David A. Kessler, *The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite* (Rodale Press, 2009).

Let me start here: This should be required reading in schools.

This fascinating book has a curious pedigree. Kessler is also the author of *A Question of Intent*, the story of taking on the tobacco industry, and his large role in it, is the man most responsible for our having nutrition labels on our food, and was one of the most respected commissioners ever of the FDA. And, as he tells us near the end of the book, he is a man who has had trouble controlling his eating, who has owned suits in many sizes, and whose struggles were in part a motivation to write this book. It is published with Rodale Press, who chose to mark their presence with as small a logo as I have seen on a book, and no contact information. Perhaps it is not needed these days, yet a quick visit to their website did not show this book at all prominently displayed. A search yielded only the hardcover edition, not the paperback I have right here. Kessler retained the copyright, and also, we read, has trademarked the name "Food Rehab."

The story in the book is straightforward: Americans overeat, and it hurts their health. One of the main reasons they overeat is that, over the last 30 years, food processors and restaurants have learned how to engineer food that will entice people to overeat. Their knowledge is effective, and people are conditioned to overeat. Kessler gives clear advice on how to resist.

The book is about 250 pages, not counting notes, and I found it a compelling read. I got up to about page 20 yesterday, and finished it this morning. Kessler uses short (3-5 pages) that make a very precise point. He is clear about when he is relying on carefully tested evidence, about when the science is unclear, and when he is using metaphor or factual description. He names names of restaurant chains and items on their menu that are particularly egregious examples of engineered food. This book has enough practical information to significantly change how you act about food.

Overeating is why people gain weight. Period. (p. 8) Why do people eat all the time, even when, upon discussion, clearly linked to unhappiness and ill health? Researchers, including Kessler, have investigated what happens in the body and conclude that much in the way of poor eating habits is what we usually call addiction. And food is an important source of meaning in the day, in the lives of those distracted by food.

There is a science to the right levels of fat, sugar and salt that will condition animals to overeat. Rats and people can be enticed to gorge themselves, and we know how put that knowledge into boxes of crackers and on restaurant menus. Rats and people will expend considerable effort in the pursuit of sugar and fat, and in the right combinations. Our brains are changed by repeated stimuli in this direction. Food industry people know this, and work to achieve this. They make money doing it. Kessler observes, "When it comes to food, we are, in essence, following an eating script that has been written into the circuits of our brains." (p. 62) These sections

on the science of brain chemistry, and how it is used by the engineers of food, are very carefully written, and largely convincing. *Of course* industry people have known what they are doing. After he presented an overview of the problems to executives as a big food company, one of them said, "Everything that has made us successful as a company is the problem." (p. 241) Kessler summarizes, "the industry has cracked the code of conditioned hypereating, and learned exactly how to manipulate our eating behavior. It has figured out the programming that gets us to pursue the food it wants to sell." (p. 244)

The food industry changed in this direction most decisively during the 1980s. Food was pitched more as entertainment, meals were redesigned to speed and increase consumption, and lots more fat and sugar were added by the designers of engineered food. "Where traditional cuisine is meant to satisfy, American industrial food is meant to stimulate." (p. 94) And, as Kessler details in chapter twenty, the industry is actively working to hide this from consumers. Deception is an important part of the racket. Even what looks like traditional food is usually misleading, in Kessler's telling. Asian food is "Americanized," mostly through the addition of fat and sugar. Again, he describes the fare in popular chain restaurants, not just fast food ones, where vegetable dishes turn into more fat delivery systems. He has a brief description of the flavor industry in chapter twenty-three (readers who want more should check the fascinating article by Raffi Khatchadourian, "The Taste Makers," *The New Yorker*, November 23, 2009, p. 84+), and in the next chapter describes how highly processed food can be made to look like complex, nutritionally balanced meals.

Kessler contributes his own "theory of conditioned hypereating," by which he attempts to explain overeating as an acquired automatic response to food cues that "competes with our conscious capacity to say no." (p. 145) Part of the success of the food making and selling techniques lies in the knowledge of food engineering. Part of it is also in a large increase in the availability of stimulating food (p. 172) and the changes in behavior among eaters—for example, snacking used to be fairly rare, now it is the norm.

In some examples, Kessler sees what he wants to see. He interprets bad manners in restaurants as signs of the "magical pull" of engineered foods. A recent house guest eats rather carefully, and managed to wolf down a meal I prepared with a ferocity unmatched by any of the cats. He is on very convincing grounds when relying on evidence, such as overeaters dramatically underestimating what they eat, or the frequency of their snacks during the day.

Kessler devotes a major section to a theory of treating conditioned overeating. Briefly, the approach is to gain awareness, to learn a competing behavior, develop new thoughts to quiet the old ones, and get the social support you need to stick with it. One needs specific behavior-oriented rules, he argues, instead of general nostrums about eating better or avoiding sweets. One needs an action

plan to override the undesired habit. He has a substantial section on his trademarked approach, Food Rehab.

Measured by the number of pages devoted to solutions, Kessler puts most responsibility on the shoulders of individual consumers. The world is as it is, and this is the one you need to learn to live in. He does travel to make the pitch to industry people, and he does not some changes in their behavior. Just tonight I heard a radio story on the CDC report that growth in obesity rates has leveled off. The trend is not as bad as it was. And, Kessler did name all of those places that engineer your food. He is a strong advocate of complete and informative labeling.

I suppose it is my own desire that he would put an equal, if not greater responsibility on industry. He reports one former food executive as saying that, in the 1980s and since then, "greed took over." They are out to make money off of you, and your health matters less. (see p. 128) They way I always paraphrase this to friends is, "it is important to remember that they hate us."

The more systematic critique is worth exploring. Why did this change so much in the 1980s? What else was going on? As Robert Putnam has argued (for the 1980s and for most of the 1970s), this was also a period where we were first dealing with the consequences of large shifts in the way people spend time, and the amount of civic engagement on the part of regular citizens. This was a time when we were watching more and more television. (see his *Bowling Alone.*) This was also a time when a new political era began—anti-union, anti-tax, anti-affirmative action, anti-government, and anti-regulation, coupled with a revived rhetoric about the wonders of the free market. It was probably not a coincidence that greed took over. The public health problems that underlie much of Kessler's analysis are plausibly another notch in the handle of the Reagan era—in which we still reside. (Shameless plug: I tried to describe some consequences of the antigovernment attitude in *The War Against the Common Good*, coauthored with David Schuman.) I do not mean to complain that Kessler did not write the book I wanted him to write. Far from it.

This book is important. Give it to someone. Get one for yourself.