

## Brief Framing

Aaron Bobrow-Strain

I am in the middle of a book project titled *White Bread: Dreamworlds of the Store-Bought Loaf*. The book is a social history of struggles over the meaning of “good food” and “correct diet”—told through the story of America’s 150-year love-hate relationship with industrially-produced white bread.

Although it fits in the genre of commodity-centered books like *Cod*, *Salt*, and *Banana: The Fate of the Fruit that Changed the World*, this is not another story of how one food “saved the world.” Rather, it’s a history of the countless social reformers, food experts, and diet gurus who have thought that the right bread *could* save the world (or, more frequently, that the wrong bread could destroy it). As much as it’s a history of modern bread, it is also a critical examination of the recurring idea that “if we could just people to make the ‘right’ choices about what to eat” it would restore the corrupted moral, physical, racial, or social fabric of the nation.

The book is written for a trade press (Beacon) and a popular audience, with the goal of inserting concepts emerging out of critical foods studies (e.g. from the biopolitics of diet to critiques of consumer-centered efforts to change the food system) into mainstream discussions of food politics.

The specific piece you have is written as an academic article (for a special issue of *Food and Foodways* that’s supposed to push scholars of U.S. food culture to think about globalization and the U.S. diet in ways that are more relational; more about “imperial encounters”). Throughout the book project, I’ve tended to hash out my ideas for the book in article form before reworking them into a chapter suitable for a popular audience.

Eventually a stripped down version of this article, combined with an extended discussion of Green Revolution wheat, cheap food policies, and the story of *pan Bimbo* in Mexico, will become a chapter. In the book, it will come after a chapter on the biopolitics of synthetic bread enrichment during WWII and the early Cold War. And it will come before a chapter on counterculture, consumerism, and class from the late 60s to early 80s (“How White Bread Became White Trash”).

Thank you in advance for taking the time to read and think about this piece. I look forward to your ideas and comments.

**Making White Bread by the Bomb's Early Light:  
Anxiety, Abundance, and Industrial Food Power in the Early Cold War**

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“The US is not loved or hated because it is a citadel of political liberty...[it is] measured by its ability and willingness to contribute from its own comfortable fat to strengthen Europe’s shivering frame....At the moment the tendency [in Europe] is to judge the United States rather severely and to make allowances for Soviet Russia...[but] *bread comes from America and it does not come from Russia.*”

—Hamilton Fish, 1947

“Bread: It Is the First Concern of a Hungry World. Trouble Looms for the Nations Which Cannot Provide it.”

—*Los Angeles Times* headline August 10, 1947

### **1. ‘Where is the White Bread?’**

After six weeks of fierce fighting for Sicily in the summer of 1943, Allied forces established their first occupation government in former Axis territory. Quick victory in Sicily would help turn the tide of the European war, but the question on the minds of many of the island’s half-starved residents was far more quotidian: “In many a liberated town,” *Time* magazine reported, “the first question asked was: ‘where is the white bread?’”<sup>1</sup> The war’s end was still years away, but *Time*’s focus

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<sup>1</sup> “Where Is the White Bread?,” *Time*, August 2 1943. The article’s title evokes Paul Boyer’s classic Cold War cultural history Paul S. Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light American Thought and Culture at the Dawn*

on hungry Sicilians' demands offered a glimpse into how the United States would see itself in the postwar world—a world that seemed to clamor desperately for bread that only America could provide.

This article explores U.S. policymakers and consumers' engagements with global bread politics during the early Cold War. It does that with an eye toward understanding the making of a particular form of “American alimentary exceptionalism” premised on the universal choiceworthiness of industrial foodways.<sup>2</sup> This alimentary exceptionalism did not assume that the U.S. industrial diet was gastronomically superior to other countries' diets, but rather that it offered a unique foundation of strength, stability, choice, and abundance on which world peace could rest in the uncertain postwar world.

During WWII, home front food production and everyday dietary choices had been explicitly enlisted in U.S. national defense efforts. Diet, patriotism, and military readiness had become inextricably linked, as Amy Bentley masterfully shows in *Eating*

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*of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). Versions of this paper were presented at the UC Davis Robert Mondavi Institute “Tasting History” conference and the University of Arizona School of Geography and Development colloquium series, where I received important feedback. Comments from Carolyn de la Pena, Melanie DuPuis, and three anonymous reviewers proved invaluable in helping me rework and clarify my argument.

<sup>2</sup> By “industrial food” I refer to sustenance produced through capital-intensive agriculture and processed into homogenous, standardized products to maximize efficiencies and returns to scale. By “industrial foodways” I refer to the collective *habitus* of consuming industrial foods. The phrase “American alimentary exceptionalism,” is, of course, intended to evoke the larger concept of American exceptionalism. That term has many meanings with different emphases, but all highlight the perception that the United States has a unique and privileged place among the nations of the world and in the march of human history. Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

*for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity*.<sup>3</sup> With victories in Europe and Asia, however, American kitchens appeared to demobilize. In Amy Drake McFeely's words, "Relieved of their pseudo-military roles, women embraced new assignments as consumers... With sugared words and pictures, the ads reminded the public once again that abundance is at the core of the American dream. The war in the kitchen was over."<sup>4</sup>

Or had it simply taken on new forms? A growing number of scholars have begun to note how Cold War propaganda explicitly mobilized "the American kitchen"—with its shining new appliances, sleek lines, and dazzling surfaces—"as an icon of the Western way of life."<sup>5</sup> But what about American food itself? To what extent was America's burgeoning taste for abundant industrial food linked to what Daniel Yergin, in his classic history of the early Cold War, called the country's newfound commitment to "permanent military readiness"?<sup>6</sup>

That question place this article in conversation with debates about the United States' exercise of "food power" during the Cold War. For decades, a well-developed line of scholarship has shown how the United States' postwar projection of food power abroad through food aid and technology transfer constituted a form of cultural, economic, and

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Mary Drake McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?: American Women and the Kitchen in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005). See also: Laura A. Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

dietary imperialism.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, debates about these alimentary projections have largely centered on the nature of their impact abroad; how they affected the culture, diets, and livelihoods of people outside the United States. This is an important subject, but *not* this article's focus.

Instead, this article explores the largely unexamined flipside of postwar food imperialism: how the exercise of food power abroad during the early Cold War shaped Americans' understandings of their diet and its place in the world. It argues that Americans' strong confidence in the choiceworthiness of its industrial foodways and industrial food production system—something whose legacies we still grapple with today—were forged, in part, on the imperial landscape of Cold War competition.

The United States' alimentary imperialism and its faith in industrial food both pre-date the Cold War,<sup>8</sup> but this article contends that they took on a new form in era of

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<sup>7</sup> Although it served as a central pillar in U.S. geopolitical strategies dating back to at least WWI, the basic premise of “food power” was most bluntly stated by Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz in the 1970s: “Hungry men listen only to those who have a piece of bread. Food...is a weapon in the U.S. negotiating kit.” Under the doctrine of food power, the U.S. would use its undisputed agricultural might and advancing food processing technologies as both a carrot and a stick in geopolitical struggles. See Robert L. Paarlberg, *Food Trade and Foreign Policy: India, the Soviet Union, and the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Writing on “food imperialism” has generally cleaved between political economy (with its focus on the ways U.S. food power impacted agrarian systems and livelihoods, particularly in the Third World) and cultural politics (with its focus on struggles over the “Americanization” of diets around the world). Examples of the former include: H. Friedmann, “Feeding the Empire: The Pathologies of Globalized Agriculture Source,” *The Socialist Register* (2005); John H. Perkins, *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution: Wheat, Genes, and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Peter Rosset, *Food Is Different: Why We Must Get the Wto out of Agriculture* (New York: Zed books, 2006); Vandana Shiva, “The Geopolitics of Food: America's Use of Food as a Weapon,” *Economics and Politics Weekly* 23, no. 18 (1988). Examples of the latter include: Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961*; Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War : The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> See for example: Nick Cullather, “The Foreign Policy of the Calorie,” *American Historical review* 112, no. 2 (2007); Mona Domosh, “Purity and Pickles: Discourse of Food, Empire and Workd in Turn-of-the-

superpower competition.<sup>9</sup> In the end, Cold War practices of food aid, reconstruction, and propaganda reinforced a particular kind of American alimentary exceptionalism—one less explicitly racialized than previous versions, and more grounded in ideologies connecting consumer abundance to global stability.

