

The Role of Corporations in the American Public Health Crisis Over Nutrition, Diet, and Diet Related Diseases

The Recent History: How the American Diet Came Into Crisis

In 1977, the United States Senate responded to increasing levels of health problems like heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, by creating a Committee on Nutrition, to investigate these problems as they related to what Americans were eating (Pollan 2007). Considering data like the dip in heart disease during World War II when meat and dairy products were in short supply, and the low rates of heart disease in countries with largely plant based diets, the head of the Committee on Nutrition, George McGovern, recommended that Americans “reduce consumption of meat (Pollan 2007).” The recommendation was straightforward, simple, and obvious based on the committee's data, but the Senate committee was swamped by the meat and dairy lobby who called for a revision of the terms of the guideline (Pollan 2007). As a senator with a large number of cattle ranchers as constituents, McGovern and his committee rewrote the recommendation to say “choose meats, poultry and fish that will reduce saturated fat intake (Pollan 2007).” This change in wording represented the beginning of a significant shift in the way people ate. “Americans got really fat on its new low-fat diet” by adding new foods that were low in saturated fat, and often high in sugar and sodium, without lowering the amounts of other foods that they had been eating (Pollan 2007). The history of American eating habits since 1977 has eerily mirrored this first attempt at government

regulation of food guidelines and diets. Food lobbies have stepped in to drag their feet and stop or stall any glimmer of government regulation of food and nutrition. Another theme in the development of the current American food system that was played out in this series of events is the way Americans interpret food advice, and the way it impacts their health. In this case, Americans did precisely what they were told to do, and chose foods low in saturated fat, but ignored the high fructose corn syrup, and salt that was present in the processed foods they were choosing. Also, since Americans were not told to limit any food, but simply choose certain foods, and as a result fat intake remained steady, and carbohydrate consumption climbed (Pollan 2007), after all, they had been told to choose foods low in saturated fat. This aspect of the changing American diet reflects a “shift from eating food to eating nutrients (Pollan 2007)” that has worked to the advantage of food corporations, and against the interests of public health, as well as the American understanding of wholesome nutritious food.

A Necessary Backdrop: The Structure of Food Corporations

It is impossible to think about the problems underlying the public health crisis of diet related diseases in America, without an understanding of the main suppliers of this American diet. Food corporations are the center of attention in current food policy discussions, as well as the media frenzy around Americans their diet, and their health. Michele Simon goes into the details of the “anatomy of a food corporation (Simon 2006, 1),” pointing out the necessity of understanding their inner workings in order to understand and evaluate their impact on the American, and even the global food system. A seemingly obvious but never the less essential point to make, is that corporations are not people. Corporations do not have a conscience, and are amoral entities; “managers

who willfully allow the bottom line [of profit] to suffer to protect the public good can be sued by company shareholders for breach of their legal obligations (Simon 2006, 3).”

Why Self Regulation of Corporations is Not an Acceptable Way to Improve the American Diet

As profit seekers, food corporations, just like any other corporations, “are in the business of transforming the natural world and bringing it to the market in the form of manufactured goods (Simon 2006, 6).” Simon points out that food corporations, as businesses seeking profit, have every motivation to create quick and easy to prepare food products that taste good, but are also difficult to recreate so that consumers are motivated to buy their product rather than make it themselves with fresh ingredients (2007, 28). The motivation to improve taste and convenience while ignoring the health of consumers is strong, as health costs are passed on as externalities to consumers and the government (Simon 2007, 7).

Simon further points out that “corporations do not commit suicide (2007, 7),” using somewhat grim language to drive home the point that corporations are not responsible for public health, and it would be ludicrous to expect them to be responsible for public health when it is in a conflict of interest with their profits—which it often is. By this logic, government should be regulating health standards to food producers, as food producers usually have no motivation to do so on their own. This has not been the case, however, and food corporations claim to be maintaining their own nutritional standards to an acceptable level without any government action. This is demonstrated by carefully timed press releases and announcements of new policies, that are carefully worded to sound caring, concerned and healthful, but require little actual change on the part of manufacturers, or the policies fail to be implemented altogether. One example of

