



The Campaign Against Big Food

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When states first started raising cigarette taxes to confiscatory levels, many Americans supported it in order to reduce smoking, which is widely viewed as unhealthy. They also supported lawsuits against the tobacco industry because the revenue was to be used to pay for anti-smoking campaigns. Even those who were skeptical on both counts mostly shrugged off their concerns since they themselves did not smoke.

All along, there were a few people warning that if the campaign against tobacco was successful, it would inevitably lead to special taxes and lawsuits against other products. Such concerns were universally dismissed as paranoid or tobacco-industry propaganda. Now the chickens are coming home to roost. The same people behind the campaign against tobacco are gearing up to do it again to sugar, fat and the foods that contain them.

As with tobacco, those leading the effort justify it on the grounds of health. Americans are obese, they say. We consume too many empty calories and not enough fruits and vegetables. The problem is especially acute among youth, we are told, who eat far too much candy and snack foods, gulp soft drinks by the gallon and get too little exercise.

Although Americans have been lectured for years about eating healthy and getting into shape, the problem has only gotten worse. The culprit, we are now told, is that food prices are too low, unhealthy fast food is too convenient, restaurant portions too large and advertising for all these things has been too successful.

In short, the campaign against Big Food is following the attack on Big Tobacco almost to a tee. The only thing we haven't heard yet is about how Big Macs, Mars Bars and Coca-Cola are addictive. I assume studies are underway to prove it, leading inevitably to charges that McDonalds, Hersheys and other purveyors of this poison knew all along and covered it up. Any day now, I expect to hear that Big Food has secretly been adding special ingredients with known health risks -- like salt -- to their products for years to tempt the ignorant. No doubt, one of Ralph Nader's groups, heavily funded by the trial lawyers, will issue a report on the subject demanding congressional action.

At this point, many readers are probably chuckling and thinking that I am playing an April Fool's prank. But it is all true. Just last week, California State Sen. Deborah Ortiz, Democrat of Sacramento, introduced legislation in that state hiking taxes on all sugared soft drinks, whether carbonated or not. Her goal, she says, is to reduce consumption of such products among youth in order to help control obesity.

Other states are eliminating sales tax exemptions for snack foods in the name of fighting fat. Connecticut, for example, plans to remove an exemption that now exists from the general sales tax for candy sold in schools, nursing homes and hospitals. This action would raise their cost by 6 percent.

Adding some scholarly veneer to these efforts is a new book, "Food Politics," by New York University nutritionist Marion Nestle (University of California Press). She indicts the food industry for producing too much, tempting us with foods that taste too good, being too efficient, charging too little for their products and being culpable in the epidemic of obesity. The book is getting a big push from the same crowd that told us about the evils of Big Tobacco.

Nestle is only the latest liberal academic to tread this path. A few years ago, Yale psychologist Kelly Brownell got headlines calling for a "Twinkie tax" on unhealthy food. He also called for regulation of advertising for "junk food" just as tobacco advertising is restricted. "As a culture, we get upset about Joe Camel, yet we tolerate our children seeing 10,000 commercials a year that promote foods that are every bit as unhealthy," Brownell says.

Sadly, little has been put forward to counter this campaign to control everything we eat for our own good. The only people cited in opposition in news stories are spokesmen for the restaurant industry or companies manufacturing the products under attack. Liberal reporters know full well that such comments, no matter how true or well reasoned, will be dismissed as self-serving. Thus, for now, the do-gooders who want to take away our candy and soft drinks are getting a free ride.

It will be too bad if most Americans react to the campaign against Big Food the same way they reacted to that on Big Tobacco. They may think that using taxes to discourage obesity is reasonable. But if the zealots are successful, we will have lost a little more of our freedom and given the government yet another means of controlling our behavior and picking our pockets.