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Sugar and Snails: Consumption, Rationing and the Gendered Perception of Wartime Food Deprivation

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From our earliest moments to our last, humans depend on food to sustain life. But food is much more than ingesting nutrients for biological survival. Because all peoples must acquire, prepare, and consume food--requiring from the majority most of their time and energy--these activities over time have become intimately woven into societies' cultural practices and beliefs. Food helps to designate gender and class, it plays a significant role in social relationships, it is a highly symbolic element in religious and magical rites, and it aids in developing and maintaining cultures' identities. Thus the consumption of food is an extraordinarily social activity fraught with complex and shifting layers of meaning. In fact, cultural foodways, one of the earliest formed layers of culture, are usually the last to erode.¹

During the Second World War food shortages in North America were nowhere nearly as acute as those in Europe or Asia--a fact United States citizens realized--but rationing and shortages, for some the only tangible indications of the terrible war being fought overseas, still altered people's lives. For those with insufficient incomes, rationing had little effect, except perhaps to heighten what was already an acute realization of their lack of resources for food.² But for Americans with adequate incomes, food rationing upset their daily patterns and habits of eating, from their morning coffee to their traditional Thanksgiving dinners. This wartime disruption of food habits and rituals decreased the amount of individual control over these seemingly small but significant matters of life. For many Americans, choosing between a steak or chops for dinner was evidence of having "made it," and the restriction of this choice encroached on an important arena for control they had over their lives.

To learn more about what food rationing meant to Americans during World War II it is illuminating to explore the symbolic importance of food in general. I am especially interested in exploring the psychological meanings of being deprived of important rituals surrounding the preparation and consumption of highly valued foods. To take this exploration to another level, I will examine how the rationing of symbolically important--and symbolically-laden--foods was experienced and felt along gender lines. I want to take a provocative leap by suggesting that a useful way to consider wartime rationing and the differing wartime experiences of American men and women is to study the official rationing of the two most highly valued foods, red meat and sugar. By looking at the ways in which these foods have been historically laden with gendered "meanings"--red meat as quintessentially male, and sugar as female--and then by examining the federal government's policies toward the rationing of these foods, the wartime publicity surrounding this rationing program, and different individuals' experiences of this rationing, we can get, I think, a highly original and important insight into how Americans experienced the war, and experienced it differently, according to gender.

There is some evidence that men ate more meat and women consumed more sugar during the war; but firmly establishing this phenomenon is not my primary intention here. I am more interested in exploring the symbolic and cultural associations which exist in American society regarding gender, red meat, and sugar. As a cultural historian, I draw from anthropology and cultural studies to explore the associations between gender and meat and sugar to suggest that at a symbolic level the rationing of and deprivation of meat and sugar carries significant weight as a metaphor for wartime Americans' experiences. My ideas are meant to be exploratory, suggestive and provocative. I want to try to identify how the "language" of food functioned to reinforce social roles and the social expectations, with their accompanying expectations about power and authority, of men and women during the war.

Gender and food

In part because of the early division of labor according to sex, in many cultures certain foods
have become symbolically linked and hence culturally associated with one sex: most commonly meat with men, and "non-meats" with women, especially grains, vegetables and sugars. In Eastern thought, yin and yang associate meat with the masculine yin and vegetables with the feminine yang while as children in our own Westernized culture we learn that little boys are made of "snails and puppydog tails" while little girls are made of "sugar and spice and everything nice." Numerous anthropologists have speculated about these cultural associations and, from both mentalist and materialist orientations, have documented strong cultural identifications between women and sugar, and men and meat. Noted anthropologist Sidney Mintz, for instance, in his research found:

One (male) observer after another displays the curious expectation that women will like sweet foods to achieve otherwise unattainable objectives; and that sweet things are, in both literal and figurative senses, more the domain of women than of men. Of course these frequent references are interesting in their own right: that there may be links between women and sweet tastes is a research problem in itself.³

Conversely, in Victorian America women had a strong, culturally predicated aversion to meat, an aversion that was powerfully reinforced by strong societal norms concerning femininity. For Victorian women and girls (whose delicate digestive systems, it was believed, could only process softer, blander and sweeter foods) red meat was especially troublesome; if females ate meat at all it was in small amounts, and it was cooked until overdone. As Joan Jacobs Brumberg relates, "The flesh of animals was considered a heat-producing food...that stimulated...sexual development and activity [and] was linked to adolescent insanity and nymphomania." Thus for Victorian America, women's consumption of meat caused "great moral anxiety."⁴

In addition, there is considerable evidence that in most societies, men eat more meat than do women, and women consume more sugar. Anthropological studies of both non-industrial societies and of working-class families in western-industrial societies document that in households with limited resources a large portion of the family's meat/protein supply goes to the father, while the women and children go without, using other foods, especially sugar, to make up the caloric differences. Even with rising industrial wages that increases the amount of money that can be spent on food these patterns tend to hold. Mintz argues that "Everybody eats more sugar, but women and children eat relatively more than adult men; everybody gets some meat, but adult men get disproportionately more than women and children."⁵