this is a 2005 policy announced by the American Beverage Association (ABA), a trade association for soft drink manufacturers. As considerable pressure was mounting from legislatures, lawyers, and concerned citizens, the soda group announced “a new school based policy ‘aimed at providing lower calorie and/or nutritious beverages to schools and limiting the availability of soft drinks (Simon 2007, 13).’” This policy announcement triggered headlines favorable to the beverage manufacturers, despite the policy being unlikely to make any real change. The ABA is an industry group that has no authority over what individual bottlers do (Simon 2007, 14). The group can make recommendations like this, but the soda producers have no reason to take part in the program, and they still receive the benefit of the good press from the announcement (Simon 2007, 14). This is precisely the purpose of industry groups such as the ABA—with such a large constituency, the association can make policies and claims that no individual corporation is ever responsible for. The policy is also effective for beverage manufacturers because it heads off legislation aimed at the same issues, allowing policy makers to believe that government regulation of these issues is not necessary, since policy has already been made (Simon 2007, 15). This example embodies the flaws inherent to corporate self regulation of health standards.

Simon aptly compares corporate self regulation to leaving a fox to guard a henhouse (2007, 10), and the conclusion to be drawn seems simple: since corporations are only concerned with profit, the government must intervene to provide a standard of health and nutrition for consumers. Corporations argue back that customers deserve freedom of choice, and that consumers are free to choose fresh produce, or frozen processed meals (Simon 2007, 22-23). The problem here is the assumption that everyone

does have access to both fresh nutritious foods and corporate produced processed foods. Processed foods have millions of dollars of advertising and packaging behind them, and fresh foods do not. Additionally, Michele Simon points out that not everyone has access to a range of food options (2007, 55). Consumers in cities without access to transportation often shop at corner liquor stores, where fresh healthy food is not an option. Although these people should ideally have access to fresh food, a moderate compromise is to at least have some sort of government regulation creating standards for health and nutrition in packaged foods, which will eventually lead to healthier lifestyles overall. Studies have shown that when people are presented with nutrition information when they eat, they tend to choose foods that are more nutritious (Pollan, 2007). Although nutrition information is currently mandated to be provided on packaged foods in the United States, a smallish black and white box is no match for flashy, colorful diagrams and claims made on the front of bags and boxes, which highlight such virtuous aspects as ‘fat-free’ and ‘high in antioxidants’ and fail to mention the levels of salt and high fructose corn syrup. It is unacceptable to have a portion of the population with no healthy choices, and to then place complete blame on them for making poor food choices; after all, “a choice between Quarter Pounders, Oreos, Diet Mountain Dew, and Whole Grain Cocoa Puffs is really no choice at all (Simon 2007, 55).”

How Corporations Benefit from the Trend to ‘Eat Nutrients,’ Relegating Foods that Are Actually Nutritious to the Sidelines

One of the major advantages that corporations have embraced in their packaged processed food, is the packaging. With the government and scientists recommending more or less of sodium, fiber, carbohydrates, proteins, different types of fats, vitamins, and an endless list of other antioxidants, phytochemicals, and other nutrients, processed

food can quickly adapt to fit the bill. Michael Pollan describes how “it’s a lot easier to slap a health claim on a box of sugary cereal than on a potato or a carrot (2007).” Fresh produce, on the other hand, is at the whim of the current scientific findings, with avocados, for example “either a high-fat food to be avoided...or a food high in monounsaturated fat to be embraced (Pollan 2007).”

Pollan also points out the importance of getting nutrition from traditional sources, and not from artificially fortified processed foods. One major flaw of the ‘eat nutrients not food’ paradigm, is that although scientists are able to isolate some of the compounds within plants that provide health benefits, they are not able to explain precisely how those compounds provide health benefits outside of their traditional context (Pollan 2007). One striking example is beta carotene, which has been shown as an important antioxidant in some plants, helping to rid the body of free radicals and lower cancer risks. Interestingly, when beta carotene is “ingested as a supplement, scientists have discovered that it actually increases the risk of certain cancers (Pollan, 2007).” Important here, is the idea that food represents a complex interplay of different chemical compounds, fiber, vitamins, and other materials that act together to provide health benefits to the consumer. Pulling out specific nutrients can be useless, because although a vitamin like beta carotene is important in the nutritive value of carrots, it only maintains this property as a result of being consumed as a part of the carrot. Processed foods with added antioxidants and vitamins may very well be making truthful claims in their marketing about added nutrients, but these nutrients taken out of their traditional context can be useless or even harmful to a human body.

