryland Food Bank Records, Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>83</sup> Emergency Jobs Appropriation Act of 1983, Pub. L. 98-8, 97 Stat. 13 (1983).

in order to distribute commodities valued at over \$1 billion.<sup>84</sup> The Act authorized nine months of spending to distribute surplus crops to certified emergency feeding organizations. Similar to Reagan's initial dairy distribution, TEFAP was intended as a one-time distribution.

TEFAP included increased administrative hurdles, the largest of which required food banks to check that every single recipient of TEFAP foods meet national eligibility requirements for the program. This required information from every local partner agency a food bank worked with, a significant challenge considering the average food bank served 100 or more local organizations. TEFAP administrators had to meet another hurdle, too. The USDA was required to *consider* the impact on commercial markets whenever it makes commodities available. However, TEFAP was the only program by 1983 including specific language in the bill ensuring that donations of commodities would not displace commercial sales.<sup>85</sup> Based on reports of commercial displacement under the earlier dairy distribution, TEFAP limited monthly donations of cheese to 35 million pounds and butter to 12 million pounds.<sup>86</sup>

Unsurprisingly given Second Harvest's concern as the bill developed, TEFAP was not identified as a positive development by leadership within the network. A memo to the Second Harvest Board of Directors lamented, "many of our worst predictions have been realized with the continued and increased distribution of commodities and the recent

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. See Sec 204 (a), 97 Stat. 13 (1983), 35-36.

<sup>85</sup> Quality Planning Corporation, "A Study of the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP);" Records of Food and Nutrition Services, Record Group 462; National Archives at College Park, MD.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

proliferation of federal legislation encouraging the domestic distribution of commodities.”<sup>87</sup>

Continued distributions of government surplus meant increased overhead and administration required by new rules and regulations around TEFAP. Another memo gets across the complications with increasing engagement in government distributions. The title of a help guide sent to member food banks is telling “The Jobs Bill Regs, Simplified – If That Is At All Possible.”<sup>88</sup> TEFAP, while providing a much-needed infusion of food into food banks, would undoubtedly be time-consuming to administer. And further to these administrative costs, there was no guarantee the program would continue after September. TEFAP created a mountain of work for a one-time distribution.

In Baltimore, TEFAP foods were distributed through the MFB. Since the Maryland Food Bank already was in touch with 95% of soup kitchens in the state, it was decided that the food should be routed through them.<sup>89</sup> This “one-time windfall” of cans of vegetables, fruits, and meat products was to be made available to soup kitchens and emergency shelters. The 1983 director’s report also showed that in July, the food bank had distributed close to 250,000 pounds of food. In a column titled “Ann’s Kitchen,” Ann Miller described food the MFB purchased with funds from the Emergency Jobs Bill would provide enough three-day grocery bags to supply 9,329 families. However, Miller reminded readers that more sustained

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<sup>87</sup> Memo, Debbie Oswalt to Second Harvest Board of Directors, “Update on Distribution of USDA Commodities,” March 2, 1983; Maryland Food Bank Records, Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>88</sup> This provided an overview of surplus commodities available under different titles of the bill and the formulas used to calculate distributions, as well as key deadlines for food banks to apply for funds and commodities. Memo, “The Jobs Bill Regs, Simplified – If That Is At All Possible,” n.d.; Maryland Food Bank Records, Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>89</sup> “Maryland Food Bank Director’s Report July 1983,” September 9, 1983; Maryland Food Bank Records, Series 2, Box 1, Folder “Board General 1979-83,” University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

donations were necessary. She closed on a positive note, “we hope that the upturn in the economy will make some of this unnecessary.”<sup>90</sup> Reflecting a paradox of many food bank directors, Miller hoped that one day the MFB would not need to exist.

Instead of a decline in need following the initial TEFAP distribution, need only grew throughout the summer of 1983. However, the Reagan administration made clear that backing this program did not mean that the administration was claiming responsibility to aid the growing legions of the hungry. Robert Carleson, Reagan’s policy assistant on welfare, noted that continued demand at food banks and soup kitchens during the summer of 1983 following TEFAP distributions was not a sign of increased hunger. In a draft memo including potential questions and answers for the president when announcing the Task Force on Food Assistance in July, Carleson included language carefully crafted to deflect blame from the administration: “Q: Aren’t the long lines at the free food distribution centers a sign of widespread hunger? A: I don’t know. A good share of the people in the lines, I’m sure, have no other alternatives. But for others, I imagine, the lure of free food may be an offer too good to resist.”<sup>91</sup> Food banks sought to end hunger by providing a right to food, something food bank directors knew surplus commodities could not provide. The Reagan administration, on the other hand, was not concerned with a right to food assistance and instead defined hunger as a problem of only a small subset of the population.

