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Susan Levine: School Lunch Politics

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The Politics of Lunch

If you search the Internet for “school lunch” these days, two types of sites will come up. The vast majority of references lead to cheery government articles about “team nutrition,” brightly decorated menus from school lunchrooms, and manuals about managing cafeteria budgets. Sprinkled here and there among the search results, however, will be another type of article entirely. Celebrity chefs have lately entered school lunchrooms. They have come to prove that school lunches can be healthy. Their aim is to rescue children from greasy food and teach students to prefer zucchini over French fries. The task is daunting. The chefs are forced to use U.S. Department of Agriculture surplus commodities that hardly make for health-food menus. The chefs must also follow federal nutrition guidelines and meal subsidies, which generally allow for a maximum of about \$2.40 per lunch for free meals. But these chefs soldier on, we are told, valiantly bucking the system in order to transform school lunches. Somewhere, buried in the articles, we inevitably find that private foundations are underwriting these experiments. In some cases, the food is subsidized, in others the chefs’ salaries are covered—usually at rates considerably higher than those of ordinary school lunch employees.¹

This book, in its own way, explains why celebrity chefs and private foundations alone cannot save the National School Lunch Program. Readers will become acquainted with the history of one of America’s most remarkable and popular social programs. But they will also learn how the politics of school lunch created structural barriers that limited which children received nutritious meals and that shaped lunchroom menus. The history of school lunch politics encompasses a combination of ideals and frustrations, reflecting, at base, America’s deep ambivalence about social welfare and racial equality. It also reflects the tension in American politics about whether public policy should address individual behavior—in this case, whether food policy should focus on convincing people to eat right—or whether policy should address public structures and institutions—for example, fully funding free lunch programs or establishing a universal child nutrition program.² The task faced by celebrity chefs in select school lunchrooms is daunting not simply because fast food is seductive and children are conservative eaters. Un-self-consciously, the chefs are entering an institution only partly governed by

concerns for children's nutrition. Historically, concerns about national agricultural policies and poverty policy have regularly competed with dietary issues in the creation of school lunch programs. School lunch is, surely, rooted in the science of nutrition and ideas about healthy diets, but those ideas have never been sufficient on their own to shape public policy (or to change people's eating behavior, for that matter). School lunch, like other aspects of public policy, has been shaped by the larger forces of politics and power in American history.

Since its founding in 1946, the National School Lunch Program has been the target of critics from the right as well as from the left. It is clear that even after more than half a century of operation, the National School Lunch Program is deeply flawed. School meals are often unattractive, unappetizing, and not entirely nutritious. The menu has always depended more heavily on surplus commodities than on children's nutrition needs. Until the 1970s, the program reached only a small percentage of American children and served very few free lunches. All the while, however, the National School Lunch Program stood as one of the nation's most popular social welfare programs. Politicians as savvy as Ronald Reagan discovered that the American public is intensely committed to the idea of a school lunch program, particularly one that offers free meals to poor children. In fact, the National School Lunch Program, to this day, is the only comprehensive food program aimed at school-aged children.³ Almost thirty million children in 98,000 schools eat school lunches each day. What is more, in most American cities, the National School Lunch Program is the single most important source of nutrition for children from low-income families. Almost 60 percent of all school children nationwide get free school lunches each day: 80 percent of Chicago's public school children qualify for free school lunches; 79 percent of the children in Atlanta's public schools receive free meals; New York City schools regularly feed almost 72 percent of their children for free; and in the state of Texas, over 70 percent of the children eat free or reduced price school lunches.⁴ The National School Lunch Program, for all its nutritional flaws, provides a crucial public welfare support for our nation's youth. Without school lunches, many children in this country would go hungry; many more would be undernourished. Indeed, the National School Lunch Program has outlasted almost every other twentieth-century federal welfare initiative and holds a uniquely prominent place in the popular imagination. It suggests the central role food policy plays in shaping American health, welfare, and equality. A history of the National School Lunch Program is thus a crucial mirror into the variety of interests that continually vie for power and authority in American public life.⁵

