



MICHAEL MINER/TRIBUNE

A proper spanking

By Frank Schell

At Davos, high in the snowdrifts of the Swiss Alps, the United States, the world's largest economy, was given a good spanking by China, the world's second-largest economy. Russia, the world's seventh-largest economy, relished spanking the U.S. even harder. About 2,200 leaders of the private and public sector looked on and took note, no doubt wondering if their time would also come for serial spankings.

At issue is the view that the U.S. financial system for decades has contaminated the rest of the world, basically treating it as an open-pit strip mine and damaging other economies besides our own. With the dollar as a largely unrivaled reserve currency for years, the U.S. came to think that it had special drawing rights on the rest of the world, particularly on China, Russia and others coming to hold massive dollar-denominated assets in their treasuries. Consumption was seen as unlimited and bacchanalian, with trade account deficits financed by our trading partners in perpetuity.

But imagine if a number of highly leveraged Chinese banks and unregulated Chinese mortgage brokers, aided by easy money through their central bank, went after much of the Chinese populace of 1.3 billion—through branch networks, fax machines, telethons and the Internet, intoxicated with the noble idea that everyone in China should and can own a home. Add to that a critical mass of well-educated, hyperkinetic Type A traders commuting to Shanghai helipads from their summer houses, able to slice, dice and pool millions of Chinese mortgages with the latest algorithms, all while ordering in pizzas.

Enter some enthusiastic Chinese credit-rating agencies, where any credit instrument, no matter how ugly, could be enhanced, sold to others and blown out at the speed of light to investors everywhere. Compound this with a couple of enormous Chinese government-sponsored firms that can fund or guarantee just about anything they like, using leverage, or lots of other people's money, to create demand for the mortgage pools. Next, layer in some populist laws enabling borrowers to walk away from responsibility if they cannot refinance or service their debt, leaving the house with the bank, which is then unable to attach other assets. Let hous-

ing prices in China fall, with homeowners then incurring negative equity and having less incentive to service their mortgages and keep their assets. Finally, set up a system to evaluate the performance of Chinese CEOs that encourages the assumption of undue and concentrated risk, just to meet short-term profit expectations.

If this crisis had emanated from China, wiping out 65 percent of our stock market as has happened to the Shanghai Composite Index, there would be a severe diplomatic confrontation between our two countries. If America had, like China, an export-driven economic model, we would see our standard of living and way of life seriously compromised by massive excesses and bad judgments made in a place relatively few Americans have been to or understand. There would be national anger, and the U.S. would hector China to reform its monetary policy, banking system, governance and regulatory process—demanding an end to the practices that infected the rest of the world. Talk-show hosts, sensing receptivity to xenophobia, would hype it and excoriate all things Chinese, from Beijing to the Karakoram Highway.

In view of the ridiculous removal of french fries from the menu of the House of Representatives during the 2003 Iraq invasion, we should expect the impounding of Chinese checkers and “The World of Suzie Wong.” Some extremists might even call for a naval blockade.

At Davos, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin gave America a good spanking. We would do at least that to them.

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Gourmet activists: Food for thought

By David Martosko

Newspaper readers who linger over the food and dining sections should be familiar with a movement urging President Barack Obama to jumpstart a “food revolution.” The enlightened eaters driving it have become very vocal about their preference for all-organic, locally grown foods. But the foodie trend is starting to have troubling side effects.

Since a few loosely organized connoisseurs have shifted their focus from the point of sale to the presidency, the boundary between personal food choices and government policymaking is gradually disappearing. In the process, once-serious debates about the future of American food and farm policy have been replaced by a bizarre mix of misguided activism, food snobbery and celebrity gossip.

The rumor mill that emerged over the Obamas' pick for White House executive chef is a perfect example. Over the holidays, activist chef Alice Waters published an open letter asking him to choose someone who would “set the tone for how our nation should feed itself.”

The white-tablecloth-and-organic-shallot set has yet to calm down.

Even after it was announced that White House chef Cristeta Comerford would be staying, The New York Times printed a rehashing of a “behind-the-scenes” feud over the letter between Waters and another high-profile chef. And the feud intensified when the Obamas announced the hiring of Sam Kass, their private chef from Chicago, to assist Comerford.

This last decision has given new hope to a movement that is begging the Obamas to turn their new backyard into an organic community garden.

According to Waters and her sprouting acolytes, growing heirloom radishes on the White House lawn will help address issues as diverse as obesity, teen diabetes and global warming. But experience and common sense suggest that solving these problems will require far more than a presidential seal on a Berkeley, Calif., ideology.

Waters is not the only activist urging Barack Obama to adopt these gestures. Food journalist Michael Pollan has been so influential in this regard that 9,000 people signed a petition urging Obama to appoint him secretary of agriculture.

While Pollan's efforts to educate the public are usually well-intended, his policy platform points to the problem with the entire foodie movement: It favors ideology over science.

In Pollan's public letter to the president, appearing in The New York Times Magazine even before Election Day, he urged the presumptive new administration to make an organically grown, completely plant-based diet the basis for a “reform of the entire food system.”



CHRIS VAN ES/ILLUSTRATION

Pollan could barely make it through one page before equating the consumption of conventional (read: non-organic) food with “eating oil and spewing greenhouse gases.”

