ABOUT TWICE EVERY DECADE, Congress enacts a gargantuan piece of agricultural legislation. The 2008 Farm Bill\(^1\) weighed in at 1,769 pages, with roughly half the word count of the King James Bible or three-fourths the length of the behemoth Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act of 2010.\(^2\) Although varying with each re-enactment, the Farm Bill typically includes loans, subsidies, price guarantees, and crop insurance for agricultural producers; nutrition programs and food stamps for eligible consumers; plus a host of regulations aimed at conserving wetlands and forests, developing rural communities, and funding agricultural research. This omnibus legislation, extended further by the National School Lunch Program and international trade agreements, holds powerful sway over which agricultural goods are produced, to whom they are sold, and at what costs—including far-reaching social costs that stretch across the Mexican border and permeate the lives of struggling families both within and beyond the United States.

The federal government has a long history of supporting agriculture. The Homestead Act of 1862 sold off federal lands at a nominal fee, provided that the participating families agreed to farm for at least five years. In the 1930s, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration offered to save the family farm by taking much of the grain supply off the market in order to drive up prices, while also building a bureaucracy for distributing meat and grain in times of need. As for recent decades, a matrix of direct subsidies, counter-cyclical payments, loans, and purchases ostensibly have kept the agricultural economy on an even keel, but critics cry “corruption” as they follow the money trail. Not everyone benefits equally, and some suffer considerable harm. Among those hit

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hardest, Mexican immigrants—both legal and not—struggle to achieve financial stability without sacrificing family integrity. Meanwhile, the standard American diet has shifted toward the handful of agricultural products that remain within consumers’ budgets—budgets strained by the dual impact of inflation and underemployment.

Big-ticket items for the 2013 Congressional session include “sequestration”—a sequel to the fiscal cliff fiasco of the prior session—plus immigration reform, the renewal of the Farm Bill, and the expansion of free trade across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Meanwhile, the combined impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Farm Bill has contributed to the immigration problems of the past two decades. What Congress enacts, or fails to enact, in this session could significantly shape the financial and nutritional futures of millions of families, both native and immigrant. But seeing the way forward will not come easily.

Uncle Sam and the Family Farm
The family farm ranks near baseball and apple pie on the scale of quintessential American emblems. For Thomas Jefferson, “the pursuit of happiness” centered on an agrarian economy. Liberty required nutritional self-sufficiency and political insulation from the corrupt world of urban commerce. The 1862 Homestead Act may nostalgically be remembered as a continuation of this Jeffersonian ideal, allotting 160 acres per family for fulfilling the American dream. But while obtaining the land was easy, farming it was a different story. As Laura Ingalls Wilder recalled in the Little House on the Prairie series, unpredictable harvests were the rule, not the exception. In the 1880s, indebted Midwestern farmers formed grassroots coalitions that culminated in the Populist Party of the 1890s. The party’s 1892 Omaha Platform called for nationalization of the railroad and banking industries, inflationary coinage of silver, plus low-interest government loans against crops held in storage until market prices rebounded. Such plans for a federally managed economy resonated more with the policies of Jefferson’s nemesis Alexander Hamilton than those of the author of the Declaration of Independence. Although the Populist Party fizzled out after its failure to elect William Jennings Bryan to the U.S. presidency in 1896, the vision of government programs for farming communities lived on.
As the new century dawned, the nation abandoned the laissez faire principles of the Gilded Age; the Progressive Era (roughly 1900–1920) was characterized by government regulation of the economy based on a scientifically calculated formula for advancing the common good. The 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act inaugurated Uncle Sam as the nation’s custodian for food safety. Anti-trust legislation and litigation weakened the steel, oil, and railroad oligarchies. The 1916 Federal Farm Loan Act extended credit to rural Americans. Meanwhile, the ratification of the Sixteenth Amendment in 1913 shifted the nation’s revenue base from tariffs to direct taxation on individual and corporate incomes. During World War I, Herbert Hoover’s Food Administration transformed America’s fields into a breadbasket for starving Europe. Thus emerged a new kind of federal government, one capable of redistributing wealth on a global scale through a combination of taxation, regulations, and—starting with the New Deal of the 1930s—entitlement programs.

