

Jeremy Rifkin The fight over GM crops exposes the weaknesses of globalisation

Bush's evangelising about food chills European hearts

In case you thought that the Bush administration's rift with its European allies ended with the Iraqi military campaign, think again. The White House has now set its sights on something far more personal — the question of what kind of food Europeans should put on their table. President Bush has charged that the EU's ban on genetically modified food is discouraging developing countries from growing GM crops for export and resulting in increased hunger and poverty in the world's poorest nations. His remarks, made just days before the G8 meeting in Evian, have further chilled US-European relations.

Last month, the US government launched a formal legal challenge at the World Trade Organisation to force the EU to lift its "de facto moratorium" on the sale of GM seeds and food in Europe. The EU has countered that there is no moratorium in place and points out that in the past year it has approved two applications for imports of GM seeds. Regardless, the new thrust by President Bush is likely to force another confrontation between the two superpowers — one whose long-term impact could be even more serious than the breach over Iraq.

For most Europeans, GM food is anathema. Although Europeans are worried about the potentially harmful environmental and health consequences, they are equally concerned about the cultural consequences. While Americans long ago accepted a corporate-driven fast food culture, in Europe food and

culture are deeply entwined. Every region boasts its own culinary traditions and touts its local produce.

In a world of globalising forces, increasingly controlled by corporate behemoths and bureaucratic regulatory regimes, the last vestige of cultural identity most Europeans feel they have some control over is their choice of food. That is why every public opinion poll conducted in Europe, including polls in the new candidate EU countries, show overwhelming public disapproval of GM food.

Global food companies doing business in Europe, such as McDonald's, Burger King and Coca-Cola, have responded to the public's aversion by promising to keep their products free of genetically modified traits. By forcing the issue, the Bush administration is stirring up a hornet's nest of public anger and resentment.

The White House has made a bad situation worse by suggesting that European opposition to GM food is tantamount to imposing a death sentence on millions of starving people in the third world. Denying poor farmers in developing countries a European market for GM food, says the White House, gives them no choice but to grow non-GM food and lose the commercial advantages that go hand-in-hand with GM food crops. President Bush's remarks on the many benefits of GM food appear more like a public relations release than a reasoned political argument.

Hunger in the third world is a complex phenomenon not likely to be reversed by

the introduction of GM crops. First, 80% of undernourished children in the developing world live in countries with food surpluses. The hunger problem has more to do with the way arable land is utilised.

Today, 21% of the food grown in the developing world is destined for animal consumption. In many developing countries, more than a third of the grain is now being grown for livestock. The animals, in turn, will be eaten by the world's wealthiest consumers in the northern industrial countries. The result is that the world's richest consumers eat a diet high in animal protein, while the poorest people on earth are left with little land to grow food grain for their own families. And, even the land that is available is often owned by global agribusiness interests, further aggravating the plight of the rural poor. The introduction of GM food crops does nothing to change this fundamental reality.

Second, President Bush talks about the cost savings of planting GM food crops. What he conveniently ignores is that GM seeds are more expensive than conventional seeds and, because they are patented, farmers cannot save the new seeds for planting during the next growing season because

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those seeds belong to the biotech companies. By exercising intellectual property control over the genetic traits of the world's major food crops, companies such as Monsanto stand to make huge profits while the world's poorest farmers become increasingly marginalised.

Third, the White House alludes to the new generation of crops with genes whose proteins will produce vaccines, drugs and even industrial chemicals. The Bush administration cites the example of "golden rice", a new genetically engineered rice strain that contains an inserted gene that produces beta-carotene. Noting that half a million poor children around the world suffer from vitamin A deficiency and become blind, the US trade representative Robert Zoellick argues that to deny them this valuable food source would be immoral. The biotech industry has been singing the praises of the "miracle" rice for years, despite articles in scientific journals that say it simply doesn't work. To convert beta-carotene into vitamin A the body requires sufficient body protein and fat. Undernourished children lack the body protein necessary for the conversion.

What is equally galling to Europeans is President Bush's moralising style. When the president said that "European governments should join — not hinder — the great cause of ending hunger in Africa", many European leaders were incensed. EU countries spend a larger percentage of their gross national income

on foreign aid than the US. The US currently ranks 22nd in the percentage of its gross national income devoted to foreign aid — the lowest of any industrial nation.

Bush's misguided plan to force Europeans to accept GM food is likely to backfire. Indeed, it may well turn out to be the straw that breaks the camel's back for European-US relations. The battle over GM food is uniting the European public and giving people a new sense of their common European identity, while distancing them even further from their old ally across the Atlantic.

The struggle over GM food may also further diminish the already weakened status of the WTO. Even if the organisation eventually sides with the US and forces the EU to introduce GM food, the victory is likely to be pyrrhic because any WTO order to accept GM food is going to have no effect on European farmers, consumers and the food industry.

US strong-arming cannot make Europeans eat GM food. A European GM food boycott will only expose the underlying weakness of globalisation and the existing trade protocols that accompany it. In the unfolding struggle between global commercial power and local cultural resistance, the GM food fight might turn out to be the test case that forces us to rethink the very basis of the globalisation process.

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