

School Lunch Oiled by the Military Machine
by
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Under-nutrition and malnutrition are very different animals, except when it comes to the convergence of soldiers and school lunch.

The school lunch program was started during the Great Depression in 1935. It was a fantastic solution to two national problems. The first problem was that farmers had surplus produce that many people could not afford leading to a drop in price. The second was that children were going hungry because of the 25% unemployment rate.

The Secretary of Agriculture was given funding to purchase surplus foods for a school lunch program via the Congress.ⁱ School children across the nation began to have at least school lunch as a daily meal. During World War II, the surplus food supply dwindled as the nation had to feed a military stationed around the globe. By the end of the war the congress was thinking of ending the program. However, the military spoke up.

The Surgeon General of the Armed Forces testified in 1946 that, “70 percent of the boys who had poor nutrition 10-12 years ago were rejected by the draft.” That meant boys between the ages of 8-14 during 1934-36 with limited food sources became a “threat to national security” due to the fact that the US could have had difficulty assembling a military force due to the stunted growth from under nutrition. This testimony was the linchpin to continuing funding.ⁱⁱ

Skip ahead to 2010. Thirty percent of teens are overweight or obese. This comes from “malnutrition”. They have food to eat, but the food is extremely high in fat and sodium and lacking fiber and many vitamins and minerals. Until now, the military has been pretty silent about school lunch, school breakfast or any other federal nutrition program, even though many of their employees have wages and salaries low enough to qualify for a number of public welfare programs.

However, on April 20, 2010 retired Navy Rear Adm. James Barnett Jr. with a group of officers called, Mission: Readiness, spoke to Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack. Adm. Barnett said that, "When over a quarter of young adults are too fat to fight, we need to take notice." Again, the military speaks up because lousy nutrition leads to lack of national security.

School lunch never hits the front page and yet it affects every child in public school, approximately 45-50 million Americans.ⁱⁱⁱ Music and art programs are being slashed and the military had approximately 23% of the 2009 US Federal spending. One budget of theirs isn't even allowed to be public. There are weapons systems, which have been denounced by top military brass, being built at the cost of millions. But we hear little to nothing about school lunch and school breakfast programs which have not had an increase in reimbursement since 1973. So, now they want to help out the poor little lunch ladies.

The military also wants to help out the phys ed department because so much money is being spent to train new recruits when seasoned soldiers are too heavy and are discharged. Military recruiters want to work with schools to help recruits lose weight before they try and sign on the dotted line. One recruiter was quoted as saying, "This is the future of our Army we are looking at when we talk about these 17- to 24-year-olds. The sad thing is a lot of them want to join but can't." ^{iv} It's great the military is motivated to preventative measures.

Well, that's one way to look at it. Another way is that the military industrial complex may not have the fodder it needs to continue its various "security" operations around the world. If we don't have an abundant supply of healthy young people we may not be able to continue as the world's police department. What would we have done if we didn't have recruits to go to Afghanistan and search for vaporous weapons of mass destruction in Iraq?

The former president of the American Medical Association, Ron Davis, MD, stated he had spent all of his time in office, 2007-2008, trying to get one word changed in defining Medicare and Medicaid. He lobbied that the word, preventative, be added to the type of care covered by these two programs. On a phone conversation he said that if preventative medicine were available to people who qualified for these programs costs would decrease because the high expense of treating diabetes, progressive cancers and health problems related to obesity could be addressed early on. It still has not happened.

But with Halliburton on board all things are possible.

ⁱ Food Research and Action Center. 2008. Commodity Foods and the Nutritional Quality of the National School Lunch Program: Historical Role, Current Operations, and Future Potential. Executive Summary. FRAC. Retrieved from http://www.frac.org/pdf/commodities08_execsummary.pdf on May 12, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Boyle M. 2003. Historical Background of Food Assistance Programs. *Community Nutrition in Action: An Entrepreneurial Approach*, pg. 124-125. Wadsworth, Belmont California.

ⁱⁱⁱ Institute of Education Sciences. [nd] *Fast Facts*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=65> on May 18, 2010.

^{iv} Jalonick MC, [2010] Are school lunches a national security threat?, Military Discussion. com, April 20. Retrieved from <http://www.military-discussion.com/forum/index.php?topic=2545.0> on May 18, 2010