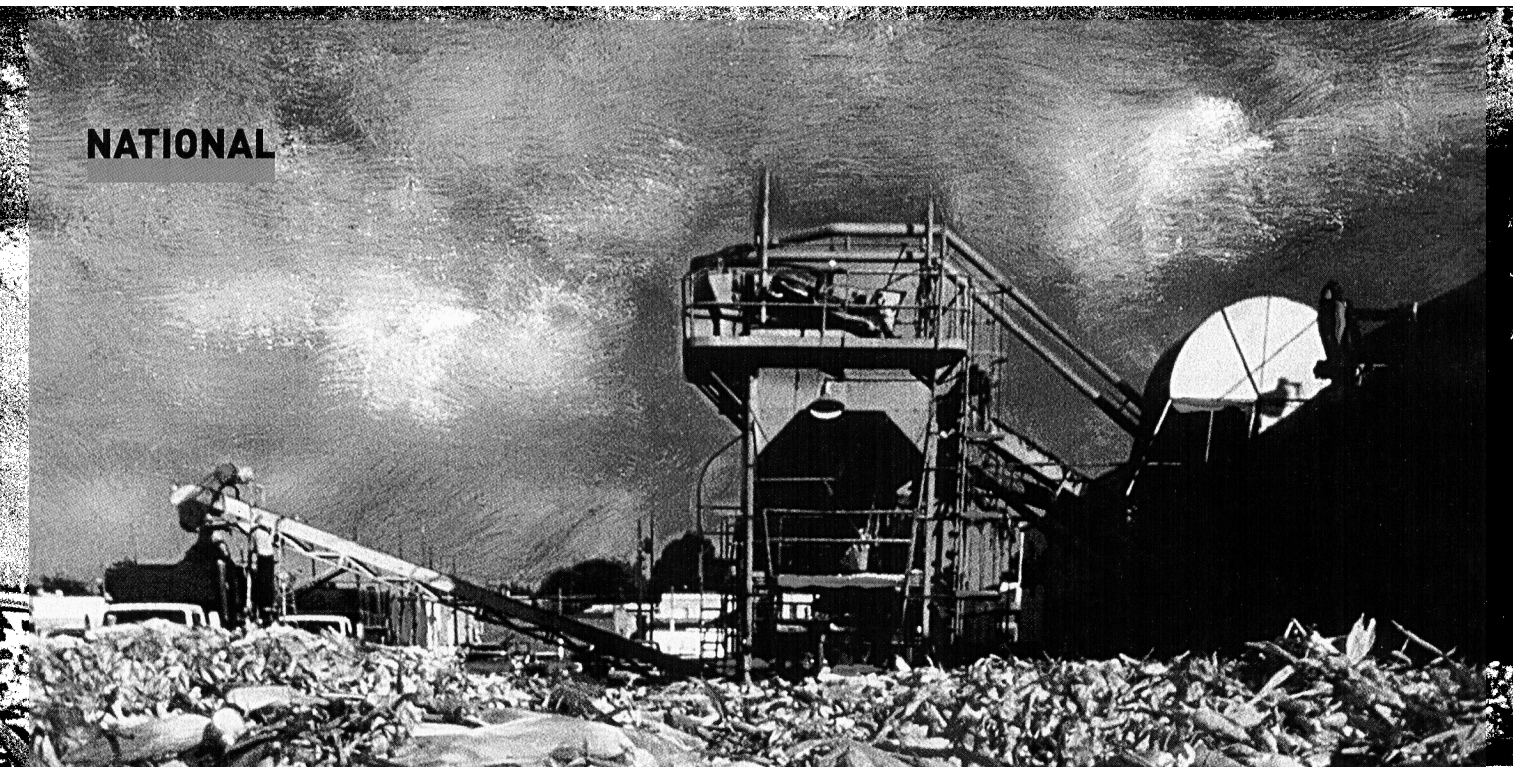


NATIONAL



IS CORN MAKING US

HEAVY?



