

TOWARD SELF-RELIANCE: Our Food Supply

by Vic Berecz

Food and water ... now we're getting down to basics. Let's leave water off today's agenda, and focus on food supply. Every time there's a hurricane warning down here in Florida, there's a mad rush on the food stores. Some would say that's prudent. I'd say it exhibits a lack of planning and self-reliance. If you can't live for a few days (the normal impact period of even a major storm) on what's in your home, you're doing something very wrong!

But, let's look at the bigger picture. Throughout history mankind has been in a race to provide enough food to feed all those mouths. In ancient times it took 99% of the population to do that ... and even so they often failed. Those failures were called famine. Today, people are still starving ... but not for our inability to produce or transport sufficient food to go around. Rather, hunger today is primarily the result of economic and political issues. I'm convinced that, with today's technology and mechanization, a couple of large fertile nations have the potential to feed the entire world themselves ... yes, the U.S., China, Brazil, India, or Russia all could do that ... maybe others as well.

Don't believe me? Think about how in the U.S. (and elsewhere) farmers are being paid NOT to plant crops. Think about how a large percentage of our corn crop isn't used to feed people, but rather to produce fuel (ethanol). Think about the food that goes to waste through spoilage or vermin. Think about ...

Rather than adding more obvious extensions to this list, let's consider eliminating the ancient mindset that food is a scarce commodity and that starvation is an effective natural means of controlling population. Instead I would propose a new mindset which believes we can ensure that sufficient food is available to feed *everyone* well. Rest assured, my use of the word "everyone" here does not mean a new entitlement guaranteeing the *good life* for those who choose indolence. Here are my musings on this proposed new mindset.

Worldwide, food production today requires fewer workers and food costs are constantly decreasing. This progress can and should continue ... for the benefit of all mankind. Also I will note, that in our ever-more-affluent society, variety in foodstuffs will be demanded, and so importation of foods not produced here will increase. So, worldwide progress in food production benefits us as well as the hungry masses in the so-called *third world*.

Where do American national interests fall in this big picture? It is in our national interest that all Americans are well fed ... a well-fed population is a healthier and more productive population. It is also in our nation's economic interest that our food exports are maximized. Neither of these big goals is consistent with constraining food production to keep prices high. Perhaps then, we need some rethinking at the national level of farm subsidies; of constraints on technological advances in food production ... including genetic engineering; and prohibitions of proven mechanisms to retard spoilage ... including irradiation. I believe progress in these three areas, combined with our effective domestic distribution system, can ensure that all Americans are well nourished and therefore able to optimally contribute to our society. It will also make our exported food less costly, benefiting the hungry everywhere.

In the preceding paragraph I used two terms that may have raised the eyebrows of some readers: *genetic engineering* and *irradiation*. Like *nuclear energy*, these terms irrationally invoke fear in too many people ... probably because they appear unnatural, and you can't see the

results. I view genetic manipulation as nothing more than a speeded-up version of the hybridization that good farmers have employed for millennia. The use of these techniques to make crops insect resistant, to bear more nutritious fruit, etc. seems to me to be a no-brainer. As for using radiation to kill undesirable microbes in meats, eggs, and vegetables ... how can you argue with ensuring healthier food? Remember, as when you have a chest x-ray, the radiation serves its purpose without leaving any residue. Technology has been a part of the 20th century food revolution, and can make an even bigger difference in 21st century food production!

For a moment let's address more local issues. California and Florida produce the bulk of America's vegetables. There, soil and climate are ideal for the mass production of these crops at low cost, as are the plains of the Midwest for grain crops. Does that mean the other 48 states should forget about vegetables? I'd shout an emphatic *NO!* I don't feel that each locality needs to be agriculturally self-sufficient ... realistically that'll never happen. But, there are many reasons states and localities throughout the country should be encouraging farming, albeit on a smaller scale. Local foodstuff production eliminates transportation costs and delays, and allows us to fully realize how good (and good for you) fresh food is. What could be better than a vine-ripened tomato or a fresh-picked ear of sweet corn? That's an advantage of our *snow-bird* life – having these wonderful locally grown foods during two seasons. Issues local government should be considering are the reduction of regulation and fees that inhibit small farmers, the encouragement of farmer's markets, and property assessments based on actual ... not highest value ... usage.

Now let's take it down a step to the personal level. Every child should learn where their food comes from and how things grow. We were fortunate, when our children were growing up, to live in a suburban community where a small vegetable garden taught valuable lessons about nature, nutrition, and literally reaping the rewards of hard work. Not everyone is so lucky. But, even in a big-city apartment a window-sill herb garden is usually possible. Think about it. Fresh basil on those tomatoes purchased at the farmer's market, or home-made pesto on your favorite pasta ... those are experiences that bring joy to every child (and adult for that matter)!

Before I conclude, let me address an underlying issue: is food an entitlement? I don't want to see anyone starve, anywhere in the world, but I recognize I don't have the power to do much about it ... especially overseas. I especially care about undernourished children ... where all too often getting off to a bad start results in lifelong impoverishment and poor health. In our country, where we have at least a fighting chance to do something about hunger, we should try. Adequate, nutritious food should be available to all American children. But, we cannot make food an entitlement that would encourage indolent and non-productive adults in our society to persist in their ways. Society has always used two approaches to dealing with folks who refuse to conform to their community's values: institutionalization or exile. Those options, in my mind, should be extended to those who opt to live off the rest of us without contributing to our society.

I hope I've made the point that self-reliance can operate at multiple levels. With respect to our food supply, by striving for at least partial self-reliance at many levels we can make life ... and eating ... better for ourselves and our families..