In an unfortunate irony, plants create powerfully healthy mixtures of nutrients, which are isolated and studied in laboratories, which can then tout the benefits of various nutrients, leaving the food behind. Corporations can then add these nutrients to their products, allowing them to market and advertise their meals at the expense of traditional plant sources, which as it turns out, are the only real way to ingest these nutrients with any health benefit. Food companies, however, choose to cite the research showing nutritional benefit of various compounds and ignore the research showing the importance of ingesting nutrients as part of a whole, natural food. An American Dietetic Association report of 2000-2001 products found that although only 4.4% of all products made health claims on their package, many categories of packaged foods well exceeded this statistic. 75.5% of hot cereals, for example, made health claims, and 66.2% of refrigerated juices, and 23.8% of snacks, granola bars, and trail mixes did the same (Legault et al. 2004, 955; appendix, figure 1).

*The Roll of Science and Government: How Nutrition Research and Guidelines
Can Hinder Good Nutritional Decision Making*

As mentioned above, the scientific methods of studying nutrition are inherently isolating. Researchers need to isolate variables in order to produce an acceptable result (Pollan 2007). Although this method is frustrating, because of the complexity of the actual interplay between nutrients and other food characteristics, it is the only feasible way to conduct nutrition research on a molecular level (Pollan 2007).

Although this research is undoubtedly important to scientific understanding of food and nutrition, it has been over publicized and over exploited at the expense of public health. Michele Simon coins the term “nutriwashing (2007, 67-68)” to describe the way that food corporations take advantage of scientific backing of nutrients in foods in their

creation of advertisements and packaging labels. She compares the tactic to the way that companies use “greenwashing,” as a PR tactic to create an appearance of care and concern for the environment, while conducting business as usual (Simon 2007, 68). Flipping through a recent issue of the magazine *Glamour*, which targets an audience of young women, there were several examples of nutriwashed advertisements. Two particularly strong examples are included in the appendix. One advertises a drink called Fuze (appendix, figure 2), and judging from the advertisement’s claim of having a mere ten calories, the “Tropical Punch” is likely sweetened with artificial chemicals, and not with real juices, despite a bottle littered with images of pineapples, and oranges. The advertisement is very numbers and nutrients focused, and on top of boasting a only ten calories, the drink proudly announces the presence of “four slenderizing vitamins and minerals” and “two carbs,” with no indication of what the phrase “two carbs” might mean. Units apparently, are unimportant to their Atkin’s crazed target audience. This advertisement, thirty two years after Senator George McGovern’s decision to recommend choosing certain foods rather than reducing others, underscores the paradigm the American food system has, of choosing foods that are [insert ‘healthy’ adjective here]. This advertisement represents a tendency to add new fortified and health labeled processed foods to the diet, rather than to limit foods that are potentially problem causing, or to include naturally healthy foods in the diet. Almost any plant based food is guaranteed to have more than four vitamins and minerals, and most vegetables are very low in calories; it would be easy to find a plant based food with less than ten calories per eighteen ounces, but vegetables are not marketed and labeled as such.

Another example of nutriwashing is taking government and other recommendations, and explicitly marketing processed food to highlight how well it matches up with these guidelines. An advertisement for a food called Lean Pockets boasts being “the new way to get whole grains” and also depicts “the old way to get whole grains”—which is a pile of twigs and some white blocks that might be tofu (appendix, figure 3). A sampling of the nutrition info from these whole grain frozen foods, shows that they contain from 220 to 260 calories per serving, which could be okay, but they also include nearly a quarter of the sodium a person should be consuming in a day, as well as ten percent of the daily recommended fat, and fourteen percent of the RDA for saturated fat. The ad also highlights the “seven tiny grams of fat.” I do not believe that ‘tiny-’ is a legitimate metric prefix. The Lean Pockets website does not contain an ingredients list, but I suspect it to be a lengthy list of unfamiliar chemicals. They do, however, provide a “where to buy” link below each product (www.hotpockets.com 2008). Conveniently, the 2005 updated USDA food guidelines recommend that Americans make “half of [their] grains whole (USDA, 2008).” Although it would be just as feasible to increase foods like brown rice, or other foods that are less processed, corporations can nutriwash their foods and extol their nutritive values and compliance with food guidelines, and so American consumers can continue their old habits of consuming processed foods, while still following the dietary guidelines as set out by the government.

Towards a Solution

The conclusion that government guidelines and scientific nutrition data has corrupted American nutrition may seem to be in direct contrast with my earlier point, that

the food system in fact needs food regulations from the government. The problem is not that the government completely ignores the food system and the crisis of diet related illness, but rather that the government comes up with solutions that cater too much to the food lobbies. This probably does more harm than good. By providing nutrition guidelines that do not emphasize real, wholesome, not-from-a-box foods, the government allows corporate manipulation of the science and the guidelines to continue. Government regulations tend to be too watered down, and suggest choices rather than the more drastic changes that need to be made to improve the health of Americans.

