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Naiveté at *Business Week* **by Tibor Machan**

Why do some reporters never manage to become educated in the areas they cover? Consider, for example, a recent piece in *Business Week*, "[A Food Fight over Calorie Counts](#)" (2/11/08).

The fight is supposed to be between public health officials and the restaurant industry. As to the latter, the report, written by one Michael Orey, leaves little doubt about the reporter's position: the industry is fighting to keep up its opportunity to sell us food without much health benefits, food that lacks nutrition, food that makes us fat. In contrast, for Mr. Orey all public health officials are "desperate to combat an epidemic of obesity." In short, they are the heroes, even saints, in the story!

I don't know how Mr. Orey knows what motivates public health officials but I do know a bit about public choice theory. This is the idea, rewarded with the Nobel Prize in economic science back in the mid 80s, that those in government are motivated no differently from those outside. They too want to advance their own agenda, including keeping and expanding the scope of their jobs.

One need not even turn to this somewhat technical field in economics to see Mr. Orey's naiveté. Most people know about the way government bureaucrats, especially, try very hard to make themselves important, to become indispensable parts of all our lives. Everywhere government bureaucrats tend to be bent on creating obstacles to commerce, technology, and industry and their rationale — their professed motivation — is mostly a concern for the public interest. In fact, however, the first concern of most government bureaucrats would be just exactly what the first concern of other human beings happens to be, namely, to make a decent living, to advance in their careers, to produce services that will be needed and well paid for. The difference is that government bureaucrats are paid from public funds and this liberates them from the need to reach a voluntary agreement with those for whom they provide their service. Instead, they mostly impose their service on us whether we want it or not.

In my neighborhood we had a good example of this recently. We had those horrible fires, followed by intermittent rains. The rains were feared by some because they could have, at their worst, produced mudslides. Because of this danger, county officials embarked upon what can only be considered fanatical alarmism — they sent out dozens of emails, daily, made phone calls to local residents, instituted voluntary and mandatory evacuations and did everything in their power to make themselves our saviors.

Needless to say, very little if anything happened that required all this panic. But the fact that there was just a chance that something could have happened sufficed for the county bureaucracy to go into action big time.

At whose expense? Well, the taxpayers'. And taxpayers have no choice about whether they to receive this service — they get it whether they want it. The government bureaucrat's blessing is a vision of the worst case scenario — something really bad that might happen, never mind what is the probability of it happening. In my neighborhood, for example, only some of the residents are exposed to any real danger when the rains come, even after fires. The rest of us are far away from hills and slopes so there is very little chance of us suffering damage or harm. But when one does not have to worry about cost but mainly about possible public rebuke — being called to account for a failure to anticipate the worst — then alarmism triumphs.

Business Week's reporters ought to know better than to assume that public health officials are all aiming to do nothing but “combat an epidemic of obesity,” especially when no such epidemic is in evidence and when, moreover, it really isn't the proper task of a public official to reform the eating habits of the citizenry. *Business Week's* writers might, at the least, mention that there is serious skepticism afoot about what really motivates government bureaucrats.

Instead while the restaurant industry is depicted mainly as intent upon cashing in on people's culinary and nutritional imprudence, government bureaucrats are presented as saints. Come on, let's get real.

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