Of course, this "hierarchy of meat distribution" exists not only by sex, but by race and class as well. Meat products like pigs feet, ham hocks, chitterlings, chicken backs and giblets which are associated with soul food, the African-American cuisine that evolved under slavery, have been usually historically regarded as inedible or "throw-aways," and in fact were the leftovers that white slave-owners discarded.⁶ Further, it has been well-documented for centuries that wealthier classes consume much larger quantities of meat than do the poor.⁷

A Gallup poll taken in January 1945--perhaps the leanest time for Americans during the war--asked: "What one product that is now rationed do you find it hardest to cut down on or get along without?" The top two items people mentioned were sugar and meat: Twenty percent listed sugar as being the hardest to do without and nineteen percent chose meat. What is particularly interesting is that the pollsters recorded that more women mentioned sugar than men, and a greater proportion of men mentioned meat. At least in this limited example, the gender associations of sugar and women and men and meat held true when it came to food preferences.⁸ What these actual preferences mean is unknown, but they raise interesting questions. If the poll is correct, why did women miss sugar more than men and men miss meat more than women? I would suggest women and men missed their respective foods for different reasons. In the case of women, I think the strong sense of deprivation was based in a highly symbolically important domestic activity that was much curtailed by wartime rationing--home baking. Women who baked at home used sugar as a primary ingredient; receiving important recognition from their families for this "special" contribution to the family diet. They also received deep personal satisfaction for providing their families with home-baked goods, and also perhaps because baking was for them a pleasurable activity. Men, who did not bake nearly
as much, did not notice sugar "the ingredient" missing as much as they did the baked items (which were also available from commercial bakeries). Instead, men were much more cognizant of the lack of a steak on their dinner plate at night. The symbolic importance of baking as part of women's contribution to the household economy, and the felt absence of this important ritual of domestic nurture during the war heightened American women's sense of what it was they were sacrificing. Men were more cognizant of missing meat, perhaps because for many men the role of being a good provider was reinforced by making sure the family had plenty of meat on their plates. In any case, what I want to argue here is that men's preferences--and the symbolic importance of men's desires--were accorded higher status by the entire culture, including the government, during the war. The symbolic associations of men with meat and women with sugar were actively reinforced by wartime government policy, advertising, and even commercial cookbooks. As a metaphor for power in the political economy of wartime America, the differences in the images and associations of meat and sugar are highly suggestive and illustrative of the many ways in which power, authority, and male desire are insinuated in seemingly insignificant details of daily life, including the family meal. To develop this argument, I will first turn to a brief discussion of the media's wartime association of meat and masculinity, and then turn to the relationship between women and sugar.

Meat and World War II

With the abundance of well-paying war-related jobs, more Americans could afford more expensive cuts of red meat. An increased demand for meat coupled with a drastically decreased supply (sixty percent of U.S. choice cuts of beef went to the military), created shortages of red meat for civilians. Scrambling to set in place some controls over the nation's food supplies the federal government early in 1942 introduced a "Share-the-Meat" campaign which urged Americans voluntarily to limit their weekly meat intake to 2.5 pounds per person. In 1943 the government began rationing most cuts of beef, pork and lamb according to a point system.

The symbolic importance of meat on Americans' table was never lost to government officials, who knew the importance of providing sufficient supplies of meat to keep citizens on the homefront mentally as well as physically strong and healthy enough to win the war. Red meat--the consummate symbol of virility-received primary status from the government during the war. Citizens felt well-fed if they could get meat; without it morale went down. Even though there were other sources of protein available--particularly eggs and beans as well as an abundance of the so-called "variety meats--eating red meat was crucial to homefront psychological well-being. Public opinion surveys bear this out: A Gallup poll released two days before the bombing of Pearl Harbor asked Americans, "Would the health of your family be better if you had more money to spend on food?" Thirty-nine percent responded "yes" and sixty-one percent responded "no." However, of those with a "lower income" (the poll did not reveal how this was defined) fifty-seven percent responded "yes," a difference of eighteen percentage points. Those who responded in the affirmative were asked: "If you had more money, what foods would you spend it on?" Topping the list with forty-five percent was meat, followed by vegetables, dairy products and fruits.

Those wartime experts advising the government on proper food rationing strategies realized the symbolic power of red meat, and knew that for Americans to comply with rationing they would need to feel that this sacrifice of their desired and highest-status food was for the "good of the country." A report by the Committee on Food Habits, a group of social scientists studying the psychological effects and cultural implications of rationing, discussed this connection:

A study of menus in different income groups has shown that families feel well fed if meat is included in the menu. Interviews in lower income groups in New York showed that people were often willing to cut down on every other essential in order to purchase meat. It is recognized that in some parts of the country the very poor do not depend upon meat, but, for the country as a whole, meat is the core of the diet. Probably more than any other food, meat combines the idea of self-preservation, strength, racial preservation (through the strong belief that meat and virility are connected) and growth, with the demands of taste and appetite. Restrictions in meat demand very careful planning.
The government, reinforcing this connection between psychological well-being and physical well-being, knew that allotting the largest portion of U.S. choice meat to the military would provide enough meat to satisfy the soldiers both symbolically and physically. In an attempt to convince skeptical Americans why the resumption of meat rationing was necessary after the quotas had been lifted for seven months, the Office of Price Administration in December 1944 explained:

