

It's a jungle out there

USDA leaving Americans at risk by not properly enforcing safety procedures

Nearly a century after Upton Sinclair exposed the scandal of America's slaughterhouses in his novel "The Jungle," some of the nation's largest meatpacking plants still fail to meet federal inspection guidelines to produce disease-free meat. There were a record 113 meat recalls last year alone.



MIDHAT FAROOQI

However, what's worse is that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has been lax in enforcing safety procedures under the new program, even at plants with repeated violations. In a report issued this month, top auditors at the USDA "question the adequacy" of programs "that identify and control hazards to the (meat) production process." Congress must force the meat industry to clean up its act and its product by reforming USDA guidelines.

In years past, government inspectors patrolled the slaughterhouses, looking to find and reject carcasses with tumors or other obvious flaws. In spite of all their hard work, they were unable to distinguish wholesome pieces of meat from pieces of meat infected with bacteria, the major cause of all food-borne illnesses.

It was only when a deadly E. coli strain contaminated hamburgers served at Jack in the Box restaurants in 1992, killing four children and making hundreds ill, that the government decided to shift to a new food safety system.

This latest approach, known as the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points program, was designed to be more scientific than the "poke and sniff" methods inspectors had previously used. It mandated steam and acid carcass washes, and, since most bacteria are found in feces, promoted a zero-tolerance policy for fecal material found on meat.

Yet, in overhauling the system, the USDA removed the burden of food safety from its own shoulders and placed it squarely on the company's. The meat processing plants were now required to identify vulnerable points in their production lines and design their own "rigorous" safety plans.

One may as well have asked cigarette companies to tell the deadly truth about their product of their own

free will. To a business inevitably seeking to maximize profit, other concerns, such as efficiency and cost, compromise the issue of safety. The USDA should realize that whenever a company is responsible for product safety, safety can always be compromised.

Also, the USDA gives meat companies free rein to manipulate this regulatory system. Since meat plants determine the placement of control checkpoints, they can effectively dictate which parts of the production process inspectors can fully monitor, limiting any unwanted interference from them.

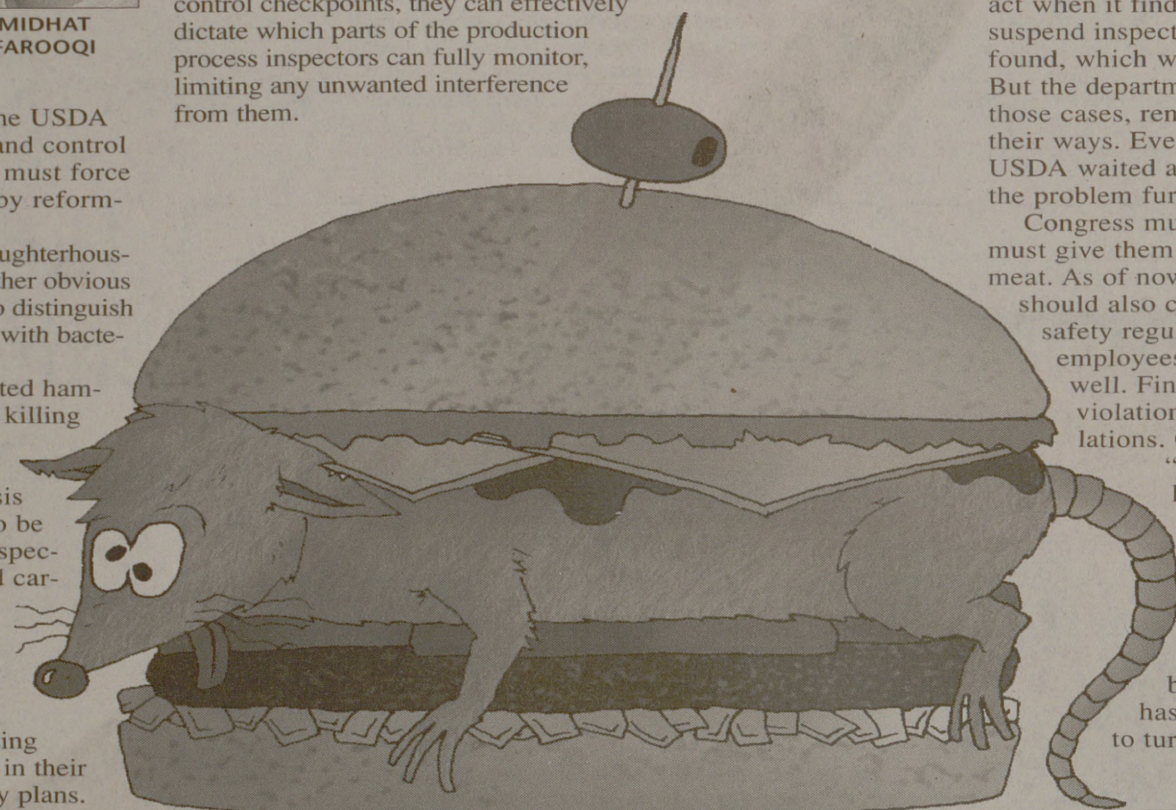
Sen. Tom Harkin, D-IA, a ranking member on the Senate Agriculture Committee, says the Agriculture Department "really doesn't have good enforcement procedures, and they don't have any clear standards for judging whether a company's plan is adequate or not."

The New York Times reported that although USDA inspectors check meat for contamination, the department is slow to act when it finds violations. In 2002, the USDA threatened to suspend inspections at 60 plants where contaminated meat was found, which would have stopped the plants from operating. But the department never acted on its threat in 95 percent of those cases, removing any reason for the meat plants to change their ways. Even after a plant failed two food-safety tests, the USDA waited an average of three months before investigating the problem further.

Congress must act quickly to empower inspectors. They must give them mandatory recall authority over contaminated meat. As of now, the system only permits voluntary recall. They should also create civil fines for meat plants that violate food safety regulations. Establishing job protection for plant employees if they report safety violations would help as well. Finally, they must impose a maximum number of violations for plants that repeatedly breach safety regulations. Currently, there is no such limit.

"How long does it take for a 'bad' plant to be listed as bad? We can't tell you," USDA Inspector General Roger Viadero said, "because (the USDA) has not told the inspector what's bad."

The changes must come fast. America's health is at risk. But if no action is taken, then maybe the words of one food inspector should be heeded: "If this is the best the government has to offer, I will instruct my family and friends to turn vegetarian."



JOSH DARWIN • THE BATTALION

Midhat Farooqi is a senior genetics major.

U.S. should join China to promote space exploration

For the first time ever, three nations are able to boast a space program that has put a man in space. The United States, the former Soviet Union, and now China constitute the elite club of countries able to independently launch one of its citizens into an earth orbit.



HAYDEN MIGL

The United States needs to use this time to advance its own space program and extend a hand to the rest of the international community. NASA needs to offer the Chinese space program assistance and promised cooperation. Now would be a perfect time for the United States, Russia and China to work together for the first time in history.

The Chinese made history on Oct. 14, when they launched their first piloted spacecraft into the earth's orbit. The pilot, Yang Liwei, is one of a group of Chinese astronauts who had been trained outside of Moscow by Russians. The Chinese rocket, the Shenzhou 5, is even based partly on the design of the Russian rocket Soyuz. The excitement of space exploration has been spreading throughout China and is quite noticeable, according to space.com. Liwei has already become a national hero, and Chinese president Hu Jintao was present at the launch to

see his country enter history and witness the "glory of our great motherland." This same enthusiasm was seen in the United States only 30 years ago, but since then it has faded.

NASA chief Sean O'Keefe has said China's launch is "extremely historic," but it could be even more memorable if the event was used to close gaps which have grown between the nations. According to a column on space.com, some analysts believe China's show of space power is a sign of its growing military technology. They worry China could use its knowledge to develop long-range missiles which would be capable of reaching the United States. The same worries were spread when the former Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957 during the Cold War, which increased tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The same reaction should not occur with China. The country should be welcomed into the space exploration community and should be offered an active role.

Currently, NASA is still feeling the effects of the Feb. 1 space shuttle Columbia

crash. The rest of the space shuttle fleet has been grounded for at least another year, according to officials, and U.S. astronauts are currently dependent on the Russians for trips to the International Space Station.

