



A Heartland Perspective

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Joe Camel Is Innocent!

by Joseph L. Bast

Somebody seems to have declared open season on cigarette smokers and their suppliers. On behalf of the 25 percent of the adult population that smokes, may I offer a few words in defense of smoking?

Earlier this summer, ABC's Peter Jennings hosted an hour-long "news special" titled "Never Say Die: Why the Tobacco Industry Keeps Winning." A Garry Wills column, titled "Lies Tobacco Companies Tell Us," has appeared in newspapers across the country. And Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole has been widely denounced for saying a few words that were vaguely supportive of smokers' rights.

According to both Wills and Jennings, the fact that "Joe Camel" is a cartoon somehow proves that Camels' manufacturer, R.J. Reynolds, is targeting kids. But cartoons are used to pitch scores of products that could only be of use to adults. Last time I checked, people under the age of 18 weren't major buyers of life insurance, household cleaners, automobile rustproofing, or tires—yet Snoopy, Mr. Clean, Rusty Jones, and the Michelin Man are used to promote those products. Joe Camel is innocent!

Wills and Jennings also claim that FDA regulation of cigarettes is opposed by Republicans because they receive campaign contributions from the tobacco industry. But it is more likely that the campaign contributions go to Republicans because they have been leading the fight against the use of "junk science" by the FDA and its evil twin, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). With respect to smoking, there's plenty of evidence—including a recent study by the Congressional Research Service—that sound science concerning the health effects of "second-hand smoke" doesn't support the claims being made by EPA and

FDA.

With or without the inducement of campaign contributions, more Republicans than Democrats would support smokers' rights. Asking the government to play "nanny" over adult citizens is a Democrat thing to do. Limiting the authority of government and leaving people "free to choose" are traditionally Republican positions.

Despite all this, Wills and Jennings apparently believe that tobacco companies ought to fund Democrats at the same level as they fund Republicans. But since the former have declared war on the tobacco industry, it seems to me that would be a pretty stupid thing for tobacco executives to do.

Most of all, I'm curious about the timing of all this. Where were Wills and Jennings during all those years when Democrats won most of the elections in southern tobacco-growing states, and consequently received most of the tobacco money? Why does the claim that this money buys too much influence emerge only now, when Republicans occupy those seats?

And speaking of partisan bias, Jennings' choice of "experts" for the program included Illinois Congressman Dick Durbin (D) and California State Representative Tom Hayden (D), two left-wing extremists who can be counted on to attack any industry, any time. The extremism of Hayden—a one-time student protester and avowed socialist—was once well-known, but the events of the 1960s now predate the memories of even most thirty-somethings. How many viewers remembered? And how many viewers knew that Durbin is as far to the left as his radical colleague, receiving the worst rating possible from Citizens Against Government Waste, an "F" from National Taxpayers Union, and a "zero" from Americans for Tax Reform?

I, for one, didn't believe a word Durbin and Hayden had to say about the tobacco industry.

Wills and Jennings would have done better to direct their skepticism at such leading advocates of censorship as Durbin, Hayden, and President Clinton. After all, what is more believable: That these pols are born-again neo-Puritans, or that they are cynically using a public health controversy to score political points?

Unfortunately, Wills and Jennings are unlikely to set the record straight by retracting their claims. And of course, many fewer people will read this rebuttal than saw the Peter Jennings special or read Garry Wills' column. Tobacco will continue to be a useful tool for politicians afraid or unable to address the real issues.

The reader may recall that Peter Jennings' station, ABC, was forced in 1994 to apologize to tobacco companies for falsely accusing them of "spiking" cigarettes with nicotine. Smokers shouldn't hold their breath waiting for Apology II.

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