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## Pop Go The Weasels: Extreme Journalism and the Sugar Wars

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Just eat the sugar cubes and see how that feels. Photo credit: Reuters

“Just how far would a government go to protect us from ourselves?” asks [Adam Geller of the HuffPo](#) (June 1 2012).

If you are thinking, say, the death penalty for gays and lesbians ([Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates](#) — all US allies and key oil producing nations — have such laws on the books) you are wrong. The government could use its limitless power to keep us from drinking 64 ounces of soda in one big gulp, rather than 16 ounces at a time so that we could check in with ourselves, between drinks, to see if we are still hungry.

As Barry Goldwater once said, as he was pounding a Sprite, Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice.

Citing the Bloomberg administration’s successful bans on smoking in public parks and transfats in restaurant food, Geller complains that “[Mayor Michael Bloomberg now wants to stop sales of large sodas and other sugary drinks](#), in a bid to battle obesity. But in a country where fries have been equated with freedom,” (and also with French opposition to the war with Iraq, Adam) “Bloomberg’s proposal raises super-sized questions about government’s role in shaping and restricting individual choices. What’s next, a Twinkie purge?”

What is wrong with this statement? I mean, other than the fact that the “freedom” to stuff your face with sugar and fat has no more to do constitutionally guaranteed liberties than the freedom to defecate in the street or blow your cigarette smoke in someone else’s face during a picnic?

Geller’s extremist rhetorical strategy has become common to a politicized journalism style that confuses facts with opinions. Blurring the government’s constitutional power to regulate trade with state fascism, he equates laws that are appropriate to curbing the falsehoods perpetrated by greedy corporations with the eclipse of the free market. A limit on how large a soda a restaurant can serve is now a complete “ban” on pleasure. For the Gellers of journalism, asking customers to think before they drink logically leads to the elimination of traditional American foods and dire predictions about the consolidation of a Nanny state.

Fortunately Mike Bloomberg, [like the honey badger](#), don’t give a sh\*t.

I would like to point out that Geller didn’t mention abortion or the right to birth control as health choices that might be made unavailable by an overreaching state. No! Of course not! Because these are moral issues — whereas restaurants persuading the public that there are no health risks attendant to stuffing half a bag of sugar into your body once or twice a day, or [the 47 grams of fat and 760 calories contained in a single Burger King Whopper with Cheese](#) would not be of concern in a country where [44 million people have no health insurance](#).

In response to the 64 ounce soda controversy, [conservative Chair of the House Budget Committee Paul Ryan \(R-WI\) says](#) that he “gave up pop for Lent three years ago” and no longer consumes it. But “do what you want,” Ryan said. ‘Do what you want with your life.’” OK, Paul: I think I’ll gay marry. How about that? In the same story John Boehner (whose trim, senior figure suggests that he’s not much of a sugar eater either) asks in his typical condescending way whether we don’t have more important things to take care of in this country.

Yes we do: medical and dental care. But since the Republican Congress would never dream of making *that* universally available, could we at least warn folks away from foods that make diabetes, joint replacement, heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and kidney dialysis inevitable?

Heck no — do what you want. Drink yourself into a diabetic coma as Congress subsidizes the sugar industry to the tune of [\\$3.4 billion tax dollars per year](#), up from [\\$2 billion in 2007](#) (figures are from reports by the American Enterprise Institute and the Cato Institute, respectively.) Absorb a half gallon of of Coke whose 744 calories contain no nutritional

value. To put this in perspective, 744 calories is over 1/3 of the recommended daily calorie intake for the average adult and almost half of the daily calories recommended for a child age 13 or younger; 216 grams of sugar, or 10 times the recommended daily amount; and 248 milligrams of salt, or 1/10 the recommended daily amount.

Despite these compelling facts that might make an argument in favor of a municipal government taking a stand on sugar consumption, Geller instead compares the elimination of 64 ounce Mega Gulps to Prohibition. “If government officials can limit the size of sodas, why couldn’t they next decide to restrict portion sizes of food served in restaurants or the size of pre-made meals sold at supermarkets?” he whines.

*Why wouldn’t a government determined to curb obesity restrict sales of doughnuts or pastries or – perish the thought, New Yorkers – ban bagels with a schmear of cream cheese?*

*If government is within its right to restrict behavior to protect health, then why wouldn’t a mayor or other official ban risky sexual conduct or dangerous sports like skydiving? What’s to stop a mayor from requiring people to wear a certain type of sunscreen or limit the amount of time they can spend on the beach, to protect them from skin cancer?*

Two reasons, Adam. Anyone determined to get as much sugar in their bodies as is contained in a 64 ounce Super Slurp can buy four sixteen ounce cups if s/he decides that the preservation of liberty depends on it. Because of this, organized and violent criminals will not make 64 ounce sodas available on the street corner any time soon. Furthermore, one restriction does not necessarily lead to similar restrictions, both *because that would be stupid, Adam* and because regulation has to be coupled to a realistic state capacity for enforcing the law.

That was the lesson of Prohibition. Unless you are taking your lessons from *Boardwalk Empire*, history does not support the argument that all government regulation related to food and drink leads to failure or dictatorship. As we are talking about alcohol, let’s turn this in another absurd direction: how would Geller feel about a bar that routinely served a 64 ounce vodka? Should a customer be permitted to choose alcohol poisoning? Should all Americans be permitted to drink alcohol in an unregulated way, regardless of age?

The fact that the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is focused on reasonable portion size at all is testament to the cynical ways in which fast food retailers and the sugar industry have ingeniously persuaded the public that their products are far less harmful than they are. It is also testament to victories over other public health hazards that date back to that Federalist period so beloved of movement conservatives. Agents of public health

departments have performed a variety of vital, but virtually invisible, functions for over 200 years that include issuing birth certificates, curing the environmental conditions that led to annual epidemics. More modern functions include making sure that we don't have rat shit in meals we purchase in restaurants.

So it's fine to let the Department of Health into McDonald's to make sure that the minimum wage, non-unionized workers are wearing hairnets and beard nets (what about a worker's freedom to choose how to wear his hair?), and to make sure the trash is bagged properly (can't we trust the equally ill-paid and overworked managers to take care of this on their own?) We *do* want inspectors to make sure that the place isn't running with vermin (if customers choose to consume there despite the roaches....)

But it's not okay to keep McDonald's from making massive profits by dangling obscenely large portions in front of customers that they will then consume because, dammit, *I paid for that drink when they super-sized the meal!!!*

And customers are going to drink it if it is served that way. Because that's the Amurrican way.