The administration had another problem on its hands with a publicity stunt outside a USDA dairy cave. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1983, the Community for Creative Non-Violence

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<sup>90</sup> “Maryland Foodbank Notes,” September 1983; Maryland Food Bank Records, Series 2, Box 2, Folder “General, 1979-1986,” University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>91</sup> Memo, Robert V. Carleson and Kevin R. Hopkins to Edwin Meese, July 20, 1983; folder “Hunger (3 of 4)” box OA 9594, Robert Carleson Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

(CCNV) began to fast outside a USDA facility in Kansas City, MO. Twenty protesters were preparing to subsist on water and fruit juice through the summer in order to win a commitment from Congress or the UDSA to use the nation's food surplus to feed its poor.<sup>92</sup> Protesters set up camp just outside a vast network of limestone caves on the edge of Kansas City. Notably, these caves served as larders full of government-owned butter, cheese, and powdered milk. Representing the "largest single share of the nation's dairy surplus," the USDA-owned stores held in Kansas City comprised 25% of the nation's 480 million pounds of butter and 20% of the surplus of 875 million pounds of cheese.<sup>93</sup> Fasting by members of Community for Creative Non-Violence was to draw attention to these uneaten stores of perfectly edible food at a time when millions of Americans were going hungry. They demanded government-owned dairy be distributed to those without enough to eat, rebutting the issues raised by cheese processors who were concerned about dairy distributions eating into their profits. The protesters highlighted that the needs of the poor should come before those of the business community, making an argument about who was entitled to government assistance and protections. The Committee on Creative Non-Violence argued the needs of hungry consumers should be satisfied before those of business.

Further dairy distributions as a part of TEFAP remained limited even as the program was reauthorized beyond its initial nine-month operation. In September of 1983, TEFAA was amended and authorized for two more years as part of the Federal Supplemental Compensation Act of 1983 (P.L. 98-92). This extended the program until 1985 and made changes in the way distributing organizations would be reimbursed for delivering surplus commodities. A Government Accounting Office Report noted the severity of the problem of

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<sup>92</sup> "20 on Fast to Release Extra Food," *New York Times*, July 19, 1983.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

limited administrative funds posed at thirty-three emergency food centers. Rising need far outpaced these organizations ability to respond, more could be done if there was more money for collecting, processing, and distributing food, along with money for, “at least, a core of paid staffers adept at getting the most out of very limited resources.”<sup>94</sup> A successful extension again in 1985 through 1989 cemented a few more years of commodity distribution, and also a new name. The “T” in TEFAP changed from “Temporary” to “The.” TEFAP was now “The Emergency Food Assistance Program.”<sup>95</sup> However, in extending the program, the paperwork became too complicated for some organizations to participate. In the spring of 1985, the Maryland Food Bank withdrew from TEFAP. New auditing requirements were too onerous for its primarily volunteer staff to comply with.<sup>96</sup>

### **Market Instability in Food Banking**

Second Harvest and its member food banks were in the unenviable position of providing a band-aid to a problem so vast that only federal intervention had the resources to solve. TEFAP recipient organizations were defined as agencies providing “nutrition assistance to relieve situations of emergency and distress through the provision of food to needy persons, including low-income and unemployed persons.”<sup>97</sup> Hunger was a temporary

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<sup>94</sup> United States General Accounting Office, *Public and Private Efforts to Feed America's Poor: Report to the Honorable Dennis E. Eckart, House of Representatives* (U.S. G.P.O., 1983); folder "Hunger (4 of 4)" box OA 9594, Robert Carleson Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>95</sup> Beth O. DaPonte and Shannon Bade, “How the Private Food Assistance Network Evolved: Interactions between Public and Private Responses to Hunger,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 35 no. 4 (Dec 2006), 680.

<sup>96</sup> “The problem was paperwork,” *The Baltimore Sun*, March 25, 1984.