School lunch politics have been marked by a shifting and not always predictable set of alliances over the course of the twentieth century. At

first glance, the program's trajectory appears to be the typical story of American liberalism, thwarted by southern Democrats who held social welfare hostage to racial segregation and states' rights. Indeed, initiated by liberal reformers in the early part of the century, school lunch programs became institutionalized only when southern Democrats agreed to support federal appropriations in exchange for agricultural subsidies and under the condition that there would be limited federal oversight and unlimited local control. The result was a system that perpetuated the nation's deep racial, regional, and class inequalities. But the fact that school lunches involve both children and food, two subjects fraught with powerful cultural and symbolic significance, renders the story more complicated and the players' motives less transparent. It was conservative southern Democrats who, at the end of the New Deal, proposed a permanently funded federal school lunch program. Indeed, the 1946 bill creating a National School Lunch Program was named after Georgia senator Richard Russell, a staunch segregationist and opponent of civil rights. While Russell's first priority was to protect a program he believed would benefit American agriculture, he was also motivated by a lasting concern about poverty in his region and a deep post-war anxiety about national defense, which linked healthy children to the future of American prosperity and strength. Despite his defense of states' rights, Russell nonetheless crafted one of the most enduring and popular federal welfare programs of the twentieth century. Children's welfare confounded predictable political lines again during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when powerful images of hungry children propelled Republican president Richard Nixon to announce that he would, within a year's time, provide every poor child a free school lunch. Nixon vastly increased funds for free meals and, ultimately, turned the National School Lunch Program into the nation's premier poverty program. Once the school lunch program became a poverty program, however, the political alliances again proved surprising. To protect the program's ability to serve poor children in the face of an effective decrease in funds (the new federal monies only paid for free food, not for equipment, labor, or operating expenses), liberal senators like George McGovern, along with anti-poverty activists, found themselves—over the protests of nutritionists who had long opposed commercializing children's meals—advocating privatization. Hoping that fast-food corporations and giant food service companies would be able to bring down the cost of lunchroom operations, these reformers saw privatization as a way to allow lunchrooms to continue to serve both free and paying children. Thus, by the time Ronald Reagan suggested that ketchup be considered a vegetable on the school lunch tray, private commercial interests already had two feet in the door of the school cafeteria.

School lunch politics suggest that children's meals have always served up more than nutrition. Indeed, the National School Lunch Program, from the start, linked children's nutrition to the priorities of agricultural and commercial food interests, both of which carried more weight in the halls of Congress than did advocates for children's health. Most particularly, school lunches have been tied to the agenda of one of the federal government's most powerful agencies, the Department of Agriculture, and, more recently, to the corporate food and food-service industries as well. Nutrition in each of these arenas takes a back seat to markets and prices. During its early years, the National School Lunch Program provided substantial welfare for commercial farmers as an outlet for surplus commodities, but actually fed a relatively small number of schoolchildren and provided few free meals to those who were poor. Since the 1960s school lunches have been a vital part of the American welfare system, characterized by means testing, insufficient appropriations, weak enforcement, and often blatant racial discrimination.

But even as a welfare program, children's nutrition took a back seat to other interests. Most notably, in order to enable school lunchrooms to serve more free meals, the Department of Agriculture eased the restrictions banning commercial operations from school cafeterias. As poor children entered school lunchrooms in large numbers, so did processed meals and fast-food companies. Political compromises, first with agricultural interests and then with the food industry, have no doubt ensured the existence and expansion of a National School Lunch Program and today ensure the availability of free meals for poor children. What those compromises do not ensure is that those meals will provide a healthy cushion for children's growth and development. Ultimately, the answers to the questions of which foods children should eat, which children deserve a free lunch, and who should pay for school meals have bedeviled even the most well intended of policy makers.

If school lunch politics hinge on priorities other than children's health, school lunchrooms nonetheless reveal fundamental American attitudes about food and nutrition. As anthropologists have long observed, hierarchies of power and culture are embedded within the decisions about which foods are deemed suitable to eat, which foods constitute a meal, and which people are appropriate eating companions.⁶ Nowhere, perhaps, is the link between food and culture more relevant than in school meals where scientific ideas about nutrition continually vie with individual food choices and the enormous variety in American ethnic food traditions. The very idea of crafting a National School Lunch Program with nutrition requirements and standard menus suggests an optimistic faith in science, education, and reason. But when it comes to nutrition, scientific advice continually changes and Americans tend to ignore expert pro-

scriptions about what to eat. When the National School Lunch program began, for example, nutritionists recommended that children needed a high-calorie diet based on whole milk, cream-based sauces, rich puddings, and butter on every slice of bread. Rooted in the belief that poor, malnourished children were “underweight” and basically needed more calories in order to grow and thrive, the prescription for a high-calorie diet made sense. Today, experts warn about an epidemic of obesity among poor children and excoriate school menus for their high calorie and high fat content. But the current obesity debate reveals more than new nutrition insight. Neither underweight children in the past nor obese children today became that way solely as a result of individual eating habits, lack of nutrition education, or bad food choices. Rather, nutrition is tied directly to social and economic circumstance—for example, family income and access to fresh foods—as much as to individual behavior. How nutrition science is translated into children’s health, therefore, has always rested on a larger context than food habits and individual choice.