This fusing of industrial foodways with the imperatives of national security instilled a particular, narrow vision of “good food” with geopolitical urgency (and marginalized alternative visions). More than a half-century later, even as critiques of industrial foodways mount from all directions, this urgency has not disappeared. Indeed, it energizes key attempts to defend industrial food production against proponents of slow, local, and organic eating.<sup>10</sup> By placing American industrial foodways in a Cold War context, this article reminds us that, even when couched in the language of humanitarianism and world peace, the present-day eliding of industrial food production and global security by authors such as James McWilliams or Nina Federoff normalizes a state of emergency in which the enormous social, economic, environmental, and health costs of industrial must be accepted without question or critique.<sup>11</sup>

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Century USA," *Social and Cultural Geography* 4, no. 1 (2003); Dan Morgan, *Merchants of Grain* (New York: Viking Press, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> A few historians have referenced the reciprocal effects of postwar food power on how people in the U.S. thought about their food. This article builds on their insights. Warren Belasco, *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity*.

<sup>10</sup> Nina V. Federoff and Nancy Marie Brown, *Mendel in the Kitchen: A Scientist's View of Genetically Modified Foods* (Washington, D.C.: Joseph Henry Press, 2004); James E. McWilliams, *Just Food: Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2009).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* For a history of this kind of crisis narrative and its effects, see: Belasco, *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food*. This might also give us pause at the way in which proponents of local food production have begun to invoke national security, e.g Michael Pollan, "An Open Letter to the Next Farmer in Chief," *New York Times*, October 9 2008.

## 2. Anxiety and Abundance: Cold War Cultural Politics and U.S. Foodways

The argument introduced above owes a debt to feminist food historians who first framed postwar foodways as *political*—a site of struggle over household gender relations, constructions of masculinity and femininity, and the meanings of domesticity in a nation of industrial power.<sup>12</sup> This article builds on those insights by placing household- and national-level food politics in global relief. It suggests that our understanding of the role domestic discourses of “healthiness,” “abundance,” “choice,” “newness,” and even “convenience,” played in shaping postwar foodways will benefit by being brought into conversation with global Cold War history.

This, in turn, inserts the article into a larger engagement with Cold War cultural history—particularly debates over whether and how anxieties about global conflict affected ordinary Americans immersed in postwar celebrations of consumer abundance. Cold War historians have long traced the ways that concerns about global superpower conflict re-injected values of military readiness and competitive toughness into many arenas of everyday life, including constructions of masculinity, childrearing practices, popular fiction, Hollywood films, and Broadway musicals.<sup>13</sup> Although it has received less

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<sup>12</sup> Steven Gdula, *The Warmest Room in the House: How the Kitchen Became the Heart of the Twentieth-Century American Home* (New York: Bloomsbury 2008); Sherrie A. Inness, *Dinner Roles American Women and Culinary Culture* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa City, 2001); McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?: American Women and the Kitchen in the Twentieth Century*; Jessamyn Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking : Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Laura Shapiro, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York: Viking, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> See for example: Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*; K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Cynthia Hendershot, *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2003); Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Lisle Abbott Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street: America in 1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2nd ed., *The American Moment* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996);



attention than other areas of Cold War popular culture, it seems likely that American foodways were shaped by those same anxieties. At the same time, however, historians have also begun to warn against ascribing too much agency to Cold War anxieties. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the argument runs, Americans may have worried about their country's ability to compete with Communists, but they also had a lot of other things on their minds. As Leo Ribuffo suggests, "Documentary filmmakers who retrospectively cherish images of suburban school children ducking under their desks during air raid drills should also show them rushing Good Humor trucks to buy ice-cream cones."<sup>14</sup>

This article takes a different tack in its approach to the question of anxiety and consumption. By placing U.S. foodways—specifically, the taste for industrially processed bread—in their larger geopolitical context, it blurs implicit divides between anxious thoughts of military readiness and joyful celebrations of consumer abundance. While McFeely and Ribuffo's points are well taken, this article suggests that duck and cover drills and Good Humor bars were not as different as we might think. Fueled by the successes of postwar food relief, an explosion of new convenience foods, and the messages of Cold War propaganda, celebrations of American alimentary abundance at home and abroad provided a reassurance at a time when the country seemed to be falling behind the Soviets in many other arenas. Wonder Bread might not have tasted as good as

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Peter J. Kuznick and James Burkhart Gilbert, *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Peter Filene, "'Cold War Culture' Doesn't Say It All," in *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, ed. Peter J. Kuznick and James Burkhart Gilbert (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); Leo P. Ribuffo, "Will the Sixties Never End? Or Perhaps at Least the Thirties? Or Maybe Even the Progressive Era? Contrarian Thoughts on Change and Continuity in American Political Culture at the Turn of the Millennium.," in *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, ed. Peter J. Kuznick and James Burkhart Gilbert (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

French baguettes or contained the natural nutrients of Soviet “black bread,” as many consumers readily acknowledged, but, unlike those other breads, they were fortified, plentiful, and cheap—and world peace seemed to depend on them.

Located at the nexus of cultural and geopolitical history, this article deploys a diverse set of sources ranging from women’s magazines, domestic advice columns, advertising, and popular food writing to the records of the Foreign Agriculture Service (FAS), U.S. Information Agency (USIA), and Supreme Commander of the Allies in the Pacific Japanese Occupation Authorities (SCAP). The article proceeds as follows: First, it places postwar breadways in the historical context of ongoing struggles over industrially produced loaves. The next two sections examine the European food crisis of 1946-48 and early 1950s anti-Soviet propaganda, respectively, showing how American bread, industrially-farmed wheat, and other modern convenience foods came to be seen as critical elements in the fight against Communism. Finally two more case studies—efforts to convert Japanese diets from rice to wheat and the mid-1950s craze for French bread—illustrate sites of uncertainty and struggle over the universal choiceworthiness of U.S. foodways. In both cases, policy makers, tastemakers, and ordinary consumers found their confidence in the universal choiceworthiness of American industrial foodways challenged by alien diets. In many ways these global encounters ultimately reinforced assumptions about the superiority of U.S industrial bread, but they also exposed cracks in the architecture of alimentary exceptionalism, creating space for the resurfacing of long-held doubts about the meaning of industrial bread. Not coincidentally, by the late 1960s, “natural” Asian diets and “authentic” French food would emerge as important icons of

resistance to American industrial food (and the imperial politics it seemed to represent). And industrial white bread would emerge as a leading icon of all that was wrong with *Amerika*.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Industrial Bread and Its Discontents

In 1890, ninety percent of American bread was baked in homes by women, and the country's few commercial bread bakeries were nearly all tiny one-oven shops with a few employees serving urban neighborhoods. Less than forty years later, this had changed dramatically: in 1930, ninety percent of the country's bread was baked outside the home by men in increasingly distant factories, neighborhood bakeries were in decline, and bread had begun to take on the form in which we know it today—a standardized, homogenous product of food science and assembly line manufacture. From the beginning, however, this revolutionary process of industrialization came accompanied by virulent protests from diverse quarters.<sup>16</sup>

From the 1910s to the 1930s, anyone reading women's magazines, health newsletters, domestic advice columns, or listening to popular radio programs could not have escaped an overwhelming sense that the country's new staff of life was broken. "The whiter your bread, the quicker you're dead," Dr. Clark jingled on his Home Health Hour radio show,

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<sup>15</sup> See Warren James Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*, 2nd updated ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed history of the industrialization of bread see: Aaron Bobrow-Strain, "White Bread Bio-Politics: Purity, Health, and the Triumph of Industrial Baking," *Cultural Geographies* 15, no. 1 (2008). Data on bread production drawn from: "Flavor of Today's Bread Is Much Better Than Many Critics Are Willing to Admit," *Western Baker*, January 1937; "The Story of American Efficiency," *The U.S. News*, October 31 1938; W.J. Panschar, *Baking in America*, vol. 1 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965); Donald R. Stabile, "Bakery Products," in *Manufacturing: A Historographical and Bibliographical Guide*, ed. David O. Whitten and Bessie Emeric Whitten (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1990).

while other prominent food gurus accused industrial bread of contributing to, among other ills, anemia, cancer, diabetes, blood poisoning, criminal tendencies, tuberculosis, polyneuritis, neurasthenia, gout, bursal rheumatism, tooth decay, liver disease, kidney failure, over-stimulated nervous systems, physical disfigurement, and acidosis.<sup>17</sup>

During WWII, highly successful campaigns to synthetically enrich industrial bread and train consumers about the value of vitamin-charged loaves silenced most of this criticism. Industrial bread was, once again, seen as vital and strong—a weapon of national defense. While, many of industrial bread’s most prominent critics disliked synthetic enrichment, they reluctantly rallied to the cause in the name of wartime expediency.<sup>18</sup> By the late 1940s, however, they once again felt free to vent.

