



Parents, not food marketers...

By: Julie Gunlock – September 24, 2013

I have nothing but respect for CATO scholar Walter Olson. He is one of the clearest voices on the high cost of food (and many other) regulations and I'm not sure I've ever disagreed with him before. But I was disappointed to hear his [comments at a Heritage Foundation event](#) yesterday focusing on food regulations. At the event, Olson said "conservatives are distracted" by Michelle Obama's anti-obesity efforts, adding, "...most of what she has done is pretty innocuous actually."

Olson's correct to remind conservatives to broaden their criticism beyond Mrs. Obama's Let's Move campaign. He reminds us of the far greater threat to food freedom that comes from Centers for Disease Control Director Thomas Frieden—who happened to be Nanny Bloomberg's health czar in New York City prior to taking the CDC gig. But think it's wrong to dismiss the First Lady's efforts as innocuous.

While I have [panned the Let's Move campaign](#) and the First Lady's efforts to [expand school feeding programs](#), my real concern isn't what Mrs. Obama is doing. Rather, it's what she fails to do.

Let me explain. Last week, the First Lady [spoke at a food summit](#) where she urged food companies to work harder to promote and sell healthy foods to kids and stay competitive and profitable at the same time.

You know, that's fine. I don't actually have a problem with encouraging companies to voluntarily sell and market healthy food (although the First Lady is hardly making innocent suggestions when she has the ear of powerful federal regulatory agencies). It's obvious Mrs. Obama sees herself as a food expert. And let's not forget, [the First Lady did serve on the board of a food company](#) that produced some not-so-healthy items. Funny that she never mentions that particular part of her resume. Oh well.

Anyway, the real problem I have is that these companies don't need this advice from the First Lady because they already know it. The food industry is well aware that healthy food sells. Companies already produce an embarrassment of riches of low calorie food and they have [already committed to limit marketing during children's shows](#).

Perhaps the First Lady (and her speechwriters) missed an interesting [study released a this summer from The Hudson Institute and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) which showed that between 2006 and 2011, lower-calorie foods and beverages were the key growth engine for restaurants and that there was a 5.5 percent increase in sales compared to a 5.5 percent decline among chains selling fewer lower-calorie servings. She also must have missed [an announcement](#) a few months ago that a coalition of more than 230 retailers, food and beverage manufacturers, and restaurants met the goal (two full years early!) of cutting 1.5 trillion calories from food and drinks available to consumers.

This is why I focus on the First Lady. It isn't the rather boring comments she makes, it's the fact that she continues to miss the most obvious opportunity to make a significant difference in the lives of children—by talking to parents.

After all, this is a popular First Lady. Wouldn't it be refreshing if the First Lady spent a little more time reminding parents that they need to fulfill the basic job of feeding their children? She could simply say that we all need to remember that it's the parents' job to provide breakfast lunch and dinner. How about she remind parents that packed lunches are cheaper and that it takes only minutes to put a sandwich and an apple in a brown paper bag.

Or how about this: How about the First Lady takes on some of the alarmists out there. The ones who tell moms they're poisoning their children if they give them conventionally grown fruits and vegetables—which are much more affordable and therefore a good source of healthy food for poor families (who suffer from obesity at higher rates than middle class children). Maybe she can take a few minutes to correct the [lies put out there by radical environmental groups](#) who tell moms that the nearly undetectable levels of pesticide residue on conventionally grown fresh fruit is dangerous.

Or, maybe she could surprise us all by taking a swing at the chemphobes who tell moms that [cheaper canned food is dangerous](#). She could do us all a favor and tell the food snobs to stick a sock in it. Particularly the ones who turn their noses up at mothers who might use [reasonably priced and convenient frozen food](#) rather than fresh produce or who might...horror of all horrors...occasionally throw a frozen pizza in the oven instead of cooking something from scratch.

Food alarmism is what turns parents off and makes them give up. The "Stop! You're doing it wrong!" messages are what make moms and dads do precisely the incorrect thing if they want healthy kids—throw their hands up and say "hmmm...maybe I should just hand my kid a couple of dollars and let the lunch lady take care of them. She must know better than me."

[Research](#) solidly points to the [benefit of having parents involved in kids' nutrition](#)—sitting down to dinner a few times a week, putting kids to bed at a reasonable hour and turning off the dang television. Just once, I'd like the First Lady to mentioned these three simple steps instead of pleading with food marketers to stop doing what businesses are free to do—advertise the products they produce.

Olson has a point when he reminds conservative to broaden their criticism beyond the First Lady but let's not dismiss Michelle Obama's inability to broaden her own remarks beyond picking on the food industry.