

The Power of Tobacco

Bernard Lown, MD

Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, USA

It seems inconceivable and totally irrational that someone can market a product that addicts and kills, yet merchandise it virtually free from governmental regulation and control. Worse still is that the targets for smoking have been children under the age of 18. The assault on callow youth is unprecedented in the uses of most sophisticated and manipulative advertising campaigns ever launched.

In a century marked by extreme, we have come to associate distorted sloganeering with totalitarian societies not with democratic ones. Yet even the most democratic of nations is not immune from misinformation machinery, labeled innocuously, as though serving the common good, public relations (PR). These agencies are in the business of selling something. The PR industry traces its roots to Edward Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud. In the early 1920's he conceived PR as a scientific technique for opinion-molding "the engineering of consent." (1) He forthrightly stated, "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, it is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it." The tobacco industry adopted Bernays' methods hook line and sinker. In fact they went much beyond this guru of PR whose stated intent was, "The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses.."

Why has it taken so long for the public to awaken to the true character of an industry which is merchandising death? The various means by which tobacco gained its enormous success need to be understood if its growing outreach in developing countries is to be effectively combated. The issue is not of exclusive concern to emerging tobacco markets, the industry is hardly on its knees even in the United States, though now widely regarded as an unmitigated social scourge. The tobacco industry continues to speak with the arrogance of power. In testimony before Congress in February 1998, top executives of the American tobacco companies indicated that they would never agree to modify their advertising and marketing practices unless the lawmakers gave the industry substantial protection.(3) They insisted that it was their constitutional right to advertise and they could not breach their responsibility to their shareholders. These are not words of a beleaguered and nearly defeated army. Wherein derives their enormous power?

In the United States big tobacco is a \$45 billion annual industry. It has leveraged prodigious wealth and political savvy to rig the game by secretly addicting politicians with the free flow of campaign financing, bribing journalists, censoring media, promoting a public image as patrons of the arts, threatening scientists while sponsoring bogus research, promoting spectacular sports events, gaining the endorsements of celebrities in every walk of life and being on the side of the angels by subsidizing righteous causes of marginalized and minority communities. Tobacco has gained influential allies by supporting numerous charities, museums, libraries and diverse good will causes. Tobacco's power also derives from the many public relations firms in its employ who spew out a torrent of disinformation and propaganda to ensnare the most susceptible.(2) The strength of tobacco in some measure also stems from the jobs created and the economic dependence of tobacco grower communities. Ultimately its durability derives from the millions of addicted customers who crave and can not break with the habit.

The industry already demonstrated its muscle a century ago when the United States Congress, accepted tobacco's argument that cigarettes were neither food, nor drug, nor cosmetic and therefore exempt from regulatory oversight of the Pure Food and Drug Act. It turned out that three key members of the Senate Finance Committee who were responsible for this decisive ruling were heavy stockholders of the then near monopoly, American Tobacco Company. (2)

By the mid 1950's as medical information began to amass on the health risks associated with smoking, the tobacco companies widely trumpeted their new filtered cigarettes. Left unreported was that whatever health advantage thus

afforded was defeated since at the same time they also increased the concentration of nicotine. When this emerged in congressional testimony in 1957, it led to a bill to limit the tar and nicotine yield and granted the Federal Trade Commission injunctive powers against deceptive tobacco advertising. So powerful was the tobacco industry, however, that the House of Representatives denied the bill a hearing, stripped the chairman, a five term Minnesota congressman, John Blatnick, from subcommittee chairmanship and dissolved the subcommittee itself. (2)

As public arousal against smoking mounted after the Surgeon General's report of the health hazards of tobacco in 1964, investment of money by tobacco companies to buy politicians grew ever more flagrant. One episode may prove illustrative. In February of 1996, the then Philip Morris CEO Geoffrey Bible chaired an unreported dinner for the Republican Governor's association in Washington DC that broke all records by raking in \$2.6 million. (4) Two weeks after this bash, Gov. Kirk Fordice (R. Miss) sued his own Attorney General, Mike Moore to block litigation against tobacco companies that Moore had initiated. This litigation got the state great visibility nationally against the tobacco industry. (4) Moore's landmark suit was emulated by a number of other states. The state of Mississippi would have garnered billions of dollars for the welfare of tobacco victims and antismoking education for its youth.

Long ago the tobacco industry decided that the way of survival as a death-dealing industry was to buy politicians. While both parties partake freely of the tobacco coffers, the GOP has been the party of tobacco. In 1995, 75% of tobacco's contributions went to the Republican party. No other industry's political donations have come close to that figure. Tobacco is deemed as an exemplar of free market conservatism.

During his political career Senator and long time Minority Leader Robert Dole (R-KS) and presidential candidate in the 1996 election, received \$330,000 from the tobacco industry. (5) This does not include company contributions to candidates' charities and foundations, lecture fees, and use of corporate jets. The number of tobacco lobbyists working for the Dole campaign was unprecedented. Big tobacco was committed to a Dole victory for the presidency since he helped the industry broaden its overseas markets and battle domestic foes such as the former FDA's Commissioner, David Kessler, who had been calling insistently for tobacco to be regulated as a drug. Dole told a meeting of pharmaceutical giants that if elected his first act will be to fire Kessler, the bete-noir of tobacco.

