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Farm Bill Deal to Hungry Americans: You're on Your Own

On the day House Republicans split food stamps off the main package, it's time to revisit a devastating documentary about hunger in America.

By Corby Kummer – July 11th, 2013

Last night, House Republicans made good on their promise to split the apparently unpassable farm bill in two--the farm part, with its many and controversial subsidies to big agriculture, now in the form of crop insurance, and the nutrition part, the \$80 SNAP, or food stamp, program. And just now, they passed the 608-page bill they released, 216-208.

As with pretty much everything to do with the going-on-two-year struggle to pass a new five-year farm bill, this has more to do with political theater than collaboration. Eric Cantor made a point of announcing the division during an appearance at the Aspen Ideas Festival a few weeks ago (which did not impress Conor Friedersdorf, who commented that the moderator, Ramesh Ponnuru, "may as well have asked, 'Could you recite conservative boilerplate in a monotone?'"). "We'll get it passed by the end of July," he said of his split bill.

Already, some were calling the move an attempt by Cantor to highlight John Boehner's last-minute failure to muster enough votes to pass the last iteration--which came to grief over the proposed \$20 billion in food-stamp cuts--and to position himself as the next, stronger, speaker of the house. That was certainly the best political explanation for a move that seemed to have nothing to do with bipartisanship or realism. And today's vote will certainly strengthen his campaign to displace Boehner, if the speculation is right.

The idea of the split makes intuitive sense. Anyone who looks at the farm bill for a few minutes--or, like Dan Imhoff, devotes a book to it, or, like Marion Nestle, an entire semester's course to it--sees what a chimera or, more to the point, a monster it is. It has next to nothing to do with the farms most people think of--the ones growing mixed crops, the ones that supply farmer's markets. It doesn't mention environmental protection or land conservation, though some of the country's most important safeguards are in it. And it doesn't mention nutrition assistance or hunger, though fully four-fifths of it are food stamps. Why not keep the agricultural parts, even if they benefit only industrial agriculture, in what's called the farm bill, and call the food-assistance portion what it is? That would get the farm bill back on the rails, and stop letting SNAP debates hijack every vote.

Here's why not: because that means, as anyone in the anti-hunger community recognizes, pushing the 47 million Americans on food stamps onto an ice floe. The last time Republicans

tried to saw off food stamps from the bill, as Jerry Hagstrom recounts in an excellent overview of the most recent farm bill failure, it set back food assistance efforts for more than a decade:

In 1996, then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., had proposed turning food stamps over to the states as part of his Contract with America. In order to get enough votes that year to pass a new farm bill, then-House Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts, R-Kan., made sure that the farm bill maintained the structure of the program, but the farm bill reauthorized food stamps for only two years and left the major changes to the program in the welfare reform act. Absent the farm bill, Congress made the biggest cuts to food stamps in the history of the program, and it took anti-hunger advocates years of action on subsequent farm legislation to claw back the benefits.

Many people, then, remain invested in the status quo. And however you view Cantor's proposal--as transparently cruel grandstanding or as long-overdue common sense--nothing much is likely to come of it. Hours before today's vote, the White House announced that President Obama will veto the bill if it ever reaches his desk. Even the Heritage Foundation, which wants a split, doesn't think that Cantor's bill goes nearly far enough in curtailing current farm programs and subsidizing crop insurance. In case it might have crossed your mind that the Republicans--who left subsidies to millionaire farmers untouched and un-subject to means testing, as the Cato Institute pointed out right away--might give a bit more consideration to agriculture lobbyists than to food-stamp recipients, Derek Thompson makes the role of campaign contributions absolutely plain in this good and stark piece.

Today's vote gives you a good reason to watch two videos: one a recent documentary on hunger in this country, one a quick and bright account of teaching kids to cook that turns unexpectedly devastating. In fact, it gives you a mandate.