<sup>97</sup> Federal Supplemental Compensation Act of 1983, Pub. L. 98-92, 97 Stat 608 (1983). See Section 201A.3 and 201A.4.

problem to be met with emergency measures, not a sign of systemic failure of the larger political economy to provide households with enough money to buy food. This definition of hunger illustrates how far away food banks were from being able to provide any kind of right to food assistance. From the perspective of food pantries and soup kitchens, a few bags of groceries or a hot meal was not going to solve hunger in the United States. However, food bank leaders could not turn away industry or government donations, even if they believed food assistance was a public responsibility.

Food banks became major outlets for the distribution of government-owned surplus as well as dumping grounds for excess production from food manufacturing and marketing. With an increasing reliance on voluntary and charitable action, food aid to the hungry also began to fluctuate with both crop and market cycles, placing the burden of risk on those who could least afford to bear it: the poor and needy themselves. As Janet Poppendieck, a prominent historian of food welfare programs notes, “the growth of the emergency food phenomenon did not do away with the major public programs that had developed in the earlier decades, but it transformed the dominant image of anti-hunger activity from lobbying and budget politics to charity and donation, from food as a right to food as a gift.”<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, these gifts were sitting on a shaky foundation.

The instability in food bank distributions first became apparent in the late 1980s. Favorable agricultural markets had led to minimal levels of government-owned surplus. While there were 903 million pounds of cheese in government inventory in FY 1983, this had dwindled to 98 million pounds in FY 1987, leaving emergency organizations a projected 227

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<sup>98</sup> Janet Poppendieck, “The USA: Hunger in the Land of Plenty,” in *First World Hunger: Food Security and Welfare Politics*, ed. Graham Riches (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 138.

million pounds of cheese short of meeting their regular distributions.<sup>99</sup> With commodity levels down, TEFAP was slated to be cut in 1989. Philip R. Warth, Jr., President of Second Harvest, testified before Congress on TEFAP. In 1987, TEFAP commodities made up one-third of food distributed by Second Harvest food banks and had become “a vital part of the everyday operations of almost every” food bank in the network. Losing TEFAP would present a “crisis” for organizations on the frontlines of hunger.<sup>100</sup> While restored in 1989, in 1990 TEFAP was on the chopping block again. In a memo to Second Harvest member food banks, Warth provided instructions for individual food bank directors to get in touch with their members of Congress. By flooding DC offices with phone calls, Warth hoped members of Second Harvest could once again make the case for the continuation of TEFAP commodity purchases. Warth noted Congress had rejected proposed improvements to the Food Stamp Program, making continued expenditures for TEFAP commodities all the more important. The Reagan administration might be persuaded to budge on their position of “no new expenditures” for \$120 million for commodities. However, Warth cautioned “there almost certainly will be no increase over” this amount, maintaining spending levels on TEFAP from the year prior.<sup>101</sup> Funds were restored again, and even increased, with

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<sup>99</sup> Memo, Phillip R. Warth to Second Harvest Network, “Probably Significant Reduction in the TEFAP Program in 1988,” November 20, 1987; Maryland Food Bank Records, Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>100</sup> Memo, Scott Rausch to Second Harvest Network, “Philip R. Warth Jr.’s testimony on TEFAP,” March 9, 1988; Maryland Food Bank Records, Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>101</sup> Memo, Phillip R. Warth to Second Harvest Network, “STATUS OF TEFAP: ONE MORE OPPORTUNITY FOR INPUT!!” October 5, 1990; Maryland Food Bank Records, Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.



reauthorization coming in at \$175 million for FY 1991.<sup>102</sup> But as Warth's appeals to Congress demonstrate, ongoing funds were far from guaranteed, leaving food bank leaders in a constant state of uncertainty, wondering if they would receive government support at all.

Food banks, an ad hoc system of emergency provision, have become an enduring piece of the American food welfare system. Food banking in combination with changes making the food stamp program less generous demonstrate how Reagan-era changes made permanent alterations to the infrastructure of food – and social – provision. Namely, these changes forced a reconfiguration of public/private welfare provision.

While food welfare programs such as food stamps have been described as a third-rail in American social policy, the reality is these programs were precarious. This precarity existed on two planes. First, at the individual level work-requirements coupled with a maze of deductions and exceptions that varied state-by-state meant many who were eligible did not apply for food stamps in the first place. Those that did were subject to up to monthly income verification to ensure their eligibility. At the legislative level, food assistance precarity was evident through ongoing debates about minimizing program expenditures, and through bypassing the legislative process entirely to make changes in administrative rules. Food stamps became a de facto incomes program in the United States in the absence of true cash transfers to the poor, but this transfer did not even provide enough for a basic diet. As uncertainty grew around the food stamp program, Reagan-era changes led to increasing reliance on the emergency feeding network.