**FRESH MEAT IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR SOLDIERS' DIETS** [sic]...Portable field kitchens and refrigeration vans move up with advancing troops to provide them daily with hot meals and huge supplies of fresh meats. Troops in the field now get fresh meats at three meals a week and the aim of the Quartermaster Corps is to provide fresh meat and butter at least two meals a day. Bacon on the breakfast menu would further increase the huge supplies of meat needed. The Quartermaster promises fresh food for every meal...provided the supplies are available. 14

Indeed, during the war a soldier received about two-and-a-half times more meat--about a pound a day--than a U.S. civilian. 15 The Armour Company (not surprisingly, since it processed meat products) in one advertisement declared the U.S. soldier as "the greatest meat eater in the world," claiming, "Not one man in ten ate as nourishing, well-balanced meals at home as he gets in the Navy today." 16

In "How to Stow and Take Care of Food on Ship Board," the official manual of the War Shipping Administration Food Control Division, the section entitled "Meat--Your Most Important Item" describes meat as the "mainstay of many a well-balanced meal":

Meat is one of the major providers of life-essential complete proteins needed to repair body tissue as it wears out, and to furnish the building blocks for new muscle and sinew in husky, hardy men who follow the sea.

But meat is more than that.

It is the provider of those savory aromas that awaken the appetite--the part of a meal that makes a man finish feeling well-fed. Meat "sticks to the ribs" (italics added). 17

Although red meat was important to citizen morale back at the homefront, most Americans were willing to sacrifice the choicest cuts to strengthen the "boys overseas." Despite bitter complaints about domestic meat shortages, it made Americans hopeful to know that the military were getting so much good, red meat. A magazine article, "Variety Meats: They are Good, Abundant, Highly Nutritious," berated those Americans for depriving G.I. Joe his hefty allotment of red meat:

The steak, chops, and roasts which have been standard fare on most tables are now being served to the men in uniform at home and abroad....The Army does not want the "variety meats" because they spoil easily, take time to prepare and the men don't like them. These objections, valid for the Army, make no sense when cited by civilians. 18

A poem by Langston Hughes, "Speaking of Food," printed in the African-American weekly the Baltimore Afro-American echoed this same sentiment; Hughes makes clear how widespread was the understanding of the importance of sacrificing meat for the war effort:

I hear folks talking
About coffee's hard to get,
And they don't know how
They're gonna live without it.

I hear some others saying
They can't buy no meat to fry,
And the way they say it
You'd think they're gonna die.

If I was to sit down
And write Uncle Sam,
I'd tell him that I reckon
I can make it without ham.

I'd say, "Feed those fighting forces
For they're the ones today
That need to have the victuals
To wipe our foes away."

Looks like to me
That's what we ought to say. 19

There were numerous such writings and media images associating men with red meat during wartime. Many of them were government pitches for compliance with rationing quotas, which
condemned civilian men specifically for eating more than their fair share of meat. The Office of war Information (OWI), the government propaganda and censorship agency, provided newspapers with an anti-black market piece entitled "THE BLACKETEER!"--a picture of a man looking at the reader, a large hand holding a steak under his nose, and the following poem:

To causes like the U.S.O.
He even gives a pint of blood...
But even so, he's still a dud.

For here's a man who eats his steak
And has his coupons, too!
The price he lets black markets take
Shoots prices up for you.

Each time he cheats it costs you dough
What's more, he gets your share.
It's up to you to let him know
He, to, must share... play square.

Attempting to explain to the American public why so much food was being shipped overseas, the OWI --appropriating the meat-as-male metaphor as well as the "hierarchy of meat" distribution--created an illustration and text which was sent to rural newspapers across the country.

When you divide up a small meat loaf at the table you may give a great big piece to Johnny, who is on the basketball team, a reasonably large piece to yourself, a fair-sized piece to the Mrs., and a tiny one to three-year-old Suzy.

That's about the way--on the basis of needs not wants--that the War Food Administration divides the U.S. food supply among the armed forces, civilians, Allies, and other "claimant" groups....Only the WFA does it on a much bigger scale and calls it "allocations."20

The OWI also provided cartoons to newspaper and magazines which dealt with men and meat. One OWI cartoon shows a butcher, from behind the meat counter, saying to a man with a black eye: "Sorry, Mr. Claybourne, but we must conserve beefsteak!" Another OWI cartoon, printed in both the Mission Times of Mission, Texas, and the Independent of Jordan, Minnesota, shows a woman talking to a man in a home overrun by rabbits: "Of course, Wilbur,

To ease the burden on beef producers and maintain Americans' health the government and others urged the use of alternate supplies of protein, specifically beans and eggs, both of which were in plentiful supply throughout the war. But, unlike the government's attempts to get men to eat less meat, its campaign to get Americans to use these alternative protein sources was aimed at women, the food preparers. Through the influence of women it was hoped men would decrease their meat intake by substituting other protein-rich foods. For instance, there was much publicity about the nutritional importance of soybeans--considered to be the new "miracle"food of the future. Mildred Lager, in her wartime cookbook, The Useful Soybean: A Plus Factor in Modern Living, sung the praises of the soybean, calling it "a little round bean rolling forth to play a spectacular and gigantic role in our agriculture, commerce, industry and nutrition."22 Lager saw the American male and his carnivorous desires as the main impediment to getting soybeans on every American table (in great quantities):

It is never easy...to change food habits or to introduce new foods. For the average American male, the soybean, or any bean for that matter, has little appeal; its wondrous protein content is overshadowed by his memory of a thick juicy steak. The chances are good that he is not the least bit interested in soybeans, does not even want to try them, and feels he can get along nicely without them. But such a rebellious male can get his beans without suspecting their presence.23

Lager went on to reveal the underhanded ways a woman could sneak soybeans into her man's diet so he might remain unaware he was eating the dreaded bean.

