

Steve Chapman

Ever-fattening government tells us to go on a big diet

We're told by the government what medicines we may take and what recreational substances we may ingest, but when it comes to food, we decide what goes down our own gullets. Gun-owning barbecuers coexist peacefully with Humane Society vegans. To paraphrase the old adage, your freedom ends where my stomach begins.

But not everyone is keen on emancipated eating. Public health puritans, appalled at the spread of excess weight, think the government should forcefully guide our dining choices. And when it comes to policy, they are getting a place at the table.

Last week, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted to hose the Happy Meal. No longer would McDonald's (or any other restaurant) be allowed to provide a free toy with a meal that exceeds specified amounts of fat, sugar and calories. If the folks at the Golden Arches want to offer a Batman action figure, it will have to be flanked by fruits and vegetables.

The impulse to overrule nutritional choices exists elsewhere too. In his last two budgets, New York's Democratic Gov. David Paterson proposed a tax on soda.

The governor says this would help cover "the \$7.6 billion the state spends every year to treat diseases from obesity." Reuters reports, ominously, that he "did not dismiss the idea of eventually imposing a tax on other obesity-linked foods such as hamburgers and chocolate bars."

San Francisco Supervisor Eric Mar speaks in more grandiose terms. He said the Happy Meal ordinance addresses "a survival issue," and proclaimed, "We're part of a movement that is moving forward an agenda of food justice." Food justice?

Now, there are many places where the government ought to be: between a citizen and a mugger, between the polluter and the sky, between us all and al Qaeda. But the space between a diner's hand and a diner's mouth is not one of them.

The nice thing about eating is that the person who makes good or bad choices is the one who reaps the reward or penalty. If I scarf a cheesecake, you don't gain weight. And if I decide that consigning myself to the Big and Tall Store is not such a bad option, it's not your place to stop me from doing so.

You don't like what's in a Happy

Meal? Don't let your kid have one.

High-calorie food is not one of those substances that presents a mortal threat to innocent bystanders. Guzzle a liter of Fanta, and you can still be trusted behind the wheel of a car. Walk by a KFC, and you don't have to worry about secondhand fat.

True, my gluttony may cause me to end up morbidly obese and a burden on the medical system. But if that's grounds for regulation, we will all soon be surrendering our TV remotes to the police and doing daily calisthenics under the watchful eye of commissars in spandex.

As it happens, soda taxes may affect only the people who don't need affecting. California Polytechnic State University economists Michael Marlow and Alden Shiers, writing in *Regulation* magazine, noted data showing that "taxes on alcohol consumption significantly lower drinking by light drinkers, but not heavy drinkers." One study found that a 58 percent tax on soda would "drop the average body mass by only 0.16 points" — on a scale of 30.

Restrictions on fatty food are no more promising. Suppose a 5-year-old has a Happy Meal every week (which is how often new toys appear). Economist Michael Anderson of the University of California at Berkeley tells me that while a child who dines on fast food may get a couple of hundred extra calories, that's not much compared to the 11,000 calories she is likely to eat in a week.

Besides, people who are diverted from the Golden Arches have plenty of other cheap, tasty, artery-clogging options. "If they don't eat at McDonald's, are they going to go home and eat broccoli and brown rice?" asks Anderson.

Fat chance. His research shows that people who live in places with fast-food restaurants are more likely to eat out, but no more likely to be obese.

The stubborn fact is that people who are intent on doing things that expand their dimensions to an unhealthy degree can always find ways to do so. Ditto for governments.

Examiner Columnist Steve Chapman blogs daily at newsblogs.chicagotribune.com/steve_chapman. To find out more about Chapman, and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate Web site.

