

What Happens Next – Sunday March 14, 2021

Future of War, COVID Variants, Farm to Table (NOT), Citizenship, and Dummies

Robert Paarlberg

Larry Bernstein: We're going to move on to our third speaker, Robert Paarlberg, who has written a book called *Resetting the Table: Straight Talk About the Food We Grow and Eat*.

Robert Paarlberg:

Well, thanks, Larry. My book is about our broken food system. And one of the messages in the book is to think again about some of the more popular remedies for improving or for fixing our food supply, or what's the evidence that our system is broken? Well, 42% of American adults are now clinically obese, and it's not always been this way. That's three times as high as it was in the 1960s. A number of popular suggestions have been made for improving our food system. I'll talk about four of them. One is switching to organically grown food. Second is switching to locally grown food. A third is ending government subsidies for commodities like corn. And fourth is putting more supermarkets in food deserts that don't have enough supermarkets. My book shows that these proposals would not improve dietary health in America. And in fact, in some instances, they could make dietary health worse.

Let's start with organic foods. These are foods that are grown without the use of any synthetic manmade chemicals. Organic farmers are not allowed to use synthetic manmade nitrogen fertilizers. And they have lower crop yields and higher production costs, and that makes organic products more expensive for consumers. On average, organic produce costs 54% more than conventionally grown produce in the supermarket. So, what does this mean? It means if we switched to an entirely organic farming system, America's consumers would have to pay 54% more for fruits and vegetables. Currently, of course, we don't eat enough fruits and vegetables. We're supposed to have five servings a day, but on average, we're consuming fewer than two servings a day. So, if the price of fruits and vegetables went up by 54%, our consumption would fall even more and our dietary health would worsen.

Of course, advocates for organic products try to claim that these products are more nutritious, but the science just doesn't back that up. It's true that organic milk has 30% more beta carotene than conventional milk, but conventional milk has so little beta carotene that 30% more than almost nothing is still almost nothing. So, a switch to organically grown foods would not solve our dietary health problem. But very few commercial farms are switching to organic production because they don't want to farm without nitrogen fertilizer. Only 2% of farm products in the United States today are organically grown. Second strategy for fixing our broken food system might be to switch to locally grown foods, but this as well will actually worsen dietary health in America because in much of the country, healthy fruits and vegetables cannot be grown at an affordable cost during the winter months.

You can live a comfortable farm to table life year-round if you live in San Diego, but not if you live in Massachusetts like me. You can grow vegetables all year-round in Massachusetts in a greenhouse, but that costs much more than bringing them in from California or from Central America. So, if we tried to do it all locally. The retail price of healthy foods would go up, and once more, consumers would eat less. The vision of producing our food on small local farms is undeniably appealing. And in New England where I live, we have large numbers of small local farms selling their products in season through farm markets or through CSAs, community supported agriculture. It's a valuable social and cultural addition to local communities. But my book says we have to be realistic about how much of our food we can grow this way.

If you looked at all of the food produced by all of the farms in New England... that's large, as well as small farms in New England... in the States of Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine combined, that adds up to only 1% of total farm production in the United States. The state of Rhode Island produces only 1% of its own food. So lucky for those of us who live in New England, we don't have to rely on locally grown foods. And locally grown foods, a little bit like organic foods, are not taking over the marketplace. They represent less than 2% of all the foods grown in the United States today. Instead of becoming more local, our food supply is becoming more global. We had about 11% of our foods imported in 1990. Now we're up closer to 20%.

Ending farm subsidies. Another proposal that wouldn't improve dietary health either. This is a because farm subsidies don't make unhealthy food cheap. They actually make foods like sugar and corn artificially expensive. This is poorly understood by most critics of farm subsidies. The federal government makes corn artificially expensive because Congress has enacted a renewable fuel standard that requires one-third of our corn crop be used for ethanol as auto fuel. This pushes up the price of the corn that's remaining to be used for food. It makes everything from corn syrup, corn chips, and meat from animals fed with corn, more expensive, not less expensive. It's a subsidy to the income of corn growers. It's not a subsidy that makes corn cheap for consumers.

The federal government also makes sugar artificially expensive by putting a quota at the border that keeps cheap foreign sugar out of our market. This makes the sugar that we buy here in the United States 64% more costly than it would be otherwise. That makes obesity-inducing foods more costly rather than artificially cheap. If we remove those subsidies, we'd be going in the wrong direction in terms of diet. That doesn't mean these farm subsidies are a good idea. I don't think they are. But they're not making us obese.

The fourth proposed remedy to our dietary health problem would be to put more supermarkets into neighborhoods where people today may have only just convenience stores or fast-food restaurants. These are so-called food deserts, and this is a well-intended proposal, but we have

an increasing number of studies now that show our problem isn't too little access to healthy food. The problem is too much access to unhealthy food. And supermarkets themselves are filled with unhealthy food. One study found that only about one-third of the beverages and packaged products sold at supermarkets today are healthy. The rest are either ultra-processed or they had too much sugar, salt, and fat.

Not just supermarkets, actually. Pharmacies are also a part of this swamp of unhealthy food that we're surrounded with. When I go to my local CVS to fill a prescription, I have to walk through aisles filled with candy and chips in order to get to the prescription counter. So, in a single visit, I can both protect my health and spoil my health at the same time. Now, the food companies that design all these foods to be irresistible, they designed them to be over-consumed. They say it's our responsibility if we consume too much, but stop and think about that. Remember that obesity in America has tripled since the 1960s. Are eaters today really three times as irresponsible as they were back then? My book explains that they are not.

The solution to this problem has to go beyond personal responsibility. It has to include government policies that nudge consumers and food companies in a healthier direction. For example, excise taxes on sugary beverages or nutrition guidance on the front of food packages or guidelines regarding advertising junk food to children. 18 different countries in Europe have at least one of these policies in place. At the federal level in the United States, we have zero, and European countries have only half the obesity prevalence of the United States. I think these are lessons we can learn from European approach and take to heart. These are the first steps that we need to take to fix our broken food system. And my new book, titled *Resetting the Table*, outlines these steps in some detail. Thanks, and I'll turn it back to you, Larry.