Eggs had long been touted as an adequate alternate source of protein to red meat. The government campaigned constantly for American women to increase their use of eggs; the government's propaganda bureau even declared them a "Victory Special," which meant that by buying the oversupply of eggs American women could demonstrate their patriotism.24 The OWI-prepared Women's Radio Guide, in one release titled, "Use More Eggs," explained why Americans should eat more of the surplus eggs.
The Guide instructed radio announcers that "Women plan the daily meals and can do most to relieve the emergency caused by the temporary super-abundance of eggs. Urge your listeners to use more eggs in every way possible for the next several weeks. Points to be stressed: 1. Nutritional value of eggs. 2. Economical to buy. 3. Eggs are not rationed." 25

Given the strong belief in meat as the ultimate strength-producing, protein rich food, it is not surprising that meat was never portrayed negatively (unlike sugar, which was regarded as an "energy food" but most knew it contained no nutrients and was fattening). During wartime rationing Americans were advised to eat less meat, but never to change permanently their eating habits in the hopes of reducing meat consumption after the war, as was the case with sugar. 26 In fact the only public reference to the wartime meat shortage being beneficial to Americans' health came from an American woman who lived most of her life outside the United States, in a country which ate very little meat. Nobel Prize winning writer Pearl S. Buck, in her introduction to the cookbook, How to Cook and Eat in Chinese by Chao Bu-wei Yang, writes:

"It is of inestimable value to the war effort and also to the economy of peace if [Americans] will learn to use meat for its taste in a dish of something else, instead of using it chiefly for its substance...We have known, abstractly, that the Chinese people is one of the oldest and most civilized on earth. But this book proves it. Only the profoundly civilized can feed upon such food." 27

Sugar and the War

Sugar was the first food item to be rationed, just a few months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the last to be taken off in 1946. Wartime shortages were even more acutely felt since during the Depression years sugar had been plentiful and low-priced. Shortages occurred not because the soldiers needed large quantities of sugar in the field, as was often mentioned in the case of red meat, although some was used in the making of explosives. Rather, shortages resulted from three sources: a lack of domestic labor available to plant and harvest the sugar beet crop; because countries such as Java, the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines which formerly produced three-fourths of the U.S. sugar supply were now in Japanese control; and because there was a lack of ships available to import sugar from Puerto Rico and Cuba. 28 Throughout the war the average yearly ration of sugar for U.S. civilians--adults and children alike--was about twenty-four pounds per person, approximately half of 1941 levels. 29

Though the sugar supply was much greater than in Europe, Americans could not satisfy their wartime sweet tooth. Gallup polls reveal the importance of sugar for all Americans, but especially for women who used much sugar for family baking and canning. As previously cited, a poll taken in January 1945 showed sugar the top vote-getter of items people found hardest to cut down or do without, with women more likely to mention sugar than men. A March 1942 Gallup poll asked housewives, "About how many pounds of sugar a week does your family use?" and found the median average to be one pound per person. When asked, "What is the smallest amount of sugar your family could get along on each week?" the "housewives" related a median average of nine-and-a-half ounces per person; this amount was one-and-a-half ounces more than the eight ounces per week the twenty-four pound-a-year allotment provided. When asked in July of 1945, "If you could have any one of these four things, which would you prefer: 15 gallons of gasoline, 25 pounds of sugar, 5 pounds of butter, or 5 pounds of beefsteak?", forty-seven percent of those questioned chose the sugar, as opposed to twenty-nine percent who chose beef, the runner-up.

It is not known whether women actually ate more sugar than men, but during the war there was a common assumption reinforced by the media that this was in fact true. Just as publications told men to stop eating so much meat, women were told to curb their sugar intake for the duration of the war. In her cookbook of dessert recipes, Sweets Without Sugar, which aimed to provide women with tempting recipes using sugar substitutes such as molasses, honey, and corn syrup, Marion White could not resist informing American women about the consequences of their cravings for sweetness:

"The woman who eats one piece of candy immediately desires another piece of candy; nothing else will satisfy the longing. Sugar spoils
the appetite for other foods, but increases the appetite for more sugar.  

An article in the Fort Worth Star Telegram entitled "Where's the Sugar?" pondered about why there was such a sugar shortage:  

One of the principal reasons why we now are short of sugar is that we ate it last year. Civilians consumed approximately 500,000 tons more sugar in 1944 than the nation could afford, eating into stocks on hand until they were left at an abnormally low level.  

Chiefly responsible for this sugar "overdraft" was the home-canning sugar program. Much of the over-liberal issuance of sugar for canning purposes, it is suspected, went into the making of cakes, candies and other delicacies for which wartime shortages whetted an appetite.  

Housewives are having to learn this year that they can not eat their cake and have their canning sugar, too (italics mine).  

In the cookbook Home Canning for Victory editor Anne Pierce, before giving canning recipes using less sugar, gave her own lecture to women about "The Sugar Situation."  

