

Asia Might 'Pay' for U.S. Aid by Saving Its Soil

By Ferdinand Kuhn Post Reporter

The Washington Post (1877-1954); Dec 4, 1949; ProQuest Historical Newspapers *The Washington Post* (1877 - 1991)

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OFFICIALS here are considering a brand new form of repayment if, as now seems likely, the United States turns over a fraction of its huge farm surpluses to needy nations in Asia.

The repayment they have in mind is not in dollars, which are scarce throughout the world, and not in foreign currencies, which the United States cannot use. Nor is it in strategic minerals, which the Asiatic countries cannot produce quickly enough, or in big enough quantities, to exchange for the food they urgently require.

The plan now under serious discussion is to get ironclad pledges that the countries taking American surpluses will conserve their soil, replant their ravaged forests and generally begin restoring their parched and wasted lands.

The idea is to embody these pledges in formal agreements with the United States. If the country that asks for help does not agree to an energetic conservation program, it will get no surplus goods. If it does not give continuing evidence of progress toward conservation and improvement of its own crop yields, it may find its surplus shipments cut off.

A Garden to Crusaders

THERE is no climatic or geological reason why Iran, Iraq, Syria and other Middle Eastern lands should remain unproductive and short of food. Thousands of years ago, and well into the Christian era, the Middle East was well watered.

The Tigris and Euphrates valleys supported populations vastly greater than those now living there. The Crusaders who landed in what is now Lebanon and Palestine told of resting in the shade of great trees, where the sun beats down on desert sands today.

The chief reason why millions live in poverty and squalor in these regions—and why their governments want American surpluses now—is that their ancestors destroyed the land, overgrazed the pastures, let wind and flood waters sweep away the

topsoil, and generally wasted the resources of what had been a rich and fertile region.

Imaginative officials at the State and Agriculture Departments are confident that the United States can reverse this trend of history. They are sure that the Middle East can grow more food if its governments will only introduce the simple conservation methods that have multiplied crop yields in the United States.

Their reasoning is not hard to follow. For if the Asiatic countries grow more food, they will need less help from the United States. If they increase their standard of living by even a slight amount, they should be able to buy more American and foreign goods and so add to the flow of world trade.

Some of the Middle Eastern nations, notably Egypt and India, have a struggle to keep up with their fast-growing population; for them, too, conservation in many forms has become essential to survival. And it is easily demonstrable that the Middle East will be less prey to communism if there is less poverty and discontent among its people.

One application of this general philosophy was the recent report of the Middle Eastern Survey Mission headed by Gordon R. Clapp, director of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Clapp went to the Middle East for the United Nations, charged with devising and recommending a plan that would put 700,000 Arab refugees to useful work. Most of these refugees are concentrated in the three arid countries of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

For some of them, Clapp could recommend nothing but outright relief; for others, he outlined work projects that would terrace the soil, strengthen the riverbanks and plant trees where the forests used to grow in ancient days.

The three countries like the idea, so long as it does not compel them to work closely with their recent enemies, the Jews of Israel. Since someone has to house and feed such a horde of refugees, a new international organization will have to administer the work, and the United Nations

will have to raise about 52 million dollars for the first eighteen months.

But this does not mean that soil conservation and reforestation in other countries will be equally expensive. It costs next to nothing to plow a slope along the contours of the land. In most areas it does not require elaborate terracing. It calls for the same tools that are used in the old-fashioned up-and-down plowing.

What it requires above all is education of the farmer whose traditions or whose ignorance keeps him wedded to the age-old methods. In this process of education the United States can help with the kind of expert "show-how" envisaged under the Point Four program. The recipient nations, however, will have to do most of the educational job themselves through their provincial and local authorities, just as the Agriculture Department did it here through its county agents.

