

# Let's Sink the Lifeboat Ethics

James W. Howe and John W. Sewell

...each rich nation can be seen as a lifeboat full of comparatively rich people. In the ocean outside each lifeboat swim the poor of the world, who would like to get in, or at least share some of the wealth.

—Garrett Hardin, "The Case Against Helping the Poor" (*Psychology Today*, September, 1974)

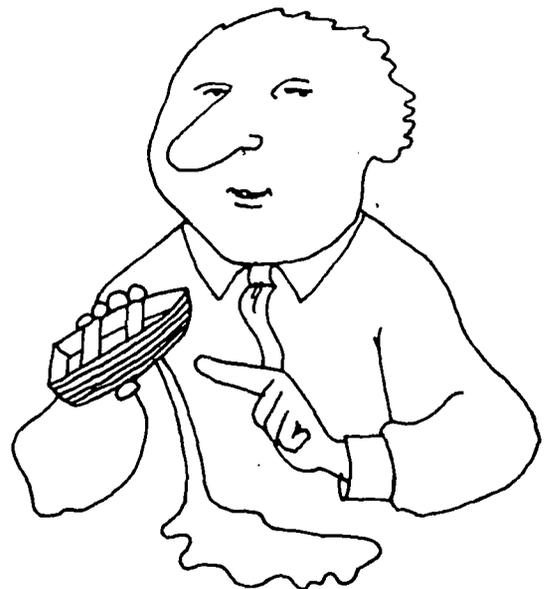
...the moment of truth will come the morning when the President must make a choice whether to save India or to save Latin America....

—William and Paul Paddock, *Famine 1975!* (1967)

In the past several months American intellectual circles have spawned a new series of challenges to the morality and efficacy of responding to the needs of the poor countries. One of the surprising aspects of these arguments—one which has given considerable satisfaction to the devoted opponents of such aid and even raised eyebrows among the usually uninvolved—is the fact that these challenges have been spawned *within* the development community, by some who have spent a lifetime advocating help for the poor countries. Unlike earlier challenges which pointed out that much of American aid was used for overt political and military purposes, these new challenges hold that the provision of assistance is in and of itself immoral. Appearing under the rubric of "lifeboat ethics" and advocating the practice of "triage," these challenges take two distinct forms. The first maintains that some of the poorest countries are beyond saving, that nothing the rich countries do, no matter how generous or

wise, can rescue them. Therefore, wasting resources on these countries deprives others that can better utilize them. The second revives Thomas Malthus's predictions of two centuries ago and holds that any help to the developing countries inexorably leads to higher birth rates. By so doing, any amount of aid merely postpones the inevitable famine, which, when it comes, will be even more disastrous because so many more will die. From this perspective aid is immoral because, if it continues, the sum total of deaths and, therefore, of human suffering, will increase.

It is ironic that these challenges have arisen precisely at the time when the developing countries are becoming increasingly important to the United States, just when the rich countries are facing a growing challenge from the developing countries to their dominant



Drawings by Janice Stapleton

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position in the international economic system. The most obvious examples of this shift are the actions of the oil-producing countries, which have both raised prices and used their dominance of the world's energy supply to increase their political power. But in many other arenas the developing countries are beginning to press for more equitable access to the world's wealth and for a greater voice in the governance of international economic institutions. The dramatic cohesion of the OPEC countries has tended to obscure a more basic long-term development—a major change in psychology on the part of *all* developing countries. These previously powerless countries will no longer tolerate being taken for granted and are demanding a voice in decisions that directly affect their future. As a result the Americans will find that, whether they like it or not, they are going to have to pay increasing attention to these countries. And most of the low-income countries have as the primary goal their own economic and social development. Thus, American foreign policy is going to have to consider what role should be given to development cooperation in our increasingly interdependent world.

The first group of challengers hold that some countries can never create viable economies and that any resources provided them, whether through aid or other means, are wasted. In fact, if we assist these countries, other countries that have a better chance of survival and that can better utilize scarce resources will be jeopardized. Some who hold this viewpoint invoke the battlefield medical principle of "triage," whereby the wounded are divided into three groups: those who will survive with little or no treatment, those who will die even if treated, and those who are likely to live only if they receive intensive care. In this situation it makes sense to concentrate the available resources on the last group, because doing so will insure that the maximum number survive. Other critics in this group use the analogy of the "lifeboat"—they claim that the rich countries can be likened to survivors in a lifeboat of limited capacity surrounded by others in the water waiting to be saved. If too many of those in the water are rescued, the boat will be swamped and all will perish.

Implicit in the argument of those who advocated "lifeboat ethics" are three premises. The first is that certain nations can never be saved; second, that the world's resources are not adequate and can never be adequate to meet the needs of all; and third, that if sacrificed, certain nations will disappear and will no longer cause other countries problems. Strikingly enough, experience since World War II bears out none of these premises. The developing countries as a whole managed to maintain an average economic growth rate of about 6 per cent per year in the decade of the 1960's, a record never equalled by any of the industrialized nations during comparable periods of their development. While there are problems with equating

development and economic growth, particularly as it neglects the questions of the distribution of the benefits of growth within countries, the record does not indicate that any nations are beyond being saved. Indeed, it is useful to recall that in 1945 Europe, Japan, China, and virtually *all* of the underdeveloped areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America were either devastated by war or economically stagnant. Today only 42 of 135 nations that are members of the United Nations are in comparably serious condition. Another score of countries are making measurable progress but are still in a somewhat precarious condition. All other countries are either making self-sustaining progress toward solving their problems or have the financial resources to do so. From another perspective, the population in countries that received aid or were stagnating economically twenty-five years ago constituted perhaps 90 per cent of the world's people. Today such countries make up less than half the population, and the "Fourth World" of the poorest countries, in greatest need of outside help constitutes only about 25 per cent of the world's population.

Many of those who advocate a form of international "triage" use India as their best example of a very poor prospect for development. But in the mid-1960's, when India suffered a large food deficit, its government undertook a massive program designed to increase agricultural production. By 1971 India had essentially closed its food deficit and was able to provide food aid for refugees from war-torn Bangladesh. The reversal of this positive trend in food production in the past two years was the result of adverse weather in 1972 and 1974, a shortage of fertilizer during 1974, and a shortage of fuel to operate irrigation pumps in the same year. As a result, India has had to import more than six million tons of grain this year, most of it paid for with hard cash. (India this year has spent nearly \$1 billion on food imports, most of it from the United States.) Barring these three unusual circumstances, India today could be producing all the cereals required to meet the current demands of its people. Thus there is reason to doubt that even those countries considered to be the "worst cases" are beyond saving.

The second premise of those who pose this challenge is based largely on the analysis of the Club of Rome, which holds that the earth's supply of resources is finite and that we will begin shortly to see real shortages. These estimates, particularly those concerning vital raw materials, are much in dispute. But even in the case most cited—the earth's capacity to produce more food—the future is not at all bleak. The opportunity to increase the production of food, particularly in the developing countries, is great. But the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that unless agricultural production in the developing countries is increased, their grain deficit by 1985 could total nearly 85 million tons, a little more than half the total amount of grain traded in the world last year. However, if the proper measures are taken to

increase production—particularly in the developing countries—that deficit could be as low as 10 to 15 million tons of grain. Clearly it is feasible to increase global food production levels if we go about it the right way.

Even if the ceiling on world food production actually had been reached, there still would be much that could be done to alleviate hunger by some modicum of redistribution. Currently each person in North America consumes each year nearly one ton of grain, mainly indirectly in the form of milk, meat, and eggs. In contrast, individuals in developing countries on the average consume less than four hundred pounds of grain a year, mostly in direct form. Thus it takes more than five times as many agricultural resources to feed an average American as it does to feed the average Indian, Nigerian, or Colombian. And the disproportionate consumption of energy and raw materials by the developed countries follows an even more exaggerated pattern.

