

Cheap, Crappy Food = A Fat Population

How Corporations and the US Government Create the Obesity Epidemic

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If the rates of obesity in the United States continue to increase at about the same rate they have been, 75 percent of the population will be overweight and 41 percent will be obese by the year 2015.¹ Obesity causes at least 111,000 deaths per year in the United States,² and some researchers place that number at over 400,000.³ Add to these figures the cases of cancer and heart disease—brought on or worsened by obesity—and the cases of type 2 diabetes caused by obesity and resulting in death, and you have the single largest killer of Americans.

For years, the government has been fighting any meaningful stance on obesity by repeating over and over their two favorite mantras: “Exercise personal responsibility,” and, “Exercise more.” Certainly each of these recommendations has a certain amount of validity, but taken from a government that does far more to *cause* obesity than to prevent it, these quiet calls for the individual to take action are hardly enough (and somewhat a slap in the face). When it comes to powerful lobbyists and moneyed corporations influencing the government to implement policies that endanger the health and safety of its citizens, the issues surrounding obesity are no exception. From how we support our farm and agriculture system to how we regulate nutrition standards in schools and all points in between, the government takes an extremely damaging and passive-aggressive role in contributing to a national health crisis that former US Surgeon General Richard Carmona called “more pressing than 9/11 or any other terrorist event you can point out to me.”⁴

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We’ve spent two years researching the causes of obesity for our documentary film, *Killer at Large*, and have been floored by the degree of culpability on the part of government policy and by government-industry collusion in regards to our national obesity crisis. One expects such things from the healthcare industry, big tobacco, and defense contractors, but the pro-obesity lobby is just as big and just as ardent in protecting its monetary interests.

The following sections briefly detail some of the more flagrant instances we’ve uncovered, where government and industry have joined hands to institute or perpetuate policies and practices that have reshaped our food system in ways that overwhelmingly benefit business.

Fast, Cheap, and Irresistible

It is very important for one to realize before analyzing the problem of obesity at any length that we, as humans, are not nearly as clever as we give ourselves credit for being. Despite advances in technology, breakthroughs in science, or successes in business, we’re still a species of hunter-gatherers with simple needs and desires. Namely, lots of food and lots of sex. While these compulsions are largely responsible for insuring our continued existence as a species over millions of years, lately they’ve made us easy targets to manipulate and have gotten us into quite a bit of trouble—most notably regarding the quality, availability, and price of our food.

There is plenty of health information out there for anyone who cares to look, but when it comes to food, the mind is willing but the flesh is weak. Despite the advice of your doctor or the promise of the heartburn and constipation to come, too many of us (against our better judgment) are springing for fast food. But with a 30-minute lunch break and

five bucks in your pocket; who can blame you? You're not a nutritionist or a culinary critic—you're a hunter searching for easy prey and enough fuel to get you through the day. With

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that in mind as you peruse the menu board at the drive-thru, the odds are already stacked in favor of the fatty, salty, calorie-loaded burger, not only because your body craves it, but your pocketbook demands bang for its buck. In a bizarre world where one salad can cost as much as five burgers, and water costs more than soda, all biological and economic incentives seem to line up against the healthy options.

Try as we might in this battle against junk food, we're hopelessly outgunned. But before lashing out at the purveyors of junk food, no matter how predatory their tactics, it would be far more productive to pull back the curtain and expose those who are supplying the ammo. Surely, all known laws of nature or economic theory would scoff at the idea that five hamburgers could be as cheap to produce as a pile of leaves and a handful of vegetables. Someone is clearly bending the rules, and though industry is the clear benefactor and the consumer the clear victim, the United States Department of Agriculture provides the impetus.

Since 1972, under Richard Nixon's Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, the USDA has poured billions of dollars into the pockets of corn and soy farmers across the country to produce as much as possible, no matter how egregious the surplus. As overproduction sends the cost of corn through the floor, the federal government picks up the slack, writing farmers a check ensuring them a small profit, ensuring continued overproduction, and ensuring that food processors pack in an endless source of calories.⁵ As most of the corn produced in the US is not fit for human consumption, the vast majority of the grain is

turned into either feed for beef or processed into high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS), in short, solving the mystery of that unnaturally cheap burger and soda at the drive-thru.

