

Big Brother Watching Your Diet

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What we eat does not rank near the top among issues being considered by political impresarios for party platforms. It ought to, because "Big Brother" increasingly is playing the tunes as consumers march down supermarket shopping lanes.

For decades, food manufacturers have been utilizing technology to bring virtually every sort of fruit, vegetable and meat to us year around as fresh, frozen, canned, precooked, ready-to-serve, or synthesized food products. Grocers' shelves offer thousands of items.

These products were developed under the American system of free enterprise. If a new item sold well, more was produced. If it didn't sell, processors went back to their kitchens, devised new recipes and tried again. Consumers decided what they liked or

didn't like.

Along came the ecology movement and "consumer activists," resulting in broadside attacks on foods, food additives and preservatives. An almost endless stream of scientists emerged to announce that nearly everything they fed to laboratory mice might cause cancer or something. Numerous foods or ingredients were publicly denounced or banned.

On pretexts of protecting public health, food activists proposed a set of federal diet guidelines. When these were rejected by those who felt people ought to decide for themselves what they should eat, the activists were disappointed but not defeated.

With allies in the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other agencies, they regrouped and now are redefining our diets by regulations that determine availability of foods. By regulating certain products out of existence, bureaucrats may decide what we shall eat.

USDA officials are taking the lead. They supervise inspection of foods and determine what may be served in school lunch programs, a subsidized operation large enough to influence packaging of many products.

Labeling of food products is being re-

quired by the Food and Drug Administration in such detail that one food company executive commented "everything would have to be packed in giant-sized cans" for labels to include all of the required information about contents.

Attacks on meat consumption, cereal manufacturers, fruit packers and food handlers are forcing changes in grocery product lines. If those who might prefer certain foods can't buy them, their diets naturally undergo changes.

This might be less objectionable if federal agencies really knew what they are doing, but even bureaucrats don't agree on diet control. The General Accounting Office says: "No recognized set of comprehensive nutrition principles exists to guide consumers, government agencies and the food industry in decision making."

An example of this uncertainty showed up recently when the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences reported there is no proven link

between lowering fat and cholesterol in the diet and a reduction in hardening of the arteries and heart attacks.

This report came after the livestock and poultry industries had suffered incalculable losses because of the "cholesterol scare."

A well-researched article in Business Week magazine (June 16, 1980) deals with widespread public and industry confusion over nutrition. "Public confusion over nutrition is at an all-time high," it states.

"The bureaucratic system is shot through with people who feel they have been appointed by God to make decisions for other people," one food company executive is quoted. Another

er said: "We expect this to do nothing but help our business," referring to food regulations.

Mankind has survived on a wide variety of diets throughout history and does so today. Many health experts argue it isn't so much the food you eat as how much you eat that determines your well being.

The Academy of Sciences report said: "Good food . . . should not be regarded as a poison, a medicine, or a talisman. It should be eaten and enjoyed."

But if food faddists succeed in limiting us to foods they may regard as desirable, will they also determine how much each of us shall eat — and when?