Sometimes even complicated social problems turn out to be simpler than they look. Take America's obesity problem, perhaps the most serious public-health issue facing the country. Three of every five Americans are now overweight, and some researchers predict that today's children will be the first generation of Americans whose life expectancy will actually be shorter than that of their parents. The culprits, they say, are the health problems associated with obesity.

You hear several explanations: Big food companies are pushing supersize portions of unhealthful foods on us; we have become a sluggish nation of couch potatoes; and families eat too much fast food.

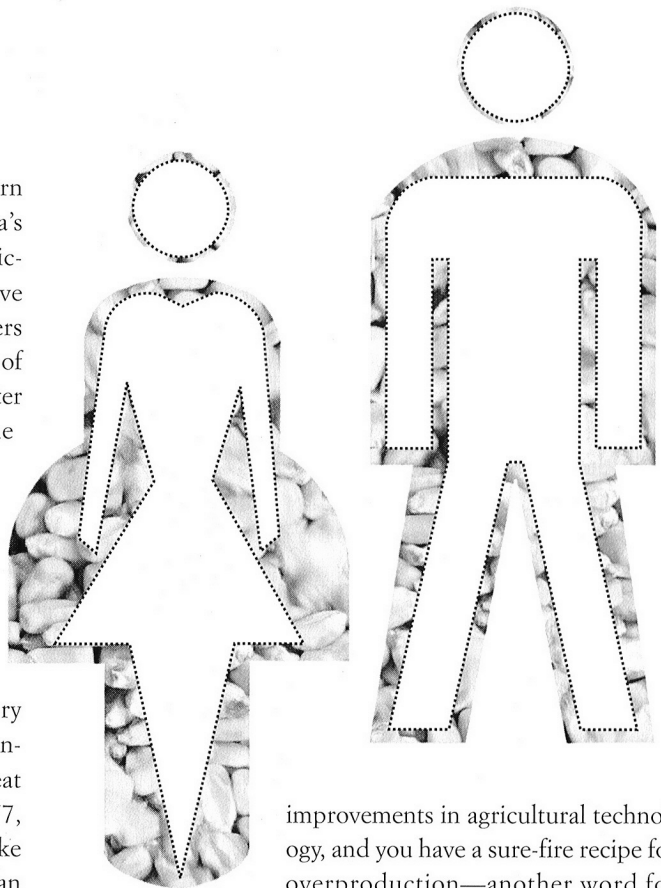
All these explanations are true, as far as they go. But

it pays to look for the cause *behind* the causes. Which, very simply, is this: When food is abundant and cheap, people will eat more of it and get fat. Since 1977, an American's average daily intake of calories has jumped more than 10 percent. The interesting question is: Where, exactly, did all those extra calories come from in the first place? And the answer takes us back to the source of all calories: the farm.

Our underlying problem is agricultural overproduction, and that problem is almost as old as agriculture itself. Even in the Bible, there's talk about how to deal not only with the lean times

but also with the fat: The Old Testament advises creation of a grain reserve to smooth out the swings of the market in food. The unpredictable nature of farming has always made it difficult to synchronize the supply of food available and the public demand for it. Farmers can decide how many acres they will plant, but precisely how much food they produce in any year is largely beyond their control due to weather and other factors.

According to the economic law of supply and demand, when prices fall, farmers should cut back on the amount of food they produce, which would shrink the supply of food and drive up its price. But in reality, farmers plant and harvest *more* food to keep their total income from falling. That drives prices down even lower. Add to this the constant



improvements in agricultural technology, and you have a sure-fire recipe for overproduction—another word for way too much food.

Making the situation worse, the government now pays farmers to produce even more unneeded food. So while the federal government is fighting obesity, it's also indirectly encouraging it, by writing farmers a check for every bushel of corn they grow.

This hasn't always been the case. In fact, government farm programs in America were originally created as a way to *shrink* the total amount of grain. The administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt established the nation's first program of farm support during the Depression, but not, as many people think, to feed a hungry nation. Then, as now, the problem was too much food, not too little.

