

## **Lean on Me**

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When Marion Nestle joined the editorial team of the "United States Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health" in 1986, she was told that the report could not recommend that people eat less meat — indeed it should avoid warning people against any type of food for reasons of health. The task force did not want a second row of the kind that had greeted "Dietary Goals for the United States", a 1977 publication of the National Institutes of Health, which urged Americans to "decrease consumption of meat" and eat more fruit and vegetables.

The howls in Washington from the cattlemen and other farm lobbyists that met the 1977 report were heard all the way back to the cornbelt. An angry president of the National Cattlemen's Association, Wray Finney, told the Senate's agricultural committee that such dietary goals could jeopardise the health of his industry, noting memorably that "decrease is a bad word".

Now professor of nutrition and food studies at New York University, Ms Nestle has written a provocative and highly readable book arguing that America's agribusiness lobby has stifled the government's regulatory power, helped create a seasonless and regionless diet, and hampered the government's ability to offer sound, scientific nutritional advice. In 1998 alone, food and agricultural lobbyists spent \$52m on Capitol Hill. Ms Nestle — no relation to the Nestlé food group — cites specific cases where this lobby persuaded the government to abandon straight talk when issuing dietary recommendations. A revised version of Dietary Goals, for example, struck out its initial recommendation to "decrease consumption of meat" and replaced it with the harder-to-follow suggestion that Americans should "choose meats, poultry, and fish which will reduce saturated fat intake".

Ms Nestle also looks closely at the success of the nutritional-supplement industry in persuading the government to pass the 1994 Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA). This act stripped the Food and Drug Administration of its ability to regulate herbal supplements and vitamins as drugs, which meant that in America health claims for supplements could subsequently be made without scientific support. An untested herbal remedy, for example, cannot go quite so far as to claim that the product reduces symptoms of arthritis, but it can boast a label saying it maintains healthy joints. By soothing anxious Americans in this way, the supplement industry has since grown into a \$15 billion enterprise.

Despite the many strengths in "Food Politics", the book has surprisingly little to say about the American food industry's influence in shaping federal farm legislation. The new American farm bill offers unprecedented subsidies that have been fashioned in large part by commodity lobbies and agribusiness. So successful have they been that American farming and food production may be about to become even more protectionist than the EU's to an extent that has not yet been fully appreciated. It's a big subject; Ms Nestle

could do well to come back to it.