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<sup>102</sup> Letter, Rep. Tom McMillen to William G. Ewing, September 27, 1990; Maryland Food Bank Records, Series X, Box 179, University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

Food banking retained its emergency designation while becoming anything but a response to an emergency: it was an entrenched feature of the landscape of food provision. Smith and Lipsky argue that the Regan and Bush administrations appropriated the concept of community and privatized the idea of responsibility. They argue calling on community “would not be a rallying point for demanding public provision of more comprehensive state services and increasing equity of the service system. Instead, it would be a vehicle for devolving social services to nongovernmental providers to enhance individual responsibility and reduce claims for public spending.”<sup>103</sup> Emergency assistance via food banks and their local partners helped to alleviate some need, but remained far from being able to end hunger. Transformations under President Reagan had a lasting impact on food assistance programs, removing any idea of an entitlement to adequate food assistance.

## **Conclusion**

As a very visible piece of the food welfare system, the rise of the food bank had vast implications for the framing of hunger. Hunger became depoliticized and “detached from issues of rights and entitlements and taxes and fairness, and became attached instead to canned goods drives, walk-a-thons, food festivals and corporate public relations.”<sup>104</sup> In this telling, food banks depoliticized hunger. However, I argue treating hunger as an emergency to be dealt with through the voluntary network *repoliticized* the problem within the bounds of moral and individual activity. The submersion of public money behind private organizations delegitimized claims for the national state to take responsibility for hunger. In

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<sup>103</sup> Steven Rathgeb Smith and Michael Lipsky, *Nonprofits for Hire: The Welfare State in the Age of Contracting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 208.

<sup>104</sup> Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 302.

this way, hunger was recast as an emergency to be met through irregular funding, and an ideal site for partnerships with for-profit food business. Privatization was framed as a public good, benefiting government, farmers, food industry, and the hungry by allowing diverse needs to be met by organizations that, some argued, already existed to feed those in their community. While spending on food stamps, school lunch, and WIC has always far outpaced public subsidies to food banks, the budget realities became hidden behind changing perceptions of the 'right' response to hunger. Public food programs continued, however the food bank captured the national imagination about the proper kind of food assistance. The supposed success of food banks took attention away from the system of public food welfare.

The fact that food banks play such a large part in food welfare today signals the enduring relationship that emerged out of the Reagan-era realignment of public/private social welfare provision. In contrast to the well-intentioned founders of a food bank network, the institution of the food bank transformed to meet broader needs than intended. In this new role, food banks embody an approach to feeding the hungry that put the needs of poor consumers last while for-profit food producers, manufacturers, and retailers won out. The food bank serves as an ongoing symbol of the degree to which the poor have been disintegrated from public welfare in the United States.

## Epilogue

On August 1, 1996, President Bill Clinton held a press conference on welfare reform, “when I ran for President four years ago, I pledged to end welfare as we know it.” The time was nearing for his promise to become reality. Clinton continued, describing an impending Congressional vote “to transform a broken system that traps too many people in a cycle of dependence to one that emphasizes work and independence, to give people on welfare a chance to draw a paycheck, not a welfare check.”<sup>1</sup> This logic echoes the Reagan-era focus highlighting responsibilities over rights of citizenship. Ideas of disenfranchisement crossed party lines with the New Democrats adopting conservative views on public assistance. According to Clinton, the current system incentivized claiming welfare benefits over earning a wage through work. Welfare reform would change the structure of incentives and, in this narrative, produce more just outcomes for society.

Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) on August 22, 1996, enacting vast changes in cash and in-kind assistance for the poor. The centerpiece of this legislation was the end of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and its replacement with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). As the name implies, TANF benefits were time-limited to five years, or even less if states so chose. Further, TANF was block-grant funded, meaning appropriations would not

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<sup>1</sup> “Text of President Clinton’s Announcement on Welfare Legislation,” *New York Times*, August 1, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/01/us/text-of-president-clinton-s-announcement-on-welfare-legislation.html>.

grow with rising need or to meet inflation.<sup>2</sup> Shifts in cash assistance took the same form as disenfranchisement in food assistance from the decade prior. Further, PRWORA changed more than cash assistance. It transformed the food stamps program, imposing tighter eligibility criteria, stronger work requirements, and time limits.