Nobody knows just what the sugar situation is, or when or how often it may change. Nevertheless, there is one, and don't blame your government for that...sugar is needed to make industrial alcohol used in making explosives. Would you like to leave our men at the front or our allies without necessary tools and munitions so that you could have more sugar in your coffee, cakes, and preserves? Use your imagination and see the sugar you save multiplied by fifty million or so, and you will feel it is worth while.  

Peirce ends her instruction with the advice, "Save 'eating' sugar for food preservation." This refrain, "Cut down on your sugar intake, it's good for you," was repeated often by those writing about the wartime sugar shortage. Most told their readers sugar was an energy source they could easily reduce or eliminate, especially as knowledge about vitamins became widespread, and sugar was condemned as empty calories.  

Although it is not known whether women ate more sugar than men, women seemed to miss it more; this longing was compounded by media images that continually made explicit connections between women and sugar (as they did meat with men). A reason for this linkage was probably the central importance of baking. Anthropologists have long noticed that baking (as opposed to roasting) is symbolically associated with women. One male writer who produced a weekly column on food for men entitled "For Men Only" in the Chicago Daily Tribune during the 1940s made clear the connection: "Personally, I am of the firm opinion that [baked items such as bread and desserts] should be the sole prerogative of the Little Woman of the household." Instead of baking themselves he encouraged his bachelor readers to buy bakery items or prepared, frozen items. Women did most (if not all) of family baking in mid-twentieth century America. Indeed women, especially women in middle-class American households, equated the careful preparation and serving of food with maternal love and nurture. Baked items, especially, carried the symbolic message of nurturance and care; thus baking brought women extra attention and recognition, which was important to their identity as homemaker as well as their sense of self. Since the cakes, cookies and pies they made were special and "different"from the every day fare they served their families, baking these items were probably pleasurable activities as well. When sugar (and fats too) became scarce and women could not do as much baking, they lost an important way of gaining family recognition, of nurturing their family, and of participating in an enjoyable activity often done in a group, as with canning or Christmas candy making.  

The media strongly equated baking and providing love and nurturance for one's family. Even in the face of admonitions to women to stop using and eating sugar, because of the importance of baking as nurturance, the cultural stereotype equating successful mothering with a full cookie jar still held. Margaret Mills's cookbook, Cooking on a Ration, hinted that despite sugar rationing, which meant limiting sweet desserts, one place not to skimp was the cookie jar--such treats could simply be made with the unrationed molasses or honey: "It will be a sorry day for the small fry when Mother doesn't manage to keep the cookie jar filled," Mills warned. "We've always contended it takes a well-filled cookie jar to make a house a home." And not only would the kids benefit from this small but significant gesture, but so would
their father: "Dad," Mills reminded, "who is only small fry grown up when it comes to cookies, makes for that jar, too."36

Because of the importance of baking for her family (as well as for herself) many women were frustrated at the rationing system which did not provide enough fats, and particularly sugar, with which to produce their accustomed amount of baked goods. The campaign to encourage extra consumption of eggs, for instance, did not go over well with some women, especially because sugar was rationed. Mrs. George M. Coffey of Ronan, Montana wrote to her congressman, pointing out the inconsistencies of urging women to buy and use more eggs without allowing them more sugar to cook with.

We were told over the radio the other day how many tons of eggs are in storage and how many tons there is no storage space for. The speaker suggested the housewives purchase a few extra dozen eggs and store them in their refrigerators, "What nonsense, positively idiotic." [sic]

It set me thinking that I'm using fewer eggs than I used to use, and why? Because I haven't sugar to bake with nor occasionally make ice cream or sherbet. Give us housewives more sugar and watch the eggs disappear--People can only eat so many cooked eggs or they will become nauseated of them, therefore, you cannot increase the consumption of cooked eggs very much."37

In her letter Mrs. Coffey, assuming that sugar shortages were caused by the same factors as were meat shortages admonished Congress to determine "whether the housewife is being allowed all the sugar she is entitled to without taking really necessary sugar from our soldiers. If our soldiers needed every cup full of sugar they are getting, we'll say no more about it, they are welcome to it." She went on to point out the blatant discrimination against women when it came to sugar distribution:

The bakers are now doing an enormous business because they are allowed more and more sugar to continue increasing their business, while the housewife gets such a stingy amount she is compelled to buy most of her cookies, cakes, and pies at the bakery...The bakers will strongly object to the housewives being allowed more sugar because their business is certainly flourishing right now, and home baking is becoming a lost art.38

Indeed, housewives were being given short shrift when it came to sugar allotments. Commercial bakeries received a disproportionate amount of sugar, approximately seventy percent of prewar levels (which was raised to eighty percent in 1944) as opposed to the private citizens' fifty percent levels. It was especially disconcerting to women when the government gave further extra allotments of sugar to commercial bakers. Commercial bakeries were given more sugar, according to the OPA, because they "wasted"less sugar than housewives who used such small amounts; and second, in order to use up quickly the tremendous egg surplus.39 The government's main excuse, that more women working outside the home in war-related jobs had less time to bake at home, still penalized the majority of women who did not have such employment, and had no choice but to buy from the bakeries.40 The War Food Administration, recognizing this discrepancy, weakly admitted "Some [will] feel insufficient if baking is done at home," but was quick to add, "Urban consumers tend to feel it sufficient."41 Although their families could still have store bought baked items, they were not baked by Mother.

