P.S.. to the NEWS

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AMERICAN EATING HABITS

What is the greatest achievement of the American private enterprise system? The automobile? Jet planes? Computers? Anti-biotics? My answer to that question is the tremendous quantity and variety of fresh foods available all year round in our markets at reasonable prices without standing in line.

When Lieutenant Viktor Belenko, the Russian jet pilot who escaped to Japan last year with a MIG-25, was debriefed by our State Department, he confirmed what visitors to Russia have been telling me for 30 years, namely, that when Russians get a chance to look at American magazines, the pictures that fascinate them most are not our beautiful women, even in scanty attire, but the colorful supermarket ads. The average Russian stares in total disbelief at the food displays that every American takes for granted.

It is depressing, therefore, to read the recent spate of news stories telling that Americans are overfed and undernourished, that malnutrition is a critical public health problem, and that six of the ten leading causes of death in the United States are connected to eating habits. These are heart disease, cancer, stroke and hypertension, diabetes, arteriosclerosis, and cirrhosis of the liver.

As Americans have increased their purchasing power over the last two decades, they have bought foods that are more expensive but less nutritious. According to hearings held by the Senate Select Coumittee on Nutrition and Human Needs, Americans have shifted from a diet of fruits, vegetables and grains to one based primarily on fats and sugar.

The result is a big drop in vitamins and minerals. The Agriculture Department estimates that fats and sugars comprise 60 percent of Americans' total caloric intake.

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A diet too heavy in fats and cholesterol appears to be related to cardio vascular disease, the number-one killer of Americans today. Too much sugar causes diabetes, obesity, and tooth decay. Too much salt contributes to high blood pressure, stomach cancer, and migraine headaches.

There are a number of reasons why the eating habits of Americans have changed so dramatically over the last two decades. One is the peculiar prejudice of some people that white is better than brown, specifically refined white bread, white sugar, and white rice, rather than wholegrain dark bread, brown sugar and brown rice. White isn't better; brown is more nutritious.

Another reason is persuasive television advertising of foods that are heavy in sugar or heavy in salt.

A third reason is the exodus of women from the kitchen and their willingness to pay high prices for instant foods instead of spending long hours cooking. Yet when they choose instant mashed potatoes and instant cereals instead of home baked potatoes and hot cooked wholegrain cereals, they are saving a few minutes in KP duty at the cost of a large sacrifice in nutrition.

A fourth reason is the way parents have allowed their children to develop a taste for snack or junk foods and drinks because they are easier to serve, whereas finicky appetites require patience.

One aspect of our country's diet dilemma is the $4 billion-a-year Federal School Lunch Program that serves 25 million school children every day.

If a recent newspaper investigation of the School Lunch Program in the Chicago area is indicative of what goes on nationally, the Program wastes massive quantities of food because children won't eat what they are served. Agriculture Department statistics show that children throw away $600 million of food annually.

A large percentage of the lunches do not meet the minimum nutrition requirements for one good meal. While some schools lunches are excellent, many others are unappetizing pre-cooked, reheated convenience foods.

It has been estimated that good nutrition could cut the nation's health bill by one-third, thereby substantially relieving the current doctor shortage. We should try it; we might like it.

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