

FINAL WORD ➞ BY TIM ROWLAND

Politicians, Markets, and Cheap Food

In a world of artificial intelligence, global infernos, and swarms of drones buzzing around the sky, who would have thought the Big Scare of 2026 would be lettuce?

Product recalls, once the province of Detroit automakers, are now as common in leafy greens as vitamin K. Food-borne illnesses have become a regular source of news-cycle hysteria, leaving consumers standing in the produce aisle straining to remember whether they should be staying away from the spinach or the collard greens.

From *Pfiesteria* in Maryland, to *E. coli* in California, to *Listeria* in Colorado, food-safety regulations have failed to keep us safe. That's no surprise, but the real culprit may be politicians trying to lower American food prices.

Wait, don't consumers want low prices? Well, hold that thought for now.

A half-century ago, Richard Nixon's secretary of agriculture, Earl Butz, decided America needed cheap food, no matter the cost. He urged farmers to plant "fence row to fence row" and "get big or get out." And Americans being Americans, we've gotten really good at it. We've scaled up production to the point that we're raising hogs in skyscrapers and chickens in shoeboxes and produce in fields that roll on forever.

Thomas Jefferson's nation of small farms has evolved into farms the size of small nations.

These economies apply across the food spectrum to an almost molecular level. Kernels of corn are deconstructed into sugars and starches that become the

building blocks of ultra-processed foods, which are not just cheap and micro-wavable but also produce a dopamine response, meaning they are addictively good—perhaps literally.

Butz's admonishment took hold. Industrial farms got big, family farms got out. Agricultural power bought political power: a seat at the taxpayer trough, plus enough clout to entrench ethanol in our fuel supply and commandeer the word "organic." Quaint-sounding producers Cascadian Farm, Honest Tea, and Santa Cruz Organic belong to General Mills, Coca-Cola, and J.M. Smucker, respectively.

Nearly the entire US commercial chicken supply comes from just two or three breeding companies producing a handful of proprietary strains. Singular genetics, coupled with mass concentrations of birds, was largely responsible for bird flu kill-offs in recent years, which cost taxpayers \$1.5 billion in indemnity payouts to the big poultry farms. And Maryland's *Pfiesteria* outbreaks have been traced to concentrated animal feeding operations on the state's Eastern Shore, where chickens in the watershed outnumber people 500 to 1.

A more direct impact comes from President Trump's star-crossed trade policies, which prompted the predictable response from foreign nations. That mucked things up so badly that, in his first term, he handed farmers \$28 billion in taxpayer dollars to compensate for trade-war disruptions, and he plans on

distributing another \$12 billion this year.

Then there are the hidden costs of ag policy. The Rockefeller Foundation's 2021 "True Cost of Food" report put US diet-related disease costs as \$1.1 trillion a year, more than half of which went to direct health care spending. Add environmental costs, and the total balloons to \$3.2 trillion—about three times what Americans pay at the grocery store register.

Is this really what consumers want? Human history has mostly been one of privation, and even today hundreds

of millions of people around the globe struggle with hunger. So, America's advances in agriculture and supply chains are nothing short of a godsend. But, that said, do our current ag markets only reflect what consumers demand and providers supply? Given all the

interventions—marketing orders for milk and other commodities, the sugar program, income and price supports, subsidized insurance, regulations for land use and (ostensibly) food safety, and now tariff subsidies—politicians are a very big player in these markets, too.

Yes, a heritage-strain chicken raised in the sunshine on grass in months instead of weeks can easily fetch \$40—a price that is certainly not what Americans want when affordability is their top concern. But believing that is the price they'd pay without heavy government intervention is to ignore the might of markets and humanity's history of food ingenuity.

What would happen if we stripped away much of that intervention and hidden cost? How would competitive hatcheries, local granaries, and small processors respond—not to mention Big Agribusiness that is no longer boosted by (and pursuing) unlevel playing fields? Food prices might get a little higher. But those prices would reflect the demands of consumers and limits of producers, and not also the desires of politicians. **R**



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