In fact, even during the industrially-infatuated 1950s, it would have been difficult to find anything positive written about industrial bread’s flavor or texture in venues ranging from women’s magazines to newspaper food columns. It was “cottony fluff,” “cotton batting,” “fake,” “purposeless perfection,” “inedible,” “limp,” and “hot air.” Consumers, for their part, echoed many of these concerns. In the largest multi-year study of American bread habits ever, a third of respondents described supermarket bread as “doughy; gummy; soggy; not well baked,” about 15 percent thought the taste was terrible, and as much as eighteen percent thought it too airy. Only about a third to a quarter (depending on the

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<sup>17</sup> Aaron Bobrow-Strain, "Kills a Body Twelve Ways: Bread Fear and the Politics of "What to Eat?," *Gastronomica* 7, no. 3 (2007); Bobrow-Strain, "White Bread Bio-Politics: Purity, Health, and the Triumph of Industrial Baking."; Aaron Bobrow-Strain, *Dreamworlds of the Store-Bought Loaf* (Forthcoming book mss.).

<sup>18</sup> Aaron Bobrow-Strain, "White Bread Bootcamp: 'Good Food' as National Defense in the Campaign for Vitamin Enrichment," (Mss. under review, Available on request from the author).

year of the study) could find nothing in their bread flavor or texture to complain about. Importantly, however, the one thing consumers *could* agree on was that their bread was good for them. With the memory of wartime enrichment campaigns still fresh in their minds, 96-100 percent of respondents believed industrial bread had the nutritional strength to build strong bodies.<sup>19</sup>

Whether they liked it or not, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Americans ate a lot of industrial bread—even though, with rising prosperity, the end of wartime shortages, and the dawning of a new age of techno-food marvels, they had many other options; perhaps more options than any group of eaters in history up to that point. The vast majority of households in the United States ate store-bought white bread at all three meals—totaling some 8.6 billion loaves a year in 1954 (not including home-baked bread, and store-bought whole wheat, raisin bread, and “ethnic” breads). In Buffalo and Minneapolis, the average family of four went through eight loaves a week!<sup>20</sup>

During WWII, bread consumption, driven by the rationing of other staples, accounted for as much as 40 percent of all calories consumed in the country daily. After the war this settled in at 25-30 percent and then, despite the absolute certainty with which food economists and baking industry specialists predicted rapid declines in consumption,

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<sup>19</sup>USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, "Consumers' Preferences among Bakers' White Breads of Different Formulas: A Survey in Rockford, Illinois, Marketing Research Report No. 118," (Washington D.C.: USDA, 1956).

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

hovered around the same point for the 1950s. Studies remarked at the high percentage of daily vitamins, iron, and protein consumers derived from the much-derided staff of life.<sup>21</sup>

Why did postwar consumers continued to eat so much industrial bread, despite widespread popular condemnation of its flavor and texture? A complete answer to that question is beyond the scope of this article. Instead it focuses on one unexamined element: the way that American industrial bread's place in Cold War politics created a metric with which consumers could compare their limp, fluffy, and much-derided, bread positively to the world's dense, hearty loaves.

#### **4. If Bread Doesn't Come, Bombs Will**

During the winter of 1945-1946, while the U.S. celebrated peace by consuming 3,000 calories a day per person and singing "Let it Snow! Let it Snow! Let it Snow!" with Vaughn Monroe, severe weather nearly destroyed Europe's entire bread grains crop. Historic drought that summer followed by another bad winter finished the job. In a region where most people got 40-55 percent of their daily calories from bread, nearly one

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<sup>21</sup> Data on consumption patterns in the preceding paragraphs drawn from: Marguerite C. Burke, "Pounds and Percentages," in *Food: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1959*, ed. United States Department of Agriculture (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959); Panschar, *Baking in America*; Esther F. Phipard, "Changes in the Bread You Buy," in *Crops in Peace and War: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1950-1951*, ed. United States Department of Agriculture (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951); "Boost for Bread," *Business Week*, February 28 1948; Thomas C. Desmond, "Bread-Your New Perfect Food," in *Food in War and in Peace, Consolidated Report of the New York State Joint Legislative Committee on Nutrition*, ed. New York State Joint Legislative Committee on Nutrition (Albany: New York State Legislature, 1944); Richard G. Walsh and Bert M. Evans, *Economics of Change in Market Structure, Conduct, and Performance: The Baking Industry, 1947-195* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Studies, 1963); Ronald L. Wirtz, "Grain, Baking, and Sourdough Bread: A Brief Historical Panorama," in *Handbook of Dough Fermentation*, ed. Karel Kulp and Klaus Lorenz (New York: CRC, 2003); M.L. Way and H.B. McCoy, *Establishing a Retail Bakery, Industrial (Small Business) Series, No. 29* (Washington D.C.: United States Department of Commerce, 1946).

hundred twenty-five million European faced starvation.<sup>22</sup> Bread riots rocked France, which had seen its worst wheat harvest in 132 years. Italy's flour stocks dwindled and Britain reported that its bread situation was worse than the darkest days of the war. Wheat stocks were so low in the U.K. that government officials were forced to extend and deepen wartime bread rationing, despite fierce popular opposition. Winston Churchill called the decision, "One of the gravest announcements [he] had ever heard in the House in a time of peace."<sup>23</sup> Things looked even less promising in Asia. China faced a massive rice crisis, famine gripped Korea, and millions of conquered Japanese survived on 520 calories per day. In total, the U.S estimated, 500 million people—1 in 5 people on the planet—faced famine conditions between 1946-1948.

Some relief supplies shipped to Asia, but for racial and geopolitical reasons Truman and the country's attention was riveted on Europe. Mobilizing his bully pulpit, grain exporters' eagerness to exploit new markets, and almost every Liberty ship in the US Navy, Truman mobilized the largest movement of wheat and flour in world history—almost 900 million bushels between 1946 and 1947; enough to bake, conservatively, 70 billion loaves of white bread.

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<sup>22</sup> European bread consumption statistics from, "Rural Diets in Europe. Annex: Report on Bread League of Nations, " August 26, 1939, Foreign Agricultural Service Correspondence (hereafter FAS) RG 166, France 1950-1954, Box 152, National Archives II at College Park, College Park, MD (hereafter NARA-CP). Background on the 1946-1948 crisis in this section drawn from: Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity*; Harry Fornari, *Bread Upon the Waters; a History of United States Grain Exports* (Nashville,: Aurora Publishers, 1973); Thomas J. Knock, "Feeding the World and Thwarting Communists," in *Architects of the American Century*, ed. David Schmitz and T. Christopher Jespersion (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 2000); Morgan, *Merchants of Grain*; Paarlberg, *Food Trade and Foreign Policy: India, the Soviet Union, and the United States*.

<sup>23</sup> FAS Field Office in London to U.S. Secretary of State, July 19, 1946, FAS RG 166, United Kingdom, Breadstuffs, 1946-1949, Box 966, NARA-CP, MD.

The United States' role as the postwar world's most important source of bread did not take policy makers by surprise. Even before Pearl Harbor, military strategists commonly argued that food "would win the war and write the peace," and agriculture officials planned for that peace even as they mobilized to fight. Most importantly, they wanted to make sure that the country avoided a devastating rural recession like the one triggered after WWI when war-stimulated grain production collided with a large postwar drop in demand for U.S. wheat. This time around the country would use its agricultural advantage strategically, killing two birds with one stone: supporting farmers at home while projecting food power into the uncertain political terrain of the future. What surprised the Truman administration was not the fact that the United States survived the war as the only power in the world with its agricultural system not only unscathed, but in peak form; the most important player in the world food system. What shook Washington was just how quickly and forcefully this role thrust itself on the country.

