

# The Hidden History of Our Modern Food System – How Big Tobacco Shaped What We Eat

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › In my interview with Calley Means, co-author of the book "Good Energy," we discuss how tobacco companies bought major food companies in the 1980s, applying addictive strategies to food production and influencing nutritional guidelines, leading to a surge in chronic diseases
- › The 1910 Flexner Report, funded by Rockefeller, reshaped medical education, emphasizing pharmaceutical interventions and marginalizing holistic approaches, setting the stage for modern health care's limitations
- › Corruption in health institutions, including conflicts of interest in research funding and guideline committees, perpetuates misguided health advice and hinders effective chronic disease management
- › Reforming the health system requires removing conflicts of interest from advisory committees, restructuring financial incentives, and empowering patients through grassroots advocacy and education
- › A multi-pronged approach to health care transformation is necessary, including individual empowerment, wellness-focused business models, and policy changes to address the chronic disease epidemic

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published October 13, 2024.***

I had the pleasure of interviewing Calley Means, co-author of the book "Good Energy" and a policy advisor to Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Our conversation uncovered some shocking truths about the origins of our modern food system and the dire health consequences we're facing as a result.

However, Means' insights into the corruption of our health institutions and his ideas for reform leave room for much optimism about the future of health in America.

## **The Tobacco Industry's Secret Takeover of Our Food Supply**

The tobacco industry's covert influence on our food system is responsible for many of the processed foods that line grocery store shelves today. As Means explained:<sup>1</sup>

*"In the 1980s when you looked at the most valuable companies in the world – now it's Microsoft and Amazon and Google – it was Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds back then. These were two of the largest companies in the world and they had the largest cash piles, the largest balance sheet of any company in human history because smoking was such a profitable business."*

As smoking rates began to decline due to public health warnings, these tobacco giants made a calculated move. With their core business under threat, these tobacco giants used their massive cash reserves to buy up major food companies:<sup>2</sup>

*"They had big piles of cash, cigarette smoking was clearly going to decline, what do they do with that cash? They bought food companies. So, we think about the 1980s as the age of Wall Street, M&A [mergers and acquisitions], Gordon Gekko. When you look at the biggest deals and the biggest Wall Street transactions in the 1980s, the two largest were cigarette companies buying food companies."*

The implications of this shift were profound:<sup>3</sup>

*"By 1990, the two largest food companies in the world were R.J. Reynolds and Philip Morris. The book 'Barbarians at the Gate,' which is the preeminent book on the M&A deals of the 1980s, was about R.J. Reynolds buying Nabisco. And then you had Philip Morris buying Kraft, US Foods, some of the largest transactions in U.S. history."*

## **Making Food Addictive – The Cigarette Company Playbook**

What happened next was a deliberate effort to apply tobacco industry tactics to food production:<sup>4</sup>

*"So, what the cigarette companies did very intentionally is they shifted two departments over, they shifted their scientists over to make food more addictive. And this is an amazing situation, right? And this is documented. This is very clear what they were trying to do.*

*They're going from cigarettes, which is becoming a stigmatized industry where it's not allowed for kids, to something every single American needs – to eat starting basically at birth."*

To push their addictive foods, the industry employed the same lobbying tactics that had kept tobacco "safe" for decades. They funded biased research from prestigious institutions like Harvard to claim sugar doesn't cause obesity. But this wasn't just about changing recipes.

The tobacco industry's influence extended to shaping nutritional guidelines. This junk science was then used to create the infamous USDA food pyramid, which Means called "the most deadly document in American history." The goal was clear: "And just as any drug provider, the business is getting people hooked, getting them hooked early, getting them hooked for a long period of time."<sup>5</sup>

## **The Health Consequences of a Corrupted Food System**

The impact of these changes on public health has been devastating. As Means pointed out:<sup>6</sup>

*"Cancer rates actually exploded since the 1980s dramatically. So, I joke, but I'm being somewhat serious, we'd be much healthier if the cigarette companies were back to making cigarettes.*

*It was actually a total disaster for the metric they were trying to solve with coming down on smoking – cancer rates. By letting the cigarette industry actually get to our food, cancer rates have absolutely just exploded along with every other chronic condition."*

This history has been largely obscured from public view. When I asked how they managed to hide their involvement, Means explained that while it has been reported on, the information hasn't been widely disseminated. He learned about it through his work in public affairs, where they openly discussed using the "tobacco playbook" for food companies.

Beyond the personal toll, this epidemic of chronic disease is threatening the economic stability of our nation:<sup>7</sup>

*"Health care costs are going up at an increasing rate today. They're at 20% GDP, they're growing double the rate GDP, health care costs. They're the largest source of U.S. inflation. They're going to be 40% GDP ... just mathematically, if these trends don't change, we will be a fat, infertile, sick, depressed and bankrupt population, if these trends aren't reversed."*

## **The Flexner Report – How American Medicine Lost Its Way**

Our discussion then turned to the historical roots of America's dysfunctional medical system. I brought up the influential [Flexner Report of 1910](#), which Means agreed was a pivotal moment:<sup>8</sup>

*"John D. Rockefeller, and let's be clear, maybe with some good intentions, the medicine was the Wild West, it wasn't ... I don't want to get into his psyche, but I want to just say what happened. As he was a top funder of modern medical education, so Johns Hopkins was one of them, and he also was the father of the modern pharmaceutical industry from a lot of his byproducts from oil."*

The Flexner Report, commissioned by Rockefeller, fundamentally reshaped medical education in America and laid the foundations of the modern medical system, dubbed "Rockefeller medicine." Rockefeller financed the campaign to consolidate mainstream medicine, adopt the philosophies of the growing pharmaceutical industry and shutter its competition.

