

THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

# Junking Junk Food

By Judith Warner

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**Earlier this month**, Sarah Palin showed up in Bucks County, Pa., with “dozens and dozens” of cookies, suggesting that the state’s schoolchildren risked losing the right to the occasional classroom treat because of a high-minded anti-sugar edict from the board of education. Pretty much everything about the setup was wrong. Pennsylvania wasn’t, as Palin tweeted, in the midst of a “school cookie ban” debate. And the school she turned into a photo op wouldn’t have been subject to such a ban had one existed; it wasn’t a public school but a private Christian academy. And while Palin might have been seizing an opportunity to “intro kids 2 beauty of laissez-faire,” she wasn’t just visiting with schoolchildren but was delivering a paid speech at a fundraiser.

Still, however shaky its factual foundations, Palin’s highly mediatized cookie showdown was a big rhetorical win. With her unerring feel for the message that travels straight to the American gut, she had come up with new and vivid imagery to make the case that the Obama “nanny state” is, essentially, snatching cookies — i.e., the pursuit of happiness — from the mouths of babes. Suddenly, Pennsylvania’s suggestion that schools encourage alternatives to high-sugar sweets became an assault on the American way of life. On freedom and simple pleasures. On wholesome childhood delights and, of course, the integrity of the family.

**Nearly 40% of the  
total calories CONSUMED by 2- to  
18-year-olds are in  
the form of EMPTY CALORIES.**

Source: National Institutes of Health.

Glenn Beck, too, has found a winning formula in mocking government efforts to lead Americans to live less fattening lives. His compendium of outrage on the topic waxes long — it includes reports of government health inspectors shutting down a 7-year-old’s lemonade stand, for example — and his argument, like Palin’s, is clear: the “choice architects” of the Obama administration, he says, believe “you’re incapable of making decisions. . . . Left to your own devices, you’re going to eat too much, you’re going to be a big fat fatty.”

At a time when more than two-thirds of American adults are indeed fat (overweight or obese) and 17 percent of children and adolescents are obese, declaring war on unhealthful eating, as the Obama administration has done to an unprecedented extent, could be fraught with political liability. Yet the administration has essentially tackled the problem as if it were a political no-brainer. Teaching Americans, and children in particular, healthier eating habits seemed so commonsensical a venture, so wholesome and safe, that Michelle Obama chose it for her apolitical personal project as first lady. She has succeeded in enlisting some bipartisan support, and some much-hyped cooperation from the food industry. But now, with antigovernment sentiment resurgent, the cookies are pushing back, like the return of the repressed. And as any homeowner who has ever been advised to bake cookies before showing a house for sale knows, their influence is irrational but real.

For in waging war on fat and sugar, what the administration is doing is taking on central aspects of the American lifestyle. Eating too much, indiscriminately, anywhere, at any time, in response to any and all stimuli, is as central to our freewheeling, mavericky way of being as car cupholders and drive-throughs. You can't change specific eating behavior without addressing that way of life — without changing our culture of food. You need to present healthful eating as a new, desirable, freely chosen expression of the American way.



Nomoco

Perhaps the most successful government effort to regulate what and how much Americans consume — the food rationing programs of World War II — recognized this political-cultural-emotional scheme. Needing a number of foods, meat in particular, for the boys overseas, the government realized that it could successfully spread its message of “eat differently” only if it fought on two fronts: the nutritional and the psychological. And so it pursued a two-pronged campaign, with the Food and Nutrition Board handling the nutrition, and the psychology tasked to the Committee on Food Habits, led by the anthropologist Margaret Mead and charged by the National Research Council with “mobilizing anthropological and psychological insights as they bear upon the whole problem of changing food habits in order to raise the nutritional status of the people of the United States.” Eating the way the government wanted you to eat — healthfully and with a mind to greater public welfare — was a way of displaying patriotism, adding to the war effort.

After the war, however, the work of the Committee on Food Habits was discontinued. But the government kept disseminating nutritional advice, with the departments of agriculture and health and human services issuing nutritional guidelines that, in recent decades, have been revised every five years to reflect new and evolving scientific developments. There has, however, been no concerted parallel attempt to create more pointed and sophisticated approaches to changing how Americans think and feel about food. So we ended up with a wealth of knowledge about best nutritional practices but no cultural change to back it up.

And cultural change is what offers the best hope for transforming how and what Americans eat. As noted by David Kessler, the former U.S. Food and Drug Administration commissioner and author of the 2009 book “The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite,” it was a shift in cultural attitudes, not laws or regulations, that led Americans to quit smoking. In the space of a generation, he says, cigarettes stopped being portrayed as “sexy and cool” and started to be seen as “a terribly disgusting, addictive product.” Because of the unique emotional power of food, it’s hard, if not impossible, to similarly stigmatize unhealthy eating. But it’s not inconceivable, Kessler says, that social norms could change: that huge portions, or eating processed foods loaded with sugar, salt and fat, for example, could come to be seen as socially unacceptable.

The task is huge — and not just because of the predictable resistance there would be from the food industry. Largely, it’s a question, Kessler says, of breaking old cycles of association: melt-in-the-mouth baked goods with home-safe happiness, for example, or fries with fulfillment — and replacing them with a new circuitry in which, somehow, eating healthfully is self-reinforcing. Can Michelle Obama make field greens and strawberries as comforting, satisfying, and heartwarmingly American as apple pie? She has her work cut out for her.

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