

Joe Camel is Way More Cool than Attacks on Individual Self-Control

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*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

I used to live in Minnesota, where a nice piece of legislation called the Clean Indoor Air Act restricts smoking in many buildings. When I first moved there, I assumed the main purpose of the law was to prevent second-hand smoke in indoor environments, which of course is a pretty good idea.

But it soon became clear to me that an equally strong motivation for the Act was the distinctively Minnesotan view that because smoking's bad for a person, anything that makes people smoke less is a good thing.

I coined a partly facetious term for this, health fascism, the idea that others can tell you what to do because they think it's for your own good, even if there are no direct consequences for themselves. I used to associate this with the otherwise wholesome community-mindedness of Minnesotans, direct descendants in spirit, as well as blood, of the early Scandinavian settlers. But it appears health fascism has spread.

The recent agreement between 40 state attorneys general and the tobacco industry is a case in point, a triumph of public health as a social objective and a simultaneous deemphasis of individual responsibility and choice. I was struck, while listening to NPR in the aftermath of the agreement, by the orgy of self-congratulation about promoting public health, public health, public health. Anything parroted that frequently and fervently can't be all good.

Don't get me wrong. I like public health. I also like my private health, which is why I don't smoke. But that's my choice. Other people make other choices.

And choice is the crux of the issue, or rather, it should be. I have absolutely no patience for the historical neglect of the problem of teen smoking. Of course tobacco sellers should have to check IDs. And why it took until now to get rid of cigarette vending machines is beyond me. I've never seen a beer vending machine (well, outside my college fraternity, that is).

Studies show that if people wait until their majority to begin smoking, they are much less likely to become addicted to tobacco. Children and teens have no business making the important decision of whether to risk addiction and death. If reducing teen smoking hurts the bottom line for the tobacco industry, so be it.

But I cannot summon any such indignation about adult smoking. While I don't want smokers to blow their smoke at me (I voted, twice, for the Greensboro ordinance limiting smoking in public places), I cannot see how I have any right to proscribe others' personal choices if they do not affect me. Some might say we are all hurt when others hurt, and smoking hurts people. Well, I'm hurt more by living in a society where health concerns are made transcendent goals of public policy. Isn't it bad enough that most of the coupons in the Sunday paper are for fat-free food items?

I want to live in a society in which people are free to do stupid, and maybe enjoyable, things, as long as they don't hurt others. I want people to be able to go hang-gliding, eat fried pork rinds, stay up too late, climb Mt. Everest, and yes, smoke cigarettes. If a hang-glider crashes and kills others, it's terrible; but if she takes only

herself out, well, as long as she wasn't misled about the risks, it's merely a shame. At least she was doing something she enjoyed.

Isn't tobacco addictive? Apparently, but so what? So are, in varying degrees and for certain people, alcohol, caffeine, chocolate, and sex. We have programs that help people kick these addictions, and I applaud those who want to do it. I respect an informed decision to quit an activity just as I do an informed decision to engage in one. What I do not respect is suing a tobacco company because a person wants to undo decades of freely made choices.

Doesn't tobacco impose health costs on society? Perhaps, but again, so what? Many activities impose costs. Take leisure, for example. Our economy could produce more if we just worked all the time. Instead, we allow hours each day, plus entire weekends, when people don't work. Oh, the loss to society! But of course leisure is something we value. We think the reduction in output is worth the gain from leisure.

I would argue that fundamentally, it's no different with smoking, though we don't seem to accept this these days because we've let the goal of public health become too important. It's not enough to say that smoking imposes costs on society. We must compare the costs of smoking to the benefits. And there are some benefits. Not everyone who smokes wants to quit, or wants to quit badly enough to do something about it. What else are we to conclude but that some, perhaps many, people value smoking?

Moreover, as a recent CBS News story pointed out, there are other benefits of smoking. The thing about smokers is that they tend to die before collecting on lifetimes of contributions to Social Security and Medicare. They're doing something we can only conclude they want to do (or else they'd quit), and the rest of us benefit. Some studies have indicated that this factor, when taken into account, actually offsets the health costs of smoking.

But back to underage smoking, and especially the role of advertising, where the brave new emphasis on public health gets really disturbing. First of all, there is the idea of deterministic advertising, which claims that certain types of advertising, notably cartoons, render teenagers unable to resist the siren song of tobacco. Of course, I'm thinking of the now-notorious Joe Camel ads. What else could a cartoon be designed to do, the reasoning goes, but work on kids?

Well, I guess I'll admit it here: cartoons work on me. I think the Joe Camel ads are pretty cool, and if I had to look like a camel, I'd want to be like Joe. But Joe doesn't make me want to smoke, any more than commercials of beautiful women blowing kisses made me want to use Ultra-Brite toothpaste as a teenager. Women and kissing certainly appealed to my surging adolescent hormones, but I knew they were just commercials.

Fixating on cartoons is simplistic. I've seen some adult-oriented cartoons that would curl many a toe. And Joe Camel is clearly an adult. To read more about the tortured logic of the anti-cartoon argument, see "Shooting Pool With Joe Camel," a recent article in the on-line magazine Slate.

Second, because even agreements require policing after the fact, the likely enforcement of advertising restrictions is troubling. For example, the recent agreement prohibits all but text-only ads in magazines with significant youth readership. Is the government really going to be checking magazine subscription lists? So much for the spirit of the First Amendment.

How about the ban on so-called product placements in films (in which a company pays the producer to show its product)? Is the government really going to micromanage movie content? And how about the agreement's ban on Internet advertising? This is getting silly. A Joe Camel ad on a World Wide Web site in Thailand is just as accessible to kids as one from down the street.

Of course the recent agreement was signed by the tobacco industry as well as the 40 attorneys general. But agreeing to something with a gun to one's head is coercion, not really a choice. The primacy of public health concerns and the consequent threat of legal action is such a gun. In contrast, a cigarette ad is not a gun.

The proportion of Americans who smoke has fallen steadily over the past two decades, and I, for one, hope it falls further. I want my fellow men and women to be healthy. But I want it to be their choice. Smoking has declined without the heavy hands of our public health commissars.

Let the government spend its time informing people fully about the manifest risks of smoking, and let it take every reasonable measure to prevent kids from starting (not from ever seeing a cigarette ad!). We should respect the wisdom of individuals to take it from there.

Some readers might feel that I am guilty of that most heinous of modern transgressions, insensitivity. But they would miss the point about what public policy should be. Personally, I feel sorry for lung-cancer victims and their families. I wish those smokers hadn't chosen to smoke. However, as a matter of policy, preventing such sad outcomes is the business of family and friends, not of the government.

During the Iran-Contra hearings, Oliver North defended the Reagan administration's subversion of the will of Congress, at which point Republican Senator Warren Rudman countered by saying the American people "have the right to be wrong." Bravo. We should also have the right to be stupid.