



Opinion: Obesity conference call 3-30-09

By George McGovern and Bob Dole

During the course of our careers, we have reached across partisan lines and teamed up to address national nutrition issues. In the wake of President Nixon's 1969 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health, we worked together to focus the nation on the issue of hunger in America and successfully sponsored a series of legislative initiatives improving food stamps and school nutrition programs and established the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program. We then turned our attention to the relationship between diet and disease. The Senate Select Committee on Nutrition, under our leadership, published Dietary Goals for the United States to highlight the relationship between fat consumption and heart disease, between sodium and hypertension and other high-risk diets.

Today, we are joining forces to suggest a national effort to combat obesity, the nation's No. 1 public health problem. The reason, of course, is self-evident. Americans are gaining weight at an alarming rate. Children are eating more, exercising less and becoming diabetic. Obesity is having a profound effect on our health and our national economy.

The relationship between diet and disease is a complicated science. The obesity equation, however, as opposed to the relationship between diet and specific diseases, is simple math, well within our grasp. It boils down to this: If you consume more calories than you burn, you will gain weight. Conversely, if you use more calories than you consume, you will lose weight. A major new study published in the New England Journal of Medicine emphasizes this exact point. "Reduced-calorie diets result in clinically meaningful weight loss regardless of which macronutrients they emphasize."

In short, if weight loss is the goal, total calorie consumption is the key. There are no good foods or bad foods when it comes to weight loss, only high-calorie and low-calorie foods. A soda, as one example, contains 140 calories. If you consume an extra 140 calories and don't want to gain weight, you must burn off those calories. Walking a mile uses up about 100 calories. As we all spend more time at a computer, we must "budget" our calories more efficiently.

President Obama has set a good example for all of us in this regard. Even during the pressure of the presidential campaign, he ate a healthy diet and was committed to exercise. (Perhaps if we had followed our own dietary advice during our respective presidential bids, we might have been more successful.) The first lady also is promoting healthy eating and exercise. In Tom Vilsack,

we have a secretary of agriculture who will work closely with the president's primary health team on the challenge that lies ahead.

While it is not the government's role to tell people what to eat, the government has an important role to play by providing basic information. Individuals will need to do their part and the business community will need to contribute to the education campaign, but nothing can replace attention from the top to get the national effort moving.

We, therefore, urge Mr. Obama to convene a second White House Conference on Nutrition. This conference would focus on obesity, the other face of malnutrition. While it would be up to the participants at the conference to craft a plan of action, the following ideas have been mentioned and may be worthy of consideration:

- All foods and beverages sold on the school campus during the school day should be consistent with Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Currently, only foods that are included in the school meal must comply.
- Integrate nutrition education into all federal nutrition programs.
- Encourage use of “obesity” computers in school cafeterias and supermarkets, along with Web sites, so students and customers can plug in a food, find out the number of calories in the food, and then be told the various options for burning off that amount of calories.
- Let's re-examine the food label with an eye to making the best use of its limited space and include alcohol beverages.
- Implement a national public information campaign on “obesity mathematics” connecting calorie consumption to physical activity.

All of this and more should be considered. We need to budget our calories as if they were dollars, or even better than dollars, because there is no credit card for calories. It is all about calories, and we need a national nutrition education program for all Americans to learn the obesity math.

A White House Conference could bring together all the stakeholders, federal, state and local officials with the private sector, public interest organizations and experts on communication. We all know there is a problem. We don't have to prove there is an obesity problem. We need to bring all parties together to establish an action plan (without government mandates) and get the job done.

George McGovern is the former senator from South Dakota and the 1972 Democratic presidential nominee. Bob Dole is the former senator from Kansas and the 1996 Republican presidential nominee. This opinion piece was originally published in the Washington Times.