

Was Politics Contaminated the Food Supply?

By Eric Schlosser

THIS fall has brought plenty of bad news about food poisoning. More than 200 people in 26 states were sickened and three people were killed by spinach contaminated with *E. coli* O157:H7. At least 183 people in 21 states got salmonella from tainted tomatoes served at restaurants. And more than 160 people in New York, New Jersey and other states were sickened with *E. coli* after eating at Taco Bell restaurants.

People are always going to get food poisoning. The idea that every meal can be risk-free, germ-free and sterile is the sort of fantasy Howard Hughes might have entertained. But our food can be much safer than it is right now.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 76 million Americans are sickened, 325,000 are hospitalized, and 5,000 die each year because of something they ate.

Part of the problem is that the government's food-safety system is underfinanced, poorly organized and more concerned with serving private interests than with protecting public health. It is time for the new Democratic Congress to reverse a decades-long weakening of regulations and face up to the food-safety threats of the 21st century.

One hundred years ago, companies were free to follow their own rules. Food companies sold children's candy colored with dangerous heavy metals. And meatpackers routinely processed "4D animals" — livestock that were dead, dying, diseased or disabled.

The publication of Upton Sinclair's novel "The Jungle" in 1906 — with its descriptions of rat-infested slaughterhouses and rancid meat — created public outrage over food safety. Even though the book was written by a socialist agitator, a Republican president, Theodore Roosevelt, eagerly read it.

After confirming Sinclair's claims, Roosevelt battled the drug companies, the big food processors and the meatpacking companies to protect American consumers from irresponsible corporate behavior. He argued that bad business practices were ultimately bad for business. After a fight in Congress, Roosevelt largely got his way with passage of the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.

The decades that followed were hardly an idyll of pure food and flawless regulation. But the nation's diverse agricultural and food-processing system limited the size of outbreaks. Thousands of small slaughterhouses processed meat, and countless independent restaurants prepared food from fresh, local ingredients. If a butcher shop sold tainted meat or a restaurant served contaminated meals, a relatively small number of people were likely to become ill.

Over the past 40 years, the industrialization and centralization of our food system has greatly magnified the potential for big outbreaks. Today only 13 slaughterhouses process the majority of the beef consumed by 300 million Americans.

And the fast-food industry's de-

mand for uniform products has encouraged centralization in every agricultural sector. Fruits and vegetables are now being grown, packaged and shipped like industrial commodities. As a result, a little contamination can go a long way. The Taco Bell distribution center in New Jersey now being investigated as a possible source of *E. coli* supplies more than 1,100 restaurants in the Northeast.

While threats to the food supply have been growing, food-safety regulations have been weakened. Since 2000, the fast-food and meatpacking industries have given about four-fifths of their political donations to Republican candidates for national office. In return, these industries have effectively been given control of the agencies created to regulate them.

The current chief of staff at the Agriculture Department used to be the beef industry's chief lobbyist. The person who headed the Food and Drug Administration until recently used to be an executive at the National Food Processors Association.

Cutbacks in staff and budgets have reduced the number of food-safety inspections conducted by the F.D.A. to about 3,400 a year — from 35,000 in the 1970s. The number of inspectors at the Agriculture Department has declined to 7,500 from 9,000.

A study published in Consumer Reports last week showed the impact of

such policies: 83 percent of the broiler chickens purchased at supermarkets nationwide were found to be contaminated with dangerous bacteria.

Aside from undue corporate influence and inadequate financing, America's food-safety system is hampered by overlapping bureaucracies. A dozen federal agencies now have some food safety oversight. The Agriculture Department is responsible for meat, poultry and some egg products, while

every day, while one inspected by the F.D.A. is likely to be inspected every five years.

Neither agency has the power to recall contaminated food (with the exception of tainted infant formula) or to fine companies for food-safety lapses. And when the cause of an outbreak is unknown, it's unclear which agency should lead the investigation.

Last year, Representative Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut and Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois, both Democrats, introduced an important piece of food-safety legislation that tackles these problems. Their Safe Food Act would create a single food-safety agency with the authority to test widely for dangerous pathogens, demand recalls and penalize companies that knowingly sell contaminated food.

It would eliminate petty bureaucratic rivalries and make a single administrator accountable for the safety of America's food. And it would facilitate a swift, effective response not only to the sort of inadvertent outbreaks that have occurred this fall, but also to any deliberate bioterrorism aimed at our food supply.

The Safe Food Act deserves strong bipartisan backing. Aside from industry lobbyists and their Congressional allies, there is little public support for the right to sell contaminated food. Whether you're a Republican or a Democrat, you still have to eat. □



Harry Campbell

How the next
Congress can protect
us from *E. coli*.

the F.D.A. is responsible for just about everything else.

And odd, conflicting rules determine which agency has authority. The F.D.A. is responsible for the safety of eggs still in their shells; the Agriculture Department is responsible once the shells are broken. If a packaged ham sandwich has two pieces of bread, the F.D.A. is in charge of inspecting it — one piece of bread, and Agriculture is in charge. A sandwich-making factory regulated by the Agriculture Department will be inspected