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Letters

Famine and free enterprise

Worldwatch Institute's Lester Brown suggests that famine correlates more highly with population growth than with agricultural inefficiency, and hence appears to advocate lowering birth rates, perhaps even via China's female infanticide ("Famine: Is there a lesson from Africa?" SN: 2/23/85, p. 118). Not mentioned is another seemingly significant variable of famine, discussed by economist Thomas Sowell: the amount of free enterprise allowed the agricultural sector by the ruling government. Are famines more likely under statist (i.e., centralized, Marxist/socialist) regimes? This seems at least as likely as Brown's position.

Joseph S. Busey
San Francisco, Calif.

Is there a lesson from Africa? Yes, indeed.

The decline in food production since 1968 is due not so much to population growth but to

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Cover: Glass fiber cables, widely used in long-distance telecommunications, may one day replace copper wires in local telephone networks as well. Here, the tip of a glass rod is softened by heat and a filament is pulled from it to form thousands of kilometers of light waveguides for optical communications. The colors are created by glass layers of differing composition. (Photo by Leo Derlak/AT&T)



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the collectivization of farming by government, and aggravated by the import of free food, which drove the Ethiopian farmers out of business. Now we're exporting "volunteers" and more aid to resurrect farming in Ethiopia without market incentives. Good luck.

The "growing masses denuded their land" because these nomads were domesticated by their government and western religion. Had they been left free to follow food and fodder as they have done for generations, the tragedy would be far less severe.

William T. Holmes
Poway, Calif.

Weight loss: An unwinnable war?

Except for certain risky surgical treatments, there is no truly successful means of permanent weight loss available today. Since the five-year failure rate of the most closely monitored weight loss treatments hovers at over 95 percent, and since repeated attempts to lose

weight are much more strongly correlated with degenerative diseases (and eating disorders) than fatness per se, one wonders what the medical profession has accomplished with the recent NIH conference which declared that "obesity is a health-threatening condition" ("Weighty problems more fat than fancy," SN: 2/23/85, p. 119). They may vow to fight fat, but with what weapons? The people they intend to liberate appear to be suffering more, not less, in recent decades.

We really ought to be concerned about the fact that research findings that tend to dampen medical optimism about the possibility or advisability of weight loss are usually left on the pages of the technical journals, far from public pronouncements. The latest pronouncement at NIH was proof that [the medical profession is] bolder now, but no better informed. What happened there was politics and pep talk, not science.

Sara Golda Bracha Mayer
Storrs, Conn.

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