Certainly there are other factors at play here, but with nearly 65-billion tax dollars from 1995 to 2005 paid directly to corn and soy farmers,⁶ the United States Farm Bill has had the largest singular effect on transforming our food landscape, as well as the physical landscape of the farm belt. Where once upon a time, crop diversity was the key to insuring a healthy and sustainable food supply, the small family farm has all but been snuffed out, swallowed by an endless sea of corn. Why chance vegetable-crop failure when drought-resistant, genetically-modified corn—saturated in hydrogen fertilizer—will guarantee you a substantial government check at the end of the year? Where once upon a time, grocery stores were filled with simple (read: healthful) foods that required imagination and effort to prepare, everything from bread, soup, frozen dinners, and all points in between is ready-made and loaded with corn-derived preservatives and sweeteners. You've no doubt noticed that as of 1997 the average American consumed 60.4 pounds of HFCS per year.⁷ That translates into 200 calories per person per day, which roughly translates into 20 extra pounds per year.

Aside from the beverage industry, the meat industry has benefited most from the endless supply of cheap corn, and with most USDA chiefs, employees, and committee members either coming from or ending up on the payroll of the meat industry, it should come as no surprise. For every pound of fattened beef, it takes six pounds of corn to produce it. It's not exactly the most efficient means of producing food unless the feed is cheaper than dirt, literally. Corn-fed American beef is not only fatter but many times cheaper and much more prevalent than its non-corn-fed counterparts, a fact punctuated by statistics showing that meat consumption in America has risen from 144 pounds per person per year in 1950 to 222 pounds per person per year in 2005.⁸

Unfortunately, the effects of these USDA subsidies don't end at

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the drive-thru and your expanding waistline. Rather, they provide the spark in the seemingly endless cycle of industry profiting from our poor health with the government’s blessing and funding.

As long as the USDA is subsidizing the burger instead of the salad, the cheapest meal is guaranteed to be the least healthful, even with the current rate of rising food prices.

Pyramid Scheme

Knowing that it’s hard to pick the right thing to eat and keep you healthy, the government offers dietary recommendations like the food pyramid. Generally, it’s as simple as how many servings of what you should have in a day for a healthy, balanced diet. One would think it’s based on sound, current nutritional science, but it’s actually the target of some of the fiercest lobby efforts in the government. Why? Because these companies will stop receiving all the farm subsidies the government gives them if people stop buying all of the over-processed, bad-for-you foods they produce.

The simple fact of the matter is that the best science dictates that our diet should consist of a wide variety of foods, not too much, mostly plants. Unfortunately, if you eat mostly plants, then you have to eat less meat, soda, candy, and processed foods, and the producers of meat, soda, candy, and processed foods don’t want you to hear that. These “food” producers simply can’t stand the idea of the government endorsing a reduction of consumption in their products, since they’ve done such a good job—and spent a lot of money—getting us to eat more of their products. (For example, as stated above, the average consumption of meat per person in the US has risen from 144 pounds a year in 1955 to 222 pounds a year today. Soda used to be an occasional treat in an 8-ounce serving, but is now a daily ritual in excess of 44 ounces for millions of Americans.⁹)

In order to please industry and provide the illusion of clearing up the “what-to-eat” debate for us, the USDA compromises on

all of the scientific recommendations it makes. When nutritionists want to say, “Eat less meat and restrict sugar intake as much as possible,” but industry wants to say, “Consume as much meat and sugar as you can, just exercise more,” then the government has to get tricky with its language. “Avoid sodium,” has become, “Choose a diet moderate in salt and sodium.” “Maintain your ideal weight,” has become, “Balance the food you eat with physical activity—maintain or improve your weight.”¹⁰ “Decrease consumption of meat,” and, “Restrict sugar to 15 percent of calories,” were changed to, “Choose more lean meats,” and, “Avoid too much sugar.”¹¹ Even the dairy lobby has come into the debate: Regardless of race, age, sex, or level of lactose tolerance, the government recommends three glasses of milk a day.¹²

The problems, however, don’t stop there. When the government comes out with a fairly helpful recommendation like, “Eat more whole grains,” you get companies like General Mills putting one gram of dietary fiber into every serving of Trix and slapping a seven-inch “Made With Whole Grain” banner on the front of each box.

What’s worse, our government allows the export of this corporate-profit-fueled lunacy to the rest of the world.

