

THE LAST WORD

It's the surreal thing – Coca-Cola corrupts the political economy

By Citizen Staff

Calley Means, a former Coca-Cola and pharmaceutical industry consultant who co-founded a company that promotes food as medicine, created a stir on the internet earlier this year when he took to Twitter and introduced himself to the world.

“Early in my career, I consulted for Coke to ensure sugar taxes failed and soda was included in food stamp funding,” Means told his audience. “I say Coke’s policies are evil because I saw inside the room.”

“The first step in playbook was paying the NAACP and other civil rights groups to call opponents racist.”

“Coke gave millions to the NAACP and the Hispanic Federation – both directly and through front groups like the American Beverage Association.”

“This picked up in 2011-2013 – when the Farm Bill and soda taxes were under consideration.”

“The conversations inside these rooms was depressingly transactional: We (Coke) will give you money. You need to paint opponents of us as racist.”

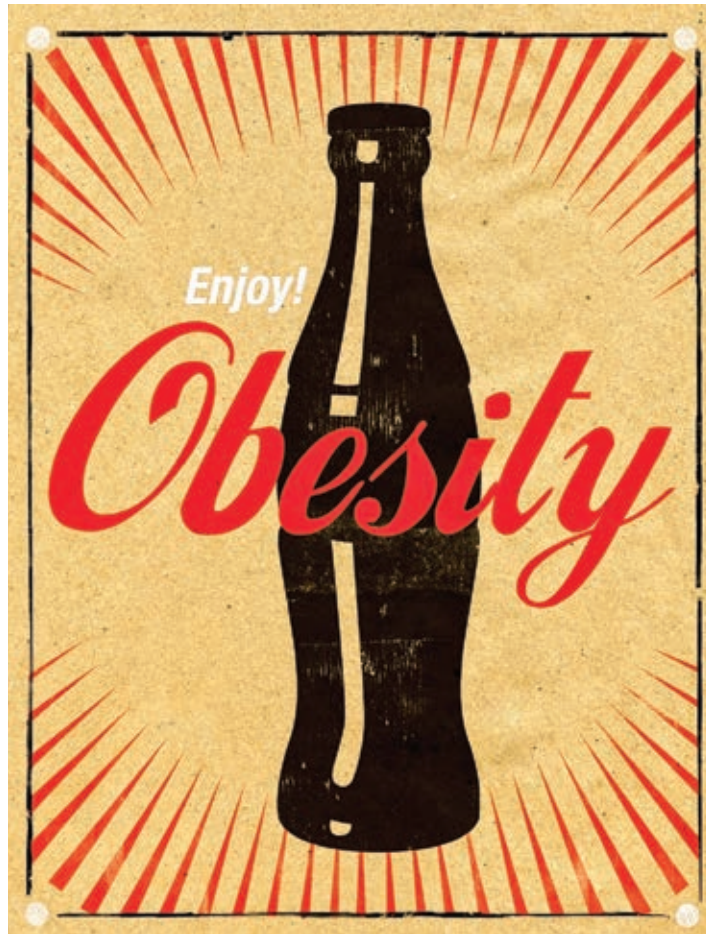
“The effort was successful, and the message was carried in thousands of articles between 2011-2013.”

“Coke’s position was clear – soda is one of the cheapest ways to get calories – a flagrantly inaccurate statement when factoring in the health consequences.”

Means linked to a 2013 *New York Times* article titled “Minority Groups and Bottlers Team Up in Battles Over Soda.”

“The decision by a New York State judge striking down the Bloomberg administration’s ban on large, sugary drinks this week was not just a high-profile victory for the soda companies in their pitched battle against anti-obesity policies that are aimed at their products,” the *Times*’ Nicholas Confessore reported.

“It was also a victory for the industry’s steadfast, if surprising, allies: advocacy groups representing the very communities hit hardest by the obesity epidemic.”



Obesity Campaign Poster

(Melissa Gruntkosky/Flickr)

“Dozens of Hispanic and African-American civil rights groups, health advocacy organizations and business associations have joined the beverage industry in opposing soda regulation around the country in recent years, arguing that such measures – perhaps the greatest regulatory threat the soft-drink industry has ever faced – are discriminatory, paternalistic or ineffective.”

Means said that “I watched as the industry funneled money to professors at leading universities – as well as think tanks on the left and right – to create studies showing soda taxes hurt the poor.”