The discrepancy in sugar allotments was made even clearer to women when it came to the increased amount of commercially-produced candy that was available. A memo by an OPA staff member discussed the problem:

At the moment grocery stores and others have counters full of candy. This includes candy bars as well as sacks of assorted candy. Conversation overheard in these stores indicates perplexity on the part of housewives. They're saying, "If sugar is plentiful, why can't we have some?" "If manufacturers can make candy for Christmas, why can't we make it at home?" Consumer mail is asking for extra sugar rations for making Christmas sweets. It seems to me that the situation calls for immediate clarification. Obviously there is something incongruous in a situation in which OPA tells the American public that Industrial Use [sic] of sugar is not increasing when for the first time since the beginning of the war candy stores are full of candy.42
Moreover, many women were unable to get even their allotted extra sugar ration for canning, another activity which brought much recognition and self-satisfaction—and was heartily endorsed by the government in order to free domestic canned goods supplies to send overseas. Again, feeling powerless against the bureaucracy, many women complained to the government. Mrs. H.C. Jones of New Market, Alabama wrote her senator about her frustrations with the sugar shortage. "I didn’t rush in and apply for canning sugar so I did not get 20 lbs as many did," Mrs. Jones explains, I didn’t get 15 lbs as a lot more did. Because my fruit was not yet ripe and I wasn’t in any great hurry--foolishly thinking...that rationing authorities meant what they said--I don’t get any at all. Well--I guess I just don’t.44

One of Mrs. Jones' main concerns, however, is just exactly where and for what the sugar supply is going. Afraid that Cuban sugar is being used for less than vital purposes, she asks Senator Lister, "HOW MANY TONS OF CUBAN POTENTIAL SUGAR WILL INSTEAD BE MADE INTO RUM? I think those of us who do not care for rum but would like to see our children nourished are entitled to this information." She goes on, describing her sacrifice of sugar for the others in the family, in this case an elderly woman and a male child:

My 79 year old mother drinks coffee for breakfast--my growing son eats cereal; I do neither, trying to make the sugar allowance stretch. We don't have desserts and if sugar is an energy food we just don't have any. I can do without it for the services, for the liberated people and for other good and sufficient reasons with good grace, but it galls to be deprived because the OPA balked on a measly 1/4 cent per pound [extra to Cuban sugar growers]. I hope to Heaven Truman will clean that crowd out and get someone in it that has to live on rationed meals instead of at hotels.

Mrs. Jones ends her letter with "Anyhow--please advise me about the volume of Cuban rum--I'm much interested."45

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to show not only the gender associations of meat and sugar which were presented in the media in the United States during World War II, but also to discuss larger, more pervasive issues connecting the production and consumption of food with power and wartime sacrifices, especially as they relate to gender. Apart from the higher nutritional content of meat, it is important to ask whether the gender association of sugar with (less-valued) women, and meat with (highly valued) men contributed to this presentation by the media. It is possible that red meat was applauded so loudly--and the reasons for sacrificing it were made so clear--because of its association with virility and potency, precisely the qualities needed to fight this "total war," the war most demanding of social resources in U.S. history. Similarly, it is plausible to argue that sugar--used by women as a symbolic way to nurture her husband and children--was regarded as more frivolous because it was associated with the (less important) female.

Just as Sweetness and Power (the title of Sidney Mintz's Path-breaking anthropological study which connects the growth of sugar production and consumption to European colonialism) succinctly makes plain, sugar as well as meat consumption during WW II involved clear issues of power--only in this instance involving gender instead of class or race. There is strong evidence to suggest that media images regarding meat and sugar rationing helped to reinforce gender roles, but perhaps it is possible to go further and suggest that they helped to construct them. More research needs to be done to more clearly determine the extent of influence regarding these media images and socialized gender roles. What is known, however, is that food, particularly the preparation and serving of it, has much to do with issues of power and control. In an insightful essay about food and power Joan Jacobs Brumberg surmises:

The question of who gathers and prepares food is a critical problem in contemporary gender politics....The politics of food remains germane precisely because the production, consumption and distribution of food always involves issues of power and cultural authority. To think that food has disappeared from politics would be sadly misguided.46

As historian Phyllis Palmer observed regarding men's and women's roles in domestic food production and consumption, "Much of the feeling
of greatness (of power) comes from being served." 47

During World War II in the United States, the chaos resulting from the country going to war caused for many a reordering or disruption of prescribed gender roles, particularly as so many women went to work outside the home. For many, these prescribed gender roles--such as were reinforced by the media's association of meat and sugar to gender--were a reflection of an ordered society. An "ordered" and thus stable society seemed a necessity for the country to wage war effectively, and socially prescribed gender roles--including the unbalanced power that often accompanied them--was for many a sure indicator that American society was still strong.

1 I would like to thank Brett Gary, whose perceptive comments and careful editing contributed much to this paper. Thanks also to the conference reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

2 People with low incomes, for instance, were not much affected by the rationing of red meat. A study commissioned by the Committee on Food Habits, a government advisory body, recorded many poor, immigrant women's comments about meat rationing such as "We use the same amount of meat, since we didn't use much before," and "I don't think we poor people are affected much by rationing. We manage to get along O.K. on our points. Its [sic] the money we're afraid won't hold out." Earl Loman and Ruth E. Thoreson, "Nutrition and the Low-Income Family," (1942): 6. Records of the Committee on Food Habits, National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C.


