

Reagan's food policies leaving voters hungry

To get re-elected, Ronald Reagan might have to change public perceptions of his policies on hunger. He already has done the same thing with the education issue.

Although the Reagan administration has greatly reduced federal involvement in and funding of America education, he has seemingly defused the possible backlash of his actions by talking up merit pay raises



Eric Peterson

for teachers. Even though his only involvement in education until he discovered the "Master Teacher" issue was essentially a negative one — he wanted to abolish the U.S. Department of Education itself — many people outside the teachers' unions are taken in by the hot air on education that he has been blowing from Washington.

The first attempt to repaint the picture that people have in their minds of government food policies — generally an accurate one of Reagan slashing every nutrition relief program that he can — was Agriculture Secretary John Block's week of eating on a food stamp budget.

I'm here to demonstrate that you can live within the plan and have a satisfactory diet, Block declared. He and his wife shopped on the maximum amount that the food stamp program will give to feed a family of four — \$58 a week.

Soon after this, Reagan himself set up a Task Force on Food Assistance, in apparent surprise that there are hungry people in the United States, even with a food stamp program which Block had supposedly proven to be adequate and even generous.

The real harm that the Reagan administration has done to nutrition in America is great. Child nutrition programs have been reduced \$1.5 billion; food stamp programs have been cut by \$1.7 billion. This means three million school children have been dropped from the school lunch program and 800,000 people aren't getting food stamps any longer. But this isn't all. Reagan favors making more cuts in the 1984 budget, from a program for pregnant women, infants and children, and from food stamp benefits to disabled and elderly people.

Reagan's recent interest in the plain fact that many Americans do not get adequate nutrition, given everything he has said and done in the past, emerges as a cynical and largely empty effort to jerk the knees of voters.

Particularly revealing is Reagan's dawdling with federal food giveaways. Federal warehouses are bloated with excess flour, rice, powdered milk and the famous surplus cheese. Despite the cheese giveaway, the federal daily surplus alone is worth more than \$2 billion.

And yet Reagan's administration sharply reduced cheese distribution throughout the country last May. This was done for two reasons. As in every government program, there were accusations of waste and abuse. Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina invented what you might call the welfare grandmother, telling of elderly recipients who drove around the state collecting free cheese — in Cadillacs! A Helms aide was glad to announce that North Carolina has restricted eligibility for the cheese.

An even more cogent reason for the change came from the cheese manufacturers: it was hurting their sales. Although some analysts said that it was the recession, not the federal cheese giveaways, which was lowering cheese sales, the Reagan administration reduced its cheese distribution to oblige the cheese makers.

By damming up the great federal river of cheese last May, Reagan surely showed his priorities. Whatever abuses might have occurred in the giveaway program, they are certainly minor compared to those which have been discovered elsewhere — in military spare parts replacement, for example. And it is shocking that an administration will pile up food rather than give it to people who need it, possibly lowering the profits of the food industry.

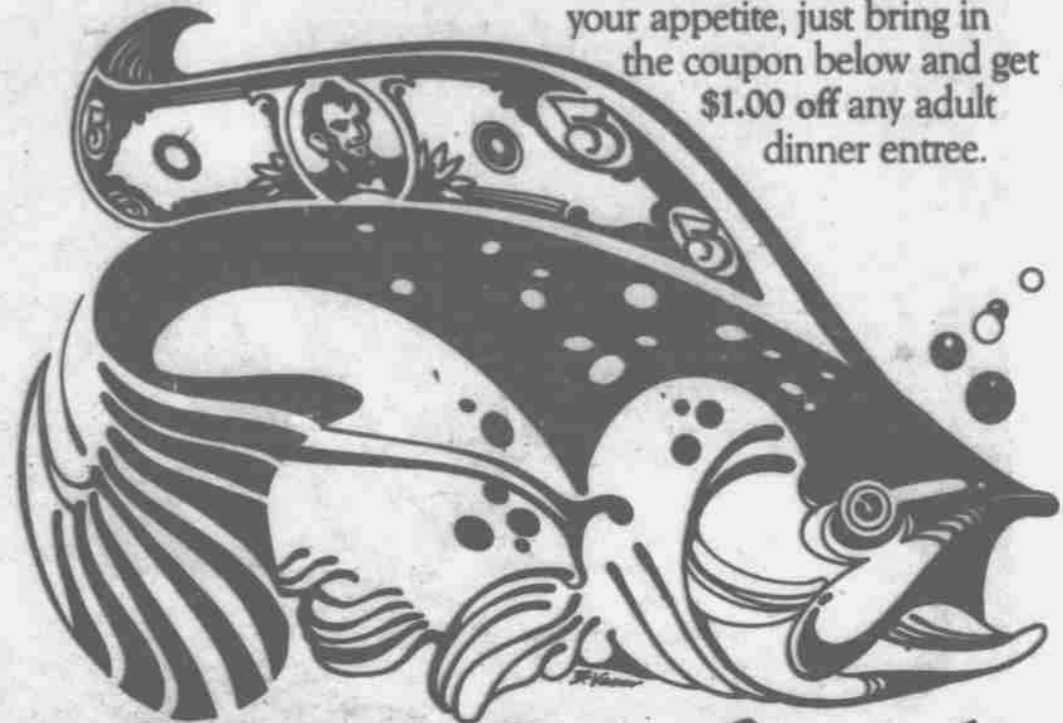
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