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## PERSPECTIVE

### Political Science


Richard Cobden, nineteenth-century Britain's tireless advocate of peace and free trade pointed out that violence—the essence of the state—changes the very nature of a thing. Just as forced religion isn't really religion, he said, so forced trade isn't really trade. That was his answer to the “free-trade imperialists” of his time.

He could have added a third example: science. At its best, science is the pursuit of the truth about physical reality. Its practitioners should be fearless and relentless seekers of the facts. If they are not, what's the point?

But science dominated by government is something different: a propaganda tool not to be trusted. Too many people naïvely assume that if science in the abstract is objective, then government-sponsored science must be the same. Curiously, that principle is not extended to business-sponsored science. A researcher whose work is funded by a corporation is irredeemably tainted as a stooge. Not so the scientist on a government grant. A corporation may surely have an agenda but is that not also true for the current crop of politicians and bureaucrats?

Given a report on global warming, is it enough to know that the report was funded by a coal company or the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)? If catastrophic global warming is *not* occurring, a coal company would surely be interested in making that known—and EPA bureaucrats bent on messianic regulation might want to keep it quiet. As the Public Choice school reminds us, people are people, whether they work in the private (overt-profit) sector or the “public” (covert-profit) sector.

We need not believe that bureaucrats will self-consciously lie about scientific research—although if businessmen can lie, why not bureaucrats? It may be instead that they let their anti-industrial bias shade their interpretation of facts, sacrificing objectivity for advancement of an agenda.



Everyone who sponsors and does scientific research is human, so the risk of bias is ever present. That is precisely why it should be off-limits to government. Free competition in the scientific marketplace is the best way to neutralize subjectivity, expose error, and approach the truth. When government impedes that competition quality suffers. Yet that is exactly what government does today when it centralizes the research grant-making process. It establishes orthodoxy, complete with protectionist white-coated high priests. Dissenters are then stigmatized as “out of the mainstream” and find little or no money for their work. This happens routinely in medicine, nutrition, environmental science, and other areas.

If we just want the facts, let’s separate lab and state.

\* \* \*

If someone really set out seriously to look after the material needs of others, would he differ at all from an efficient, profit-seeking entrepreneur? Richard Fulmer wonders.

It’s a mystery why environmentalists who think businessmen are greedy also think they wish to dump potential resources into the air and water. Pierre Desrochers shows that for years others have known better.

When a government agency aspires to possess total information about its citizens, is it time to worry? David Brown thinks so.

Trying to put in a good word for his mailman, Ted Roberts got another lesson in how bureaucracies operate.

What would be the best single way to impress on the taxpayers how burdensome government is? Dale Haywood has a candidate.

Another great and influential nation had a problem with homeland security almost two

millenniums ago. There are lessons for America in the story, says Harold Jones.

Is there a way to evade the telemarketers’ dinnertime phone calls without crying to government? Scott McPherson says there is.

Being a citizen of the European Union isn’t sheer nirvana. Ask Karl Sigfrid.

Property owners won a big victory when the oppressive California Coastal Commission bit the sand. Steven Greenhut has an update.

If people and development are really the problem that the “Smart Growth” advocates say they are, then, Barry Loberfeld writes, it’s time to get serious about ridding the environment of these blights.

Postwar West Germany, following free-market policies, achieved such prosperity that the economically illiterate dubbed it a miracle. According to Norman Barry, the real miracle would be if Germany prospered following its current statist course.

With private-sector union membership shrinking precipitously, those with a vested interest in it are turning to some dubious tactics. David Denholm explains.

In the columns department, Lawrence Reed reports on classical-liberal activity in Nigeria. Doug Bandow blows the whistle on a lawyer who undermines self-responsibility. Robert Higgs tells how the salmon industry was ruined in the Northwest. Donald Boudreaux warns that mere possibility is not a justification for state action. Walter Williams sees free speech under attack. And Robert Wright, confronting the averment that people aren’t responsible for obesity, responds, “It Just Ain’t So!”

Our reviewers this month devoured books on guns in England, school vouchers, the history of strikebreaking, media bias, John Locke, and Abraham Lincoln.

—SHELDON RICHMAN

## Environment + Genes = Obesity?

# It Just Ain't So!

**M**any Americans are overweight, Ellen Ruppel Shell, author of *The Hungry Gene*, reminded *Los Angeles Times* readers last Thanksgiving Day ("Big Food Has Become a Big Problem: Politicians and Health Officials Must Address Pandemic Obesity"). Her solution? More government regulation.

Shell calls for government to regulate food advertising to children and to subsidize the production of fruits and vegetables, hoping to increase the quantity demanded by driving down the price. Following that logic, a prohibitive sin tax on sugar and fat would be certain to follow. In short, Shell calls on the state to use its coercive powers to force Americans to eat what she believes is healthy.

The problems with Shell's program are numerous and deep. For starters, she apparently has little understanding of political economy. The government has already tried prohibiting alcohol and other drugs, restricting advertising of alcohol and tobacco, imposing sin taxes, and subsidizing agriculture. The results have been mixed—at best. Success here appears even less likely.

Moreover, scientists still do not understand the relationship between diet, weight, and health. The low-fat, high-carbohydrate regime many pushed for years has not worked; some have finally begun to take a serious look at low-carb, high-protein, and high-fat alternatives, such as the Atkins diet. Similarly, the received wisdom about the alleged link between cholesterol and heart disease has come under increased criticism of late. The foundation of modern nutritional

and health theory has been shaken and the entire edifice may soon tumble down. However, it may take many more years, even decades, before we learn the Truth about diet. In the meantime, if politicians follow Shell's advice, they may subsidize, tax, and restrict the wrong foods.

The biggest problem with Shell's article however, is her limited understanding of human behavior. She formulaically asserts that "obesity is the consequence of environment acting on genetic inclination, and the genetic predisposition combined with an increasingly 'obesogenic' environment underlies the current pandemic." According to Shell, Americans are passive victims of two forces beyond their immediate control: their genetic makeup and the "obesogenic" environment in which they live. Americans cannot change their genes, but they can, with the help of Big Brother government, make the environment less conducive to obesity. That is old statist rhetoric with a bone thrown to genetic determinists. The missing element, of course, is human volition, good old free will.

You see, human beings are endowed with the wonderful ability to think, to reason, to make decisions for themselves. They must work within the constraints set by genetics and environment, but can pick from innumerable remaining possible choices. For instance, without the aid of technology, I am genetically incapable of flying or of burrowing very far into the earth. But I can choose whether to run, jog, skip, walk, crawl, or crabwalk to get around.

Similarly, I could not live on a diet composed entirely of mercury or of twigs, but there are vast combinations of foods in between that are *entirely under my control*. (As Shell notes, Americans are bombarded with food advertisements. But advertisers should not be able to rule us, and to the extent that they do, it is because the government's schools do an inadequate job of teaching critical thinking.)