5 Mintz, 145. See also Janet M. Fitchen, "Hunger, Malnutrition, and Poverty in the Contemporary United States: Some Observations on Their Social and Cultural Context," in *Food and Foodways*, (vol. 2, 1988): 320, 323. A note in the New York Times Magazine, (27 September 1942) helps to confirm this phenomenon during WWII: "There's nothing really new in the finding of a study of the British worker's diet that mothers give to fathers and children the lion's share of rationed foods. Other studies of family diets have revealed these deep-rooted habits, common to mothers everywhere, of which there is plenty of evidence at first hand. When there isn't enough chicken to go around, mother prefers the neck" (32).


7 See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans., Edmund Jephcott, (NY: Urizen Books, 1978): 117-118; Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, (NY: Continuum, 1990) 30. It is important to note that race and class are important to consider, along with gender, when discussing sugar and meat rationing, for the coveted red meat and sugar were not as commonly eaten by some groups as they were in the mainstream. Before and during the war different groups' cuisines used sugar in different quantities. For example, many ethnic groups such as Italian Americans and African Americans did not traditionally eat much refined sugar, and thus the emphasis and "fuss" over the loss of sugar supplies did not affect them as severely. In addition, many Americans were simply too poor to buy their allotted amount of sugar or meat.
The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971. 2 vols. New York: Random House, 1973. The poll unfortunately does not provide actual numbers. It reads: "Women are more inclined to name sugar and butter than men, while a greater proportion of men mention meat and gasoline." Admittedly, there is little direct evidence that during the war the government regarded food and gender as related in this way; however, a 2/14/42 memo by Margaret Mead about future projects the CFH could conduct does mention the notion. Mead is interested in exploring food habits characteristic of heterosexual social contacts: "As more and more sex segregation is necessitated by war time conditions, it will be important to know which types of food have been associated with two sex, and which with one sex groups" (emphasis mine). Records of the Committee on Food Habits, File: A &P 1941 -44 CFH Projects, Archives of the National Research Council, National Academy of Science, Washington, DC.


Two and a half pounds of meat a week comes to .36 of a pound per day, or 130 pounds per person per year of red meat. Between 1935 and 1939, the Depression years, Americans ate an average of 126 pounds of red meat a year, significantly less than the all-time high of 163 pounds in 1908. Even so, under Share-the-Meat, Americans still got more meat per week than they did in the 1930s (130 versus 127 pounds per year), but significantly lower than the 1941 figure of 141 pounds per person per year, an amazing jump of eleven pounds per person in only two years. The per capita consumption in 1 942 turned out to be 138, so while the Share the Meat plan was moderately successful in getting people to reduce their meat intake, compulsory rationing was needed to do the job. ("Facts about the Meat Situation," October 1944, War Food Administration, RG 188, Box 782, File: program improvements. See also RB 188, Box 670, File: Butter. Other figures: 1943: 135 lbs.;1944: 148 lbs.;1945: 127 lbs. RG 188, Box 670, File: Butter. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

I feel confident in my argument associating red meat with masculine traits. It is true that women also have been symbolically associated with meat, such as being referred to as "pieces of meat" or being part of a "meat market." These references, however, serve to reinforce my argument, as on the level of metaphor, it is men using these terms who are desiring to "consume" women as they do food, connoting issues of control and domination. Women are thus classified as edible items--meat--consumed for the purpose of the men's enjoyment. See Carol Adams The Sexual Politics of Meat for a lengthy discussion of this idea. Also, contrast the describing of women as meat to the way lovers use "sweet" images to refer to each other: sweetie, honey, sugarplum, etc. Although these "sweet" images can also be used threateningly, they are used both by women and men to refer to each other. Mintz is currently doing work on this use of "sweet" language.

It is interesting to speculate why steak was so much more symbolically important than an egg in this case. Although I cannot provide concrete evidence, my opinion is that a steak is more masculine, while eggs--a symbol of female fertility, among other things--is considered more female, and thus less desirable.


Three hundred and sixty-five pounds a year!


How to Stow and Take Care of Food on Ship Board, War Shipping Administration, Food Control Division, 1945: 9. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Collage, Cambridge MA.


Langston Hughes, "Speaking of Food," The Baltimore Afro-American, (3 April 1943): 7. Hughes is not being ironic in this poem. Although Negro newspapers such as the Afro-American were vocal about the poor treatment black...
soldiers and citizens received in the midst of fighting an enemy in the name of "democracy," the paper strove to be as patriotic concerning the war, and as supportive of U.S. soldiers, as any American newspaper.

20 Although at first glance distributing meat according to weight or (perhaps) activity level might seem logical, numerous studies done recently show that vitamin and protein needs for infants, children, and lactating and pregnant women are often actually higher than for adult men (See Ross and Harris, page 570, for instance). Thus giving the largest amounts of protein to adult males and depriving women and children from adequate amounts (contributing to the higher mortality rates) in some societies acts as a population control.