The 1929 Agricultural Marketing Act offered a federal safety net to farmers by pumping $500 million into a new agency, the Farm Board, for assisting farmer-owned cooperatives. That summer, a plentiful wheat crop sent prices plummeting. The cooperatives lent money to farmers while holding their crops as collateral, under the theory that in time the supply would fall, prices would rebound, and farmers could sell the crops at profits sufficient to repay the loans. Rather than reducing surplus supply, the policy only encouraged increased production in subsequent years as farmers chased after the government-induced loan policy and sought to compensate themselves for narrow profit margins by achieving greater scale. The faulty policy of 1929 came on the heels of the record-breaking harvest of 1928 and was compounded by a corresponding oversupply in world markets, resulting in a collapse of the U.S. wheat market in 1930. Paradoxically, “farmers were thus in debt to the very cooperatives they owned,” and the Farm Board had neither the statutory authority nor the funding to bail them out.3

The October 1929 stock market crash had, meanwhile, signaled the onset of a general economic depression—soon to be recognized as the

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Great Depression. As manufacturing ground to a halt, unemployment escalated, and corn prices dropped (reaching zero in 1934), the nation turned to one man for help: Franklin D. Roosevelt. As one of the major planks to Roosevelt’s New Deal, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration would subsidize commodity production for sale abroad while the crop loans begun under the Farm Board would continue under the Commodity Credit Corporation. An amendment to the Agricultural Adjustment Act also fulfilled another dream of the Populists: suspension of the gold standard to inflate the currency and thereby ease farmers’ debts. In perhaps the most controversial of AAA policies, the U.S. Department of Agricultural (USDA) offered compensatory payments to farmers who voluntarily cut production by a designated percentage. But nature had its own course, as severe droughts during the mid-1930s eliminated the surpluses. The spectacle of hogs slaughtered to drive up prices while people went hungry led to a new, and apparently more humane, approach: direct government purchasing of food. The Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation, by purchasing and then giving food away to charitable organizations, needy families, and schools, set the course that the Federal School Lunch Program (1946) and Food Stamp Program (1964) later would follow. The government kept farmers happy by paying a good price for their surplus production, and assisted the poor at the same time. Who could complain?

The problem is, once the game has begun it can never end smoothly. The tension between raising farmers’ income, lowering consumers’ costs, feeding the poor, and maintaining a tax base to support all of the preceding policies, has remained a perennial source of political anxiety. Meanwhile, specific producers (large farm corporations) of specific commodities (corn, cotton, wheat, soybeans, and rice) in a specific region (the Great Plains) receive benefits that do not flow so generously toward small- and medium-acreage producers in the Midwest; “specialty farmers” who grow the nation’s fruits and vegetables in the highly productive states of California, Michigan, and Florida receive hardly any

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subsidies at all. Half the federal subsidies paid in 1995-2004 went to a mere 22 out of the nation's 435 Congressional districts; 75 percent of all subsidies went to the 47 most-favored districts. “Millionaire ‘farmers’ like David Letterman, David Rockefeller and the owners of the Utah Jazz” have received farm subsidies, while small family-run farms find themselves ineligible.

About half of America’s farmland consists of small- and medium-acreage farms averaging less than $250,000 in gross annual sales. Ninety percent of all farmers fall into that category. After expenses, most of them generate “virtually no (and often negative) net farm income and rely almost completely on off-farm income.” In fact, farm income accounts for less than ten percent of the total income for all U.S. farm households combined. Among large operations, however, farm income accounts for a more substantial portion of total income and is heavily subsidized by the government. The top 20 recipients of farm subsidies in 1994-2004 received cumulative payments ranging from $12 million to $534 million; this largesse is proportioned to acreage, whether planted or left fallow. As the government tilts the competition in favor of the big operators, the children of small- and medium-acre family farmers increasingly look elsewhere for their livelihood. Family farmsteads therefore pass to unrelated farm managers, many of whom become absentee, city-dwelling owners, or else the land becomes adjoined to a larger operation.