“They also paid for studies that say drinking soda didn’t cause obesity.”

“Of course, not mentioned in these studies is that incontrovertible fact that sugary drinks are one of the top causes of obesity and diabetes – leading to harrowing statistics like this.” (“Diabetes Rates May Surge Among Young People, Study Finds,” CNN, December 29, 2022.)

“Soda companies are deeply embedded in the USDA – so much so that the agency carries discredited talking points like ‘there are no bad food,

only bad diets.”

“This ignores the fact that sugar is highly addictive and has negative nutritional value.”

“In the end – racial tensions flared, soda spending was kept in SNAP funding, and many of the soda taxes were defeated. Of course, this has been a disaster for low-income communities. Addictive, deadly sugary drinks should never be included in a government nutrition program.”

“People saying that restricting soda from SNAP funding is ‘paternalistic’ or an ‘assault on personal choice’ are unwittingly doing the work of the soda companies.”

“You can’t have a free market if that market is rigged.”

Given our polarized culture, and his message that civil rights groups were beholden to junk food companies, you can imagine what happened after Means’ posts went viral.

Means appeared on Fox News. And the corporate liberal media ignored him.

The conversations inside these rooms was depressingly transactional: “We (Coke) will give you money. You need to paint opponents of us as racist”

On Fox, Means attacked Big Food and Big Pharma for driving the obesity epidemic.

Means was incensed at the American Academy of Pediatrics’ (AAP) guidelines last month encouraging pediatricians use treatments including weight loss drugs, and in some cases, surgery for children as young as 12.

During an interview with British activist Russell Brand, Means went after the new weight loss drug Ozempic.

“It’s projected to be the most expensive drug in American history,” Means said. “We’re on track to spend trillions on this drug. It would be much cheaper to just have healthy food for kids.”

To the boomers who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, go back and look at your elementary school photos. Obesity was rare. Kids were remarkably thin. That’s because Coke, KFC, McDonald’s and the other corporate predators hadn’t taken a stranglehold on the culture.

The junk food industry playbook that Means described – saturating the political economy and scientific establishment with junk foods cash – has produced results in universities, Congress and in state legislatures around the country.

Periodically, nutrition action groups push for legislation to impose a tax on sugary drinks. Last session, for example, Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro (D-Connecticut) introduced such legislation (HR 2772), but there were no co-sponsors, no hearings and no action on the bill.

Suffice it to say that the Congressional Black Caucus is still beholden to the junk food industry. Coca-Cola and Ozempic manufacturer Novo Nordisk (as well as Philip Morris) are prime sponsors of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. Coca-Cola sponsors the Black Caucus’ annual prayer breakfast.

The Congressional Progressive Caucus lists 18 key issues including “civil rights and con-

fronting white nationalism” – but combating obesity is not one of them.

Earlier this year in New Mexico, Republican state Senator Gregg Schmedes, M.D. proposed a bill to not allow soda vending machines in schools.

The bill never made it out of committee.

“This week, I found out what happens when you try to ban sodas in public schools,” Senator Schmedes said. “Coca-Cola flies six executives on a private jet to your state and kills your bill.”

Then of course you have the case of Republican Congresswoman Elise Stefanik (R-New York), she of the obesity lobby. In response to a New York City campaign to ban sugary milks from schools, Stefanik took to the House floor to introduce legislation that would require all schools to offer flavored milk.

She proudly tweeted her move with a note that read: “The fight to #SaveChocolate-Milk continues.”

To which Means responded – “24g of sugar. A bill to federally mandate this to be served to children. This is evil.”

In 2016 in West Virginia, a top-ranked obesity state, Gregory Hand, the dean of the West Virginia University School of Public Health, was forced to resign after the *New York Times* reported that Coca-Cola had given money to Hand to fund a nonprofit group – the Global Energy Balance Network – to promote the view that “weight-conscious Americans are overly fixated on how much they eat and drink while not paying enough attention to exercise.”

The Democrats in West Virginia didn’t make an issue out of the scandal, because they too are marinated in Coca-Cola money.

Democrat Talley Sargent, a former Coca-Cola public relations executive, ran for Congress and lost to a far right Republican, now Congressman Alex Mooney (R-West Virginia).

The obesity lobby has soaked both political parties to ensure no action in Congress, in New Mexico, in West Virginia and around the country.

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