

## ***Food Politics* Blames Industry for Obesity Epidemic**

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*Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*

By Marion Nestle University of California Press

What infuriates her critics the most about Marion Nestle's new book, *Food Politics*, is her comparison of the food industry with the tobacco industry. She accuses food companies of blocking regulations, misleading consumers and co-opting nutrition professionals in a blind pursuit of profits. "How dare she?" is the outraged response. Unlike cigarettes, food products are necessary, beneficial goods that enrich the lives of everyone who consumes them. Surely the food industry is morally superior to the tobacco industry. Yet Nestle, who edited the 1988 *Surgeon General's Report on Diet and Health* and now chairs the nutrition department at New York University, has struck a chord with the reading public as well as with consumer advocates and fellow nutrition professionals. Her book is a best seller on Amazon.com. It's easy to see why. You don't need a Ph.D. to recognize that the United States has become the fattest nation on earth. Half of us are overweight, many of our children are obese, and diseases related to diet are leading causes of death and disability. Where did the obesity epidemic come from? If you believe the industry and its defenders, America's nutritional problems derive from poor individual choices. There are no good foods or bad foods, only bad diets and sedentary lifestyles. The answer is more and better education. Nestle disagrees, blaming industry for creating an unhealthy environment for food choices (see box). She outlines her case in the book's preface. "I eventually came to the conclusion that food companies—just like companies that sell cigarettes, pharmaceuticals, or any other commodity—routinely place the needs of stockholders over considerations of public health," she says, continuing: "Food companies will make and market any product that sells, regardless of its nutritional value or its effect on health. In this regard, food companies hardly differ from cigarette companies. They lobby Congress to eliminate regulations perceived as unfavorable; they press federal regulatory agencies not to enforce such regulations; and when they don't like regulations, they file lawsuits. Like cigarette companies, food companies co-opt food and nutrition experts by supporting professional organizations and research, and they expand sales by marketing directly to children, members of minority groups, and people in developing countries—whether or not the products are likely to improve people's diets." Much of the book is meticulously researched history. Nestle traces the course of nutrition education from 1900, when the emphasis was on vitamin and mineral deficiencies, to 1990, when government recognized the need to discourage overconsumption of certain nutrients. She reviews political struggles over the Senate Nutrition Committee's *Dietary Goals*, the *U.S. Dietary Guidelines* and USDA's *Food Guide Pyramid*. Nestle is particularly hard on the dietary supplement industry. She condemns "technofoods" that detract from sound dietary habits, and decries the lax regulatory climate created by the 1994 Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act.

Needless to say, the critics have pounced. “Beware the day that Dr. Nestle and her colleagues succeed in restricting advertising for their long list of forbidden foods, or perhaps, as some nutrition activists have already proposed, slapping ‘sin taxes’ on foods that do not fit perfectly in the national nutritionists’ permissible menu slots,” wrote Elizabeth Whelan, executive director of the American Council on Science and Health, in the *Washington Times*. “Our prospects for long life, good health and the pursuit of happiness are far brighter in the hands of competitive profit-driven food corporations than they are in those of national nutrition-nanny know-it-alls.” Dennis Avery, director of the Hudson Institute’s Center for Global Food, characterized Nestle as the leader of a food Taliban. “Blaming obesity on advertising is absolute foolishness,” he told an interviewer. “Is she going to take away my choices to make me slimmer? The food police can’t keep me from getting fat if I want to eat. The real problem is we are rich and inactive as a nation, and we are trying to learn how to solve that and we are getting no help from [her].” However, John Banzhaf, an anti-tobacco activist who teaches public interest law at George Washington University, sees many similarities between smoking and obesity in class action law. He predicts that many obesity-related suits will be filed in the near future. “Smoking in the ‘70s was seen as an individual problem,” he told *CNSNews.com*. “All that changed when people saw the impact on non-smokers like second-hand smoke.” Regardless of who is to blame for the obesity epidemic, Nestle has laid down a challenge that won’t easily go away. It will be interesting to see how the food industry responds.