To free up wheat for the world, Truman called on the country to voluntarily conserve bread, prohibited the use of wheat in alcohol production, and mandated a higher extraction rate for white flour.<sup>24</sup> When Americans complained about the new, supposedly "gray" high extraction loaves,<sup>25</sup> Truman scolded them saying that not getting "exactly the kind of bread that [you] prefer" was a tiny price to pay for saving lives and establishing

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<sup>24</sup> Extraction rate refers to the percentage of the whole wheat berry retained in flour after the milling process. Thus, true whole wheat has an extraction rate of 100 percent. In the U.S. white flour has an extraction rate around 72 percent. Increasing extraction rates to 80 or 90 percent conserves flour by utilizing more of the bran and germ of the wheat berry, while yielding a flour somewhere between white and whole wheat.

<sup>25</sup> Extraction rate refers to the percentage of the whole wheat kernel retained in flour after milling. Thus, true whole wheat has an extraction rate of 100 percent. Standard white flour contains 70-75 percent of the whole wheat kernel, while high extraction white flours utilize 80-85 percent.



lasting peace.<sup>26</sup> Publications like *Life*, *Look*, *Parents' Magazine*, *Time*, and *American Home* backed the president running heart wrenching stories of hunger in Europe and offering readers advice on how to conserve wheat. Thousands of women signed pledges to conserve bread in their households, and food magazines went back on war footing, publishing tips and recipes for saving bread.

While Americans felt generally sympathetic toward humanitarian efforts to help allies and even former enemies in Europe, public support for wheat conservation, high extraction loaves, and possible bread rations was short-lived.<sup>27</sup> Letters to newspaper editors reveal widespread skepticism about Americans' willingness to suffer bread restrictions for altruistic reasons. Instead, humanitarian concern for "starving European children" segued into self-interested thinking about wheat exports and national security. As *Consumers' Guide* assured readers, American bread "cast upon the waters" would return, "in the form of preventing a generation of rickety European children from growing into a sickly, embittered and grasping people bent on war. It will, in other words, return to us in the form of the better chances of peace and security in our own homes which only a healthy and peaceful Europe can assure."<sup>28</sup>

An August 10, 1947 article in the *Los Angeles Times* summed up the new attitude in the headline, "Bread: it is the first concern of a hungry world. Trouble looms for the nations

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted by Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity*. See also: "Truman's Remarks to Citizen Food Committee," *New York Times*, October 2 1947.

<sup>27</sup> Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity*.

<sup>28</sup> "Bread on the Waters," *Consumers' Guide*, May 6 1946. See also: "How to Do with Less Bread," *Life*, May 6 1946; "New Dark Bread Is Part of U.S. Contribution to the Grave World Food Crisis," *Life*, March 4 1946; "Greatest in History," *Time*, June 10 1946; "Conserve Bread," *Parent's Magazine*, May 1946; "Save Wheat," *American Home*, May 1946.

that can't provide it." If bread doesn't come, the article continued, "bombs—in one form or another—will." The *Farm Journal*, which, granted, had its own interest in food exports, put the matter bluntly, "better to win friends now with flour, than have to face their guns later." "Baukhage," a nationally-syndicated D.C. pundit and popular radio personality, made the case even more explicit in his Associated Press column: "The history of Europe since the war is that every government fall when the bread ration is reduced...The free world is at stake." The only thing that can "save Europe for democracy," he continued, is "the American farmer."<sup>29</sup>

The news from France appeared particularly grave. The country's 1947-8 wheat harvest was as disastrous as the previous year's, and even with emergency shipments from France's North African colonies the government could not maintain its basic bread ration at 300 grams per person. Foreign Agricultural Service field officers in France wrote urgent telegrams to the State Department in Washington warning officials to expect a general break down of the French food distribution system by the end of May 1948 if even larger U.S. wheat shipments weren't forthcoming. This would likely trigger widespread protests and strikes, as it had in 1946 and 1947, but it might even get worse. Opposition groups were already using the country's puny bread ration as a central wedge issue. French Communists, in particular, had made impressive political hay out of a single 5,000 ton wheat shipment from Russia, and U.S. officials complained that the country didn't seem to appreciate the United States' far greater contributions. If bad

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<sup>29</sup> "Bread: It Is the First Concern of a Hungry World. Trouble Looms for the Nations Which Cannot Provide It," *Los Angeles Times*, August 10 1947; "Guns, Bread, and Butter," *Farm Journal*, September 1953; Baukhage, "U.S. Farmer Will Beat Communism," *Associated Press Syndication*, October 2, 1947. Examples of American skepticism about bread conservation cited in Paul Mallon, "Overhauling of UNRA by Hoover Expected," *Western Newspaper Union Syndication*, April 28, 1947.

harvests forced the government to lower the bread ration to 250 grams, they predicted, it might tip France's delicate political balance toward Communist forces. At the very least, the pro-government wing of organized labor might seek rapprochement with the Communists.<sup>30</sup>

In Paris, the May Day parade that year featured a contingent of workers carrying placards reading, "Give us a slice of bread," while back in the U.S., syndicated columnists Joseph and Stewart Alsop warned readers that smaller bread rations "would geometrically increase the chances of very unfortunate results in the polls...If France starved, it would go Communist...If France goes to the Communists in the spring elections, the great struggle for Europe between the Soviet and western political systems will almost certainly be ended in Russia's favor." The fate of Europe seemed to hang on French bread rations.<sup>31</sup>

Whether these fears were reasonable or not, the U.S. responded with stepped up wheat shipments. On May 10, 1948, after two years and 900 shiploads of stop-gap aid to France, the Liberty Ship John H. Quick docked at the Port of Bordeaux bearing the first official Marshall Plan wheat. Lavishly praising the U.S. for its help, government officials announced that the bread ration could be maintained. This averted full-fledged crisis in

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<sup>30</sup> FAS Field Office in Paris to U.S. Secretary of State, "French Import Requirements, Food Items," May 12, 1947; FAS Field Office in Paris to U.S. Secretary of State "Food Situation and Related Political Developments in France," February 20, 1947; FAS Field Office in Paris to U.S. Secretary of State, "The Breadgrain Situation in France," April 9, 1947; FAS Field Office in Paris to U.S. Secretary of State, June 11, 1946. All found in FAS RG 166, France, Breadstuffs, 1946-1949, Box 9, NARA-CP, MD.

<sup>31</sup> "Marshall-Aid Ship Cheered in France," *New York Times*, May 11 1948; Joseph Alsop and Stewart Alsop, "Food Is Politics," *Los Angeles Times*, May 4 1946.

France, although bread-related protests and political instability would continue into the 1950s.

For long-term stability, pundits agreed that France needed industrial baking and American-style competition. The French baking industry had too many inefficient subsidies, lax sanitation regulations, archaic distribution networks, and monopolistic guilds. When ergotism, a rare form of hallucination-inducing poisoning caused by fungus-infected rye, sickened two hundred residents in the small village of Pont Saint-Espirit during the summer of 1951, U.S. media reveled in the sensational story. The gory details of a *pain maudit* (damned bread)—a “medieval disease...never seen in the United States”—splashed across newspapers and magazines for days.<sup>32</sup> Tales of villagers convinced they were jet planes, hordes of peasants fleeing imaginary tigers, and rumors that “the village idiot had hexed the baker” seemed to confirm the larger sense of French baking: it was irrational and archaic. Campbell’s Soup Company president William B. Murphy captured this attitude at a U.S. Information Agency symposium on food and the Cold War: French foodways, he declared, were “charming” and something to “keep...happily in mind while we survey most of the other half of mankind,” but certainly no model for global security.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See for examples, stories in *Life*, *Time*, and *The New York Times*. Ergotism had less of a presence in the United States because Americans consumed relatively little rye flour, but this explanation did not factor heavily in media coverage.

<sup>33</sup> Murphy, "The Challenge of the Future: An Overview."

Figure 1



### Why do the hungry ask first for bread?

When famine strikes in Europe why does a humble North Dakota grain elevator suddenly become a tower of hope to millions of men, women and children?

Why does that slice of bread on your dinner plate (which you might casually share with the hard) symbolize life itself to so many people?

Few know the real answers . . .

- Bread is the mainstay in the diet of a large share of the world's population. It is one of the least expensive basic foods. It is convenient to use. It saves food. It's easy to digest. And it generously supplies the most immediate need of your body—food energy.
- Because bread combines energy-producing carbohydrates with muscle-building protein, it quickly satisfies hunger, and prevents early recurrence of hunger pangs.
- In its modern, enriched form, bread also provides highly important amounts of three important B-vitamins—thiamine, niacin and riboflavin—and iron. Bread also provides some phosphorus and calcium.
- On the practical side, wheat, the grain from which most bread is made, may safely be stored for years and shipped long distances without danger of spoiling.