Apart from the flaws of the first two assumptions underlying the "lifeboat" and "triage" analyses, these arguments have a still more serious weakness. Their proponents assume that nations—like persons drowning or bleeding to death—simply "die" and therefore cease to be "problems" for the rest of the world. Abandoning such countries does not get rid of them; it merely postpones the time when the problems must be dealt with. National boundaries are inadequate to quarantine permanently the tensions that build up when whole nations begin to disintegrate. Moreover, to solve them at that stage is often more costly than if they had been dealt with earlier. (The dissolution of East and West Pakistan is a recent example of such cost.)

Finally, the proponents of the "lifeboat" analogy do not accurately describe the current global crisis. The rich are clearly not in possession of a secure lifeboat they *alone* command. Instead, the rich and poor "share" the same lifeboat—although the rich, despite their lesser numbers, take up much more space in the boat than the poor and command a far greater share of the supplies necessary for survival. Confronted with the fact that there is a hole in the boat and that the boat is slowly sinking, the rich seem quite sanguine; since the hole is not in their side, they insist, its existence is not their responsibility. Actually, all the evidence of recent history supports a rather different version of the lifeboat analogy, one virtually identical with the "spaceship earth" analogy, in that it recognizes and emphasizes the interdependence of all nations and peoples.

**T**he second set of recent challenges is to the wisdom of helping the poor countries, and is similar to that originally propounded by Malthus many generations ago. The advocates of this view hold that supporting the development of the poor countries by providing food and medicine prevents people from

dying, causing populations to continue to grow until they are finally held in check by starvation and disease. These neo-Malthusians feel there would be less human suffering if the rich countries did not directly provide food or medicine, thereby allowing the restraints on population growth to come into play earlier when population levels are lower. Like those who propound the triage and lifeboat arguments, these critics assume the countries being assisted will never be able to lower their birth rates, and consequently that they must "inevitably" experience a massive famine and a consequential increase in death rates at some point in the future. But this central premise ignores a crucial fact—there is no clear evidence that birth rates cannot be brought down in the developing countries, and there are already clear indications that outside support can help to bring down birth rates if it is used to support certain innovative domestic policies.

There is now a growing consensus, underlined by the U.N. World Population Conference held in Bucharest in the summer of 1974, that the problem of population growth cannot be addressed by the provision of contraceptive techniques alone. Rather, the root of the population problem lies in the factors that motivate parents to have large families; its solution depends on changing the reasons for wanting many children.

At least three factors underlie the urge for large families in the developing countries. In many of these countries the worth, as well as the social acceptability, of an individual is still closely linked to the number of children the parents produce. A second factor is that in many societies children are economically *useful* to parents, not only as laborers but also as providers of old-age security. And finally, for many people living at the survival margin—especially if they are women, barred by varying traditions from participation in other personally satisfying activities—a large family continues to be a major emotional counterweight to the tedium of a bleak struggle to keep alive.

In the rich countries, of course, birth rates began to decline when incomes reached a certain level. But the income level in the industrial countries was much higher than that which could ever hope to be achieved in the developing countries in any reasonable length of time. Fortunately, however, there is encouraging evidence that the drive to have children has been sharply moderated in many developing countries at income levels well below \$200 per year. For example, the Chinese report a significant drop in the birth rate, and a similar drop appears the trend in such culturally diverse countries as Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Hong Kong, Egypt, and Barbados. All these countries have one characteristic in common: effective national policies favorable to the low-income majority—including measures designed to raise their income, as well as to provide them with improved health and education services.

