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Gene Healy: The coming low-sodium dystopia

By: [Gene Healy](#)
Examiner Columnist
April 27, 2010

Midway through D.C.'s February Snowpocalypse, with dystopian visions dancing in my head, I rented the 1982 sci-fi classic "Blade Runner." The movie's noir-ish picture of Los Angeles in 2019-dimly-lit and rainy, with flying cars, sexy replicants, and gruff, chain-smoking detectives-seems less prescient (and less foreboding) the closer we get to the year it depicts.

As the DVD played, one thought kept distracting me: "It's so cute that they used to think you'd be allowed to smoke in the future."

From a 2010 vantage point, the 21st century seems to promise an entirely different flavor of nightmare-one in which every individual consumption choice is subject to veto by the collective.

Consider the fact that President Obama's choice to head the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Thomas Frieden, doesn't seem to recognize any distinction between diseases you catch -- like swine flu -- and those that involve individual choice, like heart disease. When he served as Mayor Bloomberg's top health official, Frieden instituted mandatory calorie counts on restaurant menus, a trans-fat ban, and sent out swarms of officers to harass bar owners for the crime of having ashtrays.

"When anyone dies at an early age from a preventable cause in New York City, it's my fault," Frieden declared in 2006.

In September, Obama's Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned clove cigarettes (because they taste good, so kids might like them). The agency's now considering banning menthols. Obamacare makes menu-labeling mandatory for chain restaurants.

And, last week the Washington Post reported that the FDA may "gradually over a period of years," lower the level of sodium allowed in American food, "to adjust the American palate to a less salty diet." Surely as a student of the U.S. Constitution, you're familiar with the clause where the Founding Fathers gave the federal government unlimited jurisdiction over "the American palate"?

Unfortunately, our newly passed health care plan lends weight to the argument that your health affects my pocketbook, and justifies me in telling you how to live. When "we're all in this together," woe betide

the man who'd rather be left alone.

In the Eurosocijalist paradise our betters have planned for us, we won't even get the good parts of continental life: quaint medieval towns with adorable restaurants serving rich cuisine. We'll get impersonal strip-mall feedbags full of low-sodium, vegan Soylent Green.

Oh, I know: I'm being ridiculous. When a columnist starts ranting about slippery slopes and sci-fi dystopias, it's well past time for last call.

But maybe you've noticed how quickly modern American reality outpaces satire-how often, in the increasingly popular blogpost title, "Life imitates 'The Onion.'"

A similar dynamic is at work when it comes to social engineers' plans to regulate bad behavior out of the human genome. In a 1997 Cato study criticizing trial lawyers' efforts to hold tobacco companies liable for the choices of individual smokers, my colleague Bob Levy closed by deploying the much-derided "slippery slope" argument.

"What's next?" he asked-raising the specter of an American nanny state devoted to protecting us from soft drinks, red meat, and fast foods. More than a decade later, Levy's nightmare looks pretty plausible.

In 1951's Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury pictured a future America run by book-burning censors, where a merry band of dissidents meets secretly to recite banned literature. Perhaps in America 2019, rebels will gather in the fields to smoke menthols and share black-market kosher dills.

If so, sign me up for the resistance, because the FDA can have my salty smoked almonds when they peel them from my cold, dead hands: "Wolverines!!"

Examiner columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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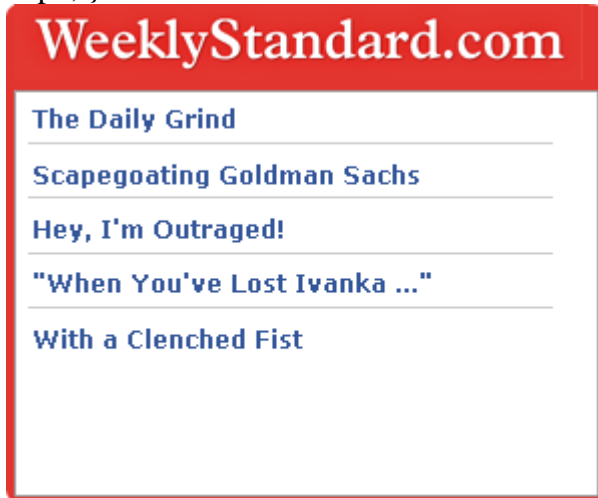
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