

FINAL WORD ↔ BY A. BARTON HINKLE

Being in Government Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry

In a lapse into candor not long ago, the *Washington Post* reported on the frustrations felt by rural electric co-ops over federal orders to stop burning coal. After all, the newspaper noted, the order wouldn't be needed in the first place were it not for the fact that "when the Arab embargoes of the 1970s threatened the country's oil supply, the U.S. government issued an edict to the nation's electricity producers: *Start burning coal.*"

Now the official federal position holds that burning coal for energy is, if you will pardon the technical jargon, a real stinkeroo. Burning coal and other fossil fuels contributes to global warming, goes the argument, which is a negative externality and a perfect example of market failure—and therefore a perfect example of the need for government intervention.

But not a perfect example of *government* failure and the need for *market* intervention. Heavens, no. Despite 1970s-era dictates, and the construction of the Interstate Highway System, and the roughly \$2 trillion in subsidies to fossil fuels that governments around the world shell out each year, and so on, anthropogenic climate change is presented as the sort of disaster that inevitably happens when you leave things up to the chaos of the free market.

We know anthropogenic climate change is a hellish reality because the scientific consensus, about which we have been instructed in countless government reports, informs us this is so. Then again, it was not so long ago that the government was informing everyone about the scientific consensus regard-



ing dietary salt: that stuff will kill you, man! Now, however, we find out that all those warnings about salt were probably wrong. A growing body of evidence says "there is no longer any valid basis for the current salt guidelines," as one author of the new research, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, put it. In fact, as the *Washington Post* noted in April, "the low levels of salt recommended by the government might actually be

dangerous." Oops! Sorry about that.

This has led to some discussion about whether the government should revise its dietary guidelines—but none about whether the government should actually cease issuing such guidelines. How on earth could Americans be expected to eat right without them?

As it turns out, other government health instructions also have led the public woefully astray. Four decades of warnings about cholesterol? Offbase. The advice to avoid fats and load up on carbs? Another big goof. There's no telling how many people have suffered health problems—and perhaps even died—because they heeded dietary advice from the government that, had it come from the private sector, could have brought lawsuits and fraud charges faster than you can say "class action." And there probably never will be such an accounting because neither those in government nor the media are interested in finding out—much less holding anybody responsible.

Holding government responsible is not something

government does particularly well. Back in August the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency caused a huge toxic spill from the Gold King Mine in Colorado that turned rivers bright orange. It was the sort of spill that could get the private sector slapped with honking big fines, and perhaps even criminal prosecution. An EPA spokesman said the agency took responsibility for the accident. Yet nobody lost a job over it, and the agency doesn't seem to have taken a budgetary hit.

This is usually how those in government take responsibility: by not taking any. Hillary Clinton says she takes responsibility for her "homebrew" email server—but how has she done so, exactly? President Obama says he takes full responsibility for the deaths of two hostages during an April anti-terror raid on an al-Qaida compound. What does that mean? Did he suspend himself from office for two weeks without pay? Did he write "I will not kill hostages" 100 times on the blackboard?

If the president is unwilling to hold himself accountable, you might think he would at least want to hold his political enemies accountable. Nope. Despite roundly condemning Bush administration activities described in a Senate report on torture as brutal and wrong, his administration declined to bring charges against anyone involved. Nothing was to be gained, the president said, "by spending our time and energy laying blame for the past." It was just so much waterboarding under the bridge, apparently.

The harm done by government is sometimes painfully apparent (as in the case of war) and sometimes irretrievably obscure (as in the case of suffering prolonged by the Food and Drug Administration's failure to approve medical innovations quickly). What it never seems to be, however, is evidence that government shouldn't be doing this or that in the first place. As the president said in April, "Mistakes—sometimes deadly mistakes—can occur." But that's no reason to get all judgmental, is it? 