I first saw *A Place At The Table* last summer, in a preview performance at the Aspen Ideas Festival, after which I did a Q&A with Kristi Jacobson, the film's co-director. It was hard to formulate questions fast, because I was so affected by the film, which quietly but insistently traces the stories of several people and families who struggle to get enough food. The gift of the film to make you see something under your eyes every day and, by its close attention to the particular and not the general, to make you understand in a visceral way that hunger is all around you--and something you need to do something about.

The film is distributed by Magnolia and Participant, which did the same for *Food, Inc.*; until they committed to the film, though, Jacobson explained, it was the usual documentary story of raising money piecemeal and always facing the possibility that shooting would come to a halt. Jacobson was a filmmaker and Lori Silverbush, her directing partner, a writer, who had been deeply affected by mentoring a young woman she came to understand was troubled largely because she didn't have enough to eat.

Silverbush's spouse, Tom Colicchio, who has joined his wife in devoting large amounts of his time to calling attention to hunger, told me after a screening in Washington last February, when the film opened, that he'd been raising money for hunger relief for 25 years but "the problem only got worse. It was time to understand the systemic reasons."

The film explains those reasons, and highlights the surprising role of Richard Nixon in winning an effective, early victory against hunger that successive Republicans succeeded in rolling back. And it makes selective use of several of the country's sanest commentators on this history and

current state of hunger programs, particularly Marion Nestle and Janet Poppendieck, of Hunter College, and Raj Patel.

But what will stay with you are the stories, particularly two. Rosie is a Colorado fifth-grader whose natural energy and curiosity we watch being continually diffused and hampered by a lack of enough to eat. The teacher who helps her and her mother get food without losing their dignity, Leslie Nichols, reveals unexpectedly and after we watch her on her missions of mercy that she too grew up in a hungry family.

And the heroine is Barbie Izquierdo, a beautifully spoken young Philadelphia mother who dreams of a college education and swears she will never feed her children Spaghetti-O's, as her mother had to feed her. So we see her take two buses to get to the nearest market that sells fresh produce, and feel the weight of the time to wait for both and then carry back the heavy grocery bags--all to put into practice the advice that food writers and nutritionists blithely give about making sure your family eats more fresh and less processed food. The length of the trip alone would make you go head for the nearest fast-food outlet.

The film's most devastating moment is when Barbie lands a job she loves--helping other people get the food stamps that allowed her to bring home those grocery bags--but at a salary that disqualifies her and her family from food stamps. So, just as she is finally doing something she believes in and cares about, we watch as she silently puts bowls of warmed-up Spaghetti-Os in front of her children.

There's a feel-good follow-up to Barbie's story, as you can find out if you go hear Jacobson or Silverbush talk about the movie--whose long-term life and relevance, as with *Food, Inc.*, is likely to be on campuses and from viewings on iTunes, Netflix, and DVD. Information on all at the site; action steps to take after watching it here.

A Place At The Table is an hour and 24 minutes--a fairly fast 1:24, I'd say. But if you only have 2:38, use it to watch Megan Bradley, a young, bright, pretty blonde woman who went to culinary school and started cooking in restaurants and in the Hamptons, but with surprising background in food stamps herself. (And if you don't want to watch video at all, read Lisa Sutherland's defense of food stamps and how they helped her become a successful PH.D nutritionist and food-industry executive.)

I met Bradley in May at a leadership conference of Share Our Strength, the country's leading anti-hunger organization certainly as it involves cooks and members of the restaurant community. The official star speaker of the conference was Tom Vilsack, the secretary of agriculture, who resoundingly reminded the audience, and the Republicans who weren't listening, that 92 percent of the 47 million on SNAP are children, the elderly, and the disabled. "If people understood just how vulnerable this population is at a time of economic struggle," Billy Shore, the founder with his sister Debbie of SOS, told me this morning, "people would understand [that separating off SNAP from the farm bill] makes no sense. This is politics at the expense of kids."

But the real star was Bradley, who was ostensibly there to speak about her work teaching children how to cook as part of Cooking Matters, a national education program SOS runs. What silenced the crowd was her talking about her educated, proud family needing food stamps, and what that was like for her. It's quick, and sincere, and un-self-pitying. Watch the short clip and see what you think of Cantor's victory.

