

Cigarette-Pack Moves Are Bad Propaganda

Serious illness should never be made light of, nor should it be used as a tool for government propaganda ("Labels Give Cigarette Packs a Ghoulish Makeover," U.S. News, June 22). Yet that is exactly what the government is doing by mandating graphic images of ill people on cigarette packs.

Not only have these "nanny" approaches not worked where previously tried, but no other industry in America has had to endure such draconian, loss-of-freedom decrees.

What's next? Photos of diseased obese people on candy-bar wrappers? Diseased livers on wine bottles? Burned human skin on fast-food coffee cups?

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Any smoker in the western world under the age of 75 can fairly be told: "You were warned." The scientific evidence about what cigarettes do to the human body was not just unambiguous but widely known by the early 1950s. Yet a policymaking cliché holds that any adults who still smoke (20 per cent in the US) do so because they have not been educated. It was in the name of education that the US Food and Drug Administration rolled out its new cigarette packet warning labels this week. They will supplement the usual warnings about how smoking causes cancer, heart disease, etc with shocking photos. The FDA argues that 213,000 people will be moved to quit smoking after they see the new labels next year.

Even if those estimates turn out right, the new labels are a mistake. They reflect an ideology-driven habit of mind: if someone is not following your orders, it must be because you are not yelling loud enough. They are disrespectful, dehumanising and abusive of law-abiding citizens. They are the sign of a governing class that has lost its sense of proportion and its sense of accountability to the public.

Many countries have added graphics to their tobacco labels. They do so in different ways. Britain uses a range of catchy pictures. A shot of implausibly blackened teeth, for instance, accompanies its warnings about the "benzene, nitrosamines, formaldehyde and hydrogen cyanide" that cigarettes give off. Brazil, by contrast, uses sickening, slasher-film images. One shows a man whose bloody skull has been hacked into as if by an axe, to show that cigarettes increase the risk of stroke. Another shows a naked man stitched up after an autopsy and one has a baby's corpse lying in a dirty pile of cigarettes. The US, alas, has chosen to go the Brazilian route. It has done its own version of the autopsy photo. It has added one of a man choking under a respirator and another of a man blowing smoke out of a tracheotomy hole.

William Corr, an anti-tobacco activist who is now deputy secretary of Health and Human Services, said recently that these ads "tell the truth". But he is right only in the sense that pornography "tells the truth" about sex or propaganda "tells the truth" about war.

These warning labels are not meant to educate or convince people. They are meant to scare people, which is often the opposite of educating and convincing. The pictures are obscene and exploitative. They show naked, vulnerable people to whom violence has been

done. The small children who will inevitably be exposed to them will be frightened more than enlightened. Six US tobacco companies recently argued that the requirement to carry such images infringes on their freedom of speech. They lost, but the case is now before a federal appeals court. Theirs should be a winning argument.

The FDA is not "advising" or "informing" citizens at all. It is trying to ban tobacco without legislation. It will not take No - even an informed No - for an answer. Some have suggested that new scare images be substituted as the old ones grow familiar and lose their power to shock. A straightforward ban would be more worthy of a democratic republic than such uncoth manipulation.

"Smoking can kill you", runs the caption next to the cadaver photo that the US copied from the Brazilian campaign. But a lot of other things can kill you too, things that the state may be in a position to prevent. Why not put pictures of beaten wives on whiskey bottles, as one smoker suggested on National Public Radio? Why not demand that singles' bars post graphic photos of venereal disease?

These ads tell the truth on tobacco only in the sense that pornography does about sex

Or force drivers to watch a graphic video on safety before hitting the road?

It is easier to bully smokers because smoking is a habit that has become increasingly concentrated in the lower and lower-middle classes.

One of the last politicians to speak honestly about its class aspects was former UK health secretary John Reid, who said in 2004, "People from those lower socioeconomic categories have very few pleasures in life and one of them they regard as smoking." If anything, the inverse relation between smoking and social standing is stronger in the US than elsewhere. US governments balance their books by taking advantage of poor people's habits. Tobacco taxes have transferred hundreds of billions of dollars to individual states. There are also widespread lottery programmes, to which state treasuries have grown just as addicted as working-class punters.

One doubts that those who belong to the class of American regulators know any present-day smokers at all. That may explain why there is such a strong element of hypocrisy in these adverts, of an "I'll knock some sense into you" arrogance trying to pass itself off as a sincere compassion.

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Smoking ads are more about class than compassion