To be fair, the governments 2005 update to its food guidelines are not completely without merit. While previous food pyramids grouped all carbohydrates together, and all vegetables together, the new food pyramid does a good job in emphasizing the importance of the quality and variety of foods eaten. As previously mentioned, the new guidelines highlight the importance of whole grains. In addition, instead of recommending servings of vegetables, the new guidelines make a point of emphasizing different types of vegetables including dark green, orange, and starchy (USDA 2008). This guideline actually works well with Michael Pollan's suggestion to look at foods rather than nutrients; instead of recommending iron and beta carotene, the pyramid takes a more holistic approach recommends dark green and orange vegetables. The problem with government regulations as they stand is that they continue to follow George McGovern's 1977 compromise with the food industry; the government has never been willing to tell Americans that they need to eat less. In the current food guidelines choices are the key phrase, but telling an increasingly unhealthy population to choose more foods is not going to decrease obesity and the diseases that come with it. This is not to say that

people should have some sort of mandated, rationed diet maintained by some super police state, although this is what some groups try to portray supporters of increased government regulation of food. One group that argues this point is the Center for Consumer Freedom (CCF). Although the name sounds benign and democratic, it is in reality an “industry front group...for the restaurant, food, beverage, alcohol, and tobacco industries (Simon 2007, 46).” One of their advertisements (appendix, figure 4) makes the claim that the government is moving towards a “department of menus,” and implies that a ban on trans fats in cooking oils in New York will lead to the ban of such New York classics as pizza, hot dogs, and reubens. The group takes the idea of government regulation, and hyperbolizes it to make consumers believe that their choice is being taken away, and that government regulation of food needs to stop. In reality, government regulation of food corporations could work to increase the availability and knowledge of fresh food choices to Americans. Americans should have a right to decide to choose less processed foods once they have full access to information, like Michael Pollan’s well researched arguments that plant based non processed foods are undoubtedly healthier and more nutritious than processed foods. If the CCF places such emphasis on informed consumer choice, it should not have any problem with the government providing researched information on unprocessed foods. As an example of other CCF projects to argue issues that are not even questioned by most scientific authorities anymore, I have also included a print ad claiming that the obesity epidemic is “hype (appendix, figure 5)” despite innumerable studies showing that record numbers of Americans are obese, and at risk for diet related diseases.

Americans need a simple food recommendation. A well researched one is already available, and is very similar to Senator McGovern's original 1977 initial attempt at a food policy that was destroyed by his cattle ranching dairy farming constituents; "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants (Pollan 2007)." Although the food lobbies will undoubtedly fight a recommendation like this tooth and nail, it is the recommendation the government needs to make and to help Americans implement in their lifestyles if there is any hope of reversing the current cycle of obesity and disease. The American government has a responsibility to ensure freedom of choice, including food choices, and also to protect public health. Despite the CCF's claims, the only way to ensure that Americans are given a true choice of foods, is to ensure that information about and access to fresh produce and unprocessed whole grain foods is available, promotion and access to these foods is the only way to stop the current public health crisis of diet related illness.

Appendix

Figure 1

Table 1. Prevalence of health claims by product group		
Product group	% of products sold with claims	Subject of health claims used
Cereals, hot	75.5	Soluble fiber from certain foods and CHD ^a Dietary saturated fat and cholesterol and CHD
Beverages, juices/drinks, refrigerated	66.2	
Beverages, juices/drinks, frozen	41.9	
Seafood	24.8	
Snacks, granola bars and trail mixes	23.8	
Eggs and egg substitutes	21.8	
Meat/poultry substitutes	15.9	
Cereals, cold	12.7	Soy protein and CHD Dietary saturated fat and cholesterol and CHD Soluble fiber from certain foods and CHD
Beverages, other dairy drinks and substitutes	8.7	Soy protein and CHD
Beverages, meal-type products	5.7	Dietary saturated fat and cholesterol and CHD
Vegetables, shelf-stable	4.9	
Beverages, milk	4.3	
Beverages, juices/drinks, shelf-stable	4.0	Dietary saturated fat and cholesterol and CHD Calcium and osteoporosis
^a CHD = coronary heart disease.		

Table of products sold with health claims, (Legault et al. 2004, 955)

Figure 2

Glamour Magazine, April 2008.

Figure 3

Glamour Magazine, April 2008.