As large farms become larger, small farms become less profitable—and less subsidized. From 1992 to 2007, the median acreage per farm enterprise devoted to the five most heavily subsidized commodities increased by 76 percent on average, ranging from 62 percent for wheat

to 100 percent (a full doubling) for corn (Chart 1). Meanwhile, the total number of low- and medium-income farms producing these commodities declined, while the number of farms with gross incomes above $250,000 increased (Chart 2). Although the government scaled back on total subsidies from 2005 to 2009, reductions occurred partly by paying out to fewer low- and medium-income producers (Chart 3). The share of commodity-related payments received by farms with gross incomes above $1 million increased from 8 percent in 1991 to 23 percent
in 2009; during the same interval, the share received by medium-income farms—those with gross sales between $100,000 and $250,000—declined from about one third to less than one fifth.\(^\text{11}\)

As Congress surveyed the public concerning what was targeted to become the 2012 Farm Bill, small family farmers frequently objected to longstanding practice of subsidizing big commodity producers. Chandler Briggs of Washon, Washington, pleaded, “Please end agricultural subsidies that support large, industrial monoculture farms. They pollute the environment and produce commodities instead of real food. Please support organic agriculture and regional production on family farms.” Similarly, Katherine Broli of Grandby, Connecticut, urged, “Please protect our family farms by stopping corn and soy subsidies. Create legislation that will help family farms so that citizens of our great country can buy food from their neighbor farmers.” Consumers also weighed in. Anu Kamath of Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, argued that obese “Americans over-consume meat and

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under-consume vegetables and fruits” because the federal government subsidizes the corn that is fed to animals while offering no comparable support for fruits and vegetables.12

Even granting the argument that the New Deal commodity programs provided a necessary solution to the Depression-era emergency, one’s imagination must strain to justify the continuation of these programs during the Cold War, when the American economy was roaring. From 1954 through 1972, farmers consistently produced surpluses—vast surpluses that had to be siphoned away by federal programs in order to keep farmers in business. Ironically, even while Paul Erlich’s Population Bomb (1968) warned that overpopulation would result in mass starvation by the 1980s, America was a land of such abundance that distribution and sale could not keep pace with agricultural production.

The government’s role in propping up farm prices became even more entrenched during the 1980s, despite President Ronald Reagan’s commitment to restoring the free market. In January 1980, President Jimmy Carter initiated a wheat embargo against the Soviet Union in retaliation to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In the years that followed, other nations also slowed their importation of American agricultural goods as a worldwide recession set in. The all-too-familiar result was a surplus of U.S. crops, communicated to the market in the form of lower prices. In response, the USDA quadrupled farm payments to a record $20 billion per year. The 1985 Farm Bill also called for greater acreage reductions (to curtail oversupply) and the inauguration of “deficiency payments,” or the forerunner to today’s “counter-cyclical” compensatory payments to farmers during times of lower commodity prices.13 But to examine only the Farm Bill is to see a grossly incomplete picture.

The Hidden Costs of Free Trade

Though seldom acknowledged as a foreign policy matter, the U.S. Farm Bill extends far beyond domestic concerns. When the United States joined with Canada and Mexico in the North American Free Trade Agreement

13. Conkin, A Revolution Down on the Farm, 132-34.
(effective January 1, 1994), the member nations agreed to eliminate or at least phase out all tariffs. Meanwhile, through an extension of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the United States also agreed to cap farm production aid according to new standards monitored by the World Trade Organization (WTO). The 1996 Farm Bill, or “Freedom to Farm Act,” accommodated this shift, putting government subsidies on the decline. Meanwhile, NAFTA permitted Mexico’s tariff on corn imports from the United States to be phased out over 15 years to allow Mexican farmers time to adjust. However, Mexico unilaterally suspended the tariff for 30 months, hoping to capitalize on the growth that cheap corn from the United States would bring to the food processing industry south of the border. (Food processing plants “create jobs”; campesinos do not.) By the end of the decade, adjustments to U.S. farm policy reinstated subsidies in such a manner as to comply with the letter, though not the spirit, of WTO standards, even while Mexico was abolishing its own subsidies for local producers.14 The convoluted pathway is difficult to trace even in retrospect, but by the turn of the century the United States was subsidizing agricultural production at a record level (47 percent of farmers’ income in 200015) and dumping cheap corn across the tariff-free border. Mexican campesinos simply could not compete as corn prices plummeted 70 percent from the inception of NAFTA in 1994 through 2001.16 Worse, the cost of tortillas—a staple of the Mexican diet—ballooned 483 percent in the first five years of the NAFTA economy, while U.S. corn producers and Mexican food processors profited.17

