Add another to the string of superlatives wreathing the world’s greatest power: Americans are now the fattest people on earth. (Actually a handful of South Sea Islanders still outweigh us, but we're gaining.) Six out of every 10 of us—and fully a quarter of our children—are now overweight. Just since 1970 the proportion of American children who are overweight has doubled, a rate of increase that suggests the fattening of America has a specific history as well as a biology. “Fat Land,” a skinny book about this big subject, is the journalist Greg Critser’s highly readable attempt to reconstruct that history.

At least from a business perspective, the fattening of America may well have been a necessity. Food companies grow by selling us more of their products. The challenge they face is that the American population is growing much more slowly than the American food supply—a prescription for falling rates of profit. Agribusiness now produces 3,800 calories of food a day for every American, 500 calories more than it produced 30 years ago. (And by the government’s lights, at least a thousand more calories than most people need.) So what’s a food company to do? The answer couldn’t be simpler or more imperative: get each of us to eat more. A lot more.

Critser doesn’t put it quite this way, but his subject is the nutritional contradictions of capitalism. There’s only so much food one person can consume (unlike shoes or CD’s), or so you would think. But Big Food has been nothing short of ingenious in devising ways to transform its overproduction into our overconsumption—and body fat. The best parts of this book show how, in the space of two decades, Americans learned to eat, on average, an additional 200 calories a day. In the words of James O. Hill, a physiologist Critser interviewed, getting fat today is less an aberration than “a normal response to the American environment.”

Some of the credit for creating this new environment belongs to an unheralded businessman by the name of David Wallerstein, the man Critser says introduced “supersizing” to America. Today Wallerstein is an executive with McDonald’s, but back in the 1960’s he worked for a chain of movie theaters, where he labored to expand sales of soda and popcorn—the high-markup items that theaters depend on for their profitability. Wallerstein tried everything he could think of to goose sales—two-for-one deals, matinee specials—but found he couldn’t induce customers to buy more than one soda and one bag of popcorn. Why? Because going for seconds makes people feel like pigs.

But Wallerstein discovered that people would spring for more popcorn and soda—a lot more—as long as it came in a single gigantic serving. Thus was born the Big Gulp and, in time, the Big Mac and jumbo fries. Though Ray Kroc himself took some convincing: the McDonald’s founder had naively assumed that if people wanted more fries they’d buy another bag. He didn’t appreciate how social taboos against gluttony (one of the seven deadly sins, after all) were holding us back. Wallerstein’s dubious achievement was to devise the dietary equivalent of a papal dispensation: Supersize it!

Now, you might think people would stop eating and drinking these gargantuan portions as soon as they felt full, but it turns out hunger doesn’t work that way. Citing studies in the “growing field of satiety”—the science of human satisfaction—Critser writes that people presented with larger portions will eat up to 30 percent more than they otherwise would. Human hunger is apparently quite elastic, which makes excellent evolutionary sense: it behooved our hunter-gatherer ancestors to feast whenever the opportunity presented itself, thereby storing reserves of fat against future famine. Researchers call this trait “the thrifty gene.” The problem is that in an era of fast-food abundance, the opportunity for feasting now presents itself 24/7.

What makes supersizing such an effective business strategy is the cheapness of basic foodstuffs in America. Since the raw materials of soda and popcorn, French fries and even hamburgers represent such a tiny fraction of their retail price (compared with labor, packaging and advertising), expanding portion size becomes a way to multiply sales without adding much to costs.

Critser, to his credit, is more interested in ferreting out the political history of “overnutrition” in America than indulging in the usual pseudopsychology or sociology of fat. So “Fat Land” begins at the beginning, with the 1971 arrival in Washington of Earl Butz. Butz, you’ll recall, was Richard Nixon’s secretary of agriculture, a blustering, quotable and foulmouthed agricultural economist from Purdue. The early 70’s marked the last time food prices in America had climbed high enough to generate political heat. Bad weather, a grain shortage and
soaring costs for agricultural inputs (fuel, chemicals, equipment) were squeezing farmers; at the same time consumers were protesting the high costs of basic foods like sugar, cheese and, perhaps most sensitively, meat. Beef, that American entitlement, had suddenly become a luxury good.

Recognizing the political peril of cranky consumers and restive farmers, President Nixon dispatched Butz to rejigger the American food system. The Sage of Purdue promptly loosened regulations, beat down trade rules and expanded subsidies. By 1976, when a racist joke he told on a plane cost him his job, Butz had largely succeeded in driving down the cost of food and vastly increasing the output of America’s farmers. Say what you will about the problems of a heavily subsidized industrial agriculture, the cost of food is no longer a political issue in the United States.

Now we find ourselves confronted with the unintended consequences of cheap and abundant food, foremost among them the epidemic of obesity. Critser takes us on a brisk tour, by turns funny and depressing, of a society learning to accommodate itself to its new dimensions: restaurants adding square inches to their seats; government agencies relaxing their weight, fitness and dietary guidelines; Seventh Avenue recalibrating clothing sizes to make for happier visits to the dressing room. Less amusing is what our weight is doing to our health, and Critser is sure-footed and clear in describing the science of obesity, especially the precise mechanism by which our diet has led to an epidemic of Type 2 diabetes. What used to be called adult onset diabetes now afflicts millions of children as well as adults, and costs America’s health system billions of dollars a year.

In the last year or so, there have been signs that the fattening of America is emerging as a political issue. A grass-roots parents’ movement to get fast food and vending machines out of the schools is gathering steam, and several lawsuits have recently been filed by obese customers against fast-food chains, seeking to hold the companies liable for health problems. The suits seem absurd on their face (no one’s forcing people to eat this stuff), but then so did the early suits against the tobacco companies. There does seem to be at least one area in which the tobacco analogy is apposite: the ethics of marketing unhealthy products to children.

Indeed, the question of responsibility looms large in the growing debate over obesity, and it is here that Critser loses his footing a bit. While “Fat Land” does an excellent job connecting the dots between government and corporate policies and the fattening of America, by the end of the book the problem has largely, and somewhat inexplicably, been redefined in terms of personal responsibility. Critser expresses the hope that “the food industry might . . . take it upon itself to do something” like resize portions, but nothing that has come before gives us reason to think the industry would ever do any such thing.

George W. Bush has defined this as “the era of personal responsibility” and finally it is under this banner, so congenial to business, that Critser marches, seemingly in spite of himself and his best journalism. So instead of seriously entertaining any public solutions to what he has so convincingly demonstrated is a public problem, Critser ends by imploring us to eat less, get off our duffs and, incredibly, bring back gluttony as a leading sin. Personal responsibility is all to the good, but everything else in “Fat Land” suggests it is probably no match for the thrifty gene and the Happy Meal.