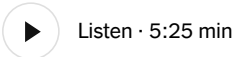


NICHOLAS KRISTOF

What the Meat Industry Doesn't Want You to Know

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We raised pigs for a time on our family farm in Oregon when I was a teenager, and they had stronger personalities than some of my human friends.

While some of our pigs were friendly, docile or ingratiating, one sow named Brunhilda was grumpy, vocal and very strong-willed. But she was a devoted mom, constantly checking on her piglets and leading them around our farm — while showing them how to be independent-minded, too.

Nobody would have mistaken Brunhilda for a saint, but nobody could forget her, either. Exasperating as she was, I would never have punished her by locking her in a cage so small, she couldn't turn around. That sounds like torture to me.

And to many people, it seems. One poll found that 84 percent of Americans considered it unacceptable for pregnant sows to be kept in tiny cages called gestation crates — as is routine on American factory farms today. Voters in California passed a ballot measure in 2018 by a 63 percent majority, as did Massachusetts voters in 2016 by a 78 percent majority, to improve treatment of farm animals and, in particular, to ban the sale of pork from hog operations that tightly confine hogs in this way.

The pork industry, ahem, squealed. It repeatedly filed lawsuits to block these referendums but lost in the Supreme Court. So having failed both at the ballot box and in the courts, the industry pulled a fast one.

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It added a provision, Save Our Bacon, to this year's farm bill in the House of Representatives to block these state laws as well as any similar future state efforts to improve pig welfare. "U.S. pork producers need a farm bill that protects American farmers from California's overreach," protests the National Pork Producers Council. It complains that it is unfair that the California law applies to pork from pigs raised in other states but sold in California.

The farm bill with the Save Our Bacon provision passed the House of Representatives. Now it's up to the Senate and the eventual congressional conference committee to decide whether to include this provision, which aims — this is my telegraphic version — to suppress the will of voters so that giant meat companies can abuse pigs. Some senators are backing away from Save Our Bacon, but others are expected to push to include it. Enactment of this provision would mark a substantial setback for animal rights in America's livestock gulag.

Fortunately, at a time when Americans can't seem to agree on anything else, animal rights are a rare issue on which many conservatives and liberals periodically find common ground. In 2005, American Conservative magazine had a cover showing confined pigs and a cover line that read, "Why conservatives should care about animal cruelty." Left and right may fight over immigrant rights, women's rights or L.G.B.T.Q. rights, but many of us do agree on pig rights.

Prominent conservatives like Tomi Lahren, Mike Cernovich and Laura Ingraham have stood firm against this provision. Cernovich called it "demonic," and Lahren referred to it in a way that is unprintable here. A number of Republican House members, led by Anna Paulina Luna of Florida, have challenged the measure in Congress.

Opposition to the provision isn't just about pig well-being. Some conservatives object to this effort to overturn the will of voters. Others note that the largest pork producer in America is Smithfield, now owned by a Chinese company, and they wonder why Congress would privilege a Chinese behemoth over the American electorate.

For me, the prime concern is animal cruelty. To confine animals in stinking cages, so many never see the sun or touch earth, is to deny their very nature. The ethos was described in a 1976 article in Hog Farm Management that said: "Forget the pig is an animal. Treat him just like a machine in a factory."

The hog industry now argues that this system is actually good for pigs, protecting them from predators and cold and heat. "So our animals can't turn around for the 2.5 years that they are in the stalls producing piglets," a pork producers spokesman said in 2012. "I don't know who asked the sow if she wanted to turn around."

I'm sure some readers are wondering why I'm writing about pigs at a time when there are so many other pressing issues, from the Iran war to Ebola to President Trump's proposed slush fund. It's a reasonable question.

I'd answer by saying that one of the great but incomplete moral revolutions of our lifetime has

been the expansion of our compassion to encompass farm animals in a limited way, even as corporate agriculture pushes in the other direction. The stakes of the Save Our Bacon provision are enormous, for more than 120 million hogs are slaughtered in the United States each year. That is approximately equivalent to the human populations of California, Texas, Florida, New York and Pennsylvania put together and means that roughly four pigs are slaughtered every second, on average, around the clock.

We tolerate cruelty toward pigs, I think, because the suffering is largely invisible and we see pigs as an undifferentiated mass rather than as Brunhildas with emotions, just like our own pets. Many Americans are ambivalent, not wanting animals to suffer unnecessarily yet also wanting inexpensive and tasty meat. The trade-offs are real, for the pork industry indeed excels at producing cheap sausage, but think of your dog enduring what pigs face, and you realize that the moral cost is incalculable.

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