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Food Reprisal Unwise

A MONG proposals for reprisals against Russia for gunning down a Korean jetliner is one calling for an embargo on grain sales. Victor Riesel, whose syndicated column appears regularly on this page, is among those who have advocated such sanctions.

"The Politburo wouldn't purchase grain from America if it could go elsewhere," Riesel wrote recently. "The Andropovs aren't known for any economic charity. They wouldn't bolster our farmers or our exports if they could hurt them." He added there are other ways American ingenuity can devise to use the grain.

Ordinarily, Riesel is on the right track, but in this case he has failed to review history adequately. As President Reagan replied when he was asked about canceling the newly signed long-term grain agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union: "We've had experience with that before, and it didn't work."

That previous experience includes a moratorium imposed in 1975 because of a longshoremen's boycott on loading Russian-bound ships and an embargo on grain sales to the Soviet Union ordered by President Carter in 1980 to persuade the Russians to call off their invasion of Afghanistan. The embargo has ended. The Russians are still in Afghanistan.

Reagan said if there was any penalty from such actions it was

against our own people more than against the Russians. Another selective embargo would strike hardest at American farmers, already in critical economic condition because of reduced production and low prices for commodities. It would be unfair to stop their trade and allow other industries to continue doing business as usual.

If the United States were at war with the Soviet Union, it would be mandatory that all trade be terminated. But so long as negotiations continue on arms limitations and other issues, actions that would hamper trade of a single industry appear to be unjustified.

James L. Lockett, president of the Oklahoma Farm Bureau, called demands for canceling grain sales to Russia an emotional response to the airliner incident. "It demonstrates that some leaders in this country continue to consider food as a weapon in foreign policy," Lockett said. "Food should be considered a tool for peace."

Most citizens probably would agree that pressures should be applied to the Soviet Union in this case, but that they ought to be handled through appropriate diplomatic procedures, not in an emotional, inconsistent manner.

As long as the United States presents itself as a major supplier of food on the world market, we have a responsibility to sell to any nation with money to buy — except, of course, to declared enemies in wartime.