Precisely as “U.S. farmers [became] more dependent on the government for their income than at any point in history,”18 rural Mexicans were being squeezed out of the corn market and displaced from their homeland. Many


sought work in cities; others moved north of the border. During the 1980s, fewer than 200,000 people immigrated to the United States each year. In the wake of NAFTA, about 300,000 to 500,000 people immigrated per year from Mexico alone, not all of them legal. In 2005, the Border Patrol arrested over a million people attempting to cross illegally.\textsuperscript{19} Today, an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants live in the United States, 58 percent of them of Mexican origin. Illegals compose less than 4 percent of the U.S. population, but they make up 25 percent of the nation’s farm labor force.\textsuperscript{20} Although Midwestern grain subsidies begin the chain-reaction, the terminus generally is a California fruit or vegetable farm. (About one in four illegal immigrants resides in California.\textsuperscript{21})

“They value, above all else, family,” explains Ann Lopéz, a scholar-turned-advocate who has personally interviewed hundreds of rural Mexicans on both sides of the border.\textsuperscript{22} Americans of Mexican origin are more likely than the native born to be married and less likely to be divorced (Chart 4), more likely to have children, more likely to give birth

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Chart 4: Marital Status of U.S. Adults, by Region of Birth}

Pew Hispanic Center, 2011 American Community Survey
\end{quote}

\begin{tikzpicture}
\begin{axis}[
    width=\textwidth,
    height=\textwidth,
    ybar,
    ymajorgrids,
    enlarge y limits=0.2,
    symbolic x coords={Married, Separated, Divorced, Widowed, Never Married},
    xtick=data,
    ymin=0,
    ymax=0.75,
    nodes near coords,
    nodes near coords align={vertical},
]
\addplot+[fill=black!20]coordinates{(Married,0.6) (Separated,0.4) (Divorced,0.2) (Widowed,0.1) (Never Married,0.3)};\addlegendentry{Native-Born}
\addplot+[fill=gray!20]coordinates{(Married,0.2) (Separated,0.1) (Divorced,0.05) (Widowed,0.05) (Never Married,0.3)};\addlegendentry{Mexican-Born}
\end{axis}
\end{tikzpicture}

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
within wedlock (Chart 5), more likely to breastfeed their children, and more likely to live in a household of three or more persons (Chart 6). Even when cohabiting, Mexican-Americans are more likely than non-Hispanics to maintain at least the fidelity of a common-law marriage, as men and women answer the call to nurture and raise the children whom they conceive.  

Chart 5: U.S. Fertility, by Marital Status and Region of Mother’s Birth

Pew Hispanic Center, 2011 American Community Survey

![Chart 5](chart_image)

within wedlock (Chart 5), more likely to breastfeed their children, and more likely to live in a household of three or more persons (Chart 6). Even when cohabiting, Mexican-Americans are more likely than non-Hispanics to maintain at least the fidelity of a common-law marriage, as men and women answer the call to nurture and raise the children whom they conceive.  

