



Consequences Of Assured Safety

President Clinton has joined a battle against an enemy he, rightly, considers universally unpopular: bacteria that grows in food and results in illness in millions of people every single year. In one of his recent Saturday radio addresses, the President proposed a \$43 million program to make food safer and to provide a better early warning system when food safety problems occur.

If approved, much of the money will go for seafood safety inspection, including risk assessment, research and consumer education. About \$10 million, however, would go to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, GA, to maintain a database on foodborne illnesses, and \$11.5 million would be used to develop an “early-warning system” for illnesses that are attributed to food.

This early-warning system is similar to one that already exists in Washington State and is credited with preventing a major disaster in that state when the *E. coli* bacteria was discovered in apple juice this past fall.

In a sense, this is all good news and certainly unobjectionable. Though, of course, there are always budget issues to consider. After all, the same money could be invested in better sanitation or cancer research or any number of good programs. As such, though response from Congress has been generally favorable, clear sailing for the President’s proposal is not a sure thing.

Yet the real quandary for America is the sentiment behind the program. President Clinton was intent on pointing out that the focus of this program was not merely safer food but peace of mind for Americans. As the President put it: “No parent should have to think twice about the juice that they serve their children at breakfast.”

And my question is why not? Why shouldn’t we encourage parents (and everyone else) to think hard about what they put in their mouths or those of their loved ones?

Long before this President came around, we, as a nation, adopted the notion that the government should guarantee the safety of many things, including the food supply. Yet, in many ways, it is all a big confidence game. Even with this extra \$43 million, the federal government has nowhere near the kind of resources necessary to make sure the food supply is safe. Indeed, even if they had inspectors at every plant from New York City to the most remote hamlet, the federal government couldn’t assure the safety of the food supply.

First of all, many of the problems are really local. They involve how food is transported or handled by retailers and foodservice operators. What’s more, it is often difficult or impossible to determine if there is a problem with food via visual inspection. Indeed the whole concept of after-the-fact inspection is inimical to quality control. HACCP procedures were developed because quality control has to take place as an integral part of the production process.

So, this assurance that everything is safe really is not true. It is an assurance we really can’t give.

Yet what is striking about promulgating this attitude — that the government has made sure no parent need think about the apple juice — is that this is exactly the attitude that discourages private companies from both investing adequately in food safety and promoting it. Think about it: If consumers go through their shopping patterns thinking that all food is safe because the government guarantees it, then why would a consumer buy one brand over another to get a better assurance of safety?

This problem has played itself out in other industries as well. Smaller carriers in the airline industry, for example, have developed, in part, because the government asserts to the public at large that all airlines authorized to fly are, in fact, safe.

In effect, governmental regulation reduces the value of brand equity. Just as consumers might choose one brand over another to ensure quality, they surely would use one brand over another to ensure safety. Yet to the degree the government is successful in assuring the public of safety, consumers will no longer find it necessary to look to brands for that attribute. This encourages business to do the minimum necessary to get governmental approval to operate.

In part this is sad, because so many of these governmental promises turn out to be imperfect. I wonder how many people don’t save for retirement because they think Social Security will take care of them. Certainly prudence dictates being concerned about what you and your family are consuming foodwise. Certainly the government just can’t deliver on this promise of perfect safety.

Even more, however, I think this goal — that Americans shouldn’t have to think about food safety because the government is taking care of it — is, in the long term, dangerous to democracy.

Democracy doesn’t only depend on people voting every now and then. It depends on people developing habits of thought and action conducive to self-management in their daily lives. It is these habits that make a people suitable for self-government. To the extent we try and protect people from having to think, we prevent them from developing the critical faculties necessary to function under our system of constitutional government.

Fortunately, help is on the way. My nephew and future President of the United States, Harrison Taylor Prevora, was born on November 24, 1996. He is still being breast-fed, and, mercifully, government regulations are pretty spare in that sphere of behavior. When he gets into apple juice, though, I’m planning on having a long talk with his parents because, unlike the President, I think they should think twice each time they give him anything. I am convinced he’ll not only eat better, but growing up that way, he’ll think better and live more freely than if he lives mindlessly thinking that the government has made everything safe for him. **pb**

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