



"CAN'T KICK THE HABIT"

Tobacco Roots Go Deep In America

by A. W. Borger

"That the sale of cigarettes is legal is an accident of history," according to Mike Pertschuk, tobacco activist and Advocacy Institute director. Certainly the money spent by the tobacco industry on lobbying lawmakers has bought silence and inaction in recent years. If cigarettes were introduced today, the same health and safety regulations that outlawed products like asbestos and lead-based paint would keep them out of the marketplace. But tobacco is more American than apple pie.

In 1496 Romano Pane, a monk who accompanied Columbus on his second voyage, first described the tobacco plant. *Nicotiana Tabacum* is native to America, requiring a warm climate and rich, well-drained soil. Native Americans showed settlers how to gather and dry it for use as a panacea. Introduced into Spain and Portugal in the mid-16th century, the use of tobacco spread quickly throughout Europe.

Early English hopes for silk, indigo, and rice from the New world were thwarted. Soon after John Rolfe planted a tobacco crop in 1612 it became the leading export of the Virginia Colony. In 1770, tobacco was the top export by value from the Continental Colonies (See Figure 1). George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe were aristocrats of a mid-18th century tobacco economy.

Cigarettes were first produced in the United States after the Civil War. By that time, cotton, minerals and products of the Industrial

Revolution were more important exports than tobacco. (Figure 2) By the 1890s it was considered socially acceptable for men to smoke in mixed company. The American Tobacco Company was formed in 1904. Cigarette advertising targeted U.S. women in 1929. While individual physicians noticed a concomitant increase in lung cancer, the first major national study to implicate tobacco as a significant cause of death wasn't released until 1964.

On January 11, 1964, a commission under U.S. Surgeon General Luther Terry found that the use of cigarettes "contributes substantially to mortality, certain specific diseases and to the overall death rate." After much deliberation Congress responded to this report with a requirement that cigarette packages carry warning labels. Since then, Federal legislation has outlawed radio and television commercials, increