

Eating Away at Our Freedoms

Thanks in large part to U.S. military might, the Afghan people are enjoying basic freedoms, no longer living in fear of the Taliban's ruthless virtue and vice ministry. Meanwhile, back in America, the media is filled with stories echoing the views of food police ideologues who want to dictate what Americans choose to eat and drink. These professional activists are part of a well-organized New Prohibitionist movement devoted to controlling basic decisions in our everyday lives.

Paternalistic activists claim to be working on behalf of public health. However, upon closer examination, their efforts follow a script perfected after decades of anti-free enterprise campaigns. Here's how it goes: first, they seize upon a contemporary health obsession – in this case "excessive" alcohol or food consumption. Next, rather than enabling individuals to make informed choices, activists demonize the usual scapegoat – American business – with alarmist rhetoric and junk social science. Then, the products they don't like, such as beverages containing sugar, caffeine, or alcohol; fast foods; and even milk, are singled out for punitive consumer taxes and regulation.

The restrictions championed by know-it-all consumer activists couldn't be any more *anti-consumer*. New sin taxes will only punish consumers, many of them lower-income, with higher prices and fewer choices. A recently proposed state soda tax, for example, could cost Californians up to \$500 million a year. And activists' support for policies like advertising restrictions or an outright ban on certain foods assumes that Americans are incapable of managing their own lives.

No doubt, the crusade to create a nanny state faces daunting challenges.

Protect consumer choice

Don't the food police understand that consumer freedom is at the core of American democracy? Americans will mightily resist anyone who tells them they can't purchase and enjoy their morning dose of Starbucks caffeine; a hot dog, beer, and fries at the ballpark; or a steak at the weekend family barbecue.

But these days, professional activists don't need public support for their misguided ideas. Instead of seeking change through the democratic process, they can draw upon their long-standing alliances with unaccountable regulators and plaintiffs' lawyers. A sympathetic government agency is certainly capable of prescribing far-reaching consumer controls over our choices. And opportunistic lawyers, perhaps teaming up with state attorneys general, can file massive lawsuits that empower a single judge to impose new regulations and taxes. Will our favorite foods soon join tobacco and other legal products as the next target of anti-democratic regulation by litigation?

Every time government is allowed to dictate fundamental choices to consumers, we drift further towards an insidious culture of control, where *all* our freedoms are exposed to attack. Isn't that a high price to pay simply to satisfy an ideological agenda?



Daniel J. Popeo
Chairman
Washington
Legal Foundation



Washington Legal Foundation
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