

March 2, 2010

David Goldman comments on the state of the economy and what lies ahead.

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[Toby Harnden](#) has a post on Jeb Bush criticizing Sarah Palin.

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In [Investor's Business Daily](#), [David Hogberg](#) interviews Thomas Sowell about his new book, *Intellectuals and Society*.

...IBD: What incentives and constraints do intellectuals face?

Sowell: *One of the incentives is that, to the extent that intellectuals stay in their specialty, they have little to gain in terms of either prestige or influence on events. Say, an authority in ancient Mayan civilization just writes about ancient Mayan civilization, then only other specialists in ancient Mayan civilization will know what he is talking about or even be aware of him.*

So intellectuals have every incentive to go beyond their area of expertise and competence. But stepping beyond your area of competence is like stepping off a cliff — you may be a genius within that area, but an idiot outside it. ...

...IBD: How about those who argue that we can use government to move society in a more conservative direction, like compassionate conservatism? Do they suffer from the vision of the anointed?

Sowell: *To some extent, yes. Compassionate conservatism meant that Republicans added to the housing problems created by the Democrats rather than mitigating them.*

George W. Bush, for example, was for a law that allowed the Federal Housing Administration to do away with nuisances like down payments on houses. And even his father was for the notion that the federal government should intervene if there were statistical differences among groups in housing or mortgage approvals.

These are people who seem to think that the way to be clever politically is to accept some of the premises of Democrats but reach different conclusions. But if you accept the premises, in many cases you've accepted the conclusions. ...

In the [Atlantic](#), [Corby Kummer](#) reports on a fascinating agricultural movement afoot. And Wal-Mart is behind it.

...I STARTED LOOKING into how and why Walmart could be plausibly competing with Whole Foods, and found that its produce-buying had evolved beyond organics, to a virtually unknown program—one that could do more to encourage small and medium-size American farms than any number of well-meaning nonprofits, or the U.S. Department of Agriculture, with its new [Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food](#) campaign. Not even Fishman, who has been closely tracking Walmart's sustainability efforts, had heard of it. "They do a lot of good things they don't talk about," he offered.

The program, which Walmart calls Heritage Agriculture, will encourage farms within a day's drive of one of its warehouses to grow crops that now take days to arrive in trucks from states like Florida and California. In many cases the crops once flourished in the places where Walmart is encouraging their revival, but vanished because of Big Agriculture competition.

Ron McCormick, the senior director of local and sustainable sourcing for Walmart, told me that about three years ago he came upon pictures from the 1920s of thriving apple orchards in Rogers, Arkansas, eight miles from the company's headquarters. Apples were once shipped from northwest Arkansas by railroad to St. Louis and Chicago. After Washington state and California took over the apple market, hardly any orchards remained. Cabbage, greens, and melons were also once staples of the local farming economy. But for decades, Arkansas's cash crops have been tomatoes and grapes. A new initiative could diversify crops and give consumers fresher produce. ...

John Tierney looks at the latest nutritional mandate in the making; the evidence for which you can take with a grain of ...something.

...That's the beauty of the salt debate: there's so little reliable evidence that you can imagine just about any outcome. For all the talk about the growing menace of sodium in packaged foods, experts aren't even sure that Americans today are eating more salt than they used to. ...

...Dr. McCarron and his colleagues analyzed surveys from 33 countries around the world and reported that, despite wide differences in diet and culture, people generally consumed about the same amount of salt. There were a few exceptions, like tribes isolated in the Amazon and Africa, but the vast majority of people ate more salt than recommended in the current American dietary guidelines.

The results were so similar in so many places that Dr. McCarron hypothesized that networks in the brain regulate sodium appetite so that people consume a set daily level of salt. If so, that might help explain one apparent paradox related to reports that Americans are consuming more daily calories than they used to. Extra food would be expected to come with additional salt, yet there has not been a clear upward trend in daily salt consumption evident over the years in urinalysis studies, which are considered the best gauge because they directly measure salt levels instead of relying on estimates based on people's recollections of what they ate...

Spengler's Inner Workings Blog

"Auntie Em! Auntie Em! There's No Place Like Home!"

by David Goldman

An old Far Side cartoon shows a cook about to throw lobsters into a kettle; a lobster says, "Auntie Em! Auntie Em! There's no place like home! There's no place like home!" Americans (whom God looks out for along with drunks and small children, in the apocryphal words of Bismarck) are accustomed to happy endings when all looks bleakest. The economics profession (or most of it) as well as the public soldiered through 2009 in the expectation that this business cycle would lead to a recovery just as other business cycles led to a recovery, and that jobs would materialize just as they did in the past.