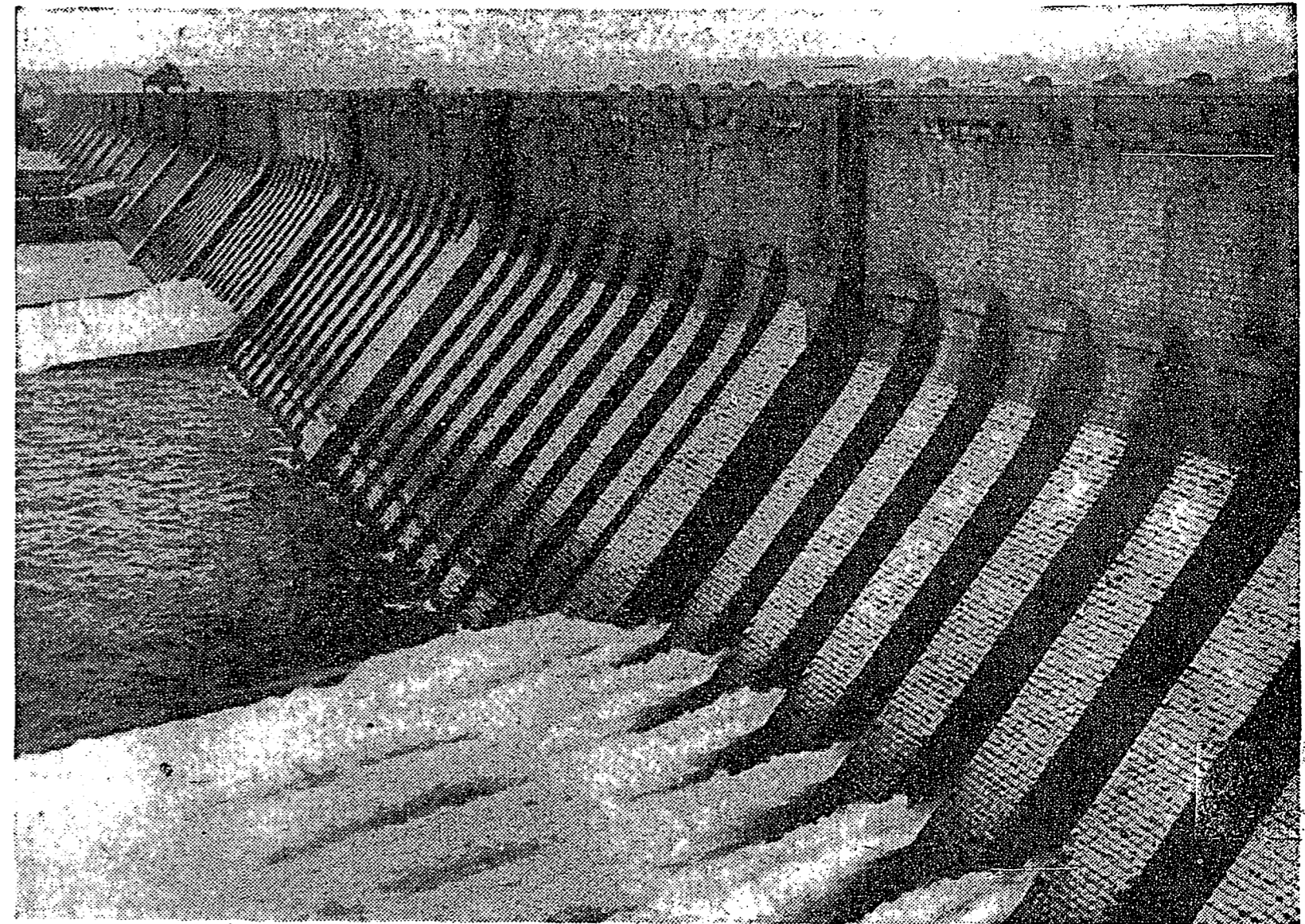
A Religious Obstacle

THE cynics will ask, "Can you persuade Middle Eastern peasants to adopt the new methods?" It all depends. In India, among Hindu farmers, soil conservation is next to impossible because of religious taboos. But there is no such obstacle among the Moslems of India and Pakistan, or in the Moslem lands of the Arab world, or in Iran, where the young and progressive Shah is already working wonders in educating a largely illiterate people.

Dr. Hugh Bennett, chief of the Soil Conservation Service of the Agriculture Department, tells of a native tribe in Basutoland, South Africa, which doubled its crop yield in a year by adopting soil conservation practices. The chief of the tribe now fines his followers by taking sheep from them if he catches any of them plowing a slope uphill.

