

Time to Outlaw Cigarettes?

Bob Greene

If a Martian were somehow to land in the United States, and the Martian could read English, and the Martian happened to pick up copies of America's most popular magazines, the Martian could be excused for coming to a quick conclusion:

Americans are crazy.

I'm not talking about the editorial content of the magazines. American magazines, by and large, are pretty good.

But I've been going through magazines for the past several weeks ripping out certain pages. The magazines I have chosen are general-interest magazines, news magazines, magazines aimed at men, magazines aimed at women. They have all been very respected magazines, with audiences that are presumed to be educated and intelligent.

Here are some examples of the pages I ripped out of the magazines:

-- The page shows three attractive, healthy-looking women playing football in the snow with a male friend. They appear to be having a marvelous time.

They are all laughing uproariously. At the bottom of the page are pictures of two packs of Salem cigarettes. The text reads: "You've got what it takes. Salem Spirit. Share the spirit. Share the refreshment."

In a large box superimposed over the feet of the football-playing friends is another message: "SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Smoking By Pregnant Women May Result in Fetal Injury, Premature Birth and Low Birth Weight."

-- The page shows a group of friends enjoying a picnic at dusk on a beautiful beach. One of the friends has a cigarette in his mouth; another of the friends is just lighting up. The overall impression is of contentment and fun. Underneath the picture of the man lighting the cigarette are pictures of two packs of Merit cigarettes, and the brand name "Merit."

In a large box superimposed over the sandy beach is another message: "SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Quitting Smoking Now Greatly Reduces Serious Risks to your Health."

-- The page shows a good-looking young couple standing on a lighthouse-like structure along what appears to be a rocky shoreline. The whole page is tinted a gorgeous shade of blue. The effect of the page is very relaxing. Down near the bottom of the page is a photograph of a pack of Parliament cigarettes, and the brand name "Parliament Lights."

In a large box superimposed over the beautiful blue sky is another message: "SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Cigarette Smoke Contains Carbon Monoxide."

-- The page shows one of the most familiar figures in American advertising history: The Marlboro Man. In this picture, he apparently is out on the range. He is wearing a cowboy hat, rough-textured gloves, and is carrying a rope. He is the very essence of a man who is in great physical shape. Down near the bottom of the page are pictures of two packs of Marlboro cigarettes, and the slogan "Come to where the flavor is."

In a large box superimposed over the rope the man is carrying, there is another message: "SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Smoking Causes Lung Cancer, Heart Disease, Emphysema, and May Complicate Pregnancy."

Now. . . the visiting Martian would look at these advertisements and think, "Are these Americans nuts? Why, on the same pages where the companies are trying to get people to buy cigarettes, are they telling their potential customers that the cigarettes will make them sick?"

The answer, of course, is that the government makes cigarette companies print the warnings--both in their advertisements and on the cigarette packages themselves. There is a new, more strongly worded series of warnings--they are the ones quoted in the four examples I listed--and the cigarette companies are required to show them even more prominently than before.

I have great sympathy for cigarette smokers. Several years back I asked my readers why they smoked, and their answers were heartfelt. Nicotine is an addiction, they said; they weren't proud of being hooked on cigarettes, but by this point they just couldn't stop. They are aware of the health risks involved in smoking. But quitting is very hard.

I have a proposal. All the warnings and all the medical studies apparently aren't going to solve the problem. People are going to smoke.

So there is only one rational route to take:

Make cigarettes illegal.

You think that is too strong a step? Our government has been quite consistent in outlawing addictive substances that pose a hazard to their users. Heroin, cocaine, marijuana . . . the government will not allow them to be sold legally, and with good reasons.

Without a doubt, cigarettes are addictive, and they pose terrible dangers. If they were outlawed, people would still be able to buy them on the black market. And it would be brutally, painfully hard for America's smokers to suddenly face the fact that to smoke cigarettes was not only a tough habit to kick--but that it was also against the law.

Still, it's time to make the move. Outlaw cigarettes. To do anything less would be the height of hypocrisy.

Write on one of the following:

1. Greene argues that our country takes a hypocritical stance towards cigarette smoking. As a solution to this problem, he proposes that we make cigarettes illegal. Do you agree with Greene's claims? Do you agree with his proposal? Are there better solutions than the one Greene suggests?

2. Take some activity or behavior currently allowed by law and argue for its prohibition; OR
Take some currently prohibited activity or behavior and argue for its legalization. In either case, try to anticipate some of the main objections of your opponents and answer them with your own counterarguments (as Greene does in his final paragraphs).

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