After PRWORA, there was a “sharp decline” in cash assistance and food stamp caseloads. In the wake of welfare reform, two studies of the food stamp program found that families presumed they were ineligible.<sup>3</sup> A narrative of tightening eligibility and stringent work requirements meant some families that met the gross income eligibility criteria believed they could not claim food stamps because a family member was in work. People also faced a new hurdle in the form of strict time limits for certain categories of food stamp recipients. For adults defined as able-bodied and without dependents, PRWORA limited food stamp benefits to no more than 3-months within any 3-year period.<sup>4</sup> These changes came straight from the playbook of the politics of disenfranchisement.

Further, PRWORA linked the food stamp program to emergency food distributions. The legislation required that \$100 million of the annual appropriation for the food stamp

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<sup>2</sup> Janet Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 278. Notes in the epilogue reference the UC Press edition.

<sup>3</sup> Judi Bartfeld, “Single Mothers, Emergency Food Assistance, and Food Stamps in the Welfare Reform Era,” *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, Vol. 37 no.2 (2003): 283-304; Beth Osborne Daponte and Shannon Bade, “How the Private Food Assistance Network Evolved: Interactions between Private Responses to Hunger,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 35, no.4, (Dec. 2006): 668-690.

<sup>4</sup> This group of individuals has been in the news again recently, often abbreviated to ABAWDs. ABAWDs are defined as between the ages of 18-50, with no dependents, no disabilities, and able to work.

program be used to purchase commodities for TEFAP.<sup>5</sup> This epitomized the reconfiguration of public/private welfare. Public funds were diverted from food stamps, the closest program the United States had to a minimum income, to subsidize the system of private, charitable food welfare.

Concern about domestic welfare reform in food programs appeared on the global stage later that same year. In November 1996, the Food and Agriculture Organization held the World Food Summit in Rome. At the summit, representatives from around the globe set a goal to halve the number of “chronically undernourished” people by 2015. Each nation in attendance formalized their pledge by signing on to a guarantee stating all people had the right to access safe and nutritious food – with one exception.<sup>6</sup> The United States was the only nation that refused to sign the final declaration of the 1996 World Food Summit. Their negotiations argued this was because the declaration would have “made welfare reform illegal under international law.”<sup>7</sup> They continued:

The United States believes that the attainment of any ‘right to food’ or ‘fundamental right to be free from hunger’ is a goal or aspiration to be realized progressively that does not give rise to any international obligations nor diminish the responsibilities of national governments towards their citizens. The United States understand and accepts provisions of the ‘right to have access to safe and nutritious food’ ...<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat*, 298.

<sup>6</sup> “Rome Declaration on World Food Security,” [fao.org/wfs/index\\_en.htm](http://fao.org/wfs/index_en.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Rosset, “U.S. Opposes Right to Food at World Summit,” Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, July 3, 2002 (blog post), <https://www.iatp.org/news/us-opposes-right-to-food-at-world-summit>.

<sup>8</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Report of the World Food Summit* (Rome: FAO, 1997), 50 in D. John Shaw, *World Food Security: A History Since 1945*, (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 354-355.

Understanding and accepting provisions was very different than signing on to an international agreement promising to uphold those standards. But given shifts in welfare and food assistance with PRWORA, this position is less surprising. Domestic welfare policy increasingly focused on the responsibilities, not rights, of citizenship. The U.S. representation at this summit merely took this approach to a global scale. In, refusing to sign the Rome Declaration, the United States signaled continued hostility to a right to food assistance.

This dissertation uncovers the complex reconfiguration of public and private food assistance in the United States. Given the intervening thirty years when this narrative ends and the present, privatized food welfare has only expanded. For many, food banks operate apart from the network of public food assistance programs. As of 2006, only 36 percent of families who used emergency food pantries received food stamps, while one-third of pantry-goers had never even applied. For some scholars, this represents “a fundamental shift in the needy’s perception of the food safety net.”<sup>9</sup> Instead of a robust system of public food welfare, food banks have become frontline service providers for those without enough to eat.

