

Feel the burn, Santa

The British, saying jolly old St. Nick's fat image is unhealthy, have mandated a slimmer Claus.

EVERYONE KNOWS Santa Claus is supposed to be fat. It's not possible for one man to eat 5 billion or so sugar cookies on the night before Christmas and be anything but a butterball. Furthermore, if he weren't fat, then we'd know he wasn't eating the cookies, and that would raise all sorts of other doubts. We thought everyone understood and accepted this logic.

But now the British say Santa's corpulence isn't cute, it's a health hazard, an apple-shaped advertisement for Type 2 diabetes and heart disease. After a study released in October found that, by 2050, more than half of Britain's population will be obese, a cabal of fitness zealots at malls and shops in Merry Olde England decreed that their Santas must be trim. That's right — skinny Santas, buff Santas and, we tremble to think of it, Santas with six-pack abs. According to news reports, a shopping center in Kent even set up a boot camp for Santas who couldn't slim down on their own.

How could this happen? Didn't England unload all of its joyless Puritans in the 17th century? Has there been some vast repatriation we failed to notice? Is it possible that the eternally erroneous

Bill O'Reilly is actually correct, and Christmas is under siege?

Listen, the United States has been fatter longer than any country in the world, and we have some perspective on this: About 66% of adults are overweight or obese; 16% of children and adolescents are overweight, and 34% teeter on the edge. In just seven years, 75% of adults will be overweight or obese. The British are probably just adopting our bad habits — supersized portions, fewer home-cooked meals, more processed food, less exercise. Trust us, Santa's not to blame.

Some literal-minded killjoys will note that the lovably chubby Santa image should be altered because it isn't all that historical. Pleasingly plump St. Nick lodged in the public imagination after Clement Clarke Moore permanently detached him from anything resembling Saint Nicholas of Myra, a red-robed (and probably slender) 4th century bishop who lived in what is now Turkey, as well as the Dutch Sinterklaas and Sint Nikolaas.

But nothing trumps an eyewitness account, and in 1822, Moore carefully described Santa:

*He had a broad face and a little round belly,
That shook, when he laughed like a bowlful of
jelly.*

*He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old
elf,*

*And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of my-
self.*

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