



Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on September 5, 2016

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Correction Please!

Item: *Writing in the Los Angeles Times for December 29, 2015, in a piece entitled “Despite GOP efforts, Obama’s safety net expansion is historic,” Noam Levey reported: “Despite Republican majorities in Congress through much of his tenure and increasingly insistent calls from GOP presidential candidates to rein in ‘free stuff,’ President Obama has engineered the largest expansion of the federal government’s safety net in half a century, a record he cemented further as he closed out his seventh year.”*

Item: *“Maine’s residents would no longer receive food stamps if Gov. Paul LePage (R) delivers on a threat to end his state’s administration of the program,” reported the Washington Post on June 22.*

The Post’s Max Ehrenfreund continued:

In a letter to the Obama administration last week, the governor wrote that beneficiaries were wasting public money on “a steady diet of Mars bars and Mountain Dew” and that he did not want his name associated with the program.

The letter escalated a long-running dispute between LePage and the administration over several aspects of the food-stamp program. Most recently, LePage had wanted to bar Maine residents from using food stamps to buy unhealthy food. When federal officials rejected his proposal to institute such a rule statewide, LePage reacted angrily.

... “I will be pursuing options to implement reform unilaterally or cease Maine’s administration of the food stamp program altogether,” the letter continued.

Item: *The “progressive” Nation magazine for June 24, 2016, in commenting on the Maine governor’s actions concerning food stamps — rebranded as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) — indignantly noted that LePage had already “kicked more than 6,000 people off food assistance last fall, after he reinstated stringent time limits for the program.”*

The magazine also blasted the potential “devastating impact” this would have on the governor’s constituents, saying that one of every seven residents in the state “rely on food stamps.” SNAP “also has important economic benefits,” said the publication. Last year alone, for example, “the program provided almost \$280 million in federal dollars to the state, which were distributed among more than 1,500 state retailers.”

Moreover, said Nation’s Alyssa Peterson and Jeremy Slevin, this “effort also demonstrates the risk of giving state executives such as LePage more authority over antipoverty programs.”

Correction: There are many reasons why Americans are fed up with solutions proffered by “progressives.”

One in particular lies with their assumption that if there is a problem anywhere in the country its answer hinges on more money being spent by the federal government. Corollaries are the suppositions that officials in state governments should be mere appendages of the wizards in Washington, and that exercising personal responsibility is an antediluvian concept.

It should go without saying that Maine Governor Paul LePage is no favorite of those on the Left — especially since his background (including being a runaway at age 11 who became a successful businessman) tends to spoil the left-wing narrative: The former homeless teen was born into a family of



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18 children.

LePage is beyond the pale for “liberals.” He doesn’t even believe that a major federal anti-poverty “nutrition” program should be subsidizing the consumption of soft drinks and candy. Worse, his state administration has already made inroads into the overspending on the multi-billion-dollar food-stamp program. Along with the rest of welfare spending in this country, SNAP expenditures have been ballooning. As summarized by Chris Edwards in the Daily Caller, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program was inflated in the administrations of both

George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The number of recipients rose from 17 million in 2000 to 46 million by 2015. The costs quadrupled from \$18 billion in 2000 to \$78 billion in 2016.

The continued growth in food stamps is perplexing because social conditions are vastly improved since the program was created in the 1960s. Food stamps were created to tackle hunger, but Harvard University’s Robert Paarlberg notes that on a typical day less than 1 percent of households now face “very low food security.” That low figure contrasts with the 18 percent of U.S. households that receive food stamps.

The main food-related health problem for low-income households today is not hunger, but obesity.

In recent years, the group that has been growing the most rapidly among those receiving food stamps has been able-bodied adults without dependents — known as ABAWDs in bureaucratic and policy circles. As was pointed out in a recent Heritage Foundation “Issue Brief,” members of this group are adults between ages 18 and 49 who are not disabled and do not have children to support. “In 2014, nearly five million ABAWDs received food stamps each month; few are employed.” The Maine governor instituted a three-month SNAP limit (every three years) on such recipients unless they work 20 hours a week, take a state job-training course, or volunteer about six hours a week. (Maine is one of several states able to get a waiver over aspects of the SNAP program, as the *New York Times* pointed out last year.)

As Rachel Seffield and Robert Rector wrote in the above Heritage paper, in Fiscal Year 2014, “Maine implemented a work requirement for ABAWDs. After the implementation of the work requirement, Maine’s ABAWD caseload dropped substantially, by 80 percent within just a few months. If a federal work requirement for ABAWDs were enacted and achieved the same level of success as was achieved in Maine, the reform could save taxpayers up to \$9.7 billion annually.”

LePage also had the temerity to take on the food stamp program in other respects — including attempting to stop recipients from being provided with federally subsidized junk food. The U.S. Department of Agriculture rejected the move. The governor called this hypocritical, writing to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack that the Obama administration “goes to great lengths to police the menu of K-12 cafeterias, but looks the other way as billions of taxpayer dollars finance a steady diet of Mars bars and Mountain Dew.”

In other words, the state wanted to provide what the feds claim they promote: healthy food. Washington would have nothing of such insubordination. You might think the feds would be happy to get some relief for a program that has grown by about five million since Barack Obama moved into the White House. Nope.

The head commissioner of the Maine Department of Health and Human Service, Mary Mayhew, sent the



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junk-food bid to the federal government in late 2015. As explained by the online Daily Signal, the agency “viewed the proposal as a way to curb what the state agency said was an obesity-related health crisis driving up both Medicaid and private insurance costs.” The request was also, she said, consistent with the governor’s goal to ensure that welfare goes to those needing it most. Melissa Quinn quoted the commissioner as follows in the Daily Signal:

“What we allow and restrict in a taxpayer-funded nutrition program should be of concern to the federal government and certainly is of concern to the state and this administration,” Mayhew said.

According to her agency, Maine’s obesity rate doubled from 14 percent to 28 percent in the past two decades. The state’s incidence of diabetes also doubled from 3.9 percent to 9.5 percent.

About 15 percent of Maine’s population is on food stamps, and of those, 88 percent are also on Medicaid. Mayhew sees a connection between the food purchased with food stamps and the strain on the state Medicaid budget.

“It is frustrating to have two federal agencies failing to connect the dots between the decisions of one to allow the purchase of these terribly unhealthy items, and you have the other federal agency paying for the health care costs associated with obesity and diabetes,” Mayhew said.

Personal decisions, meanwhile, still do make a difference. And since money is fungible, even a junk-food ban would not ensure that welfare recipients necessarily spend other assets wisely. Consider the group that the government places in the category of “Very Low Food Security.” (During a typical month in 2013, one adult out of 30 across the country reportedly experienced VLFS; among children, the number was one in 165.)

Testimony before the National Commission on Hunger, a congressional body, has covered how various lifestyles have consequences. Rector, a senior research fellow for the Institute for Family, Community and Opportunity, offered these conclusions, among others, in his submission last year:

Households with VLFS spend a quarter of their food dollars in fast-food restaurants and vending machines. Adults with VLFS drink nearly two cans of soda per day. Such spending patterns help to explain why these individuals may run short of money for food toward the end of the month. Public policy should encourage at-risk individuals to purchase healthier, less costly foods and to allocate food spending evenly throughout the month.

Smoking is another major factor contributing to hunger or very low food security in the U.S. Some 45 percent of adults with VLFS regularly smoke cigarettes. Consuming 19 packs of cigarettes per month on average, these individuals spend an estimated \$112 each month on tobacco. Since money spent on cigarettes cannot be spent on food, regular smoking in many cases leads directly to very low food security and hunger.

Simply calling for more generous government food benefits in these circumstances is clearly inappropriate. Treating food security as a stand-alone nutrition issue independent of the behaviors linked to it will only lead to unwise public policy.

From the standpoint of those whose political and professional lives hang on making more Americans dependent on Washington, it makes entirely too much sense to have state governments in charge of such programs. There is a lot of money in the poverty business. Studies have shown that the funding on means-tested cash, food, and housing programs alone represents more than twice as much as is needed



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to eliminate all poverty in the entire country.

If such programs are going to remain run by the federal government, is it too much to require adults who are able to work to do so, or to train to hold a job, in exchange for benefits?

Working really does have a direct effect on poverty. Even a relatively moderate Republican task force has made this common-sense conclusion. As the force pointed out this summer: Of all working-age adults (between age 18 and 64) who were in poverty in 2014, almost two in three were not working at all and another 27 percent were working just part-time. On the other hand, only 2.7 percent of full-time workers were below the poverty level, compared to 32.3 percent of adults who do not work. And noted the task force, part-time work does make a considerable difference: Only 17.5 percent of part-time workers are below the government's poverty level.

The launching of the "war on poverty" in 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson came with a promise "not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it." The explosion of welfare spending has assuredly not eliminated poverty. Indeed, the extent of the expenditures has exacerbated the situation. As noted by the GOP's Task Force on Poverty, Opportunity, and Upward Mobility:

Almost one-third of the U.S. population receives benefits from at least one welfare program. But even though the federal government has spent trillions of taxpayer dollars on these programs over the past five decades, the official poverty rate in 2014 (14.8%) was no better than it was in 1966 (14.7%), when many of these programs started. In other words, though these programs have helped people cope with poverty, they haven't helped people get out of poverty.

While government may be inefficient, its actions do have consequences. The key problem is what it does. Here's how it works: If you want less of something, tax it. Alternatively, if you want more of something, subsidize it.

And the federal government has been subsidizing dependency with a vengeance. This endless aid has hurt far too many of its recipients. And the campaign has not been a sweet treat for the taxpayers, the oft-ignored casualties in the war on poverty.

— William P. Hoar



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