

Water on the Brain

BY MARNI SOUPCOFF

We're not supposed to drink bottled water anymore. You know the eco-geniuses behind low-flush toilets and reusable air-sickness-bags? Well, now they've decided that we're more likely to overuse the Earth's store of potable water when we fork over \$2 for it in a bottle than when it flows freely (and free) from the tap. Hey, no one said environmentalists were good at econ.

But there's more. If we drink bottled water, we'll also pollute the environment with plastic and — according to the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom — encourage privatization that causes water wars. And by water wars, I think they mean actual armed conflict rather than bad Kevin Costner movies, though I'll admit neither is really very nice.

In fact, you may have heard that George Bush invaded Iraq for the oil, but the real story is that he was after a secret cache of Dasani sports packs buried outside of Kuwait. And get this — he's so dumb that he would have called the whole thing Operation Evian Freedom if his advisers hadn't talked him out of it.

OK, so the arguments against bottled water can get a little far-fetched. But even the ones that sound good on the surface don't make a lot of sense.

For example, there's the "you'll deprive needy African children of hygienic hydration" point (a variation on your parents' "Finish your peas because kids are starving in China" argument, only liquefied). This assumes that water used to fill a fat American's Aquafina bottle will be taken from poor African kids' local spring. In truth, a good portion of the liquid in bottled water originated from a tap in the first place, not from a pristine African river that would otherwise have sustained a brood of thirsty kiddies. That may make anyone who pays \$1.65 for the bottle of water a sucker, but it doesn't make the kids any thirstier.

And if we're really worried about dehydrated African children, we should focus on basic sanitation in sub-Saharan countries (installing simple things like toilets and sewers). That's

going to have a lot more positive effect on their water supplies than morally admonishing the American soccer mom who guzzles a bottle of water in her SUV after running errands all day. Besides, who do you think is going to be writing the checks to the aid organizations to pay for all those African toilets and sewers? That's right: American soccer Mom. And she's going to be a lot more inclined to write a generous one if she isn't feeling berated, not to mention a little parched.

Clearly, the anti-bottled water movement has been annoying enough on its own. But at least until recently we could all

just shake our heads, take a big slurp from our plastic vessels of environmental destruction, and ignore them. That is, until the government got in on the act.

The city of Chicago (the same folks who brought us the *foie gras* ban) has had the bright idea of adding a five-cent tax to bottled water in an effort to drive teetotalers back to the tap. Uh, guys? If the difference between free and two bucks doesn't dissuade enough people from choosing bottled agua, I don't think another nickel is going to do it.

Oh, but the taxes will also help pay for the degradation

to the environment that bottling and transporting water causes, supporters say. I guess that's possible in theory. But I find the *Chicago Tribune's* explanation more plausible in practice: "The city also hopes the tax, expected to bring in about \$10.5 million per year, will help plug a budget hole." Now, that's more like it.

Interestingly, interventionist governments that choose to tax bottled water get themselves in a bit of a bind because they're suddenly making a healthy beverage choice less appealing to consumers. So they're at cross-purposes with their own missions to combat obesity, cavities, heart disease, bad breath, poor complexions, etc. For God's sake, the tax on bottled water might even lead some desperate consumers to choose a sugary cola beverage!

The environmentalists and the public health patrol will have to battle that one out down the road. For now, it's enough for Chicago that a bottled-water tax has the potential to bulk up its fisc — a highly sought-after outcome that could cause this drippy idea to spread across the country. **R**



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A Regulatory Play in Two Acts

BY SCOTT WALLSTEN

CHARACTERS

Chorus *FCC Chair*
Cable VP *Trusted Staffer*
Cable CEO

PROLOGUE

Enter Chorus

Chorus

An old regulatory rule says the Federal Communications Commission can strictly regulate the cable industry once cable penetration passes two tests. First, it must be available to at least 70 percent of all homes. That's been true for a long time. Second, 70 percent of those homes must actually subscribe. One source now says that cable may have surpassed that second milestone.

Let's listen in to some conversations about this development:

ACT I. BIG CABLE COMPANY HEADQUARTERS

Enter Cable VP and Cable CEO

Cable VP

Bad news, sir. A public interest group says that 70 percent of all households that could subscribe to cable actually do so.

Cable CEO

Isn't that good news?

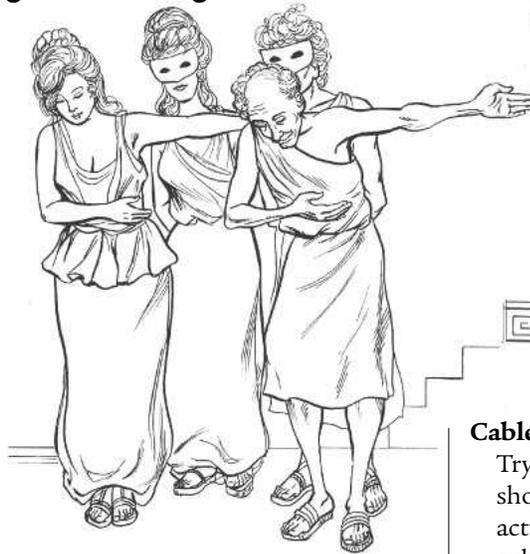
Cable VP

No. A regulation from 1984 allows the FCC to regulate us like never before once we meet that 70 percent.

Cable CEO

George Orwell controls the FCC?

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Cable VP

No, I mean the FCC adopted the regulation in 1984.

Cable CEO

Oh. Well, VP, I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this, but we have only one choice.

Cable VP

I hear you loud and clear, boss. We have to fight back with everything we've got.

Cable CEO

And pay all those lawyers? Forget it. We have to terminate cable service to a few million people.

Cable VP

Sorry?

Cable CEO

Yes, the share of households we serve is the number of subscribers divided by the number of households that could subscribe, right? So if we disconnect a few million lines, we'll be just fine.

Cable VP

I see.

Cable CEO

We should also build some lines to pass houses that can't get cable now.

Cable VP

But I thought you wanted to get rid of subscribers?

Cable CEO

Try to keep up. The new cables should just *pass* new houses, not actually connect them. Cutting off subscribers will bring down the numerator, and installing new lines will bring up the denominator. We'll be back below 70 percent in no time.

Cable VP

Brilliant, sir!

Exeunt except Chorus

ACT II. AT THE FCC, A YEAR LATER

Enter FCC Chair and Trusted Staffer

FCC Chair

We have a problem. Consumers are clamoring to subscribe to cable, but no company will sign them up.

Trusted Staffer

The good news is that people can buy and sell their subscriptions on eBay. I almost got one for myself yesterday, but someone outbid me at the last minute.

FCC Chair

So you're telling me cable subscriptions are a scarce resource?

Trusted Staffer

It would appear so.

FCC Chair

Why wasn't I informed? We can't leave this crucial public service to eBay. It's our responsibility to auction off those subscriptions. And Congress will love it! We can raise money to lower the deficit!

Exeunt

R

KEVIN TUMA