**[CASE 6.3](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781305840782/epub/OEBPS/04_contents.xhtml" \l "ch6.8)**

Sniffing Glue Could Snuff Profits

**HARVEY BENJAMIN FULLER FOUNDED THE H. B.** Fuller Company in 1887. Originally a one-man wallpaper-paste shop, H. B. Fuller is now a leading manufacturer of industrial glues, coatings, and paints, with operations worldwide. The company’s 10,000 varieties of glue hold together everything from cars to cigarettes to disposable diapers.

However, some of its customers don’t use Fuller’s glues in the way they are intended to be used.

That’s particularly the case in Central America, where Fuller derives 27 percent of its profits and where tens of thousands of homeless children sniff some sort of glue. Addicted to glue’s intoxicating but dangerous fumes, these unfortunate children are called *resistoleros* after Fuller’s Resistol brand. Child-welfare advocates have urged the company to add a noxious oil to its glue to discourage abusers, but the company has resisted, either because it might reduce the glue’s effectiveness or because it will irritate legitimate users.[106](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781305840782/epub/OEBPS/18_notes.xhtml#fn6.106)

Either way, the issue is irritating H.B. Fuller, which has been recognized by various awards, honors, and socially conscious mutual funds as a company with a conscience. Fuller’s mission statement says that it “will conduct business legally and ethically, support the activities of its employees in their communities and be a responsible corporate citizen.” The St. Paul-based company gives 5 percent of its profits to charity; it has committed itself to safe environmental practices worldwide (practices that are “often more stringent than local government standards,” the company says); and it has even endowed a chair in business ethics at the University of Minnesota. Now Fuller must contend with dissident stockholders inside, and demonstrators outside, its annual meetings.

The glue-sniffing issue is not a new one. In 1969, the Testor Corporation added a noxious ingredient to its hobby glue to discourage abuse, and in 1994 Henkel, a German chemical company that competes with Fuller, stopped making certain toxic glues in Central America. However, Fuller seems to have been singled out for criticism not only because its brand dominates Central America but also because—in the eyes of its critics, anyway—the company has not lived up to its own good-citizen image. Timothy Smith, executive director of the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility, believes that companies with a reputation as good corporate citizens are more vulnerable to attack. “But as I see it,” he says, “the hazard is not in acting in a socially responsible way. The hazard is in over-marketing yourself as a saint.”

Saintly or not, the company has made matters worse for itself by its handling of the issue. H. B. Fuller’s board of directors acknowledged that “illegal distribution was continuing” and that “a suitable replacement product would not be available in the near future.” Accordingly, it voted to stop selling Resistol adhesives in Central America. “We simply don’t believe it is the right decision to keep our solvent product on the market,” a company spokesman said.

The Coalition on Resistoleros and other corporate gadflies were ecstatic, but their jubilation turned to anger when they learned a few months later that Fuller had not in fact stopped selling Resistol in Central America, and did not intend to. True, Fuller no longer sold glue to retailers and small-scale users in Honduras and Guatemala, but it continued to sell large tubs and barrels of it to industrial customers in those countries and to a broader list of commercial and industrial users in neighboring countries.

The company says that it has not only restricted distribution but also taken other steps to stop the abuse of its product. It has altered Resistol’s formula, replacing the sweet-smelling but highly toxic solvent toluene with the slightly less toxic chemical cyclohexane. In addition, the company has tried—without success, it says—to develop a nonintoxicating water-based glue, and it contributes to community programs for homeless children in Central America. But the company’s critics disparage these actions as mere image polishing. Bruce Harris, director of Latin American programs for Covenant House, a nonprofit child-welfare advocate, asserts that Resistol is still readily available to children in Nicaragua and El Salvador and, to a lesser extent, in Costa Rica. “If they are genuinely concerned about the children,” he asks, “why haven’t they pulled out of all the countries—as their board mandated?”

[**CASE 1.1**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781305840782/epub/OEBPS/04_contents.xhtml#ch1.10)

Made in the U.S.A.—  
Dumped in Brazil, Africa, Iraq…

**WHEN IT COMES TO THE SAFETY OF YOUNG** children, fire is a parent’s nightmare. Just the thought of their young ones trapped in their cribs or beds by a raging nocturnal blaze is enough to make most mothers and fathers take every precaution to ensure their children’s safety. Little wonder that when fire-retardant children’s pajamas first hit the market, they proved an overnight success. Within a few short years more than 200 million pairs were sold, and the sales of millions more were all but guaranteed. For their manufacturers, the future could not have been brighter. Then, like a bolt from the blue, came word that the pajamas were killers. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) moved quickly to ban their sale and recall millions of pairs. Reason: The pajamas contained the flame-retardant chemical Tris (2,3-dibromoprophyl), which had been found to cause kidney cancer in children.

Because of its toxicity, the sleepwear couldn’t even be thrown away, let alone sold. Indeed, the CPSC left no doubt about how the pajamas were to be disposed of—buried or burned or used as industrial wiping cloths. Whereas just months earlier the manufacturers of the Tris-impregnated pajamas couldn’t fill orders fast enough, suddenly they were worrying about how to get rid of the millions of pairs now sitting in warehouses.