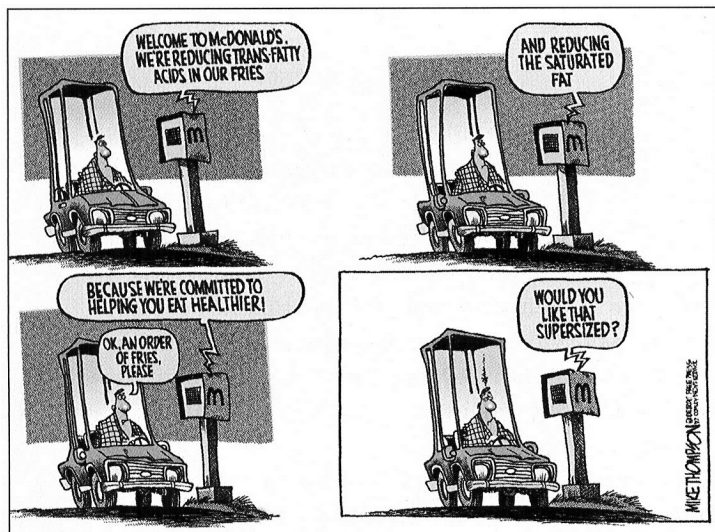
FOOD'S FARM PROBLEMS

Roosevelt's New Deal farm policy was designed to help farmers reeling from a farm depression caused by collapsing prices due to overproduction. Under that policy, when market prices dropped, farmers could take out loans from the government. They stored their corn until the market improved, then sold it and used the proceeds to repay the loan. If the market failed to improve that year, farmers could repay their debt by handing their corn over to the

Michael Pollan, a writer for The New York Times Magazine, teaches at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley.

Michael Pollan argues that U.S. farm policy promoting overproduction of corn has made America overweight—and made big food companies very happy

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT meeting some Georgia farmers during the 1932 presidential campaign. FDR's Depression-era farm policies were reversed by President Nixon in the 1970s.



government, which kept it in reserve for use in bad harvest years—again, to help smooth out swings in supply and price.

This system wasn't perfect, but it did keep cheap grain from flooding the market. And it did so at a small cost to the government, which could often sell its surplus grain at a profit when the market improved.

So why did we abandon this farm policy? In a word, politics. The shift from a system designed to discourage overproduction to one that encourages it dates to the early 1970s—to the last time high food prices in America became a hot political topic. President Richard M. Nixon's 1972 deal to sell American grain to the Soviet Union coincided with bad weather in the farm belt. The grain deal and the bad weather together caused agricultural prices to soar, and before long so did supermarket prices for meat, milk, bread and other staple foods tied to the cost of grain. With angry consumers protesting food prices, Nixon ordered his

Secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz, to do whatever was necessary to drive down the price of food.

Butz set about dismantling 40 years of farm policy designed to prevent overproduction. He replaced the old loan system with a new arrangement. Instead of lending farmers money to get them to keep their grain off the market, the government simply cut them a check for their excess grain, which freed them to sell the grain at whatever price they could get on the open market. The system encouraged huge crops and lower prices, and the price of food hasn't been a political problem since the Nixon era.

The shift from supporting agricultural prices to subsidizing much lower prices has been a boon to agriculture businesses, because it slashes the cost of their raw materials. That's why the powerful companies that produce and sell food—Big Food—consistently lobby Congress to maintain a farm policy geared to high production and cheap grain.

THE HIGH PRICE OF CHEAP FOOD

But our cheap-food farm policy comes at a high price: First, there's the \$19 billion a year the government pays American farmers. Then there's the economic misery that the dumping of cheap American grain inflicts on farmers in the developing world—cheap American grain exports drive the price of foreign crops down and make it hard for farmers overseas to compete.

And finally, there's the national obesity epidemic. Since the 1970s, farmers in the United States have produced the equivalent of 500 additional calories per person every day; Americans pack away about 200 of those; the other 300—mostly in the form of surplus corn—get dumped on overseas markets or turned into ethanol, a gasoline additive.