During the Great Recession beginning in 2008, food banks were a major source of assistance for the newly unemployed. But between the 1980s and 2000s, the Second Harvest network experienced significant declines in industry donations. Food banks at first helped to solve a market failure. Instead of throwing away edible food, food banks created an outlet where food would not go to waste. But only a decade later, shifting markets for imperfect food goods diverted industry surplus away from the food bank network. Beginning in the 1990s, the food industry fully embraced quality control measures, leaving fewer mismarked, short-weighted, or otherwise “off” products to donate. Following these changes, “there was

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<sup>9</sup> Daponte and Bade, “How the Private Food Assistance Network Evolved,” 669.

almost no chance that a ton of spaghetti sauce had a bit too much oregano or that thousands of labels were misprinted.”<sup>10</sup> Without semi-truck loads of shelf-stable products rolling in on a regular basis, food banks struggled to maintain adequate inventories to meet the needs of their clients.

The food manufacturing industry had found more profitable avenues to offload their surplus. They began selling food to overseas markets at discount or to secondary grocers in the United States. Producers received more than the value of the tax deduction they would have made from donating their goods at home. In addition, to changes in food manufacturing and production, the grocery market transformed. Grocery donations had declined in the intervening 20 years thanks to a market of secondary grocers. Retailers including Dollar General and the 99¢ Store, began buying canned and boxed goods that grocers were unable to sell.<sup>11</sup> In the 1980s, food that could not be sold in grocery stores could go two places: a dump or a food bank. By the 1990s, this was no longer the case. The market siphoned food resources away from the charitable and voluntary sector to the private sector where corporations could benefit from higher-profit alternatives. Forcing private food welfare organizations to adhere to market principles ultimately limited the food available for them to distribute.

Hunger remains a pressing problem today. TEFAP still exists, routing commodities primarily through the nonprofit sector. In FY 2011, approximately 85% of TEFAP foods were distributed through the Feeding America (formerly Second Harvest) network, and in

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<sup>10</sup> David Cay Johnston, “When the Cupboard is Bare,” November 10, 2008, *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/11/giving/11FOOD.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



2018, TEFAP commodities made up 20% of all food distributed by the network.<sup>12</sup> Public programs remain precarious, as well. Just a few weeks ago, the Trump administration proposed administrative rules to further tighten eligibility for ABAWDs, cutting 3 million from food stamp rolls.<sup>13</sup> These rules would remove what the administration defines as ‘loop-holes’ for food stamp recipients. However, the loop-holes the administration refers to are waivers for areas with especially high unemployment, allowing localities or states to provide food stamps for more than 3 months in a 3-year period to able-bodied adults without dependents even if they do not meet the work requirement. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act suspended the ABAWD time limit for 2009 and 2010. Since 2010, states have slowly moved away from these waivers.<sup>14</sup> Further, it was recently revealed that the loss of these waivers under the new Trump rules would impact students who are eligible for free school lunch. Many students are categorically eligible for free lunch if their family receives food stamps. Under Trump’s proposed rules, shifting food stamp eligibility would eliminate categorical school lunch eligibility for 500,000 children.<sup>15</sup> While President Ford’s 1976

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<sup>12</sup> “The History of Food Banking and Feeding America,” Version – March 29, 2013, 3; <https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/fact-sheets/tefap-factsheet-final.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Kalena Thomave, “The Trump Administration Plans to Kick Three Million Off Food Stamps,” *The American Prospect*, July 25, 2019, <https://prospect.org/article/trump-administration-plans-kick-three-million-food-stamps>; Pam Fessler, “3 Million Could Lose Food Stamp Benefits Under Trump Administration Proposal,” *NPR.org*, July 23, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/23/744451246/3-million-could-lose-food-stamp-benefits-under-trump-administration-proposal>.

<sup>14</sup> In 2017, there were only eight state-wide waivers remaining. Andrew Hammond and Mackenzie Speer, “SNAP’s Time Limit,” *Clearinghouse Community*, Shriver Center on Poverty Law, April 2017, <https://www.povertylaw.org/clearinghouse/article/timelimit>.

<sup>15</sup> Lola Fadulu “500,000 Children Could Lose Free School Meals Under Trump Administration Proposal,” *New York Times*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/30/us/politics/free-school-meals-children-trump.html>.

administrative changes to the food stamp program were found unconstitutional and never implemented, a similar outcome negating the ABAWD rule change seems less likely today.

John van Hengel quipped, “The poor we will always have with us, but why the hungry?” Despite attempts of the past fifty years, hunger remains in the United States today. However, it does not have to. Robust public food assistance programs, or an adequate minimum income, coupled with private food welfare has the potential to bring about the end of hunger in the United States. This dissertation has outlined glimmers of possibility on the path towards a solution to the hunger problem, demonstrating how far-reaching solutions were once in the realm of the politically possible, and could be again.

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