

# The Shape Of Things To Come

It used to be that the rich were fat, the poor were thin, and right-thinking people worried about how to feed the hungry. Now, in much of the world, the rich are thin, the poor are fat, and we're worrying about how to solve the crisis of obesity.

Evolution is mostly to blame. It has designed mankind to cope with deprivation, not plenty. Mankind is designed to store energy in good years to see them through the lean years. But we live in a time, thankfully, when lean years are becoming rarer all over the globe.

Every silver lining has a cloud: the consequences of our growing prosperity and amazing agricultural productivity is a new plague, one of obesity

While America obsesses over threats from abroad, every day our children face a barrage of obstacles to good health. They're confronted by powerful fast food and soft drink industries, endless junk food advertising, tantalizing sedentary technologies, ridiculously super-sized portions, under-funded schools selling unhealthy foods and reducing physical activity, diminishing quality family time, and a lack of safe and accessible places to play due to poor community design. Little wonder our kids are getting bigger, lazier, angrier & crazier.

Exercise has been pushed from labor to leisure. Rather than getting paid to expend calories, we now pay to do so, whether in leisure time or in money spent on health clubs, exercise, equipment, and outdoor recreation.

We've anointed size, speed, and convenience the kings of our lives. We buy in order to be. We've traded quality of life for the steady supply of cheap consumer goods. In an irony almost too much to bear, our contemporary way of life has placed our children at risk for lives shorter than the generation they're succeeding.

While the epidemic of childhood obesity is both a health and social crisis, seemingly insurmountable crises have been faced down before. Infectious diseases once thought incurable are now almost completely relegated to the history books. Once alerted to crisis, the collective resolve of American citizens and communities has always risen to the challenge.

Simply exhorting people to behave differently will not sufficiently address this crisis. It will take sustained community and political activism. So many forces are conspiring against us to change.

Some will resist the necessary changes, for reasons of financial necessity (as in the case of schools) or of political ideology.

There will be those who feel that obesity is an individual responsibility, and not a collective one. They will argue that this epidemic is a result of poor individual will power, not an obesifying environment. They will say it's up to individuals, and not the government, to decide who wins the battle between their better and worse selves.

When applied to adults, they may be right. However, the argument for intervention is that dietary habits are established in childhood. A society shares some responsibility for the care of its youngest members, and therefore should try to ensure that they are protected from forces that are conspiring against their good health.

Society has a legitimate interest in addressing the epidemic of obesity, because everybody pays for it. Thin people subsidize overweight people through health care. Less productive workers means a weaker economy and higher taxes. And so on.

Prevention must take priority, as the treatment of obesity has proven costly, difficult, and usually ineffective, as the billions spent on various weight loss programs and therapies has shown. The most logical place to start is with children.

We must mobilize as communities to create environments that promote physical activity and healthy eating for children. If we do not, the rise in childhood obesity will reduce average life spans by as much as five years.

Parents must relinquish their sense of recreation entitlement - the expectation that time home from work is time most deserved for personal relaxation & pleasure. No, time away from work is time most for our *children*.

Our nation has a long history of intervening with legislation and grassroots activism to protect the health and well-being of children. It's time to do so again.

## Did You Know?

America is truly a land of plenty. Today, America produces enough food to allow every man, woman, and child to eat 3900 calories a day. That amazing food production has to be sold, which is why portion sizes are getting bigger.

Food is everywhere in America. At the gas station. At the coffee shop near the office. At the check-out counter of any store, not just supermarkets. At work, brought in by someone for someone else's birthday, or for the holiday of the week.

We're just surrounded by food. Food is available every time you turn around, any time of day.

It's a David and Goliath fight. We're battling an entire social, cultural, corporate, and political environment. But remember, David won.