

# One Nation Under Blob: What's Gotten Into Us?

## Big Fat Lies: The Truth About Four Weight and Your Health

Glenn A. Gaesser

Fawcett Columbine / 288 pages / \$23

REVIEWED BY

Michael Fumento

**Y**ou can hardly ignore the growing numbers of Americans who are horizontally challenged: at least a third of us are obese by the government's standards, and probably more than two-thirds are unhealthily overweight, according to a 1995 report by the National Academy of Sciences. Foreigners are aghast when they gaze upon *Behemothus americanus*, and one British friend of mine likens our well-larded countrymen to the giant balloons that float above the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade in New York.

This being the Decade of the Victim, though, it's hardly surprising that there are groups who proclaim not only that "fat is beautiful," but that it is virtually harmless as well. Dedicated to the proposition that all men (and women) are not created equal—some are just meant to be fat—the pro-tubbies have their own lapel ribbons (light blue). Now they have their own book, too: Glenn A. Gaesser's *Big Fat Lies*.

"This book was written with the hope of discrediting the myths that obesity is a 'killer dis-

ease,'" writes Gaesser, a very thin associate professor of exercise physiology and associate director of the adult fitness program at the University of Virginia. All that stuff about heart disease and cancer and stroke, he says—and the warnings from health officials and doctors that 300,000 Americans are dying prematurely from obesity each year—is a health industry conspiracy. Gaesser cites "a large and ever-growing body of scientific evidence, most of it still confined to professional journals, showing that fat may not be so bad, and in fact thin may not be so good."

That's just what people with large and ever-growing bodies want to hear, people like Charles Van Dyke, chairman of the board of the National Organization for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), the nation's most prominent obesity-rights group. Van Dyke is quoted on the dust jacket gushing about Gaesser's work: "Finally, truth and justice for the fat person. People will vary, and cannot all fit some insurance chart." Indeed, it would take three insur-

ance charts laid end to end to fit Charles Van Dyke: he weighs 600 pounds.

Gaesser picks and chooses among various obesity studies to make his argument. He cites evidence, for example, that shows a link between obesity and lower rates of lung cancer and pre-menopausal breast cancer, but doesn't mention that pre-menopausal breast cancer is fairly rare, nor does he talk about any other types of cancer.

Why? Because study after study has shown that obesity is a major risk factor for post-menopausal breast cancer and a variety of other cancers. The American Cancer Society has found that, for people whose weight was 40 percent above average or more, death from cancer overall was a third higher for men, and over 50 percent higher for women. A 1995 study in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* documented that the heaviest men it looked at had three times the risk of contracting cancer of the esophagus as the lightest ones. A 1994 study found that weight gain of only 20 or even 10 pounds, in women age 30 and over, may substantially increase the risk of breast cancer later in life. One Harvard researcher has found that women just 44 pounds over ideal weight fully doubled their risk of breast cancer.

If that's not bad enough, yet another study has found that over-



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weight women who detected breast tumors as a result of self-examination generally caught the lumps at a later—and more dangerous stage—than leaner women. As one health reporter put it, “The trouble with trying to feel for a pea under 20 mattresses is that most of us won’t find it—unless it’s the size of a basketball.”

Gaesser concedes that there does seem to be a connection between obesity and certain health problems; but, in his view, the connection isn’t necessarily causal. “If you just eliminate the excess hypertension and coronary disease and cancer among this group,” he argues, “you find that their death rate is no higher than that of the thinner people.” This is correct in the same way that a heavy, sharp blade was not the actual cause of death of Louis XVI. Rather, it was the severing of his vertebrae, the cutting of all the blood vessels in his neck, and the slicing of his windpipe that did the killing—with, of course, the trauma caused by his head dropping several feet into a wicker basket to be factored in as well. As Gaesser puts it, “No study yet has convincingly shown that weight is an independent *cause* of health problems.”

**T**he real problem is with Gaesser’s disingenuousness. He points, for example, to a Duke University study of 600 obese men and women who completed a low-calorie, low-fat diet and exercise program lasting at least four weeks. They all lost weight, yet all were still obese. He then notes that their cholesterol levels, their blood pressure, and the amount of fat in their bloodstream all fell. The lesson to be learned, he emphasizes, is that “*It is possible to greatly improve or even ‘cure’ diabetes and other serious health problems while still remaining markedly overweight.*”

This is the same Gaesser who earlier warns the reader about the “myths” that “weight loss is good [and] that thinner is necessarily healthier.” He calls one chapter of his book “Diet and Die,” yet cites a program of diet and exercise in which weight loss correlates to improved health. Of course it’s true that you can improve your health by losing some weight, even if it’s not as much as you

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should. If you believe yourself utterly incapable of ever reaching your height-weight table norm, at least try to lose something and keep the pounds off. But it doesn’t mean you can’t improve your health further by losing even more weight. If you can reduce your chance of premature death by, say, 10 percent, that’s good. If you can reduce it by 50 percent, though, that’s a lot better.