We see the magical incantation, "There's no place like home!," in numerous guises. The unemployed—20% of Americans according to a Gallup poll of 20,000 individuals—are [more likely to support President Obama](#)

[than the general public](#). They still hope against hope that Obama will wave a magic wand and allow them to click their heels and go home. I dubbed him "[Obama bin Lottery](#)" in January 2008 after his surprise South Carolina primary victory. With nothing to lose, the unemployed might as well hope:

If Reagan offered "voodoo economics", as his opponents charged, Obama is selling Cargo Cult economics. After World War II, New Guinea aborigines build model airfields to entice the gods to bring them "cargo". They watched American soldiers build airstrips and land cargo planes, and sought to accomplish the same through sympathetic magic. Given the culture of the aborigines and their observations, anthropologists aver, making radios and observation towers out of straw and coconuts was a rational response. Something similar might be said of the position of the American middle class.

And we see it on the conservative side, in CPAC's choice of Ron Paul (R-Tex.) in its presidential straw poll this week. Rep. Paul is a nut case. The fact that a plurality of conservative activists voted for him suggests a desperate sort of nostalgia for a bygone era that never quite was—just get big government out of our hair and things will normalize. It's just as pathetic as the residual hope that Obama will fix everything.

Americans have trouble realizing how much trouble they have. The numbers trickling out during the past couple of weeks suggest a Wile E. Coyote effect, to mix pop culture metaphors. During 2009, most people just didn't look down. But with [30% of home mortgages at the waterline or below it](#), and a 20% effective unemployment rate, the household balance sheet is shot—and so is the balance sheet of small business. In January, Americans took a collective look down, and the numbers began to plunge like the Road Runner's canine nemesis. The first to go, of course, was consumer confidence, a squishy number to be sure, but one that does not often show a 10-point drop.

The durable goods number (down 0.6% ex-aircraft) is concerning, given that durable goods remain at such a low level:

It tells us that capital investment is not going to lead the way out of the Great Recession (which we might as well call a Second Great Depression).

Employment data remain terrible, and the nearly 500,000 level of new unemployment claims reported this morning make it very likely that the February payroll number will be worse than January's. [As I noted Feb. 5](#), the actual number of unemployment according to the BLS household survey rose by 541,000 January, but seasonal adjustment showed a fall in the unemployment rate. Seasonal adjustment presumed that employers hired a bunch of people in December as they used to, and let them go in January. But this time they didn't hire them in December to begin with, and seasonal adjustment is senseless. That means the seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate will have to rise to compensate in February and March — so prepare for a really ugly number.

The US economy simply can't run on 20% unemployment. Consumers will go to the mattresses, retail and service business will drop like flies, investors will pull in their horns, and things will get worse. The only way to reverse the problem is to persuade capital to take more risk, and the only available policy lever to accomplish this is the elimination of taxes on capital income—interest, dividends, and capital gains. As the Obama administration is proposing the precise opposite (an increase in taxation of all these categories supposedly for Medicare) it is more likely that policy will aggravate the problem rather than cure it.

It's still a [long, long way down](#).

Power Line

[Mel and Barack: What Do They Have In Common?](#)

Posted by John Hinderaker

They both hate England, apparently. The difference is that Mel Gibson's antipathy, as expressed in *Braveheart* and *The Patriot*, is mostly fictional. Why Barack Obama hates England is hard to say, but his antipathy is distressingly real. Now, Obama has declared that the U.S. is neutral with regard to the Falklands. The Telegraph headlines: "[Et tu, Barack? America betrays Britain in her hour of need](#)":

It was a headline I never expected to read: "US refuses to endorse British sovereignty in Falklands oil dispute." Washington has declined to back Britain in its dispute with Argentina over drilling rights in the waters surrounding the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and the Sandwich Islands. President Obama's position is one of strict neutrality, refusing to take sides. According to the State Department:

We are aware not only of the current situation but also of the history, but our position remains one of neutrality. The US recognises de facto UK administration of the islands but takes no position on the sovereignty claims of either party.

Has it come to this? Tony Blair sacrificed his political career and jeopardised Britain's international standing by making common cause with America in the War on Terror.

Does Obama have more affinity with Argentina's Peronist national socialism than with England's democracy? Perhaps so. There is much more, and it gets even more painful:

For this alliance to survive, both countries must recognise their obligations and, from time to time, that involves one of us setting aside more localised concerns for the sake of the cause. Tony Blair would have preferred it if President Bush had been prepared to wait for a second UN resolution before launching the invasion of Iraq, but he decided that Britain should follow America into battle nevertheless. He recognised that the preservation of the Atlantic alliance had to be prioritised above all else, both for our sake and the sake of the world.

In return, we naturally expect America to side with us when it comes to our own territorial disputes -- and this element of quid pro quo was recognised by Ronald Reagan when he backed Margaret Thatcher in the Falklands War. It wasn't in America's regional interests to side with us, but Reagan knew the terms of the deal: It was your country, right or wrong. You don't abandon your closest ally in her hour of need.

