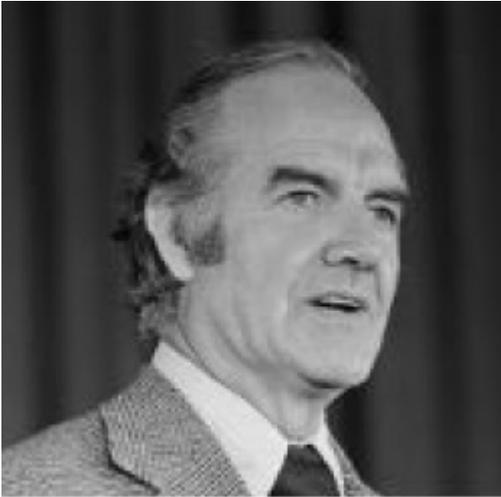


# The Disease-Mongering of the American Diet



By Edward Archer — May 23, 2018



For most of our evolutionary history, humans worried about food — finding and eating food were constant and dangerous struggles. Death was always near.

Prehistoric plants were often poisonous and had too few calories to keep us alive. So, we killed and ate animals too. But the animals often fought back — with deadly results. And we were not always the predator; sometimes we were prey. Whenever our tree-dwelling ancestors climbed down to grab a bite to eat or take a quick drink, they could be eaten. Or worse, partially eaten and left to die alone while waiting for the scavengers to finish the ‘leftovers’. Thus, from the very beginning of human history, eating and drinking were fraught with fear and death.

The passage of time did little to lessen these fears. Only 100 years ago, eating and drinking were still major causes of death. Unclean food, milk, and water killed millions of people through food-borne diseases such as typhoid, diphtheria, cholera and scarlet fever. By the 1930s, untold millions suffered and died from malnutrition and nutritional diseases such as pellagra, beriberi, scurvy, rickets, and goiter.

But that was then...

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, animals rarely eat humans and the American food supply is safer and more nutritious than at any point in history. These are well-established facts — in the U.S. almost no one has nutritional deficiencies, and in 2012, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) <sup>[1]</sup> determined that 8 out of 10 Americans were *not even at risk* for deficiencies. Despite this, millions of Americans still fear the safety of their food. Why?

The answer is a simple: Money, power, and politics.

In the 1970s, the [U.S. Surgeon General](#) <sup>[2]</sup> wrote “*the health of the American people has never been better,*” which meant the field of nutrition was quickly becoming irrelevant. But nutritional

deficiencies were not the only thing about to be forgotten. During this period, U.S. Senator George McGovern was becoming politically irrelevant. In 1972, he suffered a humiliating loss to Richard M. Nixon in the Presidential election, and in 1976 the Democratic party sidelined him in favor of a peanut farmer named Jimmy Carter. Yet as the consummate politician, Senator McGovern found a way to re-establish his relevancy. His plan was simple: he declared war on the American diet.

McGovern's partner in crime was the preeminent but politically ambitious Dr. D. Mark Hegsted of Harvard. In a classic quid pro quo, McGovern had Hegsted appointed as the USDA's first "Administrator of Human Nutrition," and together they began a politically expedient but scientifically corrupt [campaign against the American diet](#) [3]. In 1977, with Hegsted's authority leading the way, McGovern, as chair of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, published the [Dietary Goals for the United States](#) [4]. While the "McGovern Report," as it became known, was widely discredited and met with condemnation by numerous scientific organizations, the first Dietary Guidelines for Americans followed shortly thereafter.

These government reports were significant because it demonstrated that both politicians and researchers were willing to ignore rigorous evidence to the contrary and indirectly regulate the U.S. food industry by picking "winners" and "losers" (i.e., allegedly "healthy" and "unhealthy" foods, respectively). Almost immediately, industries that produced the winners were spending tens of millions lobbying to remain on that list; whereas industry losers poured even more millions into lobbying and research to "prove" their products were healthy. This milieu of "crony capitalism" engendered the use of [pseudoscientific research methods](#) [5] based on the naïve belief that a person's usual diet could be estimated simply by asking what he or she remembered eating and drinking.

Despite the *obvious* fact that people lie when asked about how much or what they ate, these methods were exactly what the unscrupulous researchers ordered. Because the results were based on complex statistical analyses of mere anecdotes, it was impossible to distinguish dietary facts from dietary fictions. This allowed unprincipled investigators to obtain any result their funders wanted, without facing accusations of scientific misconduct. Many decades of this diet-centric disinformation and disease-mongering created a fictional discourse in which "diet" caused everything from carbuncles to cancer. Thus, it was not surprising that when the public grew tired of hearing that fat would kill them, it was suddenly (miraculously?) discovered that sugar, not fat, was causing heart disease, obesity, and diabetes. As a result, most people can no longer remember the last time they ate something without reading a food label warning about sugar, salt, fat, and "chemicals."

However, there is a solution to this debacle of disease-mongering. It is called science.

My colleagues and I are fighting to re-introduce science (and common sense) into the field of nutrition. For example, we demonstrated that the diets used to establish the Dietary Guidelines [could not support human life](#) [6], and that Americans would be about 200 pounds heavier if we ate what [the USDA said we ate](#) [7]. We hoped that our rigorous results would force the U.S. government to stop funding studies based on asking people what they ate in the past. Unfortunately, our hope was in vain, and the U.S. government, leading medical and scientific journals, and even the [National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine](#) [8] simply

ignored our definitive research.

And so, the disease-mongering of the American diet continues.

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**Links**

[1] [http://www.cdc.gov/nutritionreport/pdf/Nutrition\\_Book\\_complete508\\_final.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nutritionreport/pdf/Nutrition_Book_complete508_final.pdf)

[2] <https://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/NN/B/B/G/K/>

[3] <https://www.mercatus.org/publications/government-dietary-guidelines-public-health-policy>

[4]

[https://journals.lww.com/nutritiontodayonline/Abstract/1977/09000/Dietary\\_Goals\\_for\\_the\\_United\\_States.4.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/nutritiontodayonline/Abstract/1977/09000/Dietary_Goals_for_the_United_States.4.aspx)

[5] [http://www.mayoclinicproceedings.org/article/S0025-6196\(15\)00319-5/fulltext](http://www.mayoclinicproceedings.org/article/S0025-6196(15)00319-5/fulltext)

[6] <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0076632>

[7] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5147486/>

[8]

[https://www.realclearscience.com/articles/2017/12/16/nutrition\\_researchers\\_have\\_a\\_consensus\\_to\\_use\\_bad\\_science](https://www.realclearscience.com/articles/2017/12/16/nutrition_researchers_have_a_consensus_to_use_bad_science).