Chart 6: U.S. Households, by Family Size and Region of Birth

Pew Hispanic Center, 2011 American Community Survey

![Chart 6](chart_image)

But holding a family together is difficult. Not only do immigrants face the family-destroying influences of mainstream American culture, but U.S. public policy also fosters both the disillusionment and the dissolution of immigrant families. Mexicans leave for America with aspirations of recovering from the post-NAFTA impoverishment that plagues their rural homeland. Illegal immigrants arrive with tens of thousands of dollars in coyote debt only to discover that wages in America do not so readily suffice to bring the rest of the family across the border. This actual separation from some family members—usually spouses, parents, or siblings who remain in Mexico—is compounded by a fear of additional separation from their American-born children. When the United States detains or deports an illegal immigrant, children often are placed in foster care. In 2011, a record 397,000 people were deported, including over 46,000 parents of U.S.-citizen children in the first six months alone. Another 400,000 or so undocumented adults are detained each year, again including a substantial number whose U.S.-citizen children are placed into temporary foster care. The wheels of justice, so goes the proverb, turn slowly. While parents remain detained, children lose their native language, and Child Protective Services petitions a court for “permanency”—that is, adoption of the child by U.S. citizens and termination of natural parental rights after a parent fails to appear in a timely manner in court due to detainment by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The result is that children not only lose contact with their parents, but that parents ultimately lose legal rights to regain custody.24

In more fortunate scenarios, one parent remains with the children while the other parent is detained or deported; “in this case it is the government’s own policies that create the conditions for single parenthood.”25 The tension over the U.S.-Mexican border also strains the relations among extended family members. Because crossing the border illegally is often more efficient than the legitimate procedure, many Mexicans risk their lives in bringing their families to the United


States, while those adhering to the law find themselves unable to navigate the humanitarian parole system when trying to visit a sick relative or attend a funeral across the border.\(^\text{26}\) Despite all its promises of cross-border prosperity, NAFTA and its aftermath have jeopardized the multigenerational strength of Mexican families.

Political debate over immigration reform is complex; illegal immigrants, by definition, have broken the border law, but they may have done so as a desperate reaction to a situation created by other regulations of the same border. One set of stock arguments pits conservatives who complain about paying for food stamps for the children of illegal aliens against liberals who think illegal adults should be covered, too. But often absent from this debate is the recognition that the Farm Bill contributes to immigration problems and that food stamps have never been simply a way to feed the poor; they are a tool for disposing of surplus agricultural production, much like the school lunch program.

**“Mom—um, I mean, teacher—what’s for lunch?”**

The National School Lunch Program serves as an invisible arm of the Farm Bill, since technically it operates under separate legislative authority with a budget all its own. In fiscal year 2011, 31.8 million school children received their lunch from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which in turn billed taxpayers $11.1 billion. These meals combine standard “entitlement foods” with agricultural surplus “bonus foods.”\(^\text{27}\) By purchasing lunches for nearly three out of every five school children—or over ten percent of the nation’s entire population—the USDA can strategically reduce the surpluses produced by American farmers in favored agricultural sectors. “The Farm Bill,” explains food journalist Michael Pollan, “determines what our kids will eat for lunch in school every day. Right now, the school lunch program is designed not around the goal of children’s health, but to help dispose of surplus agricultural production.”


commodities, especially cheap feedlot beef and dairy products.”

Although the program ostensibly serves the nutritional needs of low-income families (those with household incomes under 130 percent of the poverty threshold), financial incentives prompt local schools to enroll other families, too. In the department’s own Orwellian language, “families with incomes over 185 percent of poverty pay a full price, though their meals are still subsidized to some extent.” Specifically, schools receive nearly a ten-percent kickback when wealthier children purchase a “full price” program lunch. Translated into lived experience, this means that the USDA increasingly trumps the consumer choices of moms making lunches at home—all this in order to satiate the bloated agricultural sectors inflated by the Farm Bill.

Some localities have limited parents’ discretion still further. In North Carolina, even when a mom packs a lunch for her preschooler she must adhere to the school district’s USDA-approved regimen for a balanced diet. Apparently a turkey and cheese sandwich with a banana, potato chips, and apple juice does not pass inspection. Nor does cheese and salami on wheat. For vulnerable four-year-olds whose moms pack the wrong kind of lunch, the school serves chicken nuggets, pizza, and, yes, hot donuts in the cafeteria. One reporter explained that pizza was kept on the approved menu under Congressional pressure; after all, the tomato paste counts toward the daily vegetable quota. Pizza or not, the constriction of parental rights in the realm of lunchtime menus reveals a powerful food lobby capable of obtaining, even in preschools, government-mandated consumption for its surplus production.

