



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on August 31, 2010

Michelle Obama's Federal Fat Farm

ObamaCare makes every American's health the government's business, but Barack Obama is not the only member of his family interested in employing the federal government as our national nanny. His wife, Michelle Obama, is equally concerned with using her own bully pulpit and her husband's power as a means of whipping Americans into shape — for our own good, of course.



Mrs. Obama's "Let's Move!" campaign (www.letsmove.gov) has as its stated objective to "solve the challenge of childhood obesity within a generation so that children born today will reach adulthood at a healthy weight." This is indeed a worthy goal; no one wants kids to grow up overweight and ill.

However, Obama's method of addressing this issue consists of an array of Washington-issued mandates, government-corporate collusion, federal spending, and, most disturbingly, the use of government schools as food police. This would be unsettling enough if she were just some think-tank guru spouting off a wish list; but since she is married to the President of the United States, it is within her reach actually to impose her agenda — and much of it is already in progress.

Food Deserts

Among the in-progress initiatives in Obama's agenda is the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, the purpose of which is to eliminate so-called "food deserts," defined on the "Let's Move!" website as "low-income urban and rural neighborhoods that are more than a mile from a supermarket." The idea is that the lack of a large grocery store limits a community's food choices, often forcing them to shop at convenience stores and other small retailers who offer few fresh fruits and vegetables but plenty of processed, unhealthful foods.

The Healthy Food Financing Initiative is, according to the website, "a partnership between the U.S. Departments of Treasury, Agriculture, and Health and Human Services to invest \$400 million a year to provide innovative financing to develop healthy food retailers to underserved areas and help places such as convenience stores and bodegas carry healthier food options." How generous of them to "invest" hundreds of millions of other people's dollars!

Obama has named the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Initiative, a Keystone State program that combines public and private funding to provide grants and low-cost loans to grocers that operate in low-income areas, as an example of what the federal program should look like.

There is little evidence that Pennsylvania's program and other similar initiatives have any significant effects on produce consumption and obesity rates. Noting that several studies have documented a link



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between easy access to healthful foods and both better eating habits and decreased obesity, David C. Holzman wrote in an article for *Environmental Health Perspectives*:

However, the actual health toll from living in a food desert environment has not been tabulated in a peer-reviewed study. Moreover, the only 2 studies that examined diets before and after grocery stores were installed in food deserts — rather than comparing neighborhoods with grocery stores to similar neighborhoods without — are not encouraging, says Steven Haider, an associate professor of economics at Michigan State University. Neil Wrigley et al. wrote in volume 35, issue 1 (2003) of *Built Environment* that people consumed an extra half a serving of fruit and/or vegetables daily, while Steve Cummins et al. reported no change in the Winter 2005 issue of *Planning Healthy Towns and Cities*. And global nutrition professor Barry Popkin of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill says a January 2009 workshop he chaired at the Institute of Medicine on the public health effects of food deserts “could find no evidence that adding new retail stores to depressed areas changed what people consumed.”

In other words, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative is nothing more than a feel-good program that uses taxpayers’ money to help politically favored businesses locate in areas that are otherwise unsuitable for their operations. As with most public-private partnerships, profits will be privatized and losses socialized.

Federal Food Monitor

In a July 13 web chat in which Obama answered questions from concerned Americans, she said, “I think we’re living in a time when a lot of people in communities don’t know what healthy should look like.... I’m sure that most parents think that they’re making the right decisions for their children only to find that what they’ve been buying for lunch is full of added sugars and salts, and we’ve got to make it easier for families to do the right thing.”

Her means of making things easier for families is, not surprisingly, more government regulations. Specifically, she wants “things like improving front-of-package labeling so that parents don’t have to squint and figure out big, unusual words to determine whether something is healthy or not.” She later added that the Food and Drug Administration is working on “agreements” with food producers to change their front-of-package labeling. Similarly, she said that the government has “gotten some significant commitments from retailers that have committed to reducing the amounts of sugar, fat, and salt in our food.”

Of course, “agreements” and “commitments” with the government are about as voluntary as those made with the local mob boss. Companies agree to “voluntarily” regulate themselves to Washington’s liking in an effort to stave off harsher government regulations with actual penalties attached. The FDA has already sent out “warning letters” to 17 manufacturers of food products, giving them 15 business days to inform the FDA of how they intend to correct such violations of federal law as “unauthorized health claims, unauthorized nutrient content claims, and the unauthorized use of terms such as ‘healthy,’ and others that have strict, regulatory definitions,” according to a March 3 FDA press release. Commissioner of Food and Drugs Margaret Hamburg had previously warned companies to get with the FDA’s program or face penalties.

