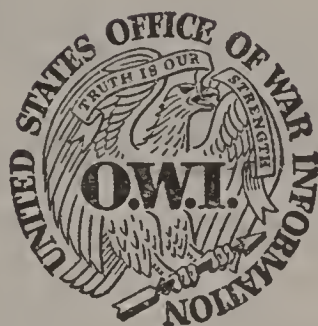


FOOD RATIONING

and the **WAR**

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Holmes

*An address by Mr. Elmer Davis on
December 27, 1942*

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PREFACE

Radio listeners may recall that on Sunday evening, December 27, 1942, Elmer Davis, Director of the Office of War Information, and the Secretary of Agriculture, Claude R. Wickard, made a special broadcast over the four major networks on food in relation to the war. Secretary Wickard discussed the food situation as it then appeared, and announced plans for rationing, plans which are now being put into practice. Mr. Davis devoted his share of the broadcast to the more general aspects of the problem. The talk by Mr. Davis is here reproduced in response to numerous requests.



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This is a talk about food and its relation to the war / / / / /

In a few minutes the Secretary of Agriculture will talk to you; he is the official charged with the wartime distribution of our food supply. But first I should like to say something as the head of the agency whose job is to keep the people informed about what is going on. We appreciate the courtesy of the radio networks in giving us this time tonight, and we assure you that we would not ask the country to forego listening to some of its favorite programs if we did not have something to talk about that is vitally important to everybody in the United States. We all eat food; and whatever sacrifices we may have to make to take care of the needs of our fighting men, the American people will continue, throughout the war, to be better fed than any other nation on earth. What Secretary Wickard and I want to talk about is how we can best make sure that after the men in the armed forces have been taken care of, the rest of us will all go on getting three square meals a day.

As you know, it was announced today that a new program of rationing, for canned and dried foods, will go into effect within a few weeks. Now, why talk about it so far in advance? Everyone in the government who has anything to do with rationing programs is in agreement that it would be a good idea not to announce any rationing measures until they are ready to be put into operation—if we could help it. But the new system of point rationing, which you will find explained in tomorrow morning's newspapers, will require the cooperation of thousands of wholesalers, hundreds of thousands of retail grocers, and of the million and a half of local OPA volunteers. To familiarize them with their parts in the program will take time; and in that time, partial and mistaken stories are likely to get around as to what is going on and what is intended. So it seemed best to tell the people tonight what is intended, and why, even though it is not going to be put into operation till some time in February.

Now it is perfectly true that this interval gives chisellers and hoarders a chance to stock up, if they are so inclined—and if they can get away with it. But I am confident that the overwhelming majority of the American people are patriotic enough, and sensible enough, not to try to do that; for it would injure the workings of a system

which seems, so far as can be seen now, to be the best that can be devised, to make sure that our food supply is fairly and evenly distributed.

As you know, Price Administrator Henderson has resigned; and some people have seemed to think that a change at the head of the Office of Price Administration, which is charged with carrying out the rationing program, means a relaxation of rationing. It does not. Rationing cannot and will not be relaxed until one of two things occurs—either we have won a complete victory; or until the men who have most carefully studied this food problem should come to the conclusion that there is some better method than rationing for using the American food supply as a weapon to win the war. So far, nobody has found a better method, or as good a method; for the purpose of rationing is to insure that everybody gets his fair share, and that the health and strength of the American people are maintained.

Food is a weapon in all wars, but in this one more than usual. The enemy has used it as a weapon, negatively—looting the conquered peoples of their food supply, and giving back to them just enough to keep them alive—indeed not always even that much; hoping to break their spirit, and when that endeavor failed, hoping to weaken them physically, so that they could make less resistance to their oppressors. We are using our food supply as a weapon, positively; so distributing it that the American army and navy, and the American people, will be well nourished; yes, and so that the armies of our allies will be kept strong too.

Fortunately, food is a weapon that we have more of than anybody else; but that doesn't mean that we can afford to waste it. We must use it as intelligently and as efficiently as we can to bring about a speedier victory. This is not a new idea; in the case of some other commodities, the American people have thoroughly accepted it. Steel, for instance, is also a weapon of which we have more than anybody else; but that doesn't mean that we waste it, or let anybody at all have as much of it as he wants. There are plenty of civilian needs for steel; but everybody has accepted the principle that our steel production must be controlled and rationed so that it can be an effective weapon for winning the war. Now, of course, the two commodities are not on the same footing; the civilian need of food is more general and more continuous and more urgent than the civilian need of steel. But the principle is the same for both weapons—namely, how our abundant supply can best be employed to serve the interest of all of us, to serve the national interest, whose first demand is complete and total victory in a war which we shall all win together or all lose together. It only makes sense to use our national assets in the way that seems most likely to win it as soon as possible.