This “yuck factor” approach has already proven to be a regulatory disaster. (The outdated, backfiring government warnings about mercury in fish, and the prevention of vital research on genetically modified foods, are two notable examples.) And Pollan's statistics, such as the claim

that meat production accounts for 18 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, are conspicuously out of date. (It's less than 3 percent in the U.S., according to Environmental Protection Agency data.)

The upshot is that Pollan's philosophy of food may be an apt guide for elitist shopping and meal-planning, but certainly not for governing.

Pollan, Waters and others may be happy to pay \$7 for organic milk. That's their right, of course. But asking the White House to lead a revolution against “cheap food” is a dangerous strategy when so many Americans are struggling to feed their families.

A knee-jerk rejection of conventionally grown—and affordable—food also fails to acknowledge the growing body of evidence showing that organic foods are no healthier (or “greener” even) than what our parents fed us.

President Obama's hesitation to appease foodie activists suggests that he realizes something many Americans still don't: Organic is a wishful agricultural philosophy, not a health issue. (You'll even find organic snack bars on the current peanut-recall list.)

Our food system isn't perfect, but neither is it “broken.” Despite alarmist claims to the contrary, America's food supply has never been safer or more efficient.

As Obama's own agriculture adviser Marshall Matz and former Sen. George McGovern wrote recently in the Chicago Tribune, “We need to get beyond ideology and depend more on science” in our food policy.

Obama is right to draw a line between public policy and his personal food preferences. And it's time for all of us to recognize the food revolution movement for what it really is: a gourmet coup d'etat.

David Martosko is director of research for the Center for Consumer Freedom.

QUESTION OF THE DAY

Was Mayor Daley right when he said city workers weren't customer friendly?

411-YES 92.2% / **35-NO** 7.8%

Results based on responses to a Tribune online question. For tomorrow's question go to chicagotribune.com

Once high on a pedestal, motherhood is taking a beating

WASHINGTON — Two stories have dominated the headlines recently and carry us away at least momentarily from the endless recitations of our collapsing economy and a stimulus policy overloaded with Democratic Party sacred cows. In fact, they carry us to the most sacred cow of all, motherhood.



Georgie Anne Geyer

her “fiance,” Levi Johnston, but has not given any sign of doing so. Former vice presidential candidate Palin is very angry about how the press has handled the births of Bristol's child, objecting to reports that the couple, as quoted by top-notch reporter Howard Kurtz of The Washington

Post, are “high school dropouts and they're going to just look for government handouts to raise their child and stuff,” while “nothing could be further from the truth.”

Kurtz then pointed out that Palin had already contacted People magazine, The Associated Press and the Anchorage Daily News, objecting to reports that Johnston had quit his job as an apprentice electrician and saying he is taking a high school correspondence course. In fact, that is exactly what he has done. It is not known who is taking care of the baby.

But what is curious is the fact that Palin runs politically on being a moral conservative and, as I recall, moral conservatives make quite a big thing of not approving of their teenagers getting pregnant outside of marriage. Yet, when Bristol's pregnancy was announced only a day after Palin's candidacy, she and her

husband just sloughed it off. These things happen, they said. Suddenly, unwed teenage pregnancies were normal.

In fact—and here is the real core of the problem—there was never, at least publicly, any of the shame they would so gladly heap upon others in accord with their stated policies.

The last we heard, People magazine editors agreed to pay Bristol and Levi as much as \$300,000 for the baby's pictures. Nothing wrong, apparently, with having their “shame” plastered across the headlines of the whole world.

What's more, Sarah Palin's motherly morality is such that her children can do in private exactly what she damns other people's children for in public—and on top of that, they should get paid for it and we outsiders should not be allowed to talk about it.

Let's look at our second, more recent “motherhood” case, that of 33-year-old unmarried Nadya Suleman of Whittier, Calif., who has eight tiny babies in the hospital and six children between 2 and 7 at home. In her parents' home, a 1,500-square-foot

house with three bedrooms.

No one knows who the sperm donor was for the octuplets, who were delivered at Kaiser Permanente Bellflower Medical Center, and no one knows how she will support them, either. Her former husband, strangely enough, is said to be the father of none of the children.

But once again, there is the “way out.” Reports say that Suleman has retained Los Angeles publicists who say they have fielded “dozens” of interview requests and offers for book, film and television deals.

Los Angeles Times blogger Elizabeth Snead says the mother of 14, who has incredibly worked as a psychiatric technician at a local hospital, is asking for \$2 million for her octuplets' story, and she would also like a “TV career as a child-care expert.”

Think of it—a child-care expert! This is a woman who, under guidelines issued 10 years ago by the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, should have no more than two embryos implanted, and reportedly had eight of her own previously frozen embryos implanted. Not only

is this considered highly irresponsible in the medical profession but premature births (the octuplets were born 9½ weeks early) puts the babies at significantly greater risk of serious health problems. In the intensive care unit, each child is costing up to \$70,000 per week or, with eight, some \$560,000 per week—for starters. Most likely to be paid for by us.

So, where are we? What is important is not the fact that these two cases seem unusual, but rather that they seem to be typical of some Americans who are using motherhood, not for the beauty inherent in it—not to speak of the responsibility of caring for one's children—but for what we might cynically call “mother-ship.”

This is a rank commercialization of bearing children. Don't tell me I'm being unkind; in fact, I'm tired to death of the whole story—tell your story to People magazine.

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