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Exporting American Obesity

In 2004, the World Health Organization (WHO) presented a study called “Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health,” in which 30 renowned scientists suggested that sugar should account for no more than 10 percent of a person’s daily caloric intake. The study warned that poor diets and lack of exercise are the leading causes of cardiovascular disease,

type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers. It went on to say that such illnesses account for nearly 60 percent of 56.5 million deaths each year, and that these deaths were deemed preventable.

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—former US Surgeon General Richard Carmona

The sugar industry first organized a coalition of other food-industry groups (which had given nearly \$200,000 to George W. Bush’s 2000 campaign) and had them write angry letters to then–Secretary of Health Tommy Thompson and then–Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman (former CEO of a food company herself), asking them to have the WHO report withdrawn. The industry went on to recruit US Senators Larry Craig and John Breaux to put further pressure on Secretary Thompson.¹³

When letter-writing seemed only to delay the publishing of the WHO report instead of quashing it completely, the sugar industry wrote to WHO Director General Gro Harlem Brundtland,¹⁴ saying that it would “exercise every avenue available” to permanently kill the health study. Taking things a step further, the industry then hired top Washington lobbyists to pressure Congress into removing the US’s \$406 million funding to the WHO.

WHO insiders commented at the time that threats like this were “tantamount to blackmail.” In *Killer at Large*, Marion Nestle, author of *Food Politics*, said that most “felt this move was extremely crass, especially since during that same time the World Health Organization was working miracles in dealing with the SARS virus.”

It was obvious to everyone involved (with the exception of the Sugar Association) that a removal of WHO funding from the US would have been disastrous.

The Bush Administration caved to the sugar industry’s demands and, in the end, all mention of sugar restrictions were removed from the final WHO health report. William Steiger, a special assistant to Secretary Thompson and godson to former President George H.W. Bush, called for far weaker, unspecified policy approaches, like “better data and surveillance, and the promotion of sustainable strategies that focus on energy balance, individual responsibility, and strong public health approaches.” In effect, he shifted the onus of responsibility onto the people and away from governments and industry.¹⁵

“People need to be empowered to take responsibility for their health,” he said. But many health groups responded to the Bush Administration

by stating that people cannot be “empowered to take responsibility” when the facts and information that would influence their decisions are censored or removed.

Continued Censorship

Three years later, it was discovered that the Europe-based WHO wasn’t the only entity being bullied and shut up by the US government. On July 10, 2007, Dr. Richard Carmona, who had recently resigned his position as the US Surgeon General, testified before the House Oversight Committee that during his 2002–2006 tenure, he had been censored, muzzled, and oft times prohibited by the Bush Administration from releasing his health and science reports to the American public.

“The job of the Surgeon General is to be the doctor of the nation not the doctor of a political party. The reality is that the nation’s doctor has been marginalized and relegated to a position with no independent budget and with supervisors who are political appointees with partisan agendas,” Carmona stated. “Anything that doesn’t fit into the political appointee’s ideological, theological, or political agenda, is often ignored, marginalized, or simply buried.”¹⁶

Among the evidence presented to the Committee was a report called “The Surgeon General’s Call to Action,” which Carmona had drafted based on his research and scientific data. The

report had been given to William Steiger (yes, the same guy) at Health and Human Services who then, in turn, edited, trimmed, and deleted portions of the report. In addition to changing scientific content about topics like sexual contraception and adding the words “Iraq” and “President Bush” over a dozen times (seriously), Steiger had completely removed Carmona’s section on obesity and obesity-related illnesses.¹⁷

Carmona testified: “I was often instructed what to say or what not to say. I did the best I could to speak out on issues. But I was blocked at every turn; I was told the ‘decision has already been made,’ ‘Stand down,’ ‘Don’t talk about it.’”¹⁸

Frustrated, Carmona resigned his post as Surgeon General. In response to his testimony before the House Oversight Committee, the Bush White House issued this statement: “As Surgeon General, Dr. Carmona was given the authority and had the obligation to be the leading voice for the health of all Americans. It’s disappointing to us if he failed to use his position to the fullest extent...”¹⁹

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Healthy Population vs. Healthy Economy

What it comes down to is simple: Obesity is good for the gross domestic product (GDP).

In a consumer culture, obesity is the physical representation of overconsumption. Obesity is proof that food marketers are doing their jobs properly.

After paying big agriculture to make you fat and depressed, you then pay big pharma to make you feel better so the cycle can continue. And, so long as success in this country is measured in dollars, the cycle will never end.

Endnotes

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