Gaesser explores at length the difference between what he calls “good” and “bad” body fat; the “good” stuff is on the hips and thighs, the bad in the muscle under the belly. “It’s not how much body fat you have,” he declares, “but where you have it that is important.” The long-accepted belief has been that it’s safer to be pear- (fat on the hips) rather than apple-shaped. Fat under the belly, Gaesser says, appears to be responsible for “such killers as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, for example.” Unfortunately, it so happens that about half of the human race—those of us known as “males”—almost always lay down their extra fat in just that region. When was the last time you saw a man with one of those ripply stomachs but who has fat hips and thighs?

In fact, lower-body fat is not “good”; it’s not even neutral. As a 1995 report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* put it not so elegantly, “Noncentral obesity [being pear-shaped] is not metabolically benign.” Researchers looked at over 2,300 Canadians and grouped them both by their shape and their overall heaviness, regardless of where the fat is locat-

ed. They found that overall heaviness “tends to be the stronger predictor” of things that can cause illness and death such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol. And they specifically warned against the belief that people who are overweight but carry the fat below the waist are at no risk.

Gaesser tells us of the case of an acquaintance he calls Lucy, a 30-year-old woman who, despite being 206 pounds and only five feet, five inches tall, “has excellent levels of cholesterol, blood sugar, and blood pressure.” How can this be? “Lucy, like a lot of women, carries the body fat on her hips and thighs,” he points out. But here’s the rub. At the age of 30, Lucy would be in no real danger of heart disease no matter what these various indicators showed. Only about 1,100 American women between the ages of 25 and 34 die of heart disease each year.

It’s only after menopause, which usually takes place around the mid-40’s, that a woman’s risk of dying of heart disease starts to go up. About 8,100 American women die each year of heart disease between the ages of 35 and 44; between 45 and 54, over 22,000 women do. But what also happens after menopause is that estrogen levels drop dramatically, and a woman’s body fat to a great extent shifts up above the waist. She becomes an apple. Just when Lucy least wants that shape, she’ll get it anyway. It’s proof once again that life isn’t fair.

For the thin or merely pot-bellied, books like *Big Fat Lies* may be easy enough to dismiss; but to all too many obese people—willing to grasp anything to confirm a defeatist attitude about their condition—such books can become bibles, their deadly advice notwithstanding. During a three-month period in early 1996, emergency crews had to cut two men out of their homes to take them to the hospital. Both lived in the same New York borough of Brooklyn, and both weighed around 1,000 pounds. One lost weight in the hospital and was discharged. The other died. He could have well bought into the same fat-acceptance theology that Gaesser spews in *Big Fat Lies*. Now, though, he’s just a big fat corpse. ❧

# The Rat in the Hat

## The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive

Edited by Richard Pipes  
Yale University Press  
204 pages / \$27.50

REVIEWED BY  
**Joseph Shattan**

**T**he *Unknown Lenin* is a misleading title for the latest entry in Yale University Press's estimable *Annals of Communism* series. *The Unpublished Lenin* would have been better, or at least more accurate: the man who emerges from these hitherto secret documents is the same murderous, dogmatic, nihilist we have gotten to know through the writings of Solzhenitsyn, Dmitri Volkogonov, Adam Ulam, Bertram Wolfe, and Richard Pipes himself, editor of the present volume. For that matter, he is exactly the same Lenin who speaks to us through his *published* works—such monuments to tedium as *What Is to Be Done?*, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, and *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

There are several reasons why Soviet authorities would have kept the documents contained in *The Unknown Lenin*—122 memos and letters by, to, and about the "great leader"—under lock and key. For one thing, they demonstrate that Soviet foreign policy was aggressive and subversive from the

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very outset. As the director of the Central Party Archive, G.L. Smirnov, put it in a letter to the Deputy General Secretary of the Central Committee, back in the days when the Soviet Union was still a going concern, "There are documents the contents of which can only be interpreted as encouraging violence against sovereign states—India, Korea, Afghanistan, England, Persia, Turkey, etc." Soviet subjects for seventy years had been hearing that India, Korea, Afghanistan, England, Persia, Turkey, etc. had been conspiring against Moscow, and it was feared that exposure to the truth might prove too disillusioning.