These are the reasons why our country has been sending all the wheat it could to hungry lands across the seas.

Now that the worst of the emergency is over, the millers and bakers of America have once again been able to turn their attention home—are once again giving you the best loaf of bread in all the world.



**General Mills**

MAKES ALL-CHOICE BAKERS' SPRINKLE COKE FLOUR  
THE BEST FLOUR FOR ALL FRESH BREAD LOAF FRESH  
HOMEBREADS THE FINEST WHOLE WHEAT AND STARCHES  
THE FINEST BAKERS' BAKERS' FLOUR HOME BAKING

©1947 GENERAL MILLS, INC., MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.

1947 General Mills Ad referring to wheat conservation and the European famine.

In Iran, another quickly emerging Cold War battleground, U.S. and Soviet strategists mobilized bread grains in the fight for control over oil. Through the late 1940s, with bad wheat harvests in Iran's Azerbaijan breadbasket triggering bread riots throughout the country, Soviet propaganda spread rumors that Tehran was sending the nation's wheat to the U.S. to pay for arms. A 1942 episode where Axis agitators allegedly stirred up anti-Allied bread riots in Tehran was still fresh in U.S. officials' minds, and they worried Soviet propaganda would turn Iran against them. What made what worried them even more than propaganda, however, was the Soviet's concrete commitment to provide the country with 100,000 tons of wheat in 1949. Luckily for U.S. strategists, the Soviet wheat traveling overland trickled into the country slowly, while American Liberty ships filled with wheat arrived with great fanfare in 1949.<sup>34</sup>

Bread and flour shipments were also credited with undermining Communist forces in Greece, where, in 1948, 96 percent of the nation's staple was made from U.S. flour or wheat.<sup>35</sup> Turkey followed a similar pattern. And the Berlin blockade, for its part, confirmed policymakers' sense of the strategic importance of fresh bread, giving civil defense experts a first-hand glimpse of the effects of bread deprivation on civilian populations. Although it would have made more sense to airlift light, nutrient dense foods instead of flour and baking fuel, officials observing the situation in Berlin quickly concluded that, in times of crisis, "ample freshly baked bread...was essential to civilian

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<sup>34</sup> U.S. Ambassador in Tehran, "Irano-Soviet Wheat Agreement," December 3, 1949, FAS RG 166, Iran, Breadstuffs 1946-1949, Box 780, NARA-CP.

<sup>35</sup> FAS Field Office in Athens to U.S. Secretary of State, August 31, 1948, FAS RG 166, Greece, Breadstuffs, 1946-1949, Box 724, NARA-CP, MD. A similar story played out in Turkey. See also Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War*.

morale.” Later, they would apply this lesson to U.S. civil defense planning, which stressed the importance of bread supplies.<sup>36</sup>

Things did not go as well in Czechoslovakia. In 1948, Truman’s failure to extend bread grain shipments to East-leaning Czechoslovakia was credited with pushing the country definitively into the Soviet camp, and the president publically vowed never to allow something like that to happen again. In a soon-to-be-famous St. Patrick’s Day speech, the president declared, “There are times in world history when it is far wiser to act than to hesitate,” demanding quick passage of the Marshall Plan, which, at first, consisted largely of stepped-up bread grain shipments. In the same speech, the President called for universal peacetime military training and the reestablishment of the Selective Service system. With bread grains leading the way, the country was going to (cold) war.<sup>37</sup>

By the early fifties, Main Street would no longer be asked to “save a slice a day” for humanitarian reasons. From that point on, food power would be the sole concern of an emerging national security wielding a golden arsenal of grain. Whether average consumers thought explicitly about their bread’s place in the world, the postwar European experience had strongly cemented a deep association between U.S. bread and security.

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<sup>36</sup> "Food in Civil Defense," *The Technology Review* 55, no. 4 (1953). On the effect of the Berlin airlift on civil defense planners’ understand of bread’s role in the Cold War see also: "Food in Civil Defense.;" Majorie M. Heseltine, "Feeding of Mothers and Children under Emergency Conditions," *Public Health Reports* 67, no. 9 (1952).

<sup>37</sup> Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War*.

This association was not new. It built on strong currents of pre-war thinking that linked industrial white bread with national vitality and eugenic fitness as well as highly successful wartime efforts to convince consumers of enriched white bread's pivotal role in national defense.<sup>38</sup> But, in the postwar context of polarized global competition, it took on more global significance. American industrial bread's association with national security—forged in the crucible of European relief efforts—helped reinforce the idea that American industrial foodways were universally choiceworthy and necessary elements of the fight against Communism.

### **3. Bread Comes from America**

In a June 1952 commencement address, President Eisenhower, despairing at the country's decline into red baiting and book banning, implored Dartmouth College graduates, "to fight Communism with something better." But, as Secretary of State John Foster Dulles noted, increasingly visible poverty and racial tensions were "ruining" the U.S.'s image abroad. The country's Cold War propaganda machine was struggling to speak convincingly of America's lofty ideals. It was getting harder and harder to point, concretely, to what that "something better" was that America offered the world.<sup>39</sup>

To make matters worse, by the end of the decade, the U.S. appeared to be losing ground to the Soviets in almost every arena that mattered—education, science, technology, weapons. Every arena except consumer goods and food production, that is. In this

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<sup>38</sup> See Bobrow-Strain, "White Bread Bootcamp: 'Good Food' as National Defense in the Campaign for Vitamin Enrichment."; "White Bread Bio-Politics: Purity, Health, and the Triumph of Industrial Baking."

<sup>39</sup> Eugenia Kaledin, *Daily Life in the United States, 1940-1959 Shifting Worlds*, Greenwood Press "Daily Life through History" Series, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000); Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War*.



context, visions of domestic consumer affluence displaced Freedom and Equality as the most important weapon in U.S. propaganda efforts. As Eugenia Kaledin notes, “When Vice President Richard Nixon challenged Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev...he did not argue that Americans had little poverty, nor did he champion the civic freedoms that define American democracy. Instead he made a big issue of American consumer production for easier living.”<sup>40</sup> U.S. efforts to combat the appeal of Communist “workers’ paradise” with glamorous images of life in a “consumers’ paradise” filled with sleek Chevrolets, color TVs, and Populuxe living room sets have been well documented.<sup>41</sup> The important role that industrial food played in creating the image of an American consumer paradise is less well known.

Over-the-top portrayals of luxurious gadget-filled American homes didn’t even convince Americans all the time, and Soviet propaganda frequently countered images of affluence with stories of race, class, and gender inequality.<sup>42</sup> But it was much harder to convince anyone that the Eastern Block ate better. Even as confidence in the superiority of US military readiness, technology and education wavered at home and abroad, Americans

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<sup>40</sup> Kaledin, *Daily Life in the United States, 1940-1959 Shifting Worlds*. See also: Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann, *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users*, Inside Technology (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009). For a classic rationalization of the shift in understanding of what made America exceptional and choiceworthy see: David Morris Potter, *People of Plenty Economic Abundance and the American Character*, Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

<sup>41</sup> Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War*.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. press coverage of the Moscow exhibition sparked considerable debate over whether its vision of American life was realistic or representative; see also: Oldenziel and Zachmann, *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users*. Soviet critiques were even more cutting. For example, during the Moscow exhibition, one Soviet journalist issued a damning, and still relevant, critique of U.S. consumer domesticity: “The numerous daily appliances used by Americans seem to bind the woman forever to the mission of housewife, wife, and cook. They lighten her role as such, but at the same time for eternity place her daily life in the profession of housewife.” “Reflections about the American National Exhibit (from *Izvestiya*) Marietta Shaginyan, " August 23, 1959, Records of the U.S. Information Agency (hereafter USIA), American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-1959, Box 2, NARA-CP, MD.

sensed that, as the influential pundit Hamilton Fish put it during the height of the European food crisis, “bread comes from America and it does not come from Russia.”<sup>43</sup> This sentiment was widely echoed in many realms: from popular media to the floor of the U.S. Senate where Hubert Humphrey declared, “Russia cannot supply food. The United States can”<sup>44</sup>

During the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow, where Richard Nixon famously accused Nikita Khrushchev of making lousy dishwashers, U.S. newspaper headlines across the country positively crowed over the way American food “Dazzle[d] Ivan.” Modern food processing was “Our Secret Weapon”—“The Newest Weapon in America’s fight against communism.”<sup>45</sup> “Johnny” might not be able to read as well as “Ivan,” as Rudolf Fleisch warned in his best-selling attack on the U.S. educational system, but few Americans doubted that Johnny could eat better than the Soviets (even as the U.S. fretted about its own bout with soaring bread prices in the early 1950s). Campbell’s Soup Company president William B. Murphy again captured this attitude speaking at the USIA in Washington: “Communism is utterly incompatible with the production of food” while “The best example of the American dream of plenty is in food.”<sup>46</sup>

To be sure, U.S. food propaganda typically focused on more glamorous modern food concoctions—TV dinners and ready-mix cakes—but industrial bread was basic and U.S.