So it is truly shocking that Barack Obama has decided to disregard our shared history and insist that we have to fight this battle on our own. Does Britain's friendship really mean so little to him? Do the sacrifices Britain has made in defence of the Atlantic alliance count for nought? Who does he think will replace us as America's steadfast ally when she finds herself embroiled in a territorial dispute of her own -- possibly with the very same motley crew of Latin American rabble rousers? Spain? Italy? France? Good luck with that, Mr President.

It is astonishing that any administration could make such a mess of both domestic and foreign policy in barely more than a year. One wonders whether we will have any allies left by the end of President Obama's term in January 2013.

SCOTT adds: See also Nile Gardiner's [Telegraph column](#) ("Even by the relentlessly poor standards of the Obama administration, whose doctrine unfailingly appears to be 'kiss your enemies and kick your allies,' this is a new low").

Telegraph Blogs, UK

[Jeb Bush on Sarah Palin: 'I don't know what her deal is.'](#)

by Toby Harnden

Some breathtakingly candid comments from Jeb Bush – who could surely be one of the strongest GOP candidates in 2012 should he wish to run – about Sarah Palin. They come 18 minutes and 39 seconds into [this fascinating Newsmax interview](#) with the former Florida governor.

Bush praises her “charisma” but then says that she needs to add to this “some depth of understanding of the complexity of life”. She has an “innate ability to communicate and connect with folks” but seems to feel that that’s pretty much it. If she could build on that with, er, understanding of and insight into the world then she could be an “incredible candidate”.

To put it mildly, that’s rather faint praise.

Bush then delivers what amounts to a devastating critique of Palin: “I don’t know what her deal is. My belief is in 2010 and 2012 public leaders need to have intellectual curiosity. The world is really an amazing place but it is very complex, it is very fast moving. If you think you’ve got it all figured out, the minute you start thinking that is the first day of your demise.”

Just in case Bush thinks he’s stopped talking about Palin, he adds: “So if she has those skills and she wants to run then she’ll be a great candidate.”

It is hard to dispute that Bush is right on both counts. Palin clearly possesses a rare and natural political talent. But thus far she has displayed very little willingness to build on this by studying the world and coming up with some intelligent conclusions or questions about it.

Given that Palin has been in the national – and international – spotlight for nearly 18 months now, it is highly questionable whether she has any real inclination to do what she has to do if she is truly serious about being elected President.

Investor's Business Daily - Interview

[Intellectuals Step 'Off The Cliff,' Drag Rest Of Us Down: Sowell](#)

by David Hogberg



Smart people should make smart decisions. So why do the best and the brightest always seem to create more problems than they solve?

This is not just an academic question, precisely because academics dominate the Obama administration and its approach to such key issues as health care and Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. Renowned economist Thomas Sowell argues that intellectuals have strong incentives to step out of their area of expertise and "off a cliff." Ultimately, everyday people pay the price when intellectuals and abstract concepts trump real-world specifics.

Sowell explores these topics and more in a wide-ranging IBD interview regarding his latest book, "Intellectuals and Society."

IBD: How do you define intellectuals?

Sowell: I define intellectuals as persons whose occupations begin and end with ideas. I distinguish between intellectuals and other people who may have ideas but whose ideas end up producing some good or service, something that whether it's working or not working can be determined by third parties.

With intellectuals, one of the crucial factors is their work is largely judged by peer consensus, so it doesn't matter if their ideas work in the real world.

IBD: What incentives and constraints do intellectuals face?

Sowell: One of the incentives is that, to the extent that intellectuals stay in their specialty, they have little to gain in terms of either prestige or influence on events. Say, an authority in ancient Mayan civilization just writes about ancient Mayan civilization, then only other specialists in ancient Mayan civilization will know what he is talking about or even be aware of him.

So intellectuals have every incentive to go beyond their area of expertise and competence. But stepping beyond your area of competence is like stepping off a cliff — you may be a genius within that area, but an idiot outside it.

As far as the constraints, since their main constraint is peer consensus — that's a very weak constraint on the profession as a whole. Because what the peers believe as a group becomes the test of any new idea that comes along as to whether it's plausible or not.

IBD: You say that most intellectuals believe in the "Vision of the Anointed." What does that mean?

Sowell: It's the theory that there is an elite group of people who are very knowledgeable and their knowledge should be used to guide the decisions of society. So they are not simply an elite in the sense that sinecurists might be an elite, but they are elite with an anointed role in the world. To put it uncharitably, as someone once said, "Born booted and spurred to ride mankind." Examples of that would not be hard to find in Washington, D.C.

IBD: Why shouldn't intellectuals make decisions for the rest of us?