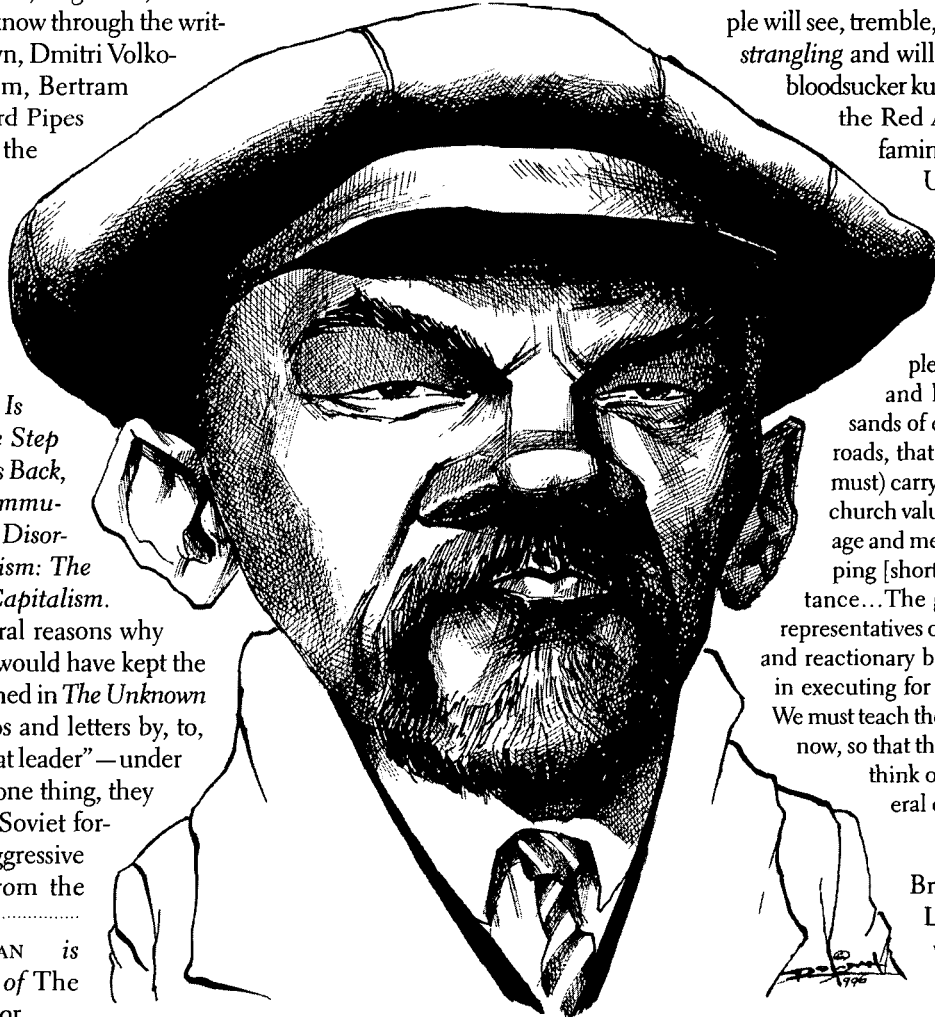
Soviet authorities also suppressed these documents because they wanted the citizenry to believe that Lenin's modest needs in the way of feminine companionship were entirely satisfied by his wife, the frumpy but faithful Nadezhda Konstantinova Krupskaya. In the West, students of Soviet history have long been aware

that Lenin had a mistress, the Paris-born, twice-married advocate of "free love," Inessa Teodorovna Armand, but in the Soviet Union this was forbidden knowledge. As Pipes dryly notes in his introduction, "It was apparently thought unseemly for the godlike leader of the world revolution to indulge in extramarital love." Now the terrible secret is out: Lenin's never-before published letters to Armand reveal that he had some human attributes, after all.

But not, one hastens to add, any good ones. The main reason for the suppression of these documents is that they reveal him to be a cold-blooded murderer: His calls for violence and terror against helpless civilians run rampant through these pages. A 1918 peasant revolt leads Lenin to demand, "The uprising of the five kulak districts should be *mercilessly* suppressed... Hang (hang without fail, so the people see) no fewer than one hundred known kulaks, rich men, bloodsuckers... Do it in such a way that for hundreds of versts around, the people will see, tremble, know, shout: *they are strangling* and will strangle to death the bloodsucker kulaks." Lenin also urged the Red Army to use the 1922 famine that devastated the Ukraine to destroy the power of the clergy:

It is precisely now and only now, when in the starving regions people are eating human flesh, and hundreds if not thousands of corpses are littering the roads, that we can (and therefore must) carry out the confiscation of church valuables with the most savage and merciless energy, not stopping [short of] crushing any resistance... The greater the number of representatives of the reactionary clergy and reactionary bourgeoisie we succeed in executing for this reason, the better. We must teach these people a lesson right now, so that they will not dare even to think of any resistance for several decades.

Brutality was always Lenin's forte. In 1892, when he was only 22 years old, he tried to dissuade friends from



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