**Rockefeller's crusade** caused the closure of more than half of U.S. medical schools, fostered public and press scorn for homeopathy, osteopathy, chiropractic, nutritional, holistic, functional, integrative and natural medicines, and led to the incarceration of many practicing physicians. It emphasized a reductionist approach that siloed different conditions and focused on pharmaceutical interventions. As Means explained:<sup>9</sup>

*"That report said anything about nutrition, anything about holistic, is not serious science. Serious science is siloing a condition, naming it once somebody already got sick, and then drugging it or committing surgery. And then that has really infiltrated medical education."*

Biology didn't change just because Rockefeller was pressured under monopoly threats from the U.S. government to advert from oil and shift into pharmaceuticals. Biology still remains the same and requires treating the causes of disease, which we in no way, shape or form do with our current medical paradigm.

Further, this paradigm shift left most physicians woefully unprepared to deal with the chronic disease epidemic plaguing the U.S. today. Our medical system excels at acute interventions but struggles to address the root causes of ongoing health issues. A key factor in perpetuating this crisis is the corruption of our health institutions, which leads to dangerously misguided health advice.

"The problem is that the majority of NIH [National Institutes of Health] grants go to conflicted researchers, that the FDA drug approval department is 75% funded by pharma, that the USDA Guideline Committee on Nutrition – 95% of the advisors are funded by food or pharma," Means says, adding:<sup>10</sup>

*"The American Diabetes Association, which accepts money from Coca-Cola, is dictating standards of care, saying that Type 2 diabetes is nonreversible and basically just a drug deficiency. It is not. It is reversible and we just need a correct accounting of why people are getting diabetes and how to potentially reverse it."*

## **Strategies to Transform American Health**

Despite the dire situation, Means remains optimistic about our ability to turn things around. He outlined a strategy for transforming American health, including fixing corrupted medical guidelines. Ideally, the first step is to remove conflicts of interest from the bodies that set medical guidelines and research priorities. As Means put it:<sup>11</sup>

*"Within a week we can do this – make it that there cannot be conflicts on these key medical advisory committees. What happens then? We actually get a report on what glyphosate is doing to us, we actually get reports on standards of care and tell the American Diabetes Association to stop dictating completely corrupt guidelines."*

While Means encourages this top-down approach to reforming the system, it's a challenge because these regulatory agencies have been taken over by the very industries they're supposed to be regulating. This occurred decades ago, and it's getting worse as time goes on. Lobbying efforts and rules, legislation, is controlled.

It's almost impossible in the current state to defeat this system, so the approach I've taken is to go from the bottom up – go to the people directly with solutions. Fortunately, technology is emerging that allows us to have the manpower, or at least the AI power, to help people understand what they need to do to achieve optimal health.

Part of Means' plan also involves restructuring the financial incentives in health care. Currently, the system profits from keeping people sick and managing chronic conditions rather than preventing or reversing them.

## **The Power of Grassroots Action**

He also emphasizes the need to educate and empower patients directly, which aligns closely with my own approach of providing people with actionable health information, and cleaning up our food supply. Means believes that with the right political will, significant changes could be made quickly:<sup>12</sup>

*"The president tomorrow can sign an executive order saying that the USDA Nutrition Guideline Committee can't take money from food companies. The president tomorrow can sign an executive order saying that NIH cannot go to researchers with conflicts of interest. Tomorrow the FDA can be disentangled from the pharmaceutical industry."*

While I'm skeptical about the ease of implementing such changes given the entrenched interests opposing them, the power of grassroots action remains. Means is working to build grassroots momentum through his nonprofit, [EndChronicDisease.org](https://endchronicdisease.org):<sup>13</sup>

*"We have thousands of people coming and taking action. You can sign up and email your congressperson and call them. These basics, that's what pharma does."*

*"When there's a bill threatening pharma, they do this grassroots advocacy where they have a bunch of old people call members of Congress and say, 'Don't take my drugs away.' That matters ... As I meet with members of Congress I hear a lot, 'Our phones aren't ringing on this issue.' So, we're getting the phones ringing on this issue."*

Means is also taking concrete steps to improve the situation through his company TrueMed. They're working within the current system to expand access to preventative health measures. This innovative approach allows people to use tax-advantaged health savings accounts to invest in their well-being proactively, rather than just paying for drugs and procedures after they get sick.

## **The Spiritual Dimension of Health**

By making chronic disease a politically resonant issue, we can drive real change and create the political pressure needed to enact real reforms. However, a point that's central to my philosophy is the connection between physical health and spiritual growth. When you're truly healthy, you're better able to connect with your intuition and fulfill your higher purpose. It's difficult to do that when you're not healthy.

Ultimately, it will take a multi-pronged approach to truly transform our health system — empowering individuals with information, developing technologies and business models to support wellness, and pushing for policy changes at the highest levels.

If you're inspired to get involved, I encourage you to check out Means' work at [TrueMed.com](http://TrueMed.com) and [EndChronicDisease.org](http://EndChronicDisease.org). By adding your voice to this growing movement, we can build the momentum needed to create real, lasting change in U.S. health care.

Remember, your health is your most valuable asset. By taking control of your own well-being and advocating for systemic reforms, you're not just improving your own life — you're contributing to a healthier, more vibrant future for all.

## **Sources and References**

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- [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 Odysee, Mercola, How Big Tobacco Captured and Transformed the Food Industry for Worse — Interview with Calley Means](#)