

Get Slim With Higher Taxes

By Kelly D. Brownell

DESPITE THE impression given by headlines declaring the discovery of a "fat gene," high-fat foods combined with inadequate exercise remain the primary cause of America's obesity epidemic.

But while the Government has imposed so-called sin taxes on cigarettes and alcohol in order to reduce consumption, it has yet to consider taxing low-nutrition foods or banning commercials for fatty snacks targeted at children.

Society has long placed responsibility for obesity squarely on the sufferer. Freud said that a person's unconscious conflicts created an irresistible need to satisfy oral cravings. When patients did not lose weight after years of psychoanalysis, therapists believed they were in repression and denial, and of course needed more therapy.

More recently, this focus on personal responsibility has intensified through a lens of morality. Values that society applauds — taking charge, delaying gratification, working hard to get ahead — have shaped the view that the body can be molded at will and that an imperfect body reflects a flawed personality.

Today, dieting is part of the American psyche, discontent with one's shape and weight is the norm and eating disorders are being diagnosed at record levels. Never has there

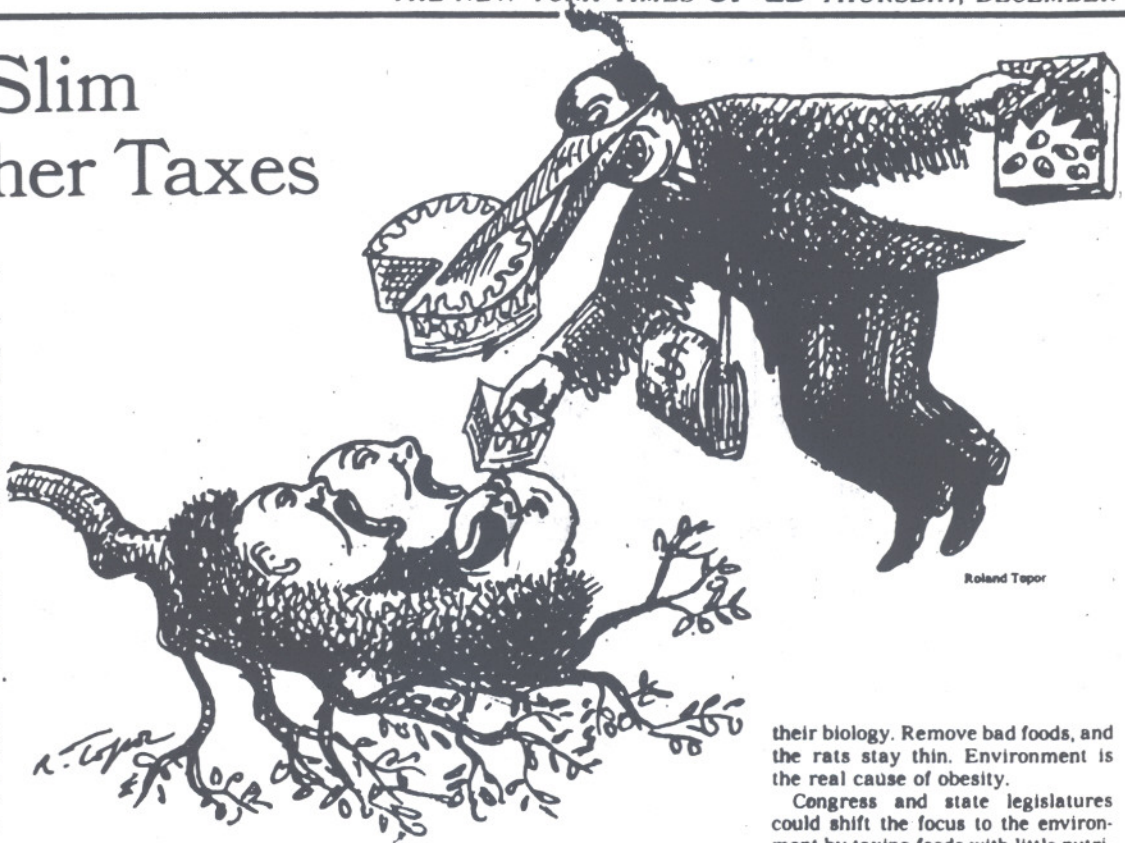
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been more pressure on the individual to lose weight. Yet in the past decade, the prevalence of obesity has increased by 25 percent.

Hence the excitement about the discovery at Rockefeller University of a gene linked to obesity in mice and the likelihood that there is a similar gene in humans. It is tempting to claim that weight gain is beyond individual control.

True, this scientific breakthrough may eventually lead to drugs that could help some people shed excess pounds. But we must be careful not to overstate the role of genetics to the degree that we have overemphasized personal responsibility.

For most people, the answer lies elsewhere. Laboratory rats given



Roland Topor

Put a surcharge
on foods with
high fat and low
nutritional value.

convenience store delights — cheese curls, chocolate bars, marshmallows, cookies — will ignore available nutritious food, even as their body weight doubles and triples. Yet we do not fault these animals for a lack of discipline, nor need we change

their biology. Remove bad foods, and the rats stay thin. Environment is the real cause of obesity.

Congress and state legislatures could shift the focus to the environment by taxing foods with little nutritional value. Fatty foods would be judged on their nutritive value per calorie or gram of fat; the least healthy would be given the highest tax rate. Consumption of high-fat food would drop, and the revenue could be used for public exercise facilities — bike paths and running tracks — or nutrition education in schools.

Unfortunately, children will still want to eat unhealthy food. At the very age that eating habits are being formed, the average child sees 10,000 food commercials per year — many using popular cartoon characters or sports heroes to push soft drinks, candy, fast food and sugar-coated cereals. We allow vending machines with snack foods in schools, and tolerate deceptive advertising (potato chips high in saturated fat are trumpeted as having no cholesterol). Then we despair at the rising obesity rates among youths, call on scientists to find solutions and, even worse, blame the children.

Since the Government controls cigarette and alcohol advertising aimed at children, a similar rationale should apply to unhealthy foods. Children can't make mature decisions in the face of clever commercials and should not be inundated with temptations to eat some of the most processed, calorie-rich, fat-laden foods on the planet.

We might lose weight by studying genetics or changing personal behavior, but the true battle must be waged against an increasingly seductive environment. □