Sowell: Because they don't know as much as the rest of us. It's one of those non sequiturs. They have more average knowledge than the average person in the limited sense in which knowledge is usually spoken of by intellectuals.

But the knowledge that has consequences in the world includes vast amounts of knowledge that I call mundane knowledge and probably no one on earth has 1% of that knowledge. Yet that knowledge is consequential, and it includes knowledge that is in no way intellectually challenging but is nevertheless crucial.

In the book, I mention the example of a pilot coming in for a landing and the control tower notices he hasn't let his landing gear down. I happen to have been on such a plane once. And as we came into land, I noticed

the pilot suddenly gunned the motor, took off again, circled back around and this time let down the landing gear. So whenever I'm on a plane and I hear the landing gear go down, I'm very pleased.

IBD: You have a lot of examples of intellectuals "in action" in your book. Does any one stand out more than the others?

Sowell: The one that stands out more in my mind is the promotion of disarmament during the 1930s while Hitler and Japan were arming themselves to the teeth. Disarmament is one of those things that probably no illiterate farmer would believe in. But some of the leading intellectuals, if not most of the leading intellectuals, of the Western democracies pushed that idea throughout the 1930s.

IBD: What do you think of the Obama administration when viewing it through the many concepts laid out in your book?

Sowell: It's very hard to answer that without using language that is totally inappropriate in polite society. But it is quite clear that they believe it is their job to take decisions out of the hands of the voting public.

And there are any number of ways they can do that, including rushing through huge bills faster than anybody can possibly read them, including the congressmen who vote on them.

They made statements during the campaign that are totally the opposite of what they will actually do. One of the more recent examples being the notion that unlike previous administrations they'd be transparent and broadcast the hearings on C-SPAN.

In fact, all of the big decisions are made behind closed doors, in one case locked doors, more so than in previous administrations. They want to supersede the public and put into operation what the anointed think should be done.

IBD: You say that intellectuals during Hitler's rise subordinated the mundane specifics of the nature of the German government to abstract principles about abstract nations, by which you meant the idea espoused at the time that "nations should be equal" and thus Germany had a right to rearm. Does that description apply to the Obama administration's approach to Iran?

Sowell: I hadn't thought of it, but it certainly does. In fact, there are other people who have said, "Some countries have nuclear weapons, why shouldn't other countries have nuclear weapons?" And they say it with an utter disregard for the nature of the countries and what those countries have been demonstrably doing for years and show every intention of doing in the future.

IBD: Do you think also that the Obama administration has abstract notions that you can negotiate with Iran the same way you can negotiate with, say, Australia?

Sowell: Oh, yes. And the question is not whether you should negotiate. We negotiate with all kinds of countries. The question is whether we think negotiations will be at all effective in carrying out what we want to do.

Reagan, after all, negotiated a disarmament treaty with Gorbachev, but he did so only after making it clear in their first meeting that he was not about to even consider Gorbachev's nonsensical proposal.

There was this marvelous scene, which I cite briefly in the book, where they are in Iceland when Gorbachev shows him this proviso at the eleventh hour. Reagan simply says, "The meeting is over, let's go, George (Schultz, the secretary of state), we're leaving."

That was utterly unthinkable to the intellectuals and utterly unprecedented in 20th-century democratic nations negotiating with totalitarian regimes.

IBD: Let me read some quotes and you tell me what you think. First, from Michelle Obama: "Barack Obama will require you to work. He is going to demand that you shed your cynicism. ... That you push yourselves to be better. And that you engage. Barack will never allow you to go back to your lives as usual, uninvolved, uninformed."

Sowell: This is bringing meaning from the top down into the unwashed masses. This is a very old idea among the intelligentsia, that they must bring meaning into the lives of "lesser folks," as if those lesser folks don't have enough meaning in their lives by their standards and by the things that matter most to them.

IBD: Next, from New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman: "There is only one thing worse than one-party autocracy, and that is one-party democracy, which is what we have in America today."

"One-party autocracy certainly has its drawbacks. But when it is led by a reasonably enlightened group of people, as China is today, it can also have great advantages. That one party can just impose the politically difficult but critically important policies needed to move a society forward in the 21st century."

Sowell: Apparently they made a big mistake at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. If only Thomas Friedman had been there, he would have put them on the right path, I suppose. Democracy has prerequisites, and not all circumstances meet those prerequisites.

As to whether or not China is better off the way it is than under an alternative system such as the one that governs the same race of people in Taiwan, is another question entirely.

IBD: The next is from Jacob Hacker, a political science professor at Yale who has spent his entire career in academia. Here's the title from one of his recent papers: "How to Structure Public Health Insurance Plan Choice to Ensure Risk-Sharing, Cost Control, and Quality Improvement."