Soon, however, ads began appearing in the classified pages of *Women’s Wear Daily*. “Tris-Tris-Tris … We will buy any fabric containing Tris,” read one. Another said, “Tris—we will purchase any large quantities of garments containing Tris.” The ads had been placed by exporters, who began buying up the pajamas, usually at 10 to 30 percent of the normal wholesale price. Their intent was clear: to dump[\*](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781305840782/epub/OEBPS/06_chapter_01.xhtml#fn26) the carcinogenic pajamas on overseas markets.[21](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781305840782/epub/OEBPS/18_notes.xhtml#fn1.21)

Tris is not the only example of dumping. There were the 450,000 baby pacifiers, of the type known to have caused choking deaths, that were exported for sale overseas, and the 400 Iraqis who died and the 5,000 who were hospitalized after eating wheat and barley treated with a U.S.-banned organic mercury fungicide. Winstrol, a synthetic male hormone that had been found to stunt the growth of American children, was made available in Brazil as an appetite stimulant for children. DowElanco sold its weed killer Galant in Costa Rica, although the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) forbade its sale to U.S. farmers because Galant may cause cancer. After the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned the painkiller dipyrone because it can cause a fatal blood disorder, Winthrop Products continued to sell dipyrone in Mexico City.

Manufacturers that dump products abroad clearly are motivated by profit, or at least by the hope of avoiding financial losses resulting from having to withdraw a product from the U.S. market. For government and health agencies that cooperate in the exporting of dangerous products, sometimes the motives are more complex.

For example, when researchers documented the dangers of the Dalkon Shield intrauterine device—among the adverse reactions were pelvic inflammation, blood poisoning, tubal pregnancies, and uterine perforations—its manufacturer, A. H. Robins Co., began losing its domestic market. As a result, the company worked out a deal with the Office of Population within the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), whereby AID bought thousands of the devices at a reduced price for use in population-control programs in forty-two countries.

The agencies involved say their motives are humanitarian. Because the death rate in childbirth is relatively high in third-world countries, almost any birth-control device is safer than pregnancy. Analogous arguments are used to defend the export of pesticides and other products judged too dangerous for use in the United States: Foreign countries should be free to decide for themselves whether the benefits of those products are worth their risks. In line with this, some third-world government officials insist that denying their countries access to these products is tantamount to violating their countries’ national sovereignty.

This reasoning has found a sympathetic ear in Washington, for it turns up in the “notification” system that regulates the export of banned or dangerous products overseas. Based on the principles of national sovereignty, self-determination, and free trade, the notification system requires that foreign governments be notified whenever a product is banned, deregulated, suspended, or canceled by a U.S. regulatory agency. The State Department, which implements the system, has a policy statement on the subject that reads in part: “No country should establish itself as the arbiter of others’ health and safety standards. Individual governments are generally in the best position to establish standards of public health and safety.”

Critics of the system claim that notifying foreign health officials is virtually useless. For one thing, governments in poor countries can rarely establish health standards or even control imports into their countries. Indeed, most of the third-world countries where banned or dangerous products are dumped lack regulatory agencies, adequate testing facilities, and well-staffed customs departments.

Then there’s the problem of getting the word out about hazardous products. In theory, when a government agency such as the EPA or the FDA finds a product hazardous, it is supposed to inform the State Department, which is to notify health officials in other nations. But agencies often fail to inform the State Department of the product they have banned or found harmful, and when it is notified, its communiqués typically go no further than U.S. embassies abroad. When foreign officials are notified by U.S. embassies, they sometimes find the communiqués vague or ambiguous or too technical to understand.

But even if communication procedures were improved or the export of dangerous products forbidden, there are ways that companies can circumvent these threats to their profits—for example, by simply changing the name of the product or by exporting the individual ingredients of a product to a plant in a foreign country. Once there, the ingredients can be reassembled and the product dumped. The United States does prohibit its pharmaceutical companies from exporting drugs banned in this country, but sidestepping the law is not difficult. “Unless the package bursts open on the dock,” one drug company executive observes, “you have no chance of being caught.”

Unfortunately for us, in the case of pesticides, the effects of overseas dumping are now coming home. In the United States, the EPA bans all crop uses of DDT and dieldrin, which kill fish, cause tumors in animals, and build up in the fatty tissue of humans. It also bans heptachlor, chlordane, leptophos, endrin, and many other pesticides, including 2,4,5-T (which contains the deadly poison dioxin, the active ingredient in Agent Orange, the notorious defoliant used in Vietnam) because they are dangerous to human beings. No law, however, prohibits the sale of DDT and these other U.S.-banned pesticides overseas, where thanks to corporate dumping they are routinely used in agriculture. In one three-month period, for example, U.S. chemical companies exported 3.9 million pounds of banned and withdrawn pesticides. The FDA now estimates, through spot checks, that 10 percent of our imported food is contaminated with residues of banned pesticides. And the FDA’s most commonly used testing procedure does not even check for 70 percent of the pesticides known to cause cancer. With the doubling of exports of Mexican produce to the United States since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the problem of pesticide-laced food has only grown worse.[22](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781305840782/epub/OEBPS/18_notes.xhtml#fn1.22)