If Basuto natives a generation or so from the jungle can get the knack of contour plowing, and can see its advantages in doubled crop yields, is there any reason why intelligent and adaptable Middle Eastern peasants should not see it, too?

Yet it will not be easy for Middle Eastern governments to carry out pledges of



Middle Eastern countries are planning and building irrigation dams, like this huge one at Assouan, Egypt, to

boost their crop yields. But some of them also want American surplus grain—and in a hurry

soil and water conservation. Those American officials who are working on the idea do not want to make it easy.

They want to make the pledges of self-help so serious and so onerous that a receiving government will think twice before

asking for a gift of American farm surpluses.

It would be a misguided American policy, on economic and other grounds, if it led Asiatic or other governments to expect free grain year after year from the United

States. A yearly dole, without stiff repayment, would upset the normal channels of trade, and would have the same demoralizing effect on recipient countries that outright American relief had just after the war.

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U. S. Wants East to Work for Surplus Aid

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When the European Recovery program came along, every European country that got American help had to assume reciprocal obligations. It had to put them in writing in formal agreements with the United States Government.

It had to set aside local currency funds to the value of its grants from the United States. It had to promise the utmost efforts toward self-help and aid to its neighbors. It had to publicize American help to its own people. It had to keep the United States informed, at regular intervals, of the progress it was making.

In the same way, those who believe the United States must give away some of its surpluses, in its own interest, also insist that the gift must carry obligations with it.

The problem that faces officials here is to work out some form of obligation that will make the gift

of surpluses both productive and nonrecurring.

There can be no Marshall Plan for Asia, since the conditions for it do not exist. The underdeveloped countries cannot be expected to integrate their economies, or to push their industrial production when they have so little of it to begin with, or to publicize American aid where there are illiterate millions to whom America has little or no meaning. But they can be expected to conserve their wasting resources so that, in time, they will not have to come to the United States for further gifts of food.

Water Is Vital

NATURALLY, those countries with little rainfall cannot increase their crops by soil conservation alone. They need water conservation, too, and for this purpose they will need big and costly dams to store the water

that will irrigate the thirsty soil.

The recent Export-Import Bank loan of 21 million dollars to Afghanistan, largely for irrigation dams, is an instance of intelligent American financing to increase crop yields in Asia. The impending World Bank loan of 25 million to India for the Domodar River dam is another such example.

India and many other Middle Eastern countries are shouldering a big part of the dam-building burden themselves. Iraq is paying for more than half of an \$8,500,000 flood control scheme, and a World Bank mission is now in Bagdad to see whether the Bank should pay for the remainder.

Egypt has already done prodigies in harnessing the Nile, notably with the huge Assouan Dam, built with the help of American engineers. It plans next month to lay the first stones of a more ambitious project to store the

headwaters of the Nile and control the flow of the great river along its 4000-mile course to the sea.

This kind of development will require many years and massive financing—some of it, no doubt, from the World Bank as well as from the local governments involved. But the building of dams will give no immediate relief to overcrowded Egypt or India, or to the other Middle Eastern countries that need grain in a hurry. Only last week, reports from Iran told of refugees pouring into Tehran from the north because of a crop failure and a famine in their province of Azerbaijan, along the Caspian Sea.

State Must Act

MIDDLE EASTERN eyes are looking hungrily at American farm surpluses, as both Pandit Nehru of India and the Shah of Iran have made plain on their

visits here. The chances are that the United States will have to supply the surpluses, whether it likes it or not, and for two reasons—because the Middle East must have support to keep it out of Communist hands, and because the food surpluses will spoil if they are not disposed of.

There is great reluctance within the Government to take the plunge and start giving away the surpluses to foreigners. Probably the Agriculture Department will not consent unless the State Department asks Congress for funds to reimburse the Commodity Credit Corporation.

Whatever the political tactics may be, this much is clear already: the surplus foods will not and cannot be a free gift to anyone. They will have to be paid for in the only coin that really has lasting value for the United States—the coin of self-help and of rising standards of living.