But why does the greatest food-producing country in the world have to so deal with its food supply that we civilians at home cannot get as much of some foods as we want, even though we shall be able to get plenty of all foods put together? Well of course the first demand on our food supply is that of our armed forces, which are constantly increasing in size. We have the best-fed army and navy in the world; and I do not believe there is a single person in the United States who objects to that.

Some of our food also goes to our allies; to hear some people talk, you would think that most of it is going to our allies. That is not so. What goes to our allies is less than what goes to our own armed forces; and don't forget that to some extent, this exchange of food works both ways. Some British food, and a great deal of Australian food, is supplied by the governments of those countries to our troops who are stationed there. The percentage of our production which is sent to our allies is greater in some foods than in others; that is due to the shipping situation, and Secretary Wickard will give you some details. But the total sent to our allies is less than what is supplied to our own armed forces; it is small compared to what is left for us at home.

Nevertheless, there are a few people who don't seem to understand why we send food to our allies at all, if it means that we must do with less than usual of something that we happen to like. Well, the answer to that one is simple—we are sending food to our allies, because they are helping us to win the war. They are not helping us to win the war for our sake, any more than we are sending them food for their sake. They are fighting, and we are feeding them, to win a victory over the common enemy of us all. Because they are fighting, our job is that much easier. If the British people had not held out single-handed, in the summer and fall of 1940, we might by this time be trying to keep the Germans out of New England or the West Indies instead of trying to throw them out of Tunis. If the British people had not continued to hold out, giving our army and navy an advanced base in Europe, we might not have been able to undertake an offensive against the Germans at all. As you all know, the British used to import most of their food and some of their usual sources of supply have been cut off. It is only simple common sense for us to spare some of our food, to help feed the British army that is killing Germans whom we won't have to kill and to help feed the British industrial population which is constantly turning out more war material that will help to win the war.

This war can be won only by killing enough Germans to discourage the rest of them. Enough Japanese too, but we can leave them

out of this discussion; since in the Pacific area we get food from our allies, instead of sending it to them. Now the Russians, so far, have killed more Germans than everybody else put together; and that is why it makes sense for us to send food to Russia. As you know, Russia used to be a great food-producing country, but some of its richest farming areas have been occupied. We send food to the Russian army, because every German who is killed by a Russian is a German whom we won't have to kill; or, for that matter, a German who will never have a chance to kill American soldiers. The food we send to our allies is a direct contribution to the winning of the war—to winning it more quickly and at less cost in American lives.

So that is why we haven't as much left as we would like of some kinds of food, for the civilian population of the United States. How are we going to see that what we have got left—a supply that will amply nourish all of us, if it is fairly distributed—how are we going to see that that supply is fairly passed around? There is no doubt that rationing is a nuisance—though not very much of a nuisance compared to some of the things that our troops at the front have to undergo, to the same end, the winning of the war. Still, rationing is bothersome; the OPA, which has to handle the rationing programs, will never be popular; but they aren't in there to be popular, they are in there to help win the war. If any particular rationing program works badly, mistakes will be corrected. But as to the principle of rationing, what would work better? Some few people have talked about the good old law of supply and demand. Well, the demand for food is universal; the law of supply and demand, in this case, merely means balancing the supply of food against the supply of money. People with most money would get most to eat; bidding against one another, they would push food prices up so high that presently some people would be getting nothing to eat at all. Not many of us are likely to take that proposal seriously. Of course, we have price ceilings on many foods; and some people would say that with that safeguard, we could let nature take its course, let everybody buy as much as he can get.

But that gives an unfair advantage to people who have the leisure to shop around from store to store, picking up this much here and that much there; it gives the chisellers and hoarders a break, to the disadvantage both of the busy housewife who can't spend too much time marketing, and of the patriotic citizen who doesn't want to buy more than his fair share. Rationing may be a nuisance, but it is the best way anybody has yet been able to figure out to make sure that what we have is fairly passed around. We have tried it, by a different method, on sugar and coffee—foods of which we are short because most of the ships that used to bring in sugar and coffee are needed now to transport troops and supplies to the fronts overseas.

Accordingly, OPA was directed to ration sugar and coffee. Most people have seen the point in that, and have become reconciled to it as something that must be done to help win the war. Now the Secretary of Agriculture, whose business it is to decide how much of our food supply goes to the fighting men and how much is left us at home, has directed OPA to ration certain other foods. They propose to do that by this system of point rationing; which, it is believed, will serve the interests of the consumer of these commodities better than any other method. The whole object of the scheme is to get as even a distribution as possible, to make sure that everybody gets what he needs. And we can all get that, even if some of us don't get as much of some things as we may want. The program could be wrecked, of course, if there were much hoarding; but the hoarder not only cheats at the expense of his neighbor, he cheats himself too, in so far as he injures the working of an instrument which is designed to help all of us to win a common victory. I do not believe there will be much hoarding. This country was organized on the principle that if the American people understood what was going on, and what had to be done in their own best interest, they would do it. That system has worked for a hundred and fifty years, and I don't believe it is going to break down now.

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