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# THE UNITED STATES FOOD SYSTEM OF THE 1970's - DISCUSSION

by

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Consumer response to Professor  
Goldberg's paper.

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My assignment is to react as a "consumer" to Dr. Goldberg's learned prognostications.

In Ray's listing of national priorities, the consumer fares very well but many consumer cynics would regard this list of national priorities--what countries would like to have happen--as somewhat of a rhetorical exercise.

A reading of the rest of the paper through a consumer's eyes leaves me with the feeling that I, the consumer, am outdoors, alone, peering through a window to watch the activity in a crowded busy room. The people I am watching are in the process of making decisions which will determine the availability, distribution and cost of food. There is no way I can call attention to my presence, no way I can enter the room, no way I can participate in the discussion nor influence the decisions. I hasten to add this is an image created not only by Dr. Goldberg's projection of food technology to the developing world, it is a recurring image created by the inadequacy and ambiguity of the consumer's role in the food system as a whole.

My service as the only consumer representative of the Food Advisory Committee of the Cost of Living Council left me with the same feelings of inadequacy and frustration. Fellow members of the Committee were skilled spokesmen for their constituencies (producers, labor, processors, retailers, etc.), well-motivated

and good companions throughout a trying exercise. However, the things I was pushing to help the consumer through a time when food prices were skyrocketing--such things as honest, labeling, disclosure of contents and actual costs, nutritional value, standardized packaging, guarantee of available food for low-income groups, encouraging true competition, elimination of distribution and transportation practices which inflate costs--you are familiar with the litany--received short shrift.

Dr. Goldberg does not give promise that the consumer will have a greater voice in policy-making in the future. Nor, aside from nutritional criteria and information, does he offer promise of any help to the consumer in his prediction of things to come.

As for nutrition, the paper lists one of the changes which has taken place in policies as "high food prices have encouraged much needed work in nutrition". This is projected into two future trends: "Nutrition will be thought of automatically in describing food and in marketing and promotional activities 'and' the consumer will have better access to nutritious kinds of new foods". All this is to the good.

I predict that the U.S. consumer will show tremendous resilience in the change-over to a world food system, with its new technologies and the demands of developing nations.

Indeed, it is remarkable that consumers have tolerated the huge net export

of grain by this country in 1972 and 1973 shown in Table 2, while domestic prices were mounting, while increasing energy costs made demands on the same consumer dollar and in spite of allegations of impropriety in connection with some of these sales.

What explains this tolerance? "Not that I love country less, but humanity more" is an old adage. Moreover, food exports provide the basis for the expansion of world trade with its rewards for the people of this country. Also, greater production means lower per unit production costs.

The point of rejection will come, as Dr. Goldberg points out, when pressure to satisfy international demands conflicts with domestic economy of high

food prices during an inflationary and at the same time recessionary period.

When the breaking point comes, if it does, the consumer may demand an inventory system, reserves, informal controls or even full governmental control of the industry.

Meanwhile, efforts should be made to consult with the Consumer. Parenthetically, I might say this was not done in the development of the Universal Product Code and you are aware of the resentment and hostility which have resulted. Bring the consumer into the room, address the needs of the final purchaser. His buying power is the last and most important link in the chain of the food system.