Cases like this have worn thin the veneer of promoting healthy nutrition through school lunch programs. As the editor of the Carolina Journal noted in a clarification to the original “chicken nugget” report,

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28. Michael Pollan, “Don’t Call It the ’Farm Bill,’ Call It the ’Food Bill,’” foreword to Food Fight, by Daniel Imhoff, 7-8, quoting 7.


which by then had gone viral, nutritional compliance translates into increased funding for preschools. It also means increased sales at guaranteed prices for producers of subsidy-supported byproducts, such as high fructose corn syrup. Thanks to Uncle Sam’s market intervention, food processors have been able to purchase high fructose corn syrup below cost, pushing consumption levels into an obesity-inducing range. Culminating years of complaints, television celebrity chef Jamie Oliver filled a school bus with sugar to demonstrate the candy-like caliber of the school milk program administered by the Los Angeles Unified School District. Meals washed down with chocolate- and strawberry-flavored milk, he calculated, contained more sugar than soft drinks, betraying the school’s claim to nutritional integrity. Appearing on ABC’s Jimmy Kimmel late-night show with LAUSD superintendent John Deasy, Oliver successfully negotiated for the district to cease serving flavored milk in school cafeterias in 2011.

Standing aloof from the sensationalistic journalism that prompts a public policy compromise on late-night television, nutrition researchers publishing in academic journals have scrutinized the merits of the National School Lunch Program and its close companion, the School Breakfast Program. What are the chief findings? Serving a school breakfast apparently decreases obesity rates, whereas school-provided lunches have the opposite impact. Among groups of children entering kindergarten with identical obesity rates, those who participate in the

35. Daniel L. Millimet, Rusty Tchernis and Muna Husain, “School Nutrition Programs and the Incidence of Childhood Obesity,” Journal of Human Resources 45, no. 3 (Summer 2010), 640-54.
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lunch program tend toward a greater rate of obesity over time.\textsuperscript{36} In general, participation in the lunch program correlates with increased caloric consumption, but not necessarily with a higher quality of overall nutrition.\textsuperscript{37} Research indicates that childhood obesity does not result from over-consumption alone, but rather from unbalanced consumption resulting in nutrient deficiencies amid calorie excesses—a condition labeled “mis-nourishment.”\textsuperscript{38} Fortunately, at least one recent study indicates that the school lunch program might now be turning the corner and, at long last, shifting childhood diets in favor of fruits and vegetables.\textsuperscript{39}

The “complex, messy, obesogenic U.S. food policy” of recent decades has grown from the “cheap food” policy initiated by the USDA in the 1970s: subsidies to grain producers make particular kinds of foods affordable for almost all Americans, while also positioning U.S. farmers to corner the world market. But rather than reducing costs, the program has merely transferred them: as food prices fall, healthcare expenses rise to meet the demand for treating diabetes- and obesity-related disorders. From 1970 to 2000, per capita daily food intake increased by 500 calories, followed by another 100-calorie jump from 2000 through 2007. Nearly half—46 percent—of the 300-calorie rise during 1985-2000 is attributable to grain consumption, and corn sweetener calories alone have more than tripled since 1970. From 1985 to 2000, the inflation-adjusted price of soft drinks fell 24 percent, while the prices of fresh fruits and vegetables increased 39 percent. High prices indicate scarcity: “only half of the [USDA] recommended servings of dark green vegetables are available [to U.S. consumers], along with one-third of the orange vegetables and one-quarter of the recommended legumes.” As a nation, Americans


literally could not eat a balanced diet if they tried because, as a result of maladjusted subsidies, farmers produce too much of one thing and not enough of another.⁴⁰

**Recommending a New Diet for the 21st Century**

The Farm Bill, like farming itself, impacts everybody. The decline of the family farm, the rise of illegal immigration, and the mis-nourishment of America’s children all may be traced back to a longstanding pattern in U.S. farm policies that has favored large producers of grains rather than small- and medium-scale producers of fruits and vegetables. As Congress revisits in the present session the failed effort to pass the 2012 Farm Bill, three considerations merit careful attention:

