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Battle of the Bulge



By Marshall Matz

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Obesity has emerged as our nation's No. 1 public health problem with dire consequences for our nation if solutions cannot be found.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), over one-third of American adults are obese. Over the past three decades, childhood obesity rates in America have tripled, and nearly one in three children is overweight or obese. The numbers are even higher in African American and Hispanic communities, where nearly 40 percent of children are overweight or obese. If we stay on the present track, one third of all children born in 2000 or later will suffer from diabetes at some point in their lives. Many others will face chronic obesity-related health problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, and asthma.

These statistics are so well known they are often quoted and referenced without a second thought or a source. When you stop and consider the significant consequences in terms of health care, lost productivity, national security and quality of life, our nation's obesity problem demands a broad-based effort to find solutions.

According to First Lady Michelle Obama at the launch of her anti-obesity program, Let's Move, "The physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake."

In an interview about diet and health with talk show host Rachel Ray, Former President Bill Clinton said that to adequately confront the obesity challenge, we must "Change our culture....Millions and millions of people have to make changes...."

Efforts to initiate such a cultural change can be seen in a number of actions taken by the food industry, public-private partnerships and public interest organizations. When the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services released the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the new food guidance icon, MyPlate, they did so with 36 "National Strategic Partners," the majority being from the food industry.

The American Beverage Association has partnered with the American Heart Association, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, and the William J. Clinton Foundation to develop guidelines for beverages sold in schools. Food manufacturers across the nation are reforming their products to contain less fat, salt, and sugar. Members of the School Nutrition Association have been following the Dietary Guidelines and changing food preparation methods. Mission: Readiness, a non-profit group of retired military leaders, has been calling for action on the serious national security risk inherent with obesity.

The most challenging question regarding obesity, however, is determining the proper role of government in fighting this epidemic and how the federal government is going to reconcile conflicting public policy goals. There are several examples of this basic conflict:

- The USDA has denied a request by New York City to limit the ability of consumers to purchase sugary drinks, such as soda pop, with food stamp benefits. An amendment is expected to be offered on the upcoming farm bill to this effect.
- USDA has issued a proposed regulation to update the school meal programs consistent with the Dietary Guidelines and the recommendations of the Institute of Medicine (IOM). Over 130,000 comments were filed raising concerns about the cost of the regulation and the ability of industry to modify food products in a timely manner consistent with consumer acceptability. The final regulation is scheduled to be issued in December.
- In April, the Inter-Agency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children released a set of proposed standards for industry to use as a guide for foods marketed and advertised to children. The group includes the Federal Trade Commission, USDA, the Food and Drug Administration, and the CDC - demonstrating the many government agencies that are seeking to exert some jurisdiction over this issue.
- The U.S. Public Interest Research Group has issued a report that criticizes farm subsidies and alleges that they contribute to obesity. The group suggests that farm programs take nutrition into consideration in how the farm safety net is managed and structured by the government.

The First Lady and Let's Move! have not proposed legislative action, instead focusing on common sense solutions dedicated to solving the challenge of childhood obesity so that children born today will grow up healthier and able to pursue their dreams. Few disagree with the need to pursue such a goal, but Congress and the Administration will face a difficult challenge in reconciling the issues outlined above.

Does the obesity epidemic justify limiting advertising and freedom of speech? The government spends billions of dollars on obesity related diseases through Medicare and Medicaid. Does that justify restricting the right of SNAP recipients to choose the foods they desire? Farm programs have been designed to support farm income and protect against disasters. Are they now to be modified to lower the cost of fruits and vegetables while increasing the cost of foods that are thought to be less healthy?

The politics of nutrition, which for years has focused on how to effectively provide low income people with adequate food, has now moved to the more difficult issues associated with overconsumption and obesity. This battle of the bulge pits different political ideologies, political forces and PACs against one another. It is a debate that our nation must deal with during the upcoming farm bill and move forward in order to secure the health of future generations.

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