
Our Healthy Future: The Global Context

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I received a call from President Bill Clinton early in his second term: “George how would you like to go to Rome as an American Ambassador for the three United Nations agencies that are located there?” I wasn’t sure—possibly it was the kind of job they give to defeated presidential candidates, to get them out of the country! After some thought, I decided it would be a good venture to undertake, as I have been interested in food and agriculture all of my public life.

HALVING THE NUMBER OF HUNGRY

After about three months in Rome, I realized that it was exactly the job I should be doing at this stage in my life. I have been there for about four years, and the year before I arrived there had been a World Food Summit, attended by representatives of 180 countries, including forty-three heads of state. They had committed themselves to halving the number of chronically hungry people in the world—800 million out of a global population of a little more than 6 billion. In other words, about one out of seven of all of the people on this planet suffered every day of their lives from hunger, and the commitment was to reduce that figure to 400 million by the year 2015. That’s only thirteen years down the road.

If you’re going to take 400 million people off the hunger roles in fifteen years, you have got to take them off at the rate of 27 million per year. The most reliable figure I could get was that over a period of four years we had reduced the number to 790 million, about two and a half million per year, which was not going to get the train to the station.

UNIVERSAL SCHOOL-LUNCH PROGRAM

I considered my experience in this country, including what I had learned from people like Bob Bergland and Orville Freeman, and came up with the idea of a school-lunch program for every hungry child. Here in the United States and in some other developed countries, most children receive a school lunch, but not in Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East. So, I proposed that the United Nations, with the United States in the lead, commit to providing a good, nutritious lunch every day to every school child in the world.

The first person I called on was my friend Bob Dole. When I was running for president in 1972, he was the Republican national chairman. He used to take a bite out of me every day before breakfast and usually another before dinner. Subsequently, I became chairman of the Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs in the United States Senate on which Senator Dole was the ranking member. We let political bygones be gone and started a bipartisan effort to deal with the problems of food and nutrition in this country.

As things developed on the universal school-lunch program, I went to the White House to seek support from President Clinton. The secretary told me he wanted to see me in the Cabinet Room, where half of the cabinet was already assembled—the Deputy Secretary of State, the Secretary of Agriculture, the Director of the Budget, the Health and Human Services people—and half of the White House staff. The president came in, sat down and asked, “George, what new subversive idea have you got now?” So, I made the pitch outlined above, explaining that when you start a school-lunch program like this, we know what happens from pilot studies that have been in operation for the last ten or twelve years in thirty countries. First, school attendance jumps dramatically. I mentioned that about 300 million youngsters from grade one to grade six, or years six through twelve, are now not receiving any lunch. They trudge off in the morning, walking maybe a mile or two to the village school, where they are expected to study for five or six hours with nothing to eat. I’ve seen such children in villages all around the world. They yawn. They are sleepy. They are lethargic. About 130 million of them have dropped out, or never started school at all. Most of them are girls because of cultural forces in so many societies. However, once the word gets out in a village that a good nutritious meal is to be had just by showing up, parents get the girls and the boys to school in increasing numbers. Academic performance, athletic performance and health all improve.

In the United States, the school-lunch program started in 1946. Its chief sponsor was Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, the long-time chairman of the Senate Arms Services Committee. During World War II, 30% of all of the young men in this country were physically ineligible for military service, many because of malnutrition. The Armed Services Committee came up with the idea that a federal school-lunch program was a way to improve national security. In this country, any time you put a defense label on a bill it goes through

Congress with a hoot and a holler. We had wonderful results from it in this country, and we are having wonderful results with the pilot school-lunch program in other parts of the world.

Another change that results from school lunches affects girls. In many parts of the world, illiterate girls get married as early as 10, 11, and 12 years of age. In Ethiopia recently, a little girl on a donkey approached our party wearing a white lacy dress and a little tiara. I asked her through the interpreter where she had been. She said that she was coming from the church where she had just been married. She smiled very proudly and told me that she was 10 years old. That little girl had no schooling and that white dress would soon be replaced by rags. In the developing world, illiterate women have an average of six children. Those who attend school—even for only six years—get married later, have a better understanding of the values of life and have an average of three children. With better nutrition and education you can cut the birth rate approximately in half without surgical procedures of any kind. There is no society where the birth rate does not drop with improved education.

I am not against big families. My wife and I have five children, but we could afford it. We gave them health care and provided education, clothing, recreation, and direction. Illiterate women who produce six children can provide none of those benefits.

Lawrence Summers, former Secretary of the Treasury, once a senior World Bank executive and now president at Harvard, said, “Dollar for dollar, the best return we get on any of our foreign assistance is the education of girls.” And no one has found a more successful magnet for pulling them into school and keeping them there in developing countries than school lunches or breakfasts, depending on the local preference.

FUNDING

President Clinton gave us \$300 million to get started, without any action by Congress. I don't know where he found the money, but I don't really care. Senator Dole and I worked hard to advance the idea on a bipartisan basis, then we went to Congress and got a coalition to introduce what has a wonderful title: *the George McGovern, Robert Dole, Food for Education and Child Nutrition Act*. Congress recently authorized \$100 million the first year, and we may be able to increase that to \$300 million via the Appropriations Committee. Failing that, there are two ways to find another \$200 million. One is through foundations, of which there are 12,000 in this country. We will also go to corporations with an interest in food and agriculture: Cargill, ADM, General Mills, Quaker Oats, etc. I think we can raise \$100 million and then get another \$100 million from other governments: the British, French, Germans, Scandinavians, Japanese, and Russians. These other countries could provide commodities, which is what the American contribution will largely be, or cash. If we get the United Nations on board, we will have a program that will literally transform life on this planet.

HELPING FARMERS AND BIOTECHNOLOGY

School lunches are not the whole thing. We need to provide help to farmers around the world in the form of scientific knowledge, advice, and procedures. In the 1960s and 70s, the green revolution—another term for scientific farming—circumvented the necessity of plowing 12 million square miles of soil to feed the growing population. This was achieved by drawing on the knowledge generated at our agriculture experiment stations and by corporate and public-sector scientific research. It was done by men like Dr. Norman Borlaug, the Nobel laureate, who showed countries like Mexico, India, and Pakistan how to increase crop production, not by cultivating additional acreage, but by increasing the productivity of acreage already being farmed, which is the best way to preserve natural ecosystems, including wetlands.

I want to see us move ahead carefully on biotechnology. It can make a big difference. Every environmentalist ought to be for it because it will increase our productivity without plowing up new land. Those who believe in preserving the natural ecosystem should be the firmest advocates for biotechnology. I am particularly interested in using biotechnology to help farmers in developing countries