Sowell: Third parties will structure how millions of people adjust to millions of different circumstances. In a sense, it is childish to imagine they can do this. But central planning has been tried for a very long time in many countries around the world.

Fortunately, most countries have discovered from bad experience — even socialist and communist countries have jettisoned it in most cases.

IBD: Would you say his knowledge of political science is seeping into another area where he has no experience?

Sowell: Not seeping, charging. Charging into another area. Or as I would put it, stepping off a very high cliff.

IBD: Now, while you note in the book that intellectuals believe that their superior knowledge in one area can be generalized to other areas, you state that chess grandmasters, musical prodigies and others who are remarkable within their respective specialties seldom make that mistake. But why do so many celebrities these days pop off on matters of foreign policy or domestic policy? The usual incentives faced by intellectuals wouldn't seem to apply.

Sowell: To some extent they face the same incentives, but also the same lack of serious constraints. So Rosie O'Donnell can pop off and it won't really affect her ability to get her next job. There is no constraint on that.

Further, fame is fleeting. And so it's not as though you can become famous at age 25, and you will still be famous at age 50 without lifting finger. Fame has to be constantly fed. And when the means of feeding that fame have no restrictions that are seriously placed on it, then you get all kinds of people popping off.

IBD: How about those who argue that we can use government to move society in a more conservative direction, like compassionate conservatism? Do they suffer from the vision of the anointed?

Sowell: To some extent, yes. Compassionate conservatism meant that Republicans added to the housing problems created by the Democrats rather than mitigating them.

George W. Bush, for example, was for a law that allowed the Federal Housing Administration to do away with nuisances like down payments on houses. And even his father was for the notion that the federal government should intervene if there were statistical differences among groups in housing or mortgage approvals.

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The Atlantic

The Great Grocery Smackdown

Will Walmart, not Whole Foods, save the small farm and make America healthy?

by Corby Kummer

BUY MY FOOD at Walmart? No thanks. Until recently, I had been to exactly one Walmart in my life, at the insistence of a friend I was visiting in Natchez, Mississippi, about 10 years ago. It was one of the sights, she said. Up and down the aisles we went, properly impressed by the endless rows and endless abundance. Not the produce section. I saw rows of prepackaged, plastic-trapped fruits and vegetables. I would never think of shopping there.

Not even if I could get environmentally correct food. Walmart's move into organics was then getting under way, but it just seemed cynical—a way to grab market share while driving small stores and farmers out of business. Then, last year, the market for organic milk started to go down along with the economy, and dairy farmers in Vermont and other states, who had made big investments in organic certification, began losing contracts and selling their farms. A guaranteed large buyer of organic milk began to look more attractive. And friends started telling me I needed to look seriously at Walmart's efforts to sell sustainably raised food.

Really? Wasn't this greenwashing? I called Charles Fishman, the author of [The Wal-Mart Effect](#), which entertainingly documents the market-changing (and company-destroying) effects of Walmart's decisions. He reiterated that whatever Walmart decides to do has large repercussions—and told me that what it had decided to do since my Natchez foray was to compete with high-end supermarkets. “You won't recognize the grocery section of a supercenter,” he said. He ordered me to get in my car and find one.

He was right. In the grocery section of the Raynham supercenter, 45 minutes south of Boston, I had trouble believing I was in a Walmart. The very reasonable-looking produce, most of it loose and nicely organized, was in black plastic bins (as in British supermarkets, where the look is common; the idea is to make the colors pop). The first thing I saw, McIntosh apples, came from the same local orchard whose apples I'd just seen in the same bags at Whole Foods. The bunched beets were from Muranaka Farm, whose beets I often buy at other markets—but these looked much fresher. The service people I could find (it wasn't hard) were unfailingly enthusiastic, though I did wonder whether they got let out at night.

During a few days of tasting, the results were mixed. Those beets handily beat (sorry) ones I'd just bought at Whole Foods, and compared nicely with beets I'd recently bought at the farmers' market. But packaged carrots and celery, both organic, were flavorless. Organic bananas and “tree ripened” California peaches, already out of season, were better than the ones in most supermarkets, and most of the Walmart food was cheaper—though when I went to my usual Whole Foods to compare prices for local produce, they were surprisingly similar (dry goods and dairy products were considerably less expensive at Walmart).

Walmart holding its own against Whole Foods? This called for a blind tasting.

I conspired with my contrarian friend James McWilliams, an agricultural historian at Texas State University at San Marcos and the author of the new [Just Food: Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly](#). He enlisted his friends at Fino, a restaurant in Austin that pays special attention to where the food it serves comes from, as co-conspirators. I would buy two complete sets of ingredients, one at Walmart and the other at Whole Foods. The chef would prepare them as simply as possible, and serve two versions of each course, side by side on the same plate, to a group of local food experts invited to judge.

