The Slippery Slope toward Public Health Serfdom
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In 1964 the Surgeon General issued his “Report on Smoking and Health.” With its argument that smoking could be hazardous to health, this report initiated a four-decade war on tobacco. This year the Surgeon General issued a “Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity.” The Surgeon General’s Call notes that obesity is correlated with such health problems as diabetes and heart disease.

The war on tobacco was accompanied by continual calls for higher taxation and increased regulation. Such calls will surely accompany a war on obesity as well. Indeed, the calls have already begun. For instance, it has been pointed out that placing a one-penny tax on each can or bottle of soft drinks could raise $1.5 billion per year, while reducing the consumption of soft drinks and the sizes of waistlines at the same time. Or at least waistlines would shrink if people continued to do everything else the same, except drink water in place of some of their soft drinks. To be sure, it’s unlikely they would drink water, and what they might drink in place of soft drinks could have even higher calories. So waistlines might not shrink after all, but the government’s budget would expand in any case.

It’s reasonable to expect people to differ in the amount of interest they take in their waistlines, just as they differ in the amount of interest they take in baseball. But why should waistlines become a matter of national political concern? It’s understandable that governments might be interested in new tax sources. They are always looking for new revenue. They are also considering a
variety of regulations that would include such things as restrictions on food advertising and limits on the location and contents of vending machines.

Why can’t people make their own choices? Some people go to a movie and eat plain popcorn while others put butter on theirs. Why can’t this freedom of choice extend to food generally? Why does the Surgeon General have to become a mouthpiece for the Nanny State and seek to police what people eat?

What we are witnessing is the slippery slope quality of our mixed economy. By mixed economy, I mean that our economy combines elements of capitalism with elements of socialism. The problem with mixing the two is that they do not truly mix. They are more like oil and water. Capitalism fosters toleration among people over different personal choices because people bear the costs of their choices. Socialism fosters intolerance because the costs associated with different choices are spread across everyone, which means that each person acquires a legitimate interest in the activities of everyone else, thereby creating a climate in which freedom cannot flourish.

Consider the Surgeon General’s claim that obesity is associated with higher medical costs. This situation plays out very differently if medical care is delivered through capitalism than if it is delivered through socialism. Half a century ago, it was delivered mostly through capitalism. Now it is delivered mostly through socialism. Under capitalist practice, someone who incurs the higher medical costs associated with obesity pays those costs himself. Whether this happens directly through higher payments to physicians and hospitals or whether it happens indirectly through higher insurance premiums does not matter
in any important way. People pay the costs associated with their chosen patterns of conduct in any case. You may not like someone's obesity for any of a number of reasons. Ultimately, however, it is no business of yours.

It is different with socialism. People who make relatively low use of medical services end up supporting people who make relatively high use. Medical costs are dumped largely into a common pool rather than charged to the individual users of those services. The capitalist principle of toleration and personal responsibility is converted into a socialist principle of intolerance and collective responsibility. The particular form of intolerance is of low cost users toward high cost users. Socialism creates meddlesome busybodies and converts them into organized pressure groups.

It is a reasonable thing for people to take responsibility for their condition, and capitalist practice encourages them to do so. Socialist practice, though, is different, as it substitutes collective for individual responsibility. Under capitalism, a person who shapes up and thereby lowers his medical costs is able to pocket that saving and use it for other purposes. Under socialism, any resulting cost reduction reverts to the government's general fund. The growing socialization of medical care that has been underway for the past half-century or so truly represents a slippery slope that will lead to an increasingly shrill and intense war over food and health. It can be no other way if collectivist principle and practice is allowed to continue its ascendancy in our national life.