

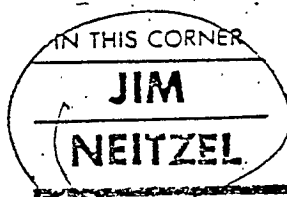


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# Tobacco industry in panic



Operating upon the idea that coincidences rarely, if ever exist, I wondered why I had received a 54-page, slickly packaged booklet recently from the Tobacco Institute about cigarette smoking.

I was tempted to junk it promptly in the waste can (much like I do at home when I get something addressed to "Occupant"); but what I read as I quickly skimmed through it got my non-smoker's blood simmering. The publication, with the best interest of the tobacco industry in mind, shot down just about every shred of evidence against the perils of smoking.

So I set the publication aside...and waited for some proof that my receiving this booklet was more than a coincidence.

I didn't wait long. The Tobacco Institute, the long lobbying arm of tobacco's big money, knew the new Surgeon General's Report on smoking was due shortly and the lobby organization knew the report wasn't going to pat smoking on the back. It was released recently to a lot of pomp, circumstance and Joseph Califano's warnings that evidence is now overwhelming that smoking not only causes lung cancer but contributes to the cause of many other fatal diseases as well.

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The Tobacco Institute tries to discredit the report in immediate attacks on Califano and his Health, Education and Welfare-led reports (as well as from this publication I received). And if you are associated with the tobacco industry at all, you can understand why. The new Surgeon General report threatens the very foundation of cigarette smoking. The new report, in other words, is bad ink for the tobacco industry.

In the booklet, any evidence against smoking is slyly discredited. The booklet acknowledges statistics pointing toward the hazards of smoking, but then it also introduces evidence from other sources that, in effect, says, "well, we can't be all that sure about this. There is a possibility that it (smoking) doesn't do all the things we say it does..." The Tobacco Institute, which employs Charles Morgan Jr., one of the best-known civil liberties lawyers around, is trying an old courtroom ploy. It's trying to discredit the witness; it's trying to cast a shadow of a doubt, which often gets the most guilty of defendants off scot-free.

The main target of the Tobacco Institute's report, as well as Califano's, is women. Women smokers have increased over the past few years and they have been victims of more of the diseases associated with smoking, such as lung cancer. And there is new evidence about the effect of smoking on a unborn baby during pregnancy.

Why the tobacco industry is pushing the panic button is somewhat of a mystery. Years ago, when cigarette ads went off TV, it pushed the same panic button. But the industry survived, even thrived, in the years hence.

The reason is simple. People enjoy smoking, or they are hooked on it or they do it for cosmetic reasons (some women and men still feel it creates an "effect") or whatever. But the bottom line is that people will smoke, with 54 million Americans (one-third of the U.S. population over 18) doing it even though most people would believe (the Tobacco Institute's smokescreen notwithstanding) that smoking is harmful. Or, as the new federal report states, "smoking is truly slow-motion suicide."

I think most, if not all, smokers agree that smoking presents a clear and present danger, but we live in a society where we indulge in all sorts of things, like eating too much as well as smoking, which symbolizes a sort of slow death. Americans, it seems, fear growing old and frail more than they do about the side effects of smoking and overeating.

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