I STARTED LOOKING into how and why Walmart could be plausibly competing with Whole Foods, and found that its produce-buying had evolved beyond organics, to a virtually unknown program—one that could do more to encourage small and medium-size American farms than any number of well-meaning nonprofits, or the U.S. Department of Agriculture, with its new [Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food](#) campaign. Not even Fishman, who has been closely tracking Walmart's sustainability efforts, had heard of it. "They do a lot of good things they don't talk about," he offered.

The program, which Walmart calls Heritage Agriculture, will encourage farms within a day's drive of one of its warehouses to grow crops that now take days to arrive in trucks from states like Florida and California. In many cases the crops once flourished in the places where Walmart is encouraging their revival, but vanished because of Big Agriculture competition.

Ron McCormick, the senior director of local and sustainable sourcing for Walmart, told me that about three years ago he came upon pictures from the 1920s of thriving apple orchards in Rogers, Arkansas, eight miles from the company's headquarters. Apples were once shipped from northwest Arkansas by railroad to St. Louis and Chicago. After Washington state and California took over the apple market, hardly any orchards remained. Cabbage, greens, and melons were also once staples of the local farming economy. But for decades, Arkansas's cash crops have been tomatoes and grapes. A new initiative could diversify crops and give consumers fresher produce.

As with most Walmart programs, the clear impetus is to claim a share of consumer spending: first for organics, now for locally grown food. But buying local food is often harder than buying organic. The obstacles for both small farm and big store are many: how much a relatively small farmer can grow and how reliably, given short growing seasons; how to charge a competitive price when the farmer's expenses are so much higher than those of industrial farms; and how to get produce from farm to warehouse.

Walmart knows all this, and knows that various nonprofit agricultural and university networks are trying to solve the same problems. In considering how to build on existing programs (and investments), Walmart talked with the local branch of the Environmental Defense Fund, which opened near the company's Arkansas headquarters when Walmart started to look serious about green efforts, and with the Applied Sustainability Center at the University of Arkansas. The center (of which the Walmart Foundation is a chief funder) is part of a national partnership called [Agile Agriculture](#), which includes universities such as Drake and the University of New Hampshire and nonprofits like the American Farmland Trust.* To get more locally grown produce into grocery stores and restaurants, the partnership is centralizing and streamlining distribution for farms with limited growing seasons, limited production, and limited transportation resources.

Walmart says it wants to revive local economies and communities that lost out when agriculture became centralized in large states. (The heirloom varieties beloved by foodies lost out at the same time, but so far they're not a focus of Walmart's program.) This would be something like bringing the once-flourishing silk and wool trades back to my hometown of Rockville, Connecticut. It's not something you expect from Walmart, which is better known for destroying local economies than for rebuilding them.

As everyone who sells to or buys from (or, notoriously, works for) Walmart knows, price is where every consideration begins and ends. Even if the price Walmart pays for local produce is slightly higher than what it would pay large growers, savings in transport and the ability to order smaller quantities at a time can make up the difference. Contracting directly with farmers, which Walmart intends to do in the future as much as

possible, can help eliminate middlemen, who sometimes misrepresent prices. Heritage produce currently accounts for only 4 to 6 percent of Walmart's produce sales, McCormick told me (already more than a chain might spend on produce in a year, as Fishman would point out), adding that he hopes the figure will get closer to 20 percent, so the program will "go from experimental to being really viable."

Michelle Harvey, who is in charge of working with Walmart on agriculture programs at the local Environmental Defense Fund office, summarized a long conversation with me on the sustainability efforts she thinks the company is serious about: "It's getting harder and harder to hate Walmart."

"WE SUPPORT LOCAL FARMERS," read a sign at an Austin Walmart. I didn't see any farm names listed in the produce section, but I did find plastic tubs of organic baby spinach and "spring mix" greens with modern labeling that looked like it could be at Whole Foods. My list was simple to the point of stark, for a fair fight. Some ingredients seemed identical to what I'd find at Whole Foods. Organic, free-range brown eggs. Promised Land all-natural, hormone-free milk. A bottle of Watkins Madagascar vanilla for panna cotta. I couldn't find much in the way of the seasonal fruit the restaurant had told me the chef would serve with dessert. But I did find, to my surprise, a huge bin of pomegranates, so I bought those, and some Bosc pears. The sticking points were fresh goat cheese, which flummoxed the nice sales people (we found some Alouette brand, hidden), and chicken breasts. I could find organic meat, but no breasts without "up to 12 percent natural chicken broth" added—an attempt to inject flavor and add weight. I wasn't happy with the suppliers, either: Tyson predominated. I bought Pilgrims Pride, but was suspicious. The bill was \$126.02.