Since 1991 the tobacco industry has contributed \$15,570,000 in soft money to the Republican Party, most of it in the past few years. It is not surprising that George W. Bush Jr., the likely Republican presidential nominee in the 2,000 election, opposed the Texas lawsuit against tobacco which garnered \$17 billion for the state treasury. He stated his trepidation that the "era of big government is not replaced with the era of big lawsuits." But at the same time his worry about big government did not include opposition to federal price support for tobacco growers. (6) He opposes increased taxes on tobacco the most effective measure to diminish the number of young smokers. He vigorously supports tort reform that would interdict consumers from suing for injuries resulting from dangerous products. .

At a time when 26,000 Texans die annually from tobacco related illnesses, Bush blocked money from the large tobacco settlement with his state being allocated for anti-tobacco prevention programs for teens. (6) Without embarrassment Bush accepted \$250,000 from attorneys of the 23 Texas law firms employed by the tobacco industry battling the law suit of the state of Texas of which he is governor.

Corrupting the political process is the hand-in-glove relation between tobacco functionaries and Washington politicians. Far worse is the revolving door from tobacco executive, to lobbyist, to advisor to politicians, to becoming a governmental official with oversight over tobacco. The industry selects as lobbyists those who have deep connections on Capitol Hill. Former Republican National Committee chairman, Haley Barbour, is an important player in the Bush 2000 presidential election campaign and arguably the number one lobbyist for Philip Morris and the tobacco industry in Washington.

One case exposed by the Washington Post (Magazine Dec 1995) is that of James Dyer a former top lobbyist for Phillip Morris, as "Director, Washington Relations." He moved from the House of Representatives Appropriation Committee's subcommittee on defense to the Reagan White House and later worked as a deputy assistant to President Bush for legislative affairs. The power imparted by these revolving in and out of government became awesomely manifest. When the Turkish government requested of Philip Morris to defeat a pending Senate resolution

to commemorate the genocide of a million Armenians by the Ottoman Turks between 1915-1923, the very same Mr. Dyer became involved. He managed to muster support to defeat the Senate resolution. The Turkish government and Philip Morris have been long partners operating a cigarette factory as a joint venture. (2)

As the crisis for the tobacco industry mounts, a flood of money is being disbursed to buy favors in every walk of life though focused on politicians or those that can influence the political process. There is ample evidence how few can resist the powerful temptation of wealth. A statesman of seemingly unimpeachable integrity such as former Senator and negotiator of the Northern Ireland peace accord, George Mitchell, recently has become involved with tobacco. Even in a cynical and jaded city like Washington DC, this cave-in to mammon has left "many here speechless." (7) Mr. Mitchell's law firm earned more than \$10 million in fees in 1997 from the five largest tobacco companies. (8) The aura of his firm's respectability was intended to sell Congress on the \$368. 5 billion tobacco settlement with the states. New York Times columnist, Maureen Dowd asks, "How can George Mitchell be both a statesman working against death in Northern Ireland and a shill for death in America?" (8) The question remains unanswered.

As long as such dipping into the bottomless tobacco till is not proscribed by a higher morality or by law, the presumed opposition by governments to the mayhem wrought by tobacco will have all the marks of a phony war despite the indignant verbal spouting by politicians at election time. (9)

In the long ongoing struggle to curtail the hold of smoking, tobacco companies have not stood still. They have shifted ground chameleon-like from smoking is not bad for your health to transforming into avid philosophic libertarians. They now insist that every sound-minded adult has a right to do anything with their lives even to committing suicide. But the rub is that while they talk of the rights of adults, they aim to net children. It has often been commented that the loss of life and health from cocaine and other drugs is minuscule by comparison with the hundreds of thousands of deaths and infirmities caused by legal smoking. Yet, the United States government spends billions and incarcerates hundreds of thousands of youth in the battle against drugs, but virtually spends nothing to prevent smoking.

Buying powerful politicians to do tobacco's bidding corrupts government and debases democratic institutions. Ultimately this is of far greater detriment to the health of a community than even that inflicted by the scourge of tobacco.

REFERENCES

1. Bernays E. Propaganda 1928.
2. Marlboro's man: Bob Dole & big tobacco's comeback strategy. Mother Jones May/June, 1996.
3. Rosenbaum DE. Tobacco leaders refuse to budge on pact. NYT Feb 25, 1998.
4. Stone PH. Our good friend the governor. Mother Jones May/June 1996 p 38.
5. Mintz M. Smoke gets in their pockets on Capitol Hill. The Washington Spectator. Oct 1, 1997.
6. Dreyfuss R. George W, Bush: calling for Philip Morris. The Nation Nov 8, 1999; p11.
7. Dowd M. Integrity clearance sale. New York Times. Op Ed; Dec 20, 1997.
8. Dowd M. Nicotine-Stained Halo. New York Times. OpEd; May 17, 1998.
9. Greenberg DS. The politics of tobacco. The Lancet. 1990; 335: 527.

[Top](#)

Your questions, contributions and commentaries will be answered by the lecturer or experts on the subject in the Prevention and Epidemiology list. Please fill in the form (in Spanish, Portuguese or English) and press the "Send" button.

Question, contribution or commentary:

Name and Surname:

Country:

E-Mail address:

Send

Erase

[Top](#)

2nd Virtual Congress of Cardiology

Dr. Florencio Garófalo
Steering Committee
President

fgaro@fac.org.ar
fgaro@satlink.com

Dr. Raúl Bretal
Scientific Committee
President

rbretal@fac.org.ar
rbretal@netverk.com.ar

Dr. Armando Pacher
Technical Committee - CETIFAC
President

apacher@fac.org.ar
apacher@satlink.com

Copyright © 1999-2001 Argentine Federation of Cardiology
All rights reserved

This company contributed to the Congress