"The Chinese have proved they have the determination and ability to launch humans into space, and they should be treated as the world power they have become."

A new space race should not be initiated, but the enthusiasm which is evident in China should spread to the rest of the world. Shuttle launches were once national events which superseded any other television programs, and astronauts were regarded as national heroes. Sadly, not many people even knew the space shuttle Columbia was in space before the Saturday morning when it disintegrated over Texas reentering the atmosphere.

President John F. Kennedy made a promise to reach the moon before 1970 and gave the entire country space fever. That interest has since ebbed and been replaced by a feeling that NASA is just another overspending government organization which has been responsible for multiple disasters. A new partnership with China might bring some of the excitement back into the space program.

The countries involved in the construction and operation of the International Space Station should invite the Chinese to become involved.

China's addition could bring a new means of transportation for astronauts to or from the station. Chinese involvement could also bring added funding for the over-budget space outpost.

Adding China as a space ally might also improve relations on the ground. Increasing ties diplomatically might improve Chinese-American ties, economically opening up a market of more than \$1 billion. Many people argue the United States should have nothing to do with communist China, but recently the country has been becoming more moderate. Further integration into the world community might also give China the incentive to change more of its policies.

The United States, Russia and other countries participating in space exploration should welcome China into the group. The Chinese have proved they have the determination and ability to launch humans into space, and they should be treated as the world power they have become. A new alliance could advance the United States' faltering space program, bring back the excitement of space exploration and bring countries together for a new cause.

Hayden Migl is a freshman political science major.

MAIL CALL

Pledge changed for religious reasons

In response to Matt Maddox's Oct. 22 column:

It should be pointed out that the U.S. Constitution does not invoke the name of God. It does use the phrase "Year of Our Lord" in giving the date for ratification, but this reflects our dating system and not a direct invocation of the name of God in the Constitution.

It is also incorrect to use the national motto to defend the pledge of allegiance's use of the phrase "Under God" because the national motto was changed to "In God We Trust" during the same time period as the change to the pledge was made. The original motto from the time of our founding fathers was "E Pluribus Unum."

The change in the pledge of allegiance and the change in the national motto were attempts by religious conservatives to insert more religion into governmental affairs than had already existed previously from the time of the founding fathers, changing the motto of our founding fathers and adding to the pledge which although written by a Baptist minister

had no need to mention God.

Allen Butler
Class of 2004

Morality has nothing to do with religion

The pledge of allegiance was originally written by a reverend who believed in the separation of church and state, but during the largest propaganda campaign in American history "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance. This was a measure that helped fuel hate for the atheistic communists and promoted a feeling of Christian nationalism. President Eisenhower failed to recognize just as some fail to recognize now that not all Americans believe in the Christian God or in any god at all.

Communism in the Soviet Union didn't fall because the country was atheist, it fell because citizens were oppressed in many ways. For example, individuals didn't determine that their occupations and public assemblies were banned. Other factors in the fall of communism in the Soviet Union were poor economy and sub-

standard leadership. Fifty percent of Russians still consider themselves non-religious; if atheism had been the fall of communism, Russians would still have a failing government today.

The ability to distinguish good from evil, often called morality, has absolutely nothing to do with religion. Many devoutly religious public figures have shown the ability to be both religious and immoral.

Stephanie Southard
Chris Jeane
Class of 2007

America's freedom founded on religion

In response to Mike Walters' Oct. 22 column:

James Madison, the primary author of the Constitution of the United States, said, "We have staked the whole future of all our political constitutions upon the capacity of each of ourselves to govern ourselves according to the moral principles of the Ten Commandments." Stating the obvious, we have no more right to "correct" the United

States Constitution than we do correcting the Ten Commandments or the Bible. President Adams said, "The highest glory of the American Revolution was this: it connected in one indissoluble bond, the principles of civil government with the principles of Christianity."

How dare anyone tell me that the Lord does not belong in America, or its principles, or its people. Without the very fabric of moral and ethical practices instilled by our

Constitution, founded on the word of God, not one of us would be walking this country in freedom. This same governmental system has graciously accepted individuals from every culture, every country, and every walk of life. Yet there are those who choose to demoralize this country by denouncing the faith with which it was established.

Kellie Scamardo
Texas A&M Employee