Figure 4

Hey New York: Here's What's Next

Now that New York has banned cooking oils with trans fat (the same substance as margarine) because there are healthier alternatives, it opens the door to banning so much more! Using the same logic, let's get rid of:



New York Style Pizza
Seriously, do you need all that cheese?



Beef Hot Dogs
Tofu dogs almost taste the same



Corned Beef
Turkey breast is much leaner



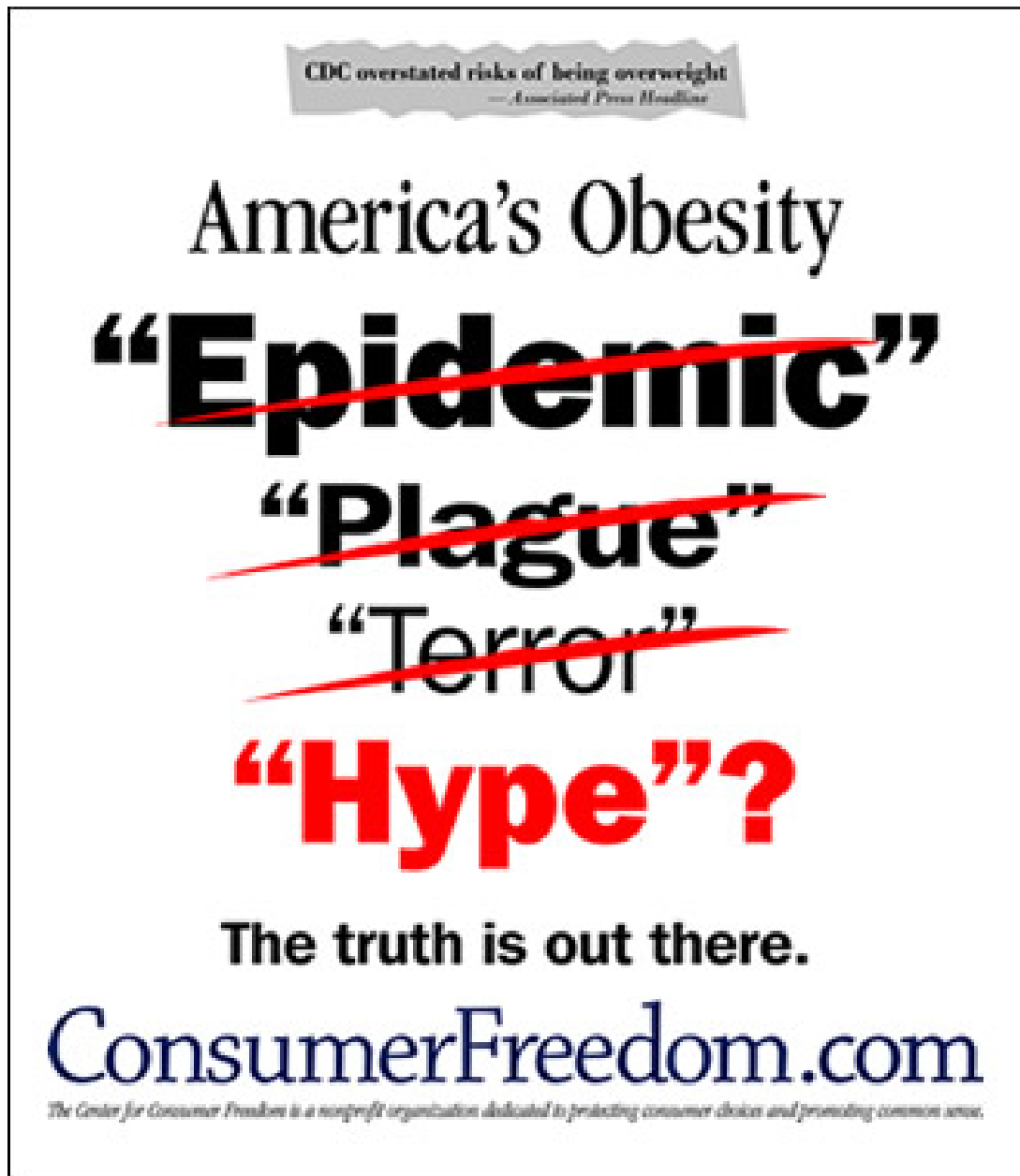
Coffee
Tea is probably better for you

Let's get a government Department of Menus!

Find out more at ConsumerFreedom.com

The Center for Consumer Freedom, 2008.

Figure 5



The Center for Consumer Freedom, 2008

Works Cited

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