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in “With Both Bread and Freedom,” *Time*, June 30 1947.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Knock, “Feeding the World and Thwarting Communists.”

<sup>45</sup> USIA, Moscow 1957-1959, Press Clipping File, Box 3, NARA-CP, MD.

<sup>46</sup> William B. Murphy, “The Challenge of the Future: An Overview,” in *Food and Civilization, a Symposium* (Washington D.C.: USIA Voice of America Lecture Series, 1966).

industrial foodways were often juxtaposed with the Communist world's scarce, "dark bread." A 1946 *Woman's Home Companion* feature on "life behind the iron curtain," for example, held white bread up as a key example of the "*pruducti*" Russian people craved, but only America could provide. While some critics of fluffy American bread praised hearty Soviet loaves, they generally conceded that the U.S. baking system was still better at providing affordable abundance. The *Los Angeles Times* proudly declared that, "a Soviet worker must work half a day or longer to earn enough money to buy a kilogram of rye bread, while an American needs to work only 12 minutes," while the U.S. Bureau of Labor trumpeted statistics indicating that American workers had to work six minutes to buy a loaf of bread compared to 25 for the Russian worker.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, the U.S. press reveled triumphantly in stories of bread hoarding and shortages caused by crop failures and poor distribution under Khrushchev—from Gaston, North Carolina ("Reds Stand in Breadlines") to Lima, Ohio ("Bread Scarce in Soviet Cupboards").<sup>48</sup> Accounts of daring escapes from the Soviet bloc run frequently by popular magazines during the early 1950s invariably mentioned bread prices and bread lines as a motivating factor in the flight from Communism. And even when American reporters in Russia observed abundant high-quality and nutritious dark bread, the staff of life was still a symbol of U.S. superiority: the Russian food system was so inefficient,

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<sup>47</sup> "Russian Works Longer for His Food ECA Says," *Los Angeles Times*, August 22 1949; Oriana Atkinson, "Mt Life Behind the Iron Curtain," *Woman's Home Companion*, October 1946; De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*; J.A. Livingston, "U.S. And Soviet Price Systems Far Apart," *Big Spring Daily Herald*, June 10 1956.

<sup>48</sup> "Bread Scarce in Soviet Cupboards," *The Lima News*, September 24 1963; Jay Axelbank, "Russians Forced to Stand in Line to Buy Most Goods," *Eau Claire Daily Telegram*, October 16 1963.

they argued, consumers had few other options and could afford little else beyond dark bread.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, with Soviet military technology advancing at frightening speeds, some comfort could be taken from the fact that bread shortages occasionally crippled its army. “A loaf of bread induced many Russian troops in Hungary to lay down their arms,” the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported, citing witnesses who “saw them hand over their tanks for a couple kilograms of bread because they were so badly supplied.”<sup>50</sup>

Thus, abundant modern food, including industrial white bread, helped constitute one of the Cold War’s most reassuring dreams: the idea of alimentary affluence in the West and dark Soviet bread lines in the East. In industrial bread, U.S. policy makers, manufacturers, and consumers had definitively fused the assumed universality of their foodways with the imperatives of national security.

Armed with this confidence—and sense of geopolitical urgency—America set out to transform the world’s bread; sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. U.S. corporations, with government support, built American-style industrial bakeries in Iran and struggled for similar footholds in Western Europe. But what happened when the iron triangle of wheat, industrial baking, and global security set down in countries with other

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<sup>49</sup> Livingston, "U.S. And Soviet Price Systems Far Apart."; Lauren Soth, "Consumer Goods Scarce," *Corpus Christi Times*, August 30 1955. Interestingly, these articles subtly (and not so subtly) introduce criticisms of U.S. industrial bread. They reverse the binary of good American bread versus bad Soviet bread, while reinforcing the larger architecture of alimentary exceptionalism.

<sup>50</sup> Willard Edwards, "Soviet Troops Confused," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 19 1956.

staple foods? The results were far more complicated than both proponents and critics of American industrial foodways acknowledge, as the cases of Japan and Mexico reveal.

#### **4. Rationalizing Rice Eaters**

In the early 1950s, U.S.-trained public health officers, and agribusiness representatives combined forces to spread the gospel of white bread to the conquered rice-eaters of Japan. Their efforts—particularly the targeting of Japanese school children’s palates through school lunch programs—are frequently held up as the ultimate example of U.S.-backed agribusiness forcing its industrial foods on defenseless populations; of the premeditated destruction of healthy, “holistic” eating.<sup>51</sup> But the story is quite a bit more complicated than that, not least because the Japanese taste for white bread long predates the end of WWII. Indeed, American occupation officials faced an imperial conundrum: Japan welcomed white bread and industrial baking technology transfers with open arms, but fiercely resisted cultural assumptions about the nutritional and political superiority of a white bread diet.<sup>52</sup> This two-sided response divided occupation official, creating room for debate about white bread’s role in securing the Asian front against Communism. While some officials argued for re-building Japan on a foundation of rice and fish protein, others insisted on bread and milk.

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<sup>51</sup> See for example: Mark Hammond and Jacqueline Ruyok, "The Decline of the Japanese Diet: From Macarthur to Mcdonalds," *East West* October (2008).

<sup>52</sup> On Japan’s long struggles over the place of foreign foods in its diet see Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, "We Eat Each Other's Food to Nourish out Body: The Global and the Local and Mutually Constituent Forces," in *Food in Global History*, ed. Raymond Grew (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999); Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, "Popularizing a Military Diet in Wartime and Postwar Japan," *Asian Anthropology* 1(2002).

Japan had been home to a small, but flourishing baking industry since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with white bread serving as a popular novelty food and sometimes status symbol.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as occupation officials quickly discovered, the most forceful complaint levied by the Japanese against U.S.-supplied bread was that it was *not white enough*. As one fifty-year-old housewife polled by SCAP sociologists in 1950 recalled, “We have always liked bread before the war, and always ate it on Sundays. So we can get used to it [as a new staple], but if it is not white bread we will be very unhappy about it.”<sup>53</sup>

After the devastation of war, however, bread of any color was nothing to scoff at. The final years of the war had been a nutritional disaster for the islands’ population, as Japan lost control over food producing territories abroad. The average weight of Japanese children plummeted and even affluent children suffered marked deficiencies of vitamin B, C, and D. After the war, the U.S. had far greater sympathy for starving white Europeans than it did for the Japanese, and the great food aid machinery doled out stingy rations to the East until the crisis in Europe was resolved. Thus, early school lunch programs consisted of less than an ounce of dry milk per child, thin miso broth, scavenged military surplus rations, and whatever vegetables parents could provide. Schools struggled to meet the 500 calorie per child goal.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> "Survey of Bread and Flour Utilization by the Japanese People," 1950, Records of the Supreme Commander of the Allies in the Pacific (hereafter SCAP), Public Opinion and Sociological Research Division, NARA-CP, MD

<sup>54</sup> Public Health and Welfare Bulletin, "Supplementary School Lunch Program," June 1948, SCAP, Civil Affairs Section, Tohoku Civil Affairs Region, Public Health and Welfare Activities, 1946-1951, Box 258, NARA-CP, MD; "Report on Public Health and Welfare in Japan," n.d. c. 1949-1950, SCAP, Economic and Scientific Section, Price and Distribution Division, Food Branch, 1946-1951, Box 6428, NARA-CP, MD.