At the flagship Whole Foods, in downtown Austin, the produce was much more varied, though the spinach and spring mix looked less vibrant. The chicken was properly dry, a fresh ivory color—and more than twice as expensive as Walmart's. My total bill was \$175.04; \$20 of the extra \$50 was for the meat.

Brian Stubbs, the tall, genial young manager of Fino, and Jason Donoho, the chef, were intrigued as they helped me carry bag after bag into the restaurant's kitchen. They carefully segregated the bags on two shelves of a walk-in refrigerator. The younger cooks looked surprised by the Whole Foods kraft-paper bags, and slightly horrified by the flimsy white plastic ones from Walmart.

The next night 16 critics, bloggers, and general food lovers gathered around a long, high table at the restaurant. Stubbs passed out scoring sheets with bullets for grades of one (worst) to five (best) for each of the four courses, and lines for comments.

The first course, bowls of almonds and pieces of fried goat cheese with red-onion jam and honey, was a clear win for Walmart. The Walmart almonds were described as "aromatic," "mellow," "pure," and "yummy," the Whole Foods almonds as "raw," though also more "natural"; they were in fact fresher, though duller in flavor. (Like the best of the food I saw at the Austin Walmart, the packaging for the almonds had a homegrown Mexican look.) The second course, mixed spring greens in a sherry vinaigrette, was another Walmart win: only a few tasters preferred the Whole Foods greens, calling them fresher and heartier-flavored. And only one noticed the little brown age spots on a few Walmart leaves, but she was a ringer—Carol Ann Sayle, a local farmer famous for her greens.

So far Walmart was ahead. But then came the chicken, served with a poached egg on a bed of spinach and golden raisins. A woman whose taste I already thought uncanny—she works as an aromatherapist—compared the broth-infused meat to something out of a hospital cafeteria: "It's like they injected it with something to make it taste like fast food." I thought it was salty, damp, and dismal. The spinach, though, was another story: even the most ardent brothy-breast haters thought the Walmart spinach was fresher.

Dessert was the most puzzling. I had thought that Walmart's locally sourced milk and exotic-looking vanilla would be the gold standard, but the Whole Foods house brands slaughtered them ("Kicks A's ass," one taster wrote). People couldn't find enough words to diss the Walmart panna cotta ("artificial, thin") and praise the Whole Foods one ("like a good Christmas"). I wished I'd bought the identical Promised Land milk at Whole Foods, to see if there is in fact a difference in the branded food products that suppliers give Walmart, as there is in the case of other branded products. The pomegranate seeds, sadly, were wan, with barely any

flavor, particularly compared with the garnet gems from Whole Foods. But Walmart got points from the chef, and from me, for carrying pomegranates at all.

As I had been in my own kitchen, the tasters were surprised when the results were unblinded at the end of the meal and they learned that in a number of instances they had adamantly preferred Walmart produce. And they weren't entirely happy.

IN AN IDEAL WORLD, people would buy their food directly from the people who grew or caught it, or grow and catch it themselves. But most people can't do that. If there were a Walmart closer to where I live, I would probably shop there.

Most important, the vast majority of Walmarts carry a large range of affordable fresh fruits and vegetables. And Walmarts serve many "food deserts," in large cities and rural areas—ironically including farm areas. I'm not sure I'm convinced that the world's largest retailer is set on rebuilding local economies it had a hand in destroying, if not literally, then in effect. But I'm convinced that if it wants to, a ruthlessly well-run mechanism can bring fruits and vegetables back to land where they once flourished, and deliver them to the people who need them most.

NY Times

[When It Comes to Salt, No Rights or Wrongs. Yet.](#)

by John Tierney

Suppose, as some experts advise, that the new national dietary guidelines due this spring will lower the recommended level of salt. Suppose further that public health officials in New York and Washington succeed in forcing food companies to use less salt. What would be the effect?

- A) More than 44,000 deaths would be prevented annually (as estimated recently in [The New England Journal of Medicine](#)).
- B) About 150,000 deaths per year would be prevented annually (as estimated by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene).
- C) Hundreds of millions of people would be subjected to an experiment with unpredictable and possibly adverse effects (as argued recently in [The Journal of the American Medical Association](#)).
- D) Not much one way or the other.
- E) Americans would get even fatter than they are today.

Don't worry, there's no wrong answer, at least not yet. That's the beauty of the salt debate: there's so little reliable evidence that you can imagine just about any outcome. For all the talk about the growing menace of sodium in packaged foods, experts aren't even sure that Americans today are eating more salt than they used to.

When you don't know past trends, predicting the future is a wide-open game.

My personal favorite prediction is E, the further fattening of America, but I'm just guided by a personal rule: Never bet against the expansion of Americans' waistlines, especially not when public health experts get involved.