This book traces the politics of school lunch from its origins in early twentieth-century science and reform to the marriage of children’s lunches and agricultural surpluses during the 1930s and the establishment of a permanent federally funded National School Lunch Program in 1946 to the transformation of school meals into a major poverty program during the 1970s and 1980s. One set of major players includes nutrition reformers—education, health, and key welfare professionals, mainly women—who struggled mightily to translate nutrition science into public policy. Another set of players includes farm-bloc legislators and Department of Agriculture officials who created the institutional infrastructure for a national school lunch program. These groups, together with political leaders responding to the demands and interests of their constituents as well as to the popular appeal of children’s health, shaped national food and nutrition policies. While the National School Lunch Program, like the American welfare system in general, is administered at the state level, the creation and fundamental outlines of the program—the development of national nutrition standards, eligibility requirements for free and reduced price meals, and the basic supply of donated foods available for lunch menus—emanate from Washington. This book thus views the nature of the school lunch and who pays for it as national policy concerns.

Chapter 1 argues that school lunch programs in the United States originated as part of the modernizing efforts of early twentieth-century social reformers. Using the new science of nutrition, professional women—home economists, teachers, and social workers—attempted to rationalize American eating habits and, in the process, bring new immigrants (and rural migrants) into a mainstream Anglo-American culture. Home economics, a new profession that attracted women who were excluded from

scientific and academic careers, used the science of nutrition first to convince low-paid workers that they could “eat better for less,” then to assimilate immigrants into American culture, and, finally, to rationalize American diets more generally. School lunchrooms appeared to be the perfect setting in which to feed poor children but, more importantly, to teach both immigrant and middle-class children the principles of nutrition and healthy eating. In this way, nutrition became part of a basic civics training for future citizens. While most school lunch programs before the 1930s were volunteer efforts on the part of teachers or mother’s clubs, they drew on the expertise of professional home economists for balanced menus and scientifically formulated recipes. By the 1920s, home economists found an institutional home in the USDA’s Bureau of Home Economics, thus linking school meals to agricultural research and, ultimately, to a national network of professionals committed to school lunchrooms both ideologically and occupationally.

Chapter 2 traces the transformation of school lunch programs from local volunteer efforts into state-sponsored operations. During the Great Depression, existing lunchrooms were overwhelmed by the numbers of children coming to school hungry. Teachers and community groups tried to expand school meal offerings by raising donations but ultimately began to look to municipal, county, and state governments for resources. At the same time, a group of agricultural economists in the USDA began to formulate policies to address the severe depression in farm prices. Committed to market-based strategies that ultimately favored commercial farm interests, these policy makers proposed that the federal government monitor supplies by purchasing surplus commodities. School lunchrooms appeared as the perfect outlet for federal commodity donations. With one stroke, the Department of Agriculture could claim to help both farmers and children. By the eve of World War II, schools in every state depended on surplus commodities for their lunchrooms.

As federal involvement in school lunches became increasingly institutionalized, nutritionists and child welfare advocates began to press for standards in nutrition and service. Chapter 3 traces the increasing federal oversight of school lunch programs through the development of operating contracts and meal guidelines. Nutrition standards for the nation’s youth became increasingly significant as the United States prepared to enter World War II. Recalling the large number of young men declared unfit for service in World War I, both military and civilian policy makers began a campaign for “nutrition in the national defense.” The Roosevelt administration enlisted the aid of prominent social scientists, such as Margaret Mead, and internationally known nutritionists, such as Lydia Roberts, to develop strategies that would prepare the civilian population for expected wartime food shortages. These women proposed a universal school lunch