These policies have the effect of providing funda-

mental education and of changing the values that have led people to have large families. Education and modernization are especially important factors where they improve the role of women, but education and modernization also challenge and force changes of interpretation in the religious prescriptions favoring large families. Social measures that enable people to feel a greater degree of economic security in their old age and permit poor families to set aside some savings to provide them with security are also important. Finally, development in general may permit a modicum of material amenities and a variety of entertaining pleasures, and therefore provide alternatives for those people who wish to have smaller families. It is encouraging to note that of some eighty-two developing countries with reliable statistics, seventy-two experienced a decrease in birth rates between 1960 and 1970. In seventeen of these countries the decrease amounted to not less than ten births per thousand, a significant decline. Unfortunately, however, the heavily populated countries for the most part have not yet made similar progress, although there are encouraging indications that a carefully designed policy of rural development reaching the poorest of the rural poor can, if successful in raising health, education, and employment production and incomes, help solve the pressing problems of hunger and high birth rates even in these countries. Experience in an increasing number of situations suggests that birth rates do decline when certain basic social needs—including an assured food supply, reduced infant mortality rate, literacy, and at least rudimentary health services—have been satisfied.

These findings challenge the moral question raised by the proponents of the "lifeboat ethic" and the "triage" theories. Outside assistance would be of doubtful morality only if it were absolutely certain that fertility could not be reduced over the decades ahead. But the available evidence indicates that fertility can best be reduced by helping countries that wish to develop, particularly those whose development strategies are designed to provide a modicum of social services to a wide portion of the population. Those who are tempted to conclude that the prospects of such overpopulated countries as India and Bangladesh are hopeless and that they therefore should be "abandoned" should ponder carefully the position they are taking. For to assume a permanent inability to reduce births is to say there is no hope these countries will ever escape the Malthusian dilemma. The evidence suggests this is a fallacy.

There is, however, a variant of the neo-Malthusian theory that raises more difficult *political* questions. It holds that disaster is inevitable not because of a series of natural constraints inherent in a finite globe, but because the rich countries lack the political will necessary to mount and support the programs that would provide the developing countries with the resources needed for sustained

progress. This formulation questions whether Americans are in fact prepared to do their share in a sustained effort to help the poor countries to develop. For if the ability of these countries to develop, and thus ultimately to limit births, turns in part on the response of the industrialized countries, then to that degree responsibility falls directly on policy-makers and the public in these countries.

The state of the American "political will" is a subject of great debate now that the United States has finally ended its involvement in Southeast Asia and at the same time is facing ever increasing domestic problems. Many maintain that Americans are no longer willing to help the poor countries, both because they themselves feel threatened by domestic problems and because they feel the development effort of the past decades has failed.

In our society governmental leadership works within the boundaries set, however unclearly, by the broad limits of public opinion on American foreign policy. But that opinion is important in determining the general direction of national policies, although scholars have argued for a number of years about just what its precise impact is and how it takes place. Public opinion is important because policy-makers pay attention to it. For the policy-maker public opinion may be a matter of concern, even though it may not tell him clearly what to do. It has political force as long as the policy-maker either receives encouragement for positions he/she wants to take, or, in contrast, sees it as presenting some limitations to his/her intended action. The key to the importance of public opinion in the policy process therefore is whether it will accept or strongly oppose the policies proposed by Congress and the executive branch.

In the case of the policy toward the developing countries the U.S. national interest in a livable world and our moral precepts coincide. But governments are often slow to take a mature and long-range view of the national interest which recognizes that coincidence. In the past, when the government's perception of public opinion has been mistaken, the public has expressed its vigorous disapproval. The antiwar movement of the late 1960's was such a manifestation, as have been the protests in the environmental field. But for more than a year now many observers have felt that the U.S. Government is out of step with the American public in the government's low level of interest in the problems of the developing countries. For in many ways the U.S. Government in 1975 seems to have been practicing a form of disengagement from the problems of the developing world, despite the rhetorical flourishes of the Secretary of State at the United Nations and the World Food Conference. And there is evidence that the public does not support a policy that *neglects* the developing world.