Cheap corn is truly the building block of our fast-food

culture. Transformed into high-fructose corn syrup, it is what allowed Coca-Cola to move from the 8-ounce soda bottle of the '70s to the 20-ounce bottle of today. Cheap corn, which is used to feed cattle inexpensively, makes beef cheaper—allowing McDonald's to supersize its burgers and still sell many of them for no more than a dollar.

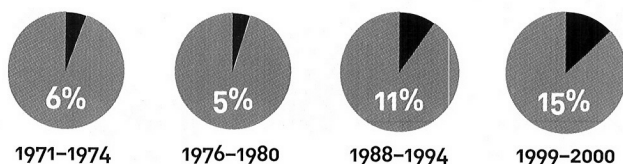
600 CALORIES BECOMES 1,550

You would have thought that lower commodity prices would mean a boon to consumers. But when the raw materials for food become so cheap, the clever strategy for a food company is not necessarily to lower prices. It makes much more sense to compete for the consumer's dollar by increasing portion sizes. So McDonald's tempts us by taking a 600-calorie meal and jacking it up to 1,550 calories.

For the food industry, the real money will never be in selling cheap corn (or soybeans or rice), but in using cheap raw materials to make the kind of snacks that consumers are willing to pay top dollar for. That's one reason why the

Getting Bigger

The percentage of overweight 12- to 19-year-olds—defined as those in the top 5 percent in weight for their age, sex and height—is rising.



SOURCE: CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

number and variety of new snack foods at the supermarket have ballooned. The game is in figuring out how to transform a penny's worth of corn into a \$3 bag of gourmet corn puffs, or a dime's worth of milk and sweeteners into Swerve, a sugary new "milk based" soft drink to be sold in schools.

As concern over obesity mounts, the focus of political pressure has settled on the food industry and its marketing strategies. Certainly Big Food bears some measure of responsibility for our national eating disorder—a reality that a growing number of food companies have accepted and are beginning to respond to. (See "Fast-Food Facelift," right.)

But the food industry is only playing by a set of rules written by our government (and maintained with the industry's political muscle). The political challenge now is to develop new agricultural policies that don't subsidize overproduction—and overeating. For unless we deal with the mountain of cheap grain, the calories will just keep coming. ①

Fast-Food Facelift

Fast-food restaurants are adding low-calorie items to their menus. *Times* food writer Marian Burros reports on the best tasting of the new meals.



Some low-fat fare is "quite edible"; most gives "healthy food a bad name."

In fast-food restaurants, long home to double cheeseburgers with fries, strange new words are emanating from the loudspeakers in the drive-through lanes.

"I'll just have a salad."

The threat of lawsuits by customers who blame their obesity on their fast-food diet, and some say, Americans changing tastes, have sent the fast-food industry scurrying to find alternatives to the high-fat staples on its menus. French fry sales are plummeting.

Fast-food customers "are gravitating toward products they perceive as healthier and fresher," says Andrew Barish, an industry analyst for Banc of America Securities.

To find out if the new low-fat fare is tasty enough to make people give up their Whoppers and Big Macs, I tested food billed as healthful at Burger King, McDonald's, Wendy's, KFC, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, Blimpie and Subway.

Some of this food was quite edible. Most gave healthy food a bad name. A lot of grilled chicken breasts only seemed grilled because they had black stripes. The salads were virtually interchangeable. The full-fat dressings were universally better tasting than the low-fat.

But here are some of the tastiest meals I found:

BURGER KING—Smoky barbecue and Santa Fe grilled chicken sandwiches. 350 calories, 5 grams of fat.

PIZZA HUT—Eat N' Delicious pizza. One slice. 140 to 180 calories, no more than 5 grams of fat.

SUBWAY—Sweet onion chicken teriyaki sandwich on honey oat bread. 380 calories, 5 grams of fat.

MCDONALD'S—Premium grilled chicken salad with low-fat balsamic dressing. 260 calories, 7 grams of fat.