program and “Recommended Daily Allowances” (RDAs) that would provide healthy diets for all children. While the idea of a universal child nutrition program never gained much traction, the RDAs formed the basis for all future government-subsidized school meals. As significant as national nutrition guidelines was the development of standard contracts governing the operation of school lunchrooms. Schools receiving federal assistance had to maintain sanitary conditions for food storage, handling, and service. The federal contracts also, for the first time, contained an anti-discrimination clause and required schools to provide lunches for free to children whose families could not afford to pay. While the only enforcement mechanism was to withhold food supplies—and no public official was interested in being accused of depriving children of food—the contracts represented a significant step in the institutionalization of the federal school lunch program.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the congressional debate surrounding the establishment of a permanently funded National School Lunch Program in 1946. These chapters argue that the compromises that were necessary in order to mount sufficient congressional support for the bill had serious consequences regarding which children received federally subsidized meals and which schools participated in the program. Like much of the American welfare system, the National School Lunch Program was characterized by weak federal oversight and a high degree of local control. After a brief attempt by child welfare advocates to place school lunches under the auspices of the commissioner of Education, the Department of Agriculture succeeded in holding on to the program. Thus, for the first fifteen years of its existence, the National School Lunch Program served primarily as an outlet for surplus commodities and only secondarily as a nutrition program for children. The congressional debate over the school lunch program raised issues of racial and regional equity, including the first attempt by New York representative Adam Clayton Powell to introduce non-discrimination language in federal legislation, but the Democratic party still relied heavily on its conservative southern wing for legislative success. While southern Democrats happily supported the idea of creating a National School Lunch Program, they vehemently opposed any direct federal role in how that program would be administered. Most particularly, they resisted any effort to establish federal oversight, nutrition standards, or eligibility requirements. The results were predictable when during its first fifteen years, few poor children received free meals and even fewer African American children participated in the program. The lack of federal oversight was particularly problematic when it came to the bill’s requirement that states match the federal contribution. With no directives out of Washington, most states counted children’s fees as their matching contribution. While Department of Agriculture officials

gave lip-service to children's nutrition—developing healthy menus and testing recipes for surplus commodities—during the 1950s the National School Lunch Program reached only about one-third of America's schoolchildren. What is more, the program utterly failed to provide free meals for poor children who arguably were in most need of federal nutrition assistance.

Despite the National School Lunch Program's shortcomings, it gained widespread popular support during the 1950s. While few Americans probably knew how the program actually operated, legislators, policy makers, and the public at large touted America's school lunch program as a symbol of prosperity, equality, and democracy in the Cold War world. Only in the early 1960s, as the nation "discovered" poverty, did the limitations of the National School Lunch Program become embarrassingly clear. Chapters 6 and 7 trace the political movement to transform the National School Lunch Program from a popular, if misunderstood, agricultural subsidy into a poverty program. Galvanized by civil rights activism, and in the context of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, a group of mainstream national women's organizations focused attention on the shortcomings of the National School Lunch Program. The women's report became crucial evidence in both Senate and House debates on race and poverty at the end of the 1960s and ultimately forced the Nixon administration to expand access to free lunches for poor children. Demands for a "right to lunch" insisted on access to free lunches for all poor children and national eligibility standards for free and reduced price meals.

Chapter 8 discusses both the expected and the unintended consequences of turning school lunches into a poverty program. Neither the program's congressional advocates nor liberal anti-poverty groups were willing to demand sufficient federal funding to allow school districts to serve large numbers of poor children free meals. Nor were the program's advocates—whether in Washington or in the states—willing to demand substantial local contributions. As a result, federal funds earmarked for free meals actually threatened to bankrupt school lunchrooms across the country. State subsidies rarely were sufficient to pay for the expansions necessary to meet the new federal free lunch mandate. The only course of action for local school lunch administrators appeared to be to raise the fees on full-price meals. As a result, paying children began to drop out of the program and school cafeterias became identified with poor children. There was, in effect, a great failure on the part of liberal anti-poverty activists and conservative legislators alike to craft a public child nutrition program that could effectively protect children's nutrition. By the end of the 1970s, many school lunch advocates saw privatization as the only way to keep lunchrooms afloat. While some nutritionists held

out against the commercialization of children's meals, they had few suggestions for lunchroom operators who saw their deficits rising. The now-familiar fast food in school cafeterias appeared to be the only solution for school districts unable to sustain their mandated free-lunch program on public funds. Still, the National School Lunch Program continued to garner a tremendous amount of public support—far more than other programs for the poor. Indeed, when President Reagan tried to cut school lunch budgets by suggesting that ketchup could be counted as a vegetable, the public outcry revealed a depth of loyalty to the program that no one anticipated.

School lunch politics suggests that fixing lunch is more complicated than convincing children to eat right. Today's critiques of school meals have a long history in which children's welfare advocates have vied with the nation's food and agricultural interests for control over school menus. Still, the politics of school meals makes it clear that detaching the National School Lunch Program from those other interests would leave a lot of children hungry. The celebrity chefs now working in school lunchrooms are finding, as generations of nutritionists and food reformers before them did, that there is more to a national school lunch program than a nutritious menu. To truly fix lunch, they will need to build a political coalition committed to an agenda that links child nutrition to agriculture, food policy, and social welfare. Such a coalition, however, will need to fix lunch for all children, not just those lucky enough to attend schools with private benefactors. Fixing lunch will require a public commitment to health, welfare, and opportunity for all children.