

OFF THE BEAT

The Invisible Famine



Bryson: Ominous developments in climate and starvation—can we hack it?

Reid Bryson is quite possibly the scariest man in America. As a climatologist, he was one of the first to warn that humans may have been subtly affecting the weather for centuries (SN: 5/14/66, p. 374), that ice ages come on rather abruptly and we need to know more about where we stand in the cycle (SN: 11/15/69, p. 452 and 458), and that really very slight climate changes can have a devastating effect on crops, wildlife and people (SN: 6/1/74, p. 352 and 3/1/75, p. 140). As a scientist steeped in history and concerned about the world food problem, he compiled a chart of declining grain reserves and predicted that by the end of 1975 a shortfall would develop equal to the requirements of 130 million people (SN: 11/30/74, p. 340).

Now, he says, the actual figure will probably be closer to 270 million people. In an interview with *SCIENCE NEWS*, Bryson said that famine has already begun to hit the poorest people of the world. In parts of northern India, for example, death rates have doubled in the last couple of years. The trouble is, this may be an invisible famine, spread among the poor of many nations rather than focused in a particular geographical area, as was the widely publicized Sahel famine. Also, the victims are likely to be in less visible rural areas: "Every country feeds its cities at the expense of the countryside—people there don't riot."

Bryson's pessimism about mankind's ability to cope with possible climate changes also remains. During the last 14

ice-age cycles, he says, warm interglacial periods have lasted only about 10,000 years, plus or minus a millenium; the present (Holocene) interglacial has now gone for 10,800 years. Even if the earth is not entering another full-blown ice age, minor changes could be devastating. Before A.D.1200, Bryson says, Plains Indians were raising corn all the way to the Rockies. Suddenly the polar ice cap expanded and a drought lasting 200 years devastated the corn belt, apparently leading to hardship and violence, according to some archaeological evidence. That climatic pattern "looks like 1974," Bryson warns, and if a similar prolonged drought should come, "I don't think we could hack it."

Like many highly visible scientists, Bryson has come under fire for speaking out publicly about some very uncertain and controversial areas of knowledge. In trying to assess this criticism, the least one can say is that he's apparently done his homework. *SCIENCE NEWS* asked William Furtick of the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization about Bryson's crop shortfall figures. He replied that they "sound right" and agreed that famine would likely be spread out among the poor of many countries, rather than be localized and visible. On the matter of climate change, the National Academy of Sciences now says this century's relatively warm conditions have been "highly abnormal" from a historical point of view and that "the question naturally arises as to whether we are indeed on the brink of a period of colder climate" (SN: 1/25/75, p. 52).

A year has now passed since the World Food Conference. What official attention has been focused on starvation in the Third World has largely dissipated and public consciousness, at least in developed countries, has turned inward toward the immediate personal problems of rising costs and unemployment. If the invisible famine is to be perceived, the task of revealing it will largely remain with scientists like Reid Bryson, who continue to speak out, despite criticism, when they recognize the need.

—John H. Douglas

The Man from MUMBLE

Remember ECOMCON? It stood for Emergency COMmunications CONtrol (obviously), and it was an officer's unfamiliarity with that acronym that resulted in the downfall of the Pentagon plot to take over the U.S. Government in the novel *Seven Days in May*. How he spotted it I'll never know. I'm not so sure, in fact, that the plot failed. Somewhere down in a sub-sub-sub-etc.-sub-basement of the Pentagon, several levels below even the War Room, a group of haggard men, shackled to the mother of all computers, are controlling influential minds across the

nation by reducing vital words to acronyms. (There are no women—they haven't held high military ranks long enough to become fully enjargonated.) The signs are everywhere.

The British journal *NATURE* recently chided a U.S. earthquake report prepared by "the PP-PIEP of the ACEP, CSS of the NAS/NRC for the FDAA of DOHUD." Chickenfeed.

The acronym of all time has just surfaced in a publication of Hughes Aircraft Corp. where it "describes" an airborne tactical radar system known as PUMCO-DOXPURSACOMLOPAR (say it slowly: *pum-codox-pursacom-lopar*), or PULSE-Modulated COherent DOppler-effect X-band PULSE-Repetition Synthetic-Array pulse-COMpression side-LOBE Planar ARray. Who needs rooms full of code clerks to protect defense secrets when The Man from MUMBLE (Marginally Useful Miniaturization By Lexicographic Engineering) is on the case?

As the most high-technology agency around, the chief offender (or victim), of course, is NASA. (Never mind what it stands for, though rumor-mongers once came perilously close to the truth in suggesting the National Acronym-Slinging Agency.) The Skylab project alone, for example, produced a 136-page, small-type volume of "astronyms," ranging from AA (Aerosol Analyzer) to ZOP (Zero-Order Predictor). Sandwiched between its appropriately black covers were such intravolutions as PEARL, a Program for EPS (Environmental Processing System) Analysis and Rapid Look-Ahead, which was but a part of MOPS, the Mission Operations Planning System. When the sub-basement jargon squads become overtired, however, the system sometimes breaks down, yielding acronyms which cannot even be pronounced. The CSM/GNC, for instance, is deathless newspeak for the Command-and-Service-Module Guidance, Navigation and Control systems engineer. Fortunately, the astronyms guide came to the rescue, revealing that this was a person in the "MOCR of the MCC . . . supported by AGC in the Operations SSR and PROP and G&N in the sws/Vehicle Systems SSR."

Who is to blame? Pentagon officials have been as victimized as the rest of us by the forces in their midst. Months of investigative reporting, however, have unearthed a single fragmented document: a mysterious form from something called WORDTRASH (Worldwide Organization for the Rapid Dissemination of Totally Rampant Acronymic and Syllabic Hatchery), authorizing WASHED-UP (Weekly Acronymic Scientific Half-English Data-Unintelligibility Project) action to be expedited by means of DRIVEL (Directorate for the Replacement of Intelligible Verbiage with Ersatz Lingo).

It's enough to drive one DAFT (Dysfunctional Alienation From Talking).

—Jonathan Eberhart