The harder the experts try to save Americans, the fatter we get. We followed their admirable advice to [quit smoking](#), and by [some estimates we gained 15 pounds](#) apiece afterward. The extra weight was certainly a worthwhile trade-off for longer life and better health, but with success came a new challenge.

Officials responded by advising Americans to shun fat, which became the official villain of the national dietary guidelines during the 1980s and 1990s. The anti-fat campaign definitely made an impact on the marketing of food, but as we gobbled up all the new low-fat products, we kept getting fatter. Eventually, in 2000, the experts revised the dietary guidelines and conceded that their anti-fat advice may have contributed to [diabetes](#) and [obesity](#) by unintentionally encouraging Americans to eat more [calories](#).

That fiasco hasn't dampened the reformers' enthusiasm, to judge from the growing campaign to impose salt restrictions. Pointing to evidence that a salt-restricted [diet](#) causes some people's [blood pressure](#) to drop, the reformers extrapolate that tens of thousands of lives would be saved if there were less salt in everybody's food.

But is it even possible to get the public to permanently reduce salt consumption? Researchers have had a hard enough time getting people to cut back during short-term supervised experiments.

The salt reformers say change is possible if the food industry cuts back on all the hidden salt in its products. They want the United States to emulate Britain, where there has been an intensive campaign to pressure industry as well as consumers to use less salt. As a result, British authorities say, from 2000 to 2008 there was about a 10 percent reduction in daily salt consumption, which was measured by surveys that analyzed the amount of salt excreted in urine collected over 24 hours.

But the British report was challenged in a recent article in [The Clinical Journal of the American Society of Nephrology](#) by researchers at the [University of California, Davis](#), and [Washington University](#) in St. Louis. The team, led by Dr. David A. McCarron, a nephrologist at Davis, criticized the British authorities for singling out surveys in 2008 and 2000 while ignoring nearly a dozen similar surveys conducted in the past two decades.

When all the surveys in Britain are considered, there has been no consistent downward trend in salt consumption in recent years, said Dr. McCarron, who has been a longtime critic of the salt reformers. (For more on him and his foes, go to [nytimes.com/tierneylab](#).) He said that the most notable feature of the data is how little variation there has been in salt consumption in Britain — and just about everywhere else, too.

Dr. McCarron and his colleagues analyzed surveys from 33 countries around the world and reported that, despite wide differences in diet and culture, people generally consumed about the same amount of salt. There were a few exceptions, like tribes isolated in the Amazon and Africa, but the vast majority of people ate more salt than recommended in the current American dietary guidelines.

The results were so similar in so many places that Dr. McCarron hypothesized that networks in the brain regulate sodium appetite so that people consume a set daily level of salt. If so, that might help explain one apparent paradox related to reports that Americans are consuming more daily calories than they used to. Extra food would be expected to come with additional salt, yet there has not been a clear upward trend in daily salt consumption evident over the years in [urinalysis](#) studies, which are considered the best gauge because they directly measure salt levels instead of relying on estimates based on people's recollections of what they ate. Why no extra salt? One [prominent advocate of salt reduction](#), Dr. Lawrence Appel of [Johns Hopkins University](#), said that inconsistent techniques in conducting the urinalysis surveys may be masking a real upward trend in salt consumption.

But Dr. McCarron called the measurements reliable and said they could be explained by the set-point theory:

As Americans ate more calories, they could have eased up on some of the saltier choices so that their overall sodium consumption remained constant. By that same logic, he speculated, if future policies reduce

the average amount of salt in food, people might compensate by seeking out saltier foods — or by simply eating still more of everything.

The salt reformers dismiss these speculations, arguing that with the right help, people can maintain low-salt diets without gaining weight or suffering other problems. But even if people could be induced to eat less salt, would they end up better off? The estimates about all the lives to be saved are just extrapolations based on the presumed benefits of lower blood pressure.

If you track how many strokes and heart attacks are suffered by people on low-salt diets, the results aren't nearly as neat or encouraging, as noted [recently in JAMA](#) by Michael H. Alderman, a [hypertension](#) expert at [Albert Einstein College of Medicine](#). A low-salt diet was associated with better clinical outcomes in only 5 of the 11 studies he considered; in the rest, the people on the low-salt diet fared either the same or worse.

“When you reduce salt,” Dr. Alderman said, “you reduce blood pressure, but there can also be other adverse and unintended consequences. As more data have accumulated, it's less and less supportive of the case for salt reduction, but the advocates seem more determined than ever to change policy.”

Before changing public policy, Dr. Alderman and Dr. McCarron suggest trying something new: a rigorous test of the low-salt diet in a randomized clinical trial. That proposal is rejected by the salt reformers as too time-consuming and expensive. But when you contemplate the potential costs of another public health debacle like the anti-fat campaign, a clinical trial can start to look cheap.