21 All OWI material found in RG 208, Entry 66, Box 8, File: FFFF-general. National Archives, Suitland, MD. There were, however, an estimated 250,000 to 3 million vegetarians in the U.S. who consumed no meat. See "3 Million Vegetarians Seen 'Short Changed' Under OPA Program," Greenville, SC News, Feb. 5, 1943. A letter from Symon Gould, Associate Editor of The American Vegetarian to Claude Wickard, Dec. 2, 1942: "If [cheese, butter, milk, beans, etc] are to be rationed in the same degree that meat will be rationed, we feel that the vegetarians should come under a special regulation enabling them to substitute for unwanted meat rations these other food materials...similar to the food regulations applying to vegetarians in Great Britain." RG 188, Box 802, File: Meat Consumption Patterns, 1942-5. National Archives, Washington, D.C.


23 Ibid. 175.

24 The Committee on Food Habits stated the obvious: "In all daily matters of food choice and preparation, women, and particularly mothers and wives, play a, or, the leading role. A national campaign for dietary betterment, to succeed, must make sure of their active participation." CFH "Provisional Program of Action," Feb. 28, 1941. File: Program of Action, Records of the CFH, Archives of the National Research Council, National Academy of Science, Washington, D.C.


26 For instance, Dr. Algernon Jackson, in his regular column "AFRO Health Talk," in the Baltimore Afro-American, warned his readers, "It is possible that the shortage of sugar is a blessing in disguise, for the opportunity is given us to use healthier substitutes. Eat more fruit daily and forget the sugar shortage. (28 March 1942): 6.


29 Roy A. Ballinger, Sugar During World War II, USDA Bureau of Agricultural Economics, (June 1946): 1-3. In addition, each person could apply for an extra allotment of sugar--from 10 to 20 pounds--for home canning and preserving. This figure also does not include sugar people ingested in commercially canned items, baked goods and soft drinks--combining for a total of 71.5 pounds per year in 1945, compared to 89 pounds in 1944. See: OWI Advance Release for Tuesday Morning papers, May 1, 1945. RG 188, Box 674, File: Food Rationing Division 1945--Sugar. National Archives, Washington, D.C.


31 July 19, 1945, RG 188, Box 674, File: Food Rationing Division 1945--Sugar. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

33Levi-Strauss, 225.


38Ibid.

39A letter from War Food Administrator Marvin Jones to office of Price Administrator Chester Bowles, June 12, 1944, on the egg surplus: "We are faced with an emergency storage problem that threatens the loss of hundreds of carloads of eggs unless every possible means of moving them into consumption can be used....We have taken a nation-wide campaign through all possible media, urging housewives to take home an extra dozen of eggs and store them in the refrigerator to help meet this problem. We are asking retailers, through their national association headquarters, to join with us in this campaign. We are asking hotels and restaurants... But these efforts will not be enough. We need immediately an incentive for increased industrial use of eggs. This, we believe, can most effectively be done by increasing sugar allocations to bakers. It is imperative that allocations for this use be increased for a period of thirty days." [Bowles approves the measure.] RG 188, Box 633, File: Surplus egg situation. National Archives, Washington, D.C. "Household consumers complained bitterly." RG 188, Box 977, File: Institutional users, p. 226. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

40Marvin Jones, letter to Hugh Fulton, (29 April 1944). RG 16, Box 231. File: WAR 7 (f), (rationing from 1 January 1944). National Archives, Washington, D.C. See also Roy A. Ballinger, Sugar During World War II, (USDA Bureau of Agricultural Economics, June 1946): 13; Betty Crocker—a fictitious woman created in the 1930s to give homemakers a friendly female face with which to identify—was the only homemaker to get an increased allotment of sugar. By allotting the mostly male-owned and operated commercial bakeries 20 percent (and then 30 percent) more sugar than homemakers, the government reified the power of the public, "masculine" arena of the commercial bakery at the expense of the woman in her private, and less powerful sphere of influence. See Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Places: The Rhetoric of Women's History," (Journal of American History, 75 (June 1988): 9-39, for an in-depth discussion of physical space designated by gender.

41"Analysis of TENTATIVE sugar allocations for the year beginning April 1, 1944 and their relation to the WFA General Food Program, Feb. 11, 1944." RG 16, Entry 42, Box 233, File: WAR 7 (s) (rationing). National Archives, Washington, D.C.

42Memo to Jim Kelley from Judy Russell, November 19, 1945. RG 188, Box 674, File: sugar rationing. National Archives, Washington, D.C.


45Ibid. "In 1944, about 900,000 tons of Cuban production were diverted from sugar to high-test molasses for industrial alcohol. As a result of the improvement of the alcohol situation, the Government gave distillers a "holiday" from making industrial alcohol to permit production of beverage alcohol. Other unessential uses of alcohol also have been authorized and liberalized. The United States had record crops of wheat and corn in 1944 and we are facing large carryovers of
these grains at the end of the current crop year. The increased utilization of grains for alcohol will help to hold down the carry-over to more normal levels. In view of the above uses of alcohol, the surplus grains, and furthermore, the shortage of sugar, no diversion of sugar to alcohol should be made in 1945. (From "Chronology of Sugar Rationing" RG 199, Box 674, File: Sugar Rationing, 12. National Archives, Washington, D.C.


47Palmer, 159.