

from
Upholding the Law
and Other Observations
by
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Obesity Is Not A Public Health Problem
(But Fat-Headedness Is...)



As is so often the case, a few minutes recently spent listening to National Public Radio sufficed to provide me with a subject for a commentary. This liberal organ is a treasure-trove of soft, but often important, targets. In this case, what caught my ear was a story about the increasing incidence of obesity among Americans, which was matter-of-factly presented as a “public health problem”.

Obesity is NOT a “public health” problem. It is a personal health problem. Only communicable diseases qualify as having even a *potential* “public” health dimension. If I can't catch it from you, it's not 'our' problem, it's your problem-- and especially if it's behavior-related or behavior-remediable. By no means can a non-communicable, personally-controllable condition such as obesity qualify as being public-health related.

However, what is really meant by the NPR characterization is that obesity is a health-related *financial* problem, with a public-policy dimension. This is based upon the proposition that eventually society will be obliged to spend extra

money remediating the ill effects of self-destructive overeating and sloth, which therefore brings either the behavior, or external factors which contribute to it, properly into the ambit of public decision-making. This is a standard example of tail-wagging-the-dog reasoning.

In this case, society's completely optional inclination toward charity (the tail) is used as a pretext to legitimize its assertion of authority over anything which might stimulate that inclination (the dog). It never occurs to those who make this argument that society can simply forego its inclination toward charity, and that to do so is infinitely more ethical than claiming tyrannical authority over individuals in order to prevent occasions for indulging that inclination from arising in the first place.

Still, even if the logical fallacy and moral bankruptcy of this formula go unchallenged, the simplest of clear-eyed analyses establishes that, from no more than an utterly pragmatic perspective, the opposite of what the dog-waggers suggest is actually the case. Obesity is anything BUT a public financial problem-- and particularly within this wagged-dog context.

After all, that context necessarily embraces regular old-age-related welfare outlays such as 'Social Security' and 'Medicare' to an endless stream of beneficiaries. Because one of the effects of obesity is an early death, the lifetime consumption of Social Security benefits by the obese as a class is considerably lower than it otherwise would be. Thus, as long as Social Security is in the picture, obesity is actually a net benefit to the public finance.

The same is true regarding Medicare. The obese-- like the fit-- conduct the vast majority of their overall health-care resource consumption as their lives are winding to a close. There are two reasons why this is true: age-related incapacity, and lingering illness. Since the obese rarely, if ever, make it to

an extremity of age at which incapacity becomes a problem, and tend to succumb to illness quickly rather than hold it at bay (once at an age to qualify for Medicare), end-of-life related outlays for the obese also tend to be much less than those made on behalf of the healthy.

So, all in all, obesity is anything BUT a 'public problem', whether viewed from a health *or* a financial perspective. However, there *is* a public-health dimension to its mischaracterization.

After all, few things are more supportive of general health than is general wealth, and little is more systemically destructive of general wealth than subjecting individual choice-making to political interference-- which is to say, subordinating the choices of some Americans to the interests of whichever of their neighbors have gained control of the political apparatus, whether under the pretext of controlling public 'charitable' outlays, or for any other reason. The relentless decline of every polity which has succumbed to such foolishness testifies to this simple and straightforward reality: Societal prosperity (and thus, overall well-being) is maximized-- spontaneously, and exclusively-- when each person is left alone to make his own decisions and look out for his own interests.

Only under conditions of maximum freedom can the millions of information signals, and reward feedbacks, which are the key to high levels of universal personal productivity be accurately (and thus usefully) generated and injected into the economic matrix. Political interference overrides those signals, requiring participants in the economy to make choices which are not actually responsive to its data. Those artificially skewed choices inject distortion, and a consequent reduction in efficiency, into the overall system. Thus, to allow yet another incremental expansion of governmental control is to diminish the polity's wealth, and in turn, its health-- by reducing its aggregate ability to research and develop weight-control

products, for instance; or its individual member's ability to finance the leisure time needed for fitness training.

Rich polities like America are prone to the kind of sloppiness and distraction that invite political interference in the economy-- but such interferences cannot be afforded for long. Sooner or later, the distortions introduced into the economic matrix come to dominate, and what had been a harmonious free-form concert becomes a much poorer cacophony. Such an afflicted economy won't necessarily collapse, but every participant-- other than those manipulating the political process to skew the choices of others-- will get less for their efforts than they otherwise would and should.

Of course, the manipulators actually do BETTER in the cacophony than they otherwise would (at least in the short run), and thus it is in their interest to keep the rest of us acclimated to the inefficiencies of discord. As a result, we are treated to the sort of idiotic pontifications of NPR that inspired this commentary. Also as a result, we are seeing an increasingly rapid and sophisticated formulation of the public-relations campaign and the novel, custom-fitted legal theory intended to truss up another victim for the furnishing of a blood-meal to the same parasitic class of lawyers and politicians that developed its tastes on the tobacco and medical-silicone industries.

It would be an intolerable groaner to exploit the opportunity presented here for references to these slimy special interests as seeking to "live off the fat of the land,"-- and so I will regretfully content myself with this one contrivance alone. I am sufficiently shameless to observe that the dynamic outlined above-- an early practice of sharp-eyed and disciplined clear thinking resulting in a prosperity which, a generation or so later, is thoughtlessly wallowed in, while crippling corruption takes hold unnoticed-- can be usefully expressed as a run of self-indulgent 'fat' years followed as surely as night follows day by a run of 'lean'.

America is a long way down this ruinous path already. We're not quite past the point of no return, but turning around and climbing back the slope down which we have come will be hard work. But, hey-- as we are so unctuously reminded by NPR and its fellow-travelers, we can use the exercise.