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A Food Manifesto for the Future

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For decades, Americans believed that we had the world's healthiest and safest diet. We worried little about this diet's effect on the environment or on the lives of the animals (or even the workers) it relies upon. Nor did we worry about its ability to endure — that is, its sustainability.

That didn't mean all was well. And we've come to recognize that our diet is unhealthful and unsafe. Many food production workers labor in difficult, even deplorable, conditions, and animals are produced as if they were widgets. It would be hard to devise a more wasteful, damaging, unsustainable system.

Here are some ideas — frequently discussed, but sadly not yet implemented — that would make the growing, preparation and consumption of food healthier, saner, more productive, less damaging and more enduring. In no particular order:

- End government subsidies to processed food. We grow more corn for livestock and cars than for humans, and it's subsidized by more than \$3 billion annually; most of it is processed beyond recognition. The story is similar for other crops, including soy: 98 percent of soybean meal becomes livestock feed, while most soybean oil is used in processed foods. Meanwhile, the marketers of the junk food made from these crops receive tax write-offs for the costs of promoting their wares. Total agricultural subsidies in 2009 were around \$16 billion, which would pay for a great many of the ideas that follow.
- Begin subsidies to those who produce and sell actual food for direct consumption. Small farmers and their employees need to make living wages. Markets — from super- to farmers' — should be supported when they open in so-called food deserts and when they focus on real food rather than junk food. And, of course, we should immediately increase subsidies for school lunches so we can feed our youth more real food.
- Break up the U.S. Department of Agriculture and empower the Food and Drug

Administration. Currently, the U.S.D.A. counts among its missions both expanding markets for agricultural products (like corn and soy!) and providing nutrition education. These goals are at odds with each other; you can't sell garbage while telling people not to eat it, and we need an agency devoted to encouraging sane eating. Meanwhile, the F.D.A. must be given expanded powers to ensure the safety of our food supply. (Food-related deaths are far more common than those resulting from terrorism, yet the F.D.A.'s budget is about one-fifteenth that of Homeland Security.)

- Outlaw concentrated animal feeding operations and encourage the development of sustainable animal husbandry. The concentrated system degrades the environment, directly and indirectly, while torturing animals and producing tainted meat, poultry, eggs, and, more recently, fish. Sustainable methods of producing meat for consumption exist. At the same time, we must educate and encourage Americans to eat differently. It's difficult to find a principled nutrition and health expert who doesn't believe that a largely plant-based diet is the way to promote health and attack chronic diseases, which are now bigger killers, worldwide, than communicable ones. Furthermore, plant-based diets ease environmental stress, including global warming.
- Encourage and subsidize home cooking. (Someday soon, I'll write about my idea for a new Civilian Cooking Corps.) When people cook their own food, they make better choices. When families eat together, they're more stable. We should provide food education for children (a new form of home ec, anyone?), cooking classes for anyone who wants them and even cooking assistance for those unable to cook for themselves.
- Tax the marketing and sale of unhealthful foods. Another budget booster. This isn't nanny-state paternalism but an accepted role of government: public health. If you support seat-belt, tobacco and alcohol laws, sewer systems and traffic lights, you should support legislation curbing the relentless marketing of soda and other foods that are hazardous to our health — including the sacred cheeseburger and fries.
- Reduce waste and encourage recycling. The environmental stress incurred by unabsorbed fertilizer cannot be overestimated, and has caused, for example, a 6,000-square-mile dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico that is probably more damaging than the BP oil spill. And some estimates indicate that we waste half the food that's grown. A careful look at ways to reduce waste and promote recycling is in order.
- Mandate truth in labeling. Nearly everything labeled "healthy" or "natural" is not. It's probably too much to ask that "vitamin water" be called "sugar water with

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vitamins,” but that’s precisely what real truth in labeling would mean.

- Reinvest in research geared toward leading a global movement in sustainable agriculture, combining technology and tradition to create a new and meaningful Green Revolution.

I’ll expand on these issues (and more) in the future, but the essential message is this: food and everything surrounding it is a crucial matter of personal and public health, of national and global security. At stake is not only the health of humans but that of the earth.

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