When, in 1949, officials could finally announce that, “Owing to the goodwill of SCAP, the complete lunch program will be carried out by providing each child with pure white bread and butter,” 100g of bread per child twenty days a month at a heavily subsidized price looked extremely good. Children protested at the “odious flavor” of many SCAP-imported foods—especially dry milk, which students flat out refused to drink—but white bread was popular. Students and parents overwhelmingly praised the school lunch program and lobbied for its continuation.<sup>55</sup>

At the same time, Japanese consumers balked at the idea that bread could sustain a nation, despite the fact that, even before the war, Japanese leaders had tried to connect wheat diets with modernization and military might.<sup>56</sup> Sounding not unlike a European-American complaining about sushi, one housewife spelled out the problem: “With a bread diet, one becomes hungry immediately; with a rice diet it lasts longer.” “With bread alone,” another housewife bemoaned, “people like my husband, who does carpentry work, get tired.” Although, thanks to subsidized ration coupons, 93 percent of the islands’ population ate bread once a day and the majority told pollsters that they enjoyed it, few would choose bread over rice if given a choice.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> "Supplementary School Lunch Program; "Tabulation of Public Opinion of School Lunch," July 25, 1951, SCAP, Economic and Scientific Section, Price and Distribution Division, Food Branch, 1946-1951, NARA-CP, MD.

<sup>56</sup> On Japanese attempts to connect wheat diets and military strength, which pre-date the postwar period: Cwiertka, "Popularizing a Military Diet in Wartime and Postwar Japan."

<sup>57</sup> "Survey of Bread and Flour Utilization by the Japanese People."

Figure 2



Illustration from SCAP's "Survey of Bread and Wheat Utilization by the Japanese," (1950).



This attitude generated debate among occupation officials, public health officers, and agribusiness representatives. From early on in the occupation, public health officials—whose cultural understandings of what constituted a “real meal” had a tendency to mix freely with their understanding of scientific nutrition—saw the occupation as a watershed chance to “rationalize” and “improve” the Japanese by liberating them from their polished rice staple. Officials’ frustration and disappointment are palpable in documents complaining of the inability to provide a “complete” or “real” lunch for Japanese school children—by which they meant that they could not provide bread and butter along with what they recognized as more culturally-appropriate table of miso stew, fish protein, and vegetables. Even as their capacity to provide calories and protein expanded dramatically through the late 1940s and early 1950s, the lack of bread constituted a gaping hole in planners’ visions of a full meal.<sup>58</sup>

Only when school districts finally had the flour, baking facilities, and cooking fuel to produce bread would they deem their program a true success—the school lunch program had much loftier goals than mere calorie distribution. Its larger mission was to “rationalize” or “correct” the Japanese diet, while fostering, “the scientification of the Japanese kitchen; [and the] permeating of democratic thought.” “Democratic spirit,”

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<sup>58</sup> "The Complete School Lunch--Providing Bread and Butter," August 9, 1949, SCAP, Civil Affairs Section, Hokkaido Civil Affairs Region, Civil Affairs Files, 1945-1951, Box 2534; "Instruction from Ministry of Education Concerning School Lunch," n.d., SCAP, Civil Affairs Section, Hokkaido Civil Affairs Region, Civil Affairs Files, 1945-1951, Box 2534; Vice Education Minister to Prefectural Governors, "Concerning the Encouragement and Popularization of the School Lunch Program," December 11, 1946, SCAP, Headquarters Division, Public Welfare Files, 1945-1951, Box 2278; "Recent Tendencies of School Lunch Program and Counter Measures," August 22, 1949, SCAP, Civil Information and Education Section, Education Division, Physical Education and Youth Affairs Branch, Topical Files, 1946-1951, Box 5721; Chief Manager of School Lunch, Hokkaido Board of Education to SCAP General Headquarters, "Nowadays Condition of School Lunch in Hokkaido," handwritten letter, n.d., SCAP, Civil Affairs Section, Hokkaido Civil Affairs Region, Civil Affairs Files, 1945-1951, Box 2534. All in NARA-CP.

SCAP headquarters insisted could be nurtured in school cafeterias through the “substitution of reason and scientific practices in place of local customs and superstitions regarding cooking practices.”<sup>59</sup> Propagating American meals was part of a strategy of forging civilized citizens, and without bread—the perceived core of a civilized diet—a local school official complained, how can we teach these lessons to our children?<sup>59</sup>

In 1950, J.L. Locke, a U.S. milling industry representative summed up these cultural assumptions in an appeal to “improv[e] the health and attitude of the Japanese people by supplementing their diet with enriched white bread”: “There is some reason to believe that a change in diet might so change the health and attitude of that warlike people that we could live with them in improved peace and harmony.” Locke’s self-interested motives were transparent and occupation officials, hoping to develop a domestic milling industry in Japan, roundly rejected the U.S. milling industry’s appeals. But in many ways they accepted the basic premise of Locke’s argument.<sup>60</sup> The occupation offered a historic opportunity to transition Japan toward wheat, and this, in turn, had important political ramifications. As SCAP Commander General Douglas MacArthur wrote in 1950, finding a reliable substitute (i.e. wheat) for rice was a key to “block[ing] the rapacious encroachment of Communism” in the region.<sup>61</sup> When Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson talked with *U.S. News and World Report* about his 1958 trip to Japan, the sight of “kiddies at their desks—each kiddie...with a big wheat roll made of American-grown

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<sup>59</sup> Chief Manager of School Lunch to SCAP General Headquarters.

<sup>60</sup> J.L. Locke to SCAP General Headquarters, "Suggestions for Improvement of the Health and Attitude of the Japanese People by Supplementing their Diet with Enriched White Bread," August 3, 1949, SCAP, Price and Distribution Division, Food Branch, 1946-1951; SCAP General Headquarters to J.L. Locke, September 26, 1949, SCAP, Price and Distribution Division, Food Branch, 1946-1951. Both in NARA-CP, MD.

<sup>61</sup> General MacArthur to Ambassador Gasciogne, UK Political Representative in Japan, October 6, 1950, SCAP, Price and Distribution Division, Food Branch, 1946-1951, NARA-CP, MD.

wheat products and a bowl of reconstituted milk,” wasn’t just a gift for U.S. farmers it was a good sign for world peace.<sup>62</sup>

This perceived relation between rice-eating and weakness built on a longstanding popular discourse in the United States. During the 1910s, for example, an advertising campaign for Veribest Bread in the Midwest declared, “Bread eating nations lead the world,” with a drawing of a U.S. soldier towering over a caricatured Japanese man. “An interesting fact,” it continued: “Rice eating nations are not so strong or progressive as bread eating nations.”<sup>63</sup>

The conservative columnist George Sokolsky worried that rice would not fortify Asia against Communist incursions, and urged the government to deploy America’s genius for advertising in the service of shifting Japan toward more vital foods.<sup>64</sup> To support this idea Sokolsky pointed to the popular radio adventure character Jack Armstrong “the All American Boy,” who so effectively cemented connections between fortitude and Wheaties in the 1930s. This, in turn, might have reminded readers of the central plotline of many Jack Armstrong shows: the handsome wheat-fueled All-American Boy travels to an exotic, non-Western land where he accomplishes heroic feats unimaginable to the natives.

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<sup>62</sup> Reprinted in "Feeding the World's Hungry: Cure for Farm Troubles? An Interview with Ezra Taft Benson," *The Altoona Mirror*, March 22 1958.

<sup>63</sup> "Bakeries in Ogden Are Praised by Expert," *Ogden Standard*, July 2 1915.

<sup>64</sup> George E. Sokolsky, "China's Rice," *Hearst Newspaper Syndication*, January 17 1953.

Reporting on an eleven-fold increase in Japanese wheat consumption during the occupation, a widely-reprinted 1957 news story gave this plot a new twist: thanks to the presence of bread in Japanese school lunches, “Japan’s youth is literally outgrowing and outweighing its parents.” This effect could also be observed in Japanese beauty pageants where bread was producing “long-limbed beauties.”<sup>65</sup>

Ultimately, however, U.S. bread subsidies, school lunch programs, bread festivals, baking classes, advertising campaigns, and sandwich recipe contests had only marginal impact. Bread production increased dramatically during the fifties, but the association of bread with vigor, and civilization—did not stick. Even the founder of one of the country’s largest postwar bakeries—a pioneering force behind the Americanization of Japanese baking—complained in 1967,

“I find myself the only one in my family who stubbornly sticks to eating bread. I eat bread with beer, bread with anything and I have done my best over the years to get the other members of my household to understand that it is in our interests to eat bread. My children, who went off to study overseas, have come home and now won’t touch anything but rice. What’s a father to do?”<sup>66</sup>

This left policy makers pondering the best route to a secure Asia. Officials connected with the USDA and farm lobby continued to present wheat exports and bread habits as

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<sup>65</sup> "Japanese Eat Various Types of Bread, Grow Taller," *Associated Press Syndication*, December 24 1957.

