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# Supersized government won't reduce obesity in the U.S.

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Glenn Lammi

"Sugar is toxic and makes you dumber!"

"High-fat foods are as addictive as cocaine!"

Americans are bombarded daily with troubling assertions about what we eat and drink.

One might dismiss such hyperbole as nothing more than trendy Big Food bashing. But the bombast is part of a deliberate campaign, conceived by seasoned "public interest" activists and allies in government. Though their asserted goal -- reducing obesity -- may be worthy, their approach distracts from realistic solutions. Even worse, their tactics aim to substitute government paternalism for personal responsibility and consumer freedom.

Those tactics, perfected during past public health activist crusades, feature public demonization of the disfavored products, nation-wide litigation, and obstructive government regulation.


The demonization is well underway. Prominent politicians, media columnists, celebrity chefs and quotable activists heap scorn and ridicule on "unhealthy" foods and beverages, and accuse companies of manipulating our diets. Academics have released advocacy-tinged studies on the extreme dangers of certain foods and their ingredients, or the purported link between food advertising and obesity.

Federal, state and local government have thrown their weight behind these demonization efforts. Cities like Boston and Los Angeles have run graphic advertisements where people drink fat and mothers serve children glasses of sugar. New York City even used a Photoshopped image of an obese youth missing a leg to hammer home its claim that soda consumption can lead to diabetes. Federal food police recently fined a Utah public school \$15,000 for unlawfully leaving vending machines plugged in during lunch. And this month, a federal advisory committee report urged far-reaching policy changes to improve "the

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context for the exercise of free choice."

In addition to scaring people away from targeted products, such public "education" is designed to build support for regressive "sin" taxes on certain food products, new regulations on product marketing and labeling, or bans or limits on some ingredients.

Food and beverage demonization also helps pave the way for activists' third and perhaps most potent, tactic: a national wave of lawsuits. Class action suits alleging that food and beverage product labels or ads are misleading or false are on the rise. Most such lawsuits may lead to minor marketing changes, but the most damaging ones will advance the claim that companies engineer foods to be "addictive." These have potential for huge damage awards and attorneys' fees, as well as expensive, widespread changes to our food.

After the dust settles from all the negative rhetoric and legal maneuvering, will Americans be any thinner? Messages that foment fear are more likely to cause consumer apathy or rebellion than better eating habits. Soda and fatty food taxes will just harm lower-income consumers, and graphic warning labels or advertising bans, as many studies have shown, are ineffective.

Instead of embracing Mayor Mike Bloomberg's proposed ban on 16 ounce drinks and other silly rules, activists should invest time and resources in workable solutions. Government can positively and neutrally inform consumers' diet choices, with an emphasis on moderation and variety. It should continue and expand opportunities for physical activity in public schools and provide safe places for kids to play. Public interest groups should turn their PR efforts away from judgmental scolding and instead arm people with positive ideas on the many small diet and exercise strategies that can make a big difference.

Abundant choices, the free flow of information and innovation are the types of American values that can, if allowed, reduce our collective waistline. Supersized portions of government, on the other hand, will only eat away our freedoms.

*Glenn Lammi is Chief Counsel of Washington Legal Foundation's Legal Studies Division.*

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