

Our Sisyphean battle against obesity

In Greek mythology, the character Sisyphus was a king of Corinth, condemned for his deceitfulness to arduously roll a gigantic boulder uphill, only to see it roll downhill, and to repeat the action into eternity. Sisyphus has come to be a metaphor for futility.

Fast-forward 2,500 years. Imagine a hypothetical society of overfed, sedentary people where elusive thinness is praised above all other attributes, so much so that it drives a generation to emulate unrealistic magazine images by purging and starving. But, at the same time, where irresistible food advertising and myriad “fast-food” opportunities conspire to seduce the populace into caloric overload; where government provides generous subsidies to growers of high-test sugar, corn and wheat to artificially lower the price of snack food; where massive food stamp programs underwrite overindulgence in sweets and soda; and where virtual experience on the computer screen has replaced walking and playing.

And, then, as part of this thought experiment, imagine if this society were to enact a massive new healthcare law, with perverse incentives: healthy people will see their health insurance premiums double or triple, while individuals with chronic diseases—often borne of unhealthy lifestyles—will see their premiums drop. In effect, healthy eaters and exercisers will be subsidizing hordes of junk food-consuming couch-sitters.

Now, this society has declared obesity a disease, not just the inevitable consequence of all its cultural imperatives to accrue pounds. As a result of this new formulation, trillions of dollars of government and insurance money will be unleashed in an effort to curb the very selfsame obesity that the society itself has engendered. There will be programs galore, there will be massive underwriting of new drugs to treat overweight and there will be bold new surgeries to alter our physiology so we render citizens “well” again.

Don't we see the irony in this? The profitable imperatives to gain weight have now spawned a counter-industry to reverse the problem. The only proper analogy to this futile societal boulder-rolling might be war itself: massive destruction and the threat of annihilation prompt technological advances and stimulate industrial production. Even the consequent death tolls of a shooting war and an obesity war are comparable: corpses festoon the battlefields/hospital wards while Daddy Warbucks/Big Pharma and Big Medicine reap huge profits.

The worst thing that could happen to this stimulus merry-go-round would be for massive segments of the population to opt out. Instead of cramming themselves with delectable goodies and foregoing exercise and then seeking rescue from their “disease” via government largesse, they could get off the obesity grid altogether by pursuing healthy lifestyles from cradle to grave.

But this would be a catastrophe for our consumer economy. We need to push the stock market to ever-dizzying heights and combat unemployment, so we can't pull back on the throttle. Keep eating food and stupefying ourselves with blockbuster Hollywood entertainments and social media. The Keystone Pipeline? Who needs it when we have a huge pharmaceutical drug pipeline.

Government wants be part of the solution to get more voters to subscribe to party platforms that dispense ever-wider health benefits, including the “right” to obesity

drugs and surgeries. The “health sector” is one of the few places left to park investments in a country where we’re manufacturing less and less things.

These days, the word “restraint” is fading from our lexicon. It’s a relic of a bygone era. Today we conflate our Founding Fathers’ phrase “the pursuit of happiness” with endless indulgence. But since it was just Independence Day, here’s what a few forgotten luminaries once said about restraint:

“What is liberty without wisdom and without virtue? It is the greatest of all possible evils; for it is folly, vice and madness, without tuition or restraint.”
Edmund Burke

“It is restraint that is honorable to a person, not their liberty.” John Ruskin

“Liberty exists in proportion to wholesome restraint.” Daniel Webster

“Absolute liberty is absence of restraint; responsibility is restraint; therefore the ideally free individual is responsible to himself.” Henry Adams

These days, restraint is badly in need of a glitzy PR campaign to revive its popularity amid a societal cacophony that urges us to indulge in every way possible. Any takers? Nah, I didn’t think so. But that may be the only way we can get off the Sisyphean cycle of futility that we’re currently on. The American Medical Association and the Federal Government can’t be our saviors. We don’t have forever to make a course correction.