<sup>66</sup> Company, *From a Corn of Wheat: Yamakazi*.

central to peace, but others wavered. By the 1960s, talk of transitioning Japan to a wheat diet had faded, and rice supplies topped the list of food security concerns. Wheat exports and American bakery technology transfer continued, but with fewer of the trappings of a civilizing mission. The association between American bread habits and military strength was durable, but not unshakeable.<sup>67</sup> When it came to creating a secure foundation for peace, local tastes and traditions did matter—perhaps rice could be a source of strength.

Of course, industrially refined white rice shared certain affinities with American white bread that allowed for this culturally flexible embrace of rice as a security food. When it came to artisanal French bread, however, this was not the case. With French bread—relatively similar to U.S. bread in its basic contents, but the product of a very different approach to food provisioning—taste and tradition carried the taint of frailty.

## **5. Good Baguette, Bad Baguette**

By the mid 1950s, Americans could increasingly compare their supermarket bread to the golden products of western European bakeries. Subsidized by Marshall Plan money, U.S. tourists had begun travelling to France in record numbers.<sup>68</sup> And, they returned from those tours with stories of ungodly good bread. At the same time, in New York and other big cities, affluent consumers could purchase what would today be called “artisanal”

European breads from “real” French, Italian, and English bakeries—bakeries that stood a

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<sup>67</sup> Recall that even occupation officials debated whether rice might be a more culturally appropriate bastion of strength. Strains of U.S. popular opinion had also made this argument. For example, a widely-reprinted 1951 news piece argued, “The most important thing for to the majority of the people of Asia is not Democracy, nor Communism, nor any political ideology—but food, which means life itself. And in most of Asia food is rice.” “Who Controls Rice Supply Controls Asiatic Destiny,” Found in *The Richwood (OH) Gazette*, June 22, 1951, among other newspapers.

<sup>68</sup> Christopher Endy, *Cold War Holidays American Tourism in France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

class above “ethnic” bread shops that had served immigrant neighborhoods for decades. By 1962, New Yorkers could even duck into Bloomingdales and come out with baguettes that had been baked in Paris the night before.<sup>69</sup>

Not everyone had this type of access or would want to pay the hefty premium for authentic European bread, of course, but anyone who read the newspaper could form an opinion about the difference between American white bread and its European counterparts. The message was clear: European bread might taste divine, but it lacked system and fortitude. And, for better or worse, in a dangerous world system and fortitude had to trump taste.

What is striking is that this attitude didn’t just emanate from jingoistic Francophobes. Francophiles also replicated the divide between taste and security. A 1955 article by *New York Times* food editor Janet Nickerson exemplified this trend. Pitting American white bread against its European counterparts, Nickerson argued that opposition to American white bread divided into two camps, one based on health and the other on flavor. The epicurean critics held a special place in her heart; indeed they were incontrovertibly correct. Fluffy, limp-crust, and bland industrial white bread couldn’t hold a candle to crisp, nutty-flavored French and Italian breads. Alas—and one can almost hear her sigh echoing across the decades—“health values deal with fact while flavor considerations deal with opinion.” Thus, in the end, she advised readers were better off buying industrial white bread. A baguette or *pan de como* might brighten the table on a special occasion, but “the fact that they are made with water rather than milk impairs their

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<sup>69</sup> "Bread from France," *New York Times*, May 16 1962.

nutritional value.”<sup>70</sup> Growing fascination with “charming” French foodways in the 1950s and early 1960s had the ironic effect of reinforcing U.S. nationalism: “Superiority in food and wine [made] France itself seem suspect.”<sup>71</sup>

Although Francophobia/philia holds a special place in U.S. nationalism, this logic easily applied to other “exotic” lands and their breads. For example, New York gourmets like Silas Spitzer might wax poetic about Middleeastern breads, made in ways “unchanged from the earliest days” by “tribesman” with “native skill,” but without an influx of modern baking techniques and “rationalized” distribution networks, U.S. observers concluded many countries faced bread riots and ugly political situations. “We are the only people in the world who subsist largely on commercial bread, manufactured by impersonal machinery on an assembly line—limp white bread that is pre-sliced, prepackaged, and all but predigested,” Spitzer lamented, “Yet there is an articulate and growing minority, only partially made up of people of foreign blood, that rejects white bread.”<sup>72</sup>

The *Holiday* article continued on to praise “exotic” breads—“fascinating loaves of strange size and contour”—but, of course in the end, returned to France, “whose sanitary regulations are notoriously few, but whose bread is truly wonderful.” The author hoped to tempt skeptical readers into New York’s ethnic bakeries, but, in singing the praises of strange loaves of uncertain hygiene, enjoyed by, a small “minority, only partially made

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<sup>70</sup> Janet Nickerson, “Bread Gets an Airing,” *New York Times*, March 13 1955.

<sup>71</sup> Kennan Ferguson, “Mastering the Art of the Sensible: Julia Child, Nationalist,” *Theory and Event* 12, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>72</sup> Silas Spitzer, “Break Bread with the World,” *Holiday* 1955.

up of people of foreign blood,” he reaffirmed the overarching sentiment presented in this paper: at some level—as intangible yet as real as newfangled television waves—*not* having white bread on hand, whether in the kitchen cupboard or on the international stage, was somehow risky.

## **6. Conclusion**

During the 1950s American food writers, diet advisers, and consumers lambasted the country’s industrial loaves. They were “gummy,” “underbaked,” and “cottony.” Yet only a small minority doubted enriched white bread’s nutritional strength and vigor—fortitude clearly needed in an age of looming global threats. As this article has shown, however, industrial bread’s strength and vigor was also seen as something needed *from* America. Early Cold War practices of food aid and alimentary propaganda gave America’s much-derided loaves a central role in the ongoing drama of global superpower competition. The “successes” of these efforts, in turn, confirmed the country’s sense that its industrial bread and processed foodways were universally choiceworthy elements of a stable world order. Thus, through the bread politics of the early Cold War, U.S. industrial foodways and the imperative of national security became fused in policy makers and the general public’s minds.

Forged in the crucible of European relief efforts and postwar reconstruction, the elision of industrial food and geopolitical stability helped construct one of the key binaries through which Americans perceived Cold War geopolitics: the contrast between an efficient American system of alimentary abundance made possible by the industrialization of



eating on one hand, and the rest of the world's inefficient, backwards food systems, on the other. Visions of America's unique ability to feed the world and expand consumption through abundant industrial food—American alimentary exceptionalism—helped underpin the larger formations of Cold War American exceptionalism.

The binary between America's efficient food system and the world's more questionable, systems could be reversed or blurred, as seen in the cases of French food and Japanese school lunches, but it still placed American industrial bread in an architecture of dietary hierarchy. This, in itself, was nothing new. U.S. food writers, consumers, and public health experts had long compared America's sliced white industrial bread to "foreign" loaves—but this had almost always been done in the context of figuring out the internal boundaries that made up "America." It had largely taken the form of comparison between modern bread, eaten by "real Americans," and the stuff devoured by dark, swarthy European immigrants and poor Southerners.

During the early Cold War, as this article has shown, that changed. The country, more willing to include various European immigrant populations under the heading of "white" (if unchanged in its attitude toward blacks and non-European immigrants), used white bread to confirm the *national* boundaries of America in a context of international competition. As U.S. foodways grew increasingly homogenous in postwar period, food fights that had, in the past, raged within the U.S. (e.g. between modern white bread and backwards Southern corn bread) were transplanted to the international stage. In this way, past contrasts between industrial white bread eaten by eugenically fit white populations

and the “dark, dusky” loaves of immigrant populations gave way to more *global* hierarchies of dietary progress. In many ways, it was through imperial encounters around bread, flour, and wheat described in this article that modern industrial bread truly became “American bread.”

Over the next two decades, many Americans come to reject that imperial boundary making project all together. Sixties and seventies counterculture held up factory-made bread an icon of all that was wrong with industrial, imperialist America. The technocratic system of order and efficiency that simultaneously churned out reassuring loaves, sustained Cold Warriors, and held social chaos at bay, gave way. When, amidst the upheavals of 1968, John G. Fuller published *The Day of St. Antony's Fire*, a best-selling account of the Pont Saint-Espirit ergotism outbreak, hallucinatory French bread symbolized freedom and resistance, not dangerous disorder.

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<sup>1</sup> {Company, 1996 #412}

<sup>2</sup> {"Instruction from Ministry of Education Concerning School Lunch, #419}