1. *Comprehensive immigration reform must begin with the Farm Bill.* Republicans intent on “securing the border” before offering a “path to citizenship” to people who have already immigrated illegally should recognize that although “good fences make good neighbors,” the triple fence south of San Diego would not have been necessary if U.S. and Mexican policies had not encouraged corn dumping in the 1990s. With the U.S. government subsidizing grain production, and the Mexican government eliminating tariffs on grain imports, Mexican corn farmers had good reason to look for new employment. Even when considering the dangers of crossing the border illegally, seeking work in America appeared a rational choice to many displaced campesinos. Reducing U.S. grain subsidies and/or restoring Mexican tariffs might help to alleviate the conditions that drive the illegal immigration industry.

   Another strategy would be to lessen the attraction of southern California for illegal immigrants by instituting a “USDA Certified Legal Producers Program.” Under this proposal, producers would voluntarily enlist to guarantee that all of their workers are documented and appropriately

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compensated, while socially minded consumers would be willing to pay a premium in the supermarket to cover the additional costs borne by participating producers. Already, “some consumers [are] willing to pay a 40-45% price premium for organically labeled milk.” An analogous label for legal farm labor is estimated to cost participating consumers as little as 5 percent extra. As implementation becomes widespread, the Certified Legal Producers Program “will discourage Mexican citizens from attempting to cross the border illegally as fewer agricultural jobs will be available to them.”

2. The war against mal- and mis-nutrition also must begin with the Farm Bill. Between 1995 and 2001, $18.2 billion dollars of farm subsidies boosted production of 14 ingredients found in Twinkies (most notably: corn syrup, high fructose corn syrup, corn starch, and hydrogenated vegetable oils). Only $637 million supported apples, one of the few fruits that receives any federal subsidy at all. Compared per calorie, carrots cost five times as much as potato chips. So long as junk food sells at a lower price than fresh fruits and vegetables, America cannot hope to reverse the epidemic trends in childhood obesity and type-2 diabetes. The current course of dietary politics is unsustainable.

Short of dismantling the entire food bureaucracy, prudent options include shifting subsidies away from corn and its morbidity-inducing byproducts and toward fruits and vegetables, or mobilizing the huge purchasing power of the National School Lunch Program and food stamps in favor of nutrient-dense, locally grown fresh produce. Fortunately, My Plate, the 2011 replacement for the Food Pyramid, graphically increases the


proportion of vegetables in a model USDA diet. But according to a recent survey of annual media exposure, “Children [see] on average 1,400 ads for fast food and restaurants, but only 16 ads for vegetables and legumes, and not one ad for fresh fruit.” Community service announcements and private advertisements therefore have a niche to fill by highlighting the benefits of fruits and vegetables, particularly for parents of young and growing children.

3. **Broader economic reform also can begin with agricultural policy.** Consider, for example, wage reform. President Barack Obama proposed in his February 12, 2013, State of the Union Address to increase the minimum wage from $7.25 to $9 per hour. Already, the H-2A federal employment regulations for temporary agricultural workers—covering the Mexican-born population legally employed for fruit and vegetable harvests in California—require that employers provide housing plus a wage on the order of $11 per hour. While it is commendable that this practice at least approaches a living wage, the requirement burdens fruit and vegetable farms with extra labor costs not incurred by Midwestern commodity producers who instead receive a federal profit enhancer for their machine-intensive operations. The resulting economic imbalance between grain and vegetable production shows itself in supermarkets where families find corn- and soy-filled processed foods more affordable than nutrient-dense fresh produce. Most ironically, it is the subsidized grain producers who can best afford to buy fruits and vegetables for their own families, since the Farm Bill

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That the median income for eligible farmers outpaces that of all other households by a generous margin (Chart 7).

In brief, America’s families reap what federal policy sows. This spring, it is time for Congress to plant something new.

Dr. Ryan C. MacPherson is senior editor of The Family in America.