

Make guns, not butter

Farmers are nice people who, as we see almost nightly on TV, are having a hard time making ends meet.

Of course, farmers, as the writer H.L. Mencken observed 50 years ago, always have trouble making ends meet. High prices, low prices, rain or shine, farmers will always tell you they are in trouble and must have help from the government.

And help they get. Last year, governments in the industrial democracies — North America, Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, forked out the gargantuan sum of \$70 billion in subsidies to their hard-done-by farmers. In the U.S., the West's leading agricultural producer, farm subsidies in 1986 will hit \$35 billion, up 39% from the previous year.

Such subsidies include price support programs, marketing boards, payments for seeds, fertilizer and farm equipment, credit assistance, free storage and transport and a host of other programs. Subsidies are running amok in the U.S., Canada and the Common Market where almost inconceivable quantities of government-purchased produce lie mouldering in storage. Nobody knows what to do with the West's mountains of eggs, wheat, butter, meat, and cheese nor its seas of wine and milk.

Thank farmers' political clout for this madness. Farmers may look like innocent rustics but when it comes to making politicians jump they are razor sharp. Idealists who like to think that Canada and the U.S. have a one-man, one-vote political system need to think again. A vote from a farm state or province seems to have the same value as six city votes.

Otherwise, how could 600,000 American farmers, for example, squeeze \$35 billion out of Washington? Steel workers, shoe makers, and textile workers have worse economic problems than farmers but lack the political whammy to make

Washington open the public purse. Farmers, as Mencken only half-jokingly suggested, may be a scourge rather than the backbone of the nation.

The problem, simply, is that there are too many farmers producing too much. Normally the law of supply and demand would have reduced this surplus but, as we have seen, politics ensures that it remains and grows.

This month's sale of subsidized, cut-price grain by Washington to the Soviet Union perfectly illustrates the lunacy of farm politics. American taxpayers will foot the bill for Russia to get cheap grain so that the Soviets can devote the money saved to arms. Why? Because it's an election year in the politically sensitive farm states. Forget national security, farm votes come first.

NATO does not have enough money to build adequate conventional forces to defend western

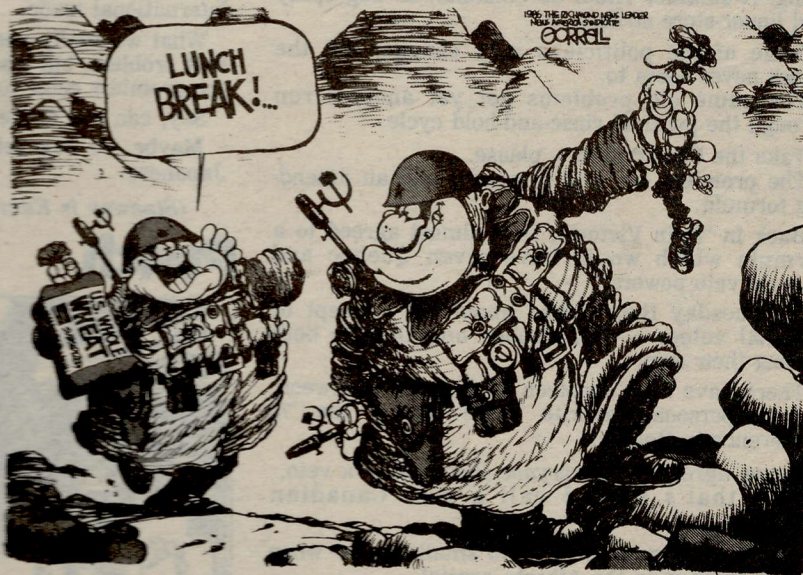
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Europe and must threaten nuclear war in a time of crisis. If only *one year's* farm subsidies in Europe, the U.S. and Canada were invested in conventional forces, the Warsaw Pact's superiority could be reduced to zero — and so the threat of a nuclear clash.

And there is the question of public health. Farmers are overproducing because of their heavy use of pesticides, artificial fertilizers and other agricultural chemicals. Our entire food supply chain — water, soil and food — is now poisoned.

But try getting our Health Protection Branch, for one, to go to Manitoba and tell farmers to stop using most pesticides. Even though there is mounting evidence of chemicals poisoning our environ-



ment, politicians just don't have the nerve to take action. Doing so would probably cut the farm surplus by a third but it would also hit husbandmen in their pocketbooks — who would then turn around and hit politicians right between the eyes.

The day is fast approaching when it may be cheaper for governments to buy each farmer a condo in Florida, pay them an allowance and tell these noble tillers of the soil to stay away and sunbathe. This year, each American farmer will get an average \$58,000 from Washington in subsidies. Meanwhile, laid-off workers in the Rust Belt struggle on social security to support families and mortgages.

Dealing with the Russians, who can't ever seem to grow enough food, is easy compared to the problem of what to do with the western world's farmers who don't know when to stop.