The feeling that the American public may be more sympathetic to the development needs of the poor countries than U.S. policy indicates is borne out by

three events that have taken place in the past two years. These are the current high level of public concern over the world hunger situation; the participation of citizen groups in the legislative fight for the replenishment of the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA), whose programs are targeted mainly at the poorest developing countries; and the steadily rising trend of voluntary contributions of private aid programs.

The response of Americans to the world food crisis has been widespread and intense. In the first place there were a number of spontaneous private endeavors to help Americans better understand the nature of the long-term World Food Conference. A score of organizations traditionally associated with overseas programs established a temporary coalition, the World Hunger Action Coalition, which attracted participation by some seventy member organizations. The groups used a variety of measures to mobilize American opinion on these issues and organized a campaign involving a petition signed by nearly 30,000 Americans and addressed to the Secretary of State, calling for a more forthcoming U.S. response to the needs of the developing countries. Other groups organized fasts on college campuses, and American religious organizations, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, all became deeply involved in educating and mobilizing their constituencies on the problem of world hunger. In November U.S. church leaders made a nationwide public appeal to President Ford to increase food aid immediately to the countries most severely affected by hunger and malnutrition—which no doubt was one of the reasons why mail to the White House during the final weeks of 1974 ran heavily in favor of increased food aid for the hungry countries.

The American public's basic sympathy with the plight of the poor countries was further borne out by a survey conducted in December under the auspices of the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (recently published under the title *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy* and available from the Chicago Council). Although the survey was taken during a severe economic downturn, its results showed that 92 per cent of Americans felt that combating world hunger was a "very" (61 per cent) or a "somewhat" important goal for United States foreign policy. Three-quarters of those surveyed indicated they would be willing to give up meat one day a week and cut back the use of fertilizer for nonessential purposes in order to transfer food and fertilizer to those countries most in need. It was also striking to see that the foreign affairs event followed most closely by Americans on radio and television during recent months was not President Ford's visit to Vladivostok or the events in the Middle East, but the Rome World Food Conference.

This latter finding underlined the impact of newspapers, radio, and TV in reinforcing the already strong American interest in activity on the food issue. Each of the major news weeklies devoted special features to the



hunger situation, despite competition for space from the severe domestic political crisis that the United States was undergoing at the time. In addition, major national newspapers devoted numerous articles not only to the immediate aspects of starvation and malnutrition, but also to the causes and possible solutions to the food dilemma. The result of all these efforts was rising pressure on the U.S. Government to increase its assistance to the countries most severely affected by hunger and malnutrition. (One interesting sidelight in the findings of the Chicago survey is the emphasis on "fairness" or equity. Seven out of ten Americans were willing to respond to the need of the poor countries when asked to do so voluntarily. When asked, however, if they would be willing to submit to a 10 per cent higher food bill as a form of rationing to provide grain to the poor countries, only one in five agreed they would be.) In early 1975 President Ford did take action to increase substantially the amount of food aid.

A second illustration of how the public can affect governmental policy was provided in 1974 by the public debate on the question of the U.S. contribution to the International Development Association, the soft-loan "window" of the World Bank. In January, 1974, the legislation authorizing American funds for IDA was defeated in the House of Representatives by a vote of 248 to 155, a result due in part to Congressional resentment of the oil embargo and the arbitrary price increases of the OPEC countries, but also due to inept handling on the part of the Administration. Following this defeat there was a determined campaign on the part of public and private groups to reverse the decision. An extensive educational program was undertaken, and citizens groups pressed individual legislators to respond to the merits of the issue. This public support was reinforced by editorials in over a hundred major American newspapers. In July, 1974, the Congress reversed itself and voted 225 to 140 to provide the U.S. share to IDA.

The basic sympathy of the American public about the crisis of development has likewise been reflected in the

increasing amount of private contributions to such voluntary organizations as CARE, Catholic Relief, and Church World Service. It is ironic that at a time when the U.S. Government is doing much less on development issues than in earlier decades voluntary contributions to development programs from the American people have risen to an all-time high of nearly \$230 million (excluding aid to Israel), an increase of nearly 82 per cent since 1964. This trend has been continuous over the past ten years, but moved steeply upward in 1974 despite the worsening economic situation in this country. For instance, CARE's contributions were 42 per cent higher in 1974 than in 1973. With diminishing American assistance and rising private contributions from individuals, about 32 cents in every dollar provided as aid to the developing countries now comes from private contributions.

A survey taken in 1972 under the auspices of the Overseas Development Council revealed that Americans had a basic, albeit uninformed, sympathy about the problems of the poor countries. It was not surprising, therefore, that this rise in American concern for the developing countries was reflected in the 1974 edition of the *State of the Nation*, Potomac Associates' biennial survey of American public opinion. The public's response to this survey indicated an increase in support for foreign economic aid since the 1972 survey in that more than half of all Americans favored increasing foreign aid or keeping it at its present level. It was striking that 79 per cent of the Americans questioned in the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations survey were in favor of providing economic assistance to the poor countries if they could be reassured that it would end up helping the people of those countries.

What does this mean about public opinion in the future? No one can predict future trends in public opinion with certainty, but several conclusions can be drawn from these recent survey results. First, there is no evidence of a swing toward isolationism that would parallel and support the current disengagement policies of the U.S. Government from the needs of the poor countries. There is, of course, a decreasing concern about cold war issues and a corresponding decrease in support for military spending. Second, there is a strong increase in concern about domestic issues, particularly inflation and social problems. But Americans do not seem to want to disengage from the rest of the world on account of these or other reasons. It may simply be that Americans are less prone to follow the slogans of the past and more desirous of making up their own minds on specific questions. It is striking to note that the numbers of Americans who rank themselves as "independent" when questioned in a recent Harris poll about party affiliation has now grown to one-third of the electorate. Thus American opinion on global issues is likely to be different in the future from its past patterns. In *Anguish of Change*, a study of opinion on such controversial is-

suces as Vietnam, women's rights, domestic poverty, and crime, pollster Louis Harris concluded: "It can be said with certainty that the people by-and-large have been well ahead of their leaders."

It may well be that the current period is one in which public opinion is fluid and could go in a number of different directions. It could turn inward on the mistaken assumption that a more "independent" policy can effectively protest the current U.S. position of relative economic strength. Or it could support policies designed to meet the realities of an increasingly interdependent world, including support for programs designed to meet the needs of the world's poor majority.

The events of the past year provide some indication that Americans will not support policies based on the "triage" or neo-Malthusian assumptions. Indeed, there is a good deal of evidence that most Americans find both concepts alien to their traditional concern for those in need. Unfortunately current governmental leadership is not offering policies congruent with the new realities of an increasingly interdependent world. And without the kind of leadership that would confront Americans with the choices before them, a special obligation falls on both Congressional and private leaders to translate the current rising public understanding of interdependence into a willingness to make the very small personal and national sacrifices needed.

The final irony is that the debate in the United States over the efficacy and morality of providing aid comes precisely at the moment when the challenge from the developing countries encompasses a much broader set of issues. The demands put forth by the developing countries under the heading of the "New International Economic Order" range far beyond aid to cover issues of trade, commodity policy, investment, technology transfer, and decision-making in international organizations. Aid per se is becoming less important than other resource transfers, and Americans may find themselves in the position of arguing about a particular type of response to the needs of the developing countries.

In sum, Americans have already demonstrated that they can affect governmental policy. Private leaders and indeed the public in general have an obligation to reject proposals that nations be written off as unsalvageable and to make clear their response to the argument of the neo-Malthusians. The real choice and challenge before governments and the public in both rich and poor countries is whether or not they will address themselves to the basic causes of uncontrolled population growth. And in this effort development progress—and outside help—have an important role to play.

What will be the response of the U.S. Government and the American people to this historic challenge? It may well be that now is the time for Americans to make it good politics for their leaders to be good statesmen.