Big businesses, too, take the opportunity to work out such agreements in an effort to prevent smaller competitors, who do not have the resources to meet the new requirements, from becoming serious threats to them. Not for nothing did Obama receive a standing ovation when she spoke to the Grocery



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Manufacturers Association in March, seemingly to harangue food producers about improving their labels and making their foods more nutritious. In fact, she tipped her hand when, near the end of her speech, she said:

So I hope all of you will help support our efforts. I hope that you'll embrace this future, because really that's what this industry has always done. Just think back to the early part of the last century when food manufacturers helped pass the first major federal law establishing basic standards for our food, beverages, and drugs. Back then, consumers had little protection against unscrupulous manufacturers who tainted their products with all sorts of chemicals and fillers. When these abuses came to light, Congress responded, drafting the 1906 Food and Drug Act. And instead of opposing that law and instead of viewing it as a threat, many manufacturers decided to embrace it.

The fact of the matter is that many food manufacturers got behind the Pure Food and Drugs Act because they saw it as a way to eliminate their competition, as Jim Powell documented in his book *Bully Boy: The Truth About Theodore Roosevelt's Legacy*.

Powell maintains that "there was no food crisis." He points out that the food supply had been getting steadily safer for decades because of private entrepreneurs' advances in canning, preserving, refrigeration, and transportation.

However, that did not stop the Bureau of Chemistry's chief chemist, Harvey Washington Wiley, from launching a crusade for a pure-food law on behalf of his political allies, including straight whiskey producers, one of whom sent him a complimentary case of rye whiskey for his efforts; sugar producers, for whom he lobbied for high sugar tariffs and who protected him from political enemies; and even the H.J. Heinz company, for whom Wiley promoted a ketchup monopoly. Once the law was passed, Wiley used it especially to benefit sugar producers, going after saccharin, corn syrup, and Coca-Cola (because Coke bought its sugar from a rival to one of Wiley's close allies).

Powell cites a report by economists Clayton A. Coppin and Jack High, which concluded that Wiley's enforcement of the act "did not improve the health of the consumer, the plane of competition among producers, or the honesty and integrity of government officials. If anything, Wiley's enforcement worsened the ability of consumers to make informed judgments about food and drugs."

Are the current efforts by the federal government to change food labeling and contents any more likely to succeed in improving consumers' ability to determine the healthfulness of food? No, but they will succeed in raising the cost of doing business and in giving the government another bludgeon with which to beat companies that don't play ball with the Washington political class.

Private Endorsements

In her web chat Obama said, "Kids are malleable, and they're also open to learn." With that in mind, she is seeing to it that her message is communicated to them in a variety of ways.

For example, she said, "We want to see every major sports league in this country finding a way to invest in the health of our kids. I want to see every athlete, every Olympian in a school." To that end, she appeared at a baseball clinic at the home of the Baltimore Orioles and "announced that [Major League Baseball] and the MLB Players Association will team with the White House in the Let's Move campaign," according to a July 20 Associated Press report. Thirty ballplayers have agreed to appear in public service announcements for Obama's initiative. The New York Mets have already sent players to local schools, where, according to a press release, "players joined students in fitness programs in support of First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign to combat childhood obesity through



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exercise and nutrition.”

Another of Obama’s means of getting the word out is through television shows with juvenile audiences. “I hope that we’re seeing more marketing of healthy foods to our kids so that we start seeing some of our partners like Disney and others taking a step and ensuring that we’re having conversations with our kids in the venues that they love best, those Disney shows, and we’re talking about nutrition,” Obama said in her web chat.

Disney has, in fact, already gotten on board, using its media juggernaut to spread Obama’s message. A February 9 Disney press release explained:

Disney will create a series of PSAs [Public Service Announcements] featuring the First Lady and leading Disney Channel stars to inspire healthier eating habits, physical activity and more. The messages will be featured across Disney’s kid and family targeted media platforms, including Disney Channel, Disney XD, Radio Disney, and Disney.com and will begin airing later this year....

At least one episode of each [Disney Channel] series currently in production — including “Hannah Montana,” “Wizards of Waverly Place,” “Sonny With a Chance,” “Zeke and Luther,” “Phineas and Ferb” and “The Suite Life on Deck” — centers on a healthy lifestyle theme. In addition, over 100 interstitials have been dedicated to encouraging healthier lifestyles. They include “Pass the Plate,” a global effort to both inform and empower viewers, showing them how kids just like them around the world enjoy and benefit from healthy foods, and “Get’cha Head in the Game,” an interstitial series that inspires kids to follow their dreams through physical activity.

This is not just a few harmless PSAs to show that the company supposedly cares about its audience; it’s a major media campaign requiring a great deal of trouble and expense. Even if it does center solely on nutrition and fitness, it shows the lengths to which big media corporations will go to indoctrinate kids with the government’s message, especially if they think there’s good publicity in it for them. What might Disney, Major League Baseball, and other corporate entities with great influence over children do to promote other government priorities, even those explicitly opposed by those same children’s parents? Vigilance is required.

Nutrition and Nonsense

Furthermore, how valid is the nutritional advice the government has to offer anyway? Federal nutritional standards have always been subject to political pressure. Powell mentions that Wiley — who, again, had a vested interest in seeing the sugar industry prosper — “encouraged Americans to consume more sugar.... ‘Childhood without candy,’ he remarked, ‘would be Heaven without harps.’”

The USDA Food Pyramid, too, is hardly immune to politics. *The Wall Street Journal* described the lobbying that took place when the USDA’s dietary guidelines came up for their pentennial review in 2002 — “an exercise,” said the *Journal*, “that attracts not only critics from the world of medicine but industry lobbyists and those promoting the virtues of various food groups and diets.”

Some medical researchers criticized the pyramid’s emphasis on grains at the expense of fruits and vegetables, possibly due to the influence of the grain lobby. Others complained that the pyramid was either too critical of fats or failed to indicate that dairy products — dairy farmers have a powerful lobby, too — should be consumed in low-fat varieties.

Meanwhile, wrote the *Journal*, “During the last revision, the advisory committee considered changing the 1995 recommendation of adhering to a diet ‘moderate’ in salt and sugar to ‘eating less salt and



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sugar.’ The powerful sugar industry fought the change, and the guidelines now tell consumers to ‘moderate your intake of sugars.’ (The ‘less salt’ revision stuck.)” A 2004 *Journal* article explained how lobbyists worked to keep sugar, potatoes, and bread in the pyramid before the next revision.

The current version of the pyramid has also been criticized for its seeming genuflections to special interests, such as the prominence of dairy products, which are not necessarily essential to a healthy diet (as the health of many of those who abstain from dairy products attests).

Thus, even if one trusts media conglomerates not to fill young skulls full of mush with more controversial government propaganda, it still remains the case that telling kids to follow the feds’ nutritional advice could be hazardous to their health.

Obama’s primary avenue for fighting childhood obesity is clearly the public schools. The “Let’s Move!” website emphasizes them greatly, and Obama did so as well in her web chat. Asked what progress toward her goal she envisioned in the next five years, Obama said, “In five years I hope to see us making progress in our school lunches. I hope that we have a viable and well-funded school nutrition act, child nutrition act, and that we’re seeing the quality go up in our schools, we’re seeing more education going on around nutrition in our schools. We want to see more schools participating in community gardens and being the place where kids are gonna get their first taste of fresh fruit and vegetables and understand how that grows.”

The child nutrition reauthorization act of which Obama speaks was passed by the House Education and Labor Committee on July 15, an act for which Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack effusively praised the committee on the “Let’s Move!” website. The act, if passed, will require more nutrition education in schools and force all food sold in schools, whether in the regular cafeteria line, in vending machines, a la carte, or even in school fundraisers, to meet federal nutrition standards.

Of course, as we have already seen, those standards are somewhat less than scientific. But even supposing they are scientifically accurate, the policy will amount to denying kids various foods that Washington bureaucrats deem unhealthy, regardless of the health and weight of the individual child or the wishes of his parents.

One would hope that such a policy, onerous and unconstitutional though it is, would at least have the beneficial effect of reducing obesity and improving health among children. However, existing school nutrition programs premised on the same theory have been less than rousing successes, as Harriet Brown reported in a 2006 *New York Times* article, “Well-Intentioned Food Police May Create Havoc With Children’s Diets”:

Like other misguided public health campaigns ... , putting children on de facto diets at school just doesn’t work. In a 2003 experiment involving 41 schools, more than 1,700 children — many of them American Indian — were served lower-calorie and lower-fat lunches and were taught about healthy eating and lifestyles.

While the children took in fewer calories from fat at school, they experienced no significant reduction in their percentage of body fat.

Another study, in rural Nebraska in the mid-1990s, put one group of elementary school students on lower-fat and lower-sodium lunches, increased their physical activity at school and offered more education about nutrition. Compared with students having no special program, the active, lower-fat group showed no differences in body weight or fat, or in levels of total cholesterol, insulin or glucose after two years.



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Researchers concluded that pupils whose school lunches offered 25 percent fat (compared with 31 percent in the control group) were compensating for the reduction by eating higher-fat foods at home.

The act praised by Vilsack and Obama, officially the Improving Nutrition for America's Children Act, also expands the federal school lunch program to weekends, holidays, and summer vacations, thus ensuring that taxpayers get soaked even more and that the recipients of these "free" lunches grow up to be grateful wards of the state, disinclined to raise a ruckus about its steady encroachments upon their liberties.

Food Police

The first lady has also proposed turning schools into food police in other ways. In her web chat she suggested that teachers eat with their students and explained why: "And if you're sitting down at the lunch room table and you're talking about who's brought what for lunch and what a balanced lunch looks like, and you're giving them a little encouragement to eat the vegetable that is put into the lunch or to ... encourage children to ask their parents to incorporate vegetables."

It's bad enough that schools already send home lists of foods that parents are forbidden to put in the children's lunches. How many parents really want their kids' teachers critiquing the lunches they have packed?

In England the schools, prodded by a socialized healthcare system trying to cut costs, have already taken to doing this. According to a July 3 report in the *Daily Mail*, teachers in Gloucestershire "secretly photographed pupils' packed lunches over six months and analyzed the contents," after which "staff awarded marks to the food and then showed their findings to outraged parents, offering them advice on how to improve nutrition."

Some British town councils have gone even further, actually banning fast-food restaurants in the vicinity of schools and preventing children from leaving school at lunchtime for fear they might eat some of the dreaded stuff, the *Daily Mail* reported in June.

Public schools in the United States are no slouches at the food-police business, either. For example, Houston's KHOU TV news reported in May that a third-grader in Brazos County, Texas, was given a week's detention when a teacher spotted a single piece of candy in her lunch. "The school's principal and superintendent said they were simply complying with a state law that limits junk food in schools," said the report.

Students, therefore, are already being punished by schools for running afoul of government-imposed food restrictions. How long will it be until parents, as in Britain, are graded on the lunches they pack and then, perhaps, penalized for failing to meet the government's nutritional standards?

This is where "Let's Move!" intersects with ObamaCare and other Obama Administration initiatives.

Mrs. Obama is pushing for children's Body Mass Index to be used as a measure of their obesity or lack thereof — "never mind that B.M.I.," as Brown reported in her *Times* article, "is only a measure of height against weight and does not take into account muscle mass, body type or other factors." Some schools already report on students' BMI; Mike Huckabee made it a requirement for Arkansas schools when he was governor.

Meanwhile, the 2009 federal stimulus law mandates that all Americans' health records be stored electronically, with BMI among the many personal details required in those records — records that, by the way, can be shared with the government with very few restrictions.



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Then ObamaCare establishes national standards for obesity, with behavior-modification programs and home visitations for individuals and families who fail to live up to these standards. (Obese persons are a drag on government-run healthcare systems, after all.) Having everyone's BMI available to federal bureaucrats will surely aid in identifying Americans who are resistant to Washington's diet and exercise regimen and subjecting them to behavior modification or removing their high-BMI children into the custody of the state.

The "Let's Move!" website offers many other detailed anti-obesity suggestions for parents, schools, mayors and local officials, community leaders, chefs, and kids. These recommendations run the gamut from the relatively innocuous (asking parents to provide fruit for their children's snacks and telling kids to do jumping jacks) to the highly intrusive (setting "goals for improving healthy behaviors among [school] staff"). Then there are standard big-government solutions, such as asking local officials to encourage families to get their kids into the government's school lunch program and to offer "free" (i.e., taxpayer-funded) intramural sports. The First Nanny even tells churches to "provide healthy selections" and reduce portion sizes at congregational dinners!

Mrs. Obama's anti-childhood-obesity campaign is far from the usual First Lady fluff. It has serious implications for constitutional government, individual privacy, and family stability, especially when combined with other intrusive federal programs such as ObamaCare. With the federal government already morbidly obese, it is no time to be packing on another ton of unconstitutional, wasteful, intrusive, and probably counterproductive programs. Instead, let's move to trim this fat from Uncle Sam's waistline faster than you can say Jenny Craig.

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