The Un-American Lie:
Methods Through History Used to Distort Facts and Promote Tobacco Products
Through Channels That Would Be Unacceptable Today

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As an avowed free-marketer, the instincts of this writer as a young twenty-something was that all advertising, including cigarette advertising, should be left to the market forces of supply and demand. As Dr. Monica Barratt (2016) might ask, “What if you live on top of a bakery and you like cakes?” It follows that you should eat as much cake as you like and is available. That was until Uncle Jack died a prolonged and miserable death from throat cancer. Jack started smoking a young teen in Cuba, a habit that he continued when he came to the United States (see appendix “A”: The Cuban Tobacco Connection). He found American cigarettes milder than the Cuban brands he was accustomed to. It followed that they were somehow “better” or “not as bad” (Uncle Jack’s own words). Jack was unaware of the ingredients baked into the “cake” he was inhaling. Uncle Jack had been a smoker for most of his life, and although he had quit the addictive habit when he was in his early fifties, its effects came back to kill him by the time he was in his sixties. For the purposes of this paper, the writer will focus on the cigarette merchandising during the decades of the 1930s to the 1960s.

Cuba long had a culture steeped in *tabaquismo*: known internationally for its cigar industry, but also having an extensive cigarette market. Smoking was not an issue that the Cuban government or the medical establishment considered important (Cuban Transitions, 2012). In the late 19th century, Cuban inventor Luis Susini developed a machine that could produce 1,600 cigarettes per hour. At one time, pornographic pictures were included as Crackerjack-like prizes in some cigarette packages (Hyman, 2010). Cuba cooperated greatly with the antisubmarine efforts of the United States Navy during World War II (Longino, 1946; Morison, 2002). When American sailors were allowed to go on shore leave on the island, they naturally took their cigarettes ashore as well, adding the allure of a foreign product to the selection nationally available. Cigarettes were included in American servicemen’s rations (Meyer, Klicka, 1982). Arriving in the United States in the 1950s, Jack found the American commercial culture of the time concerning cigarettes much like what he had known and been accustomed to in Cuba: advertisements in billboards, magazines, and newspapers extolling the appeal of smoking which inundated popular culture (Markel, 2007).
Addicted to tobacco along with countless GIs and civilians in his generation, Jack formed a loyal group of customers who were unaware of the severe damage they were causing to their bodies (Vernellia, 1999). With the dawn of the mid-1950s, Jack was further inundated by television commercials and movies extolling the allure, if not the outright “health benefits” of cigarettes (Gardner, Brandt, 2006). His favorite actor, singer and comedian, Dean Martin, rarely appeared onstage or onscreen without a cigarette in his hand, which somehow seemed to add to his aura of natural charisma and effortless composure (Parish, 2003; Tosches, 1999). A heavy lifelong smoker, Martin died of emphysema in 1995 (Holden, 1995). Rarely discussed in the media (most likely because Hollywood has a long history of promoting smoking), lung disease due to tobacco use took a heavy toll on Uncle Jack’s Hollywood idols. In addition to Dean Martin, the list includes Suzanne Pleshette, George Harrison, Yul Brynner, Johnny Carson, Sammy Davis, Jr., Michael Landon, Dana Reeve, Lucille Ball,, Nat King Cole, Walt Disney, and Joe DiMaggio, to name just a few Hollywood greats. The exact cause of their death is discussed rarely. It seems obvious that Hollywood has acted as an accomplice, directly or otherwise, to the tobacco industry for many years (Landman, 2008).

After the 1964 Surgeon General’s report linking cigarettes to lung cancer and other forms of terminal illnesses, Jack thought about quitting smoking. However, the American tobacco industry changed their advertising strategies and employed terms like “low”, “light”, and “mild” to imply that their new brands were less harmful (Harvard Health, 2004). Uncle Jack switched brands and kept smoking. He found that it was easier than quitting. Jack was to discover the un-American lie: that Marlboros or Winstons were not safer than the cigarettes that he had smoked in Cuba. No cigarette is “better” or “not as bad”, and the certainty is that no cigarette is “safe”. It was not until January 2, 1971, that the Federal government banned cigarette advertising on radio and television. In 1984, cigarette companies were required to place the Surgeon General’s health warning on their packages and advertising (FTC, 2015). Unfortunately, the impact of cigarette advertising is such that approximately 4,000 youngsters start smoking each day, and it is estimated that 1,000 of them become addicted to tobacco. As a result, the leading
preventable cause of death in the United States is directly related to smoking, where more than 440,000 human beings succumb each year. The latest figures show that more than 8,600,000 Americans suffer from chronic illnesses due to smoking (USFDA, 2012).

So, after Uncle Jack's death, what happened to this avowed “free marketer”? Simply put, the free market operates under the principle that consumers are aware of the risk associated with any product. Regardless of the safety features, one must assume that driving in a subcompact is more risky than in a full-sized car. That is not the case with the tobacco industry, which purposely distorted the sense of risk to the consumer. It is often time consuming and difficult to change government regulations. Self-regulation in these cases is an unrealistic, even impossible, expectation. These changes are expedited when there public consensus that such change is appropriate.

As a society, we now understand so much more about smoking than Uncle Jack's generation did. This writer cannot understanding why anyone would engage in smoking today, knowing the disastrous and almost immediate effects it has on one's health. Additionally, why would someone subject their family and loved ones to the heartbreak of seeing them die miserably? Perhaps this writer can be accused of being radicalized about imposing severe limitations, if not banning outright, tobacco products. Perhaps... but Uncle Jack, if he were still alive, would definitely not think so.
Sources:

Barratt, M. (2016). ‘What if you live on top of a bakery and you like cakes?’–Drug use and harm trajectories before, during and after the emergence of Silk Road... Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/24382120/


APPENDIX A: The Cuban Tobacco Connection

1940s Competidora Gaditana Cuban Cigarettes

Cuban cigarette advertising. Translation: “For all types of tastes...strong and mild...and they are Cuban.”

The same cigarette company, “Regalias”. Translation: “Regalias…the stamp…extra fine.”

Source: Ads. Retrieved from https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/564x/6a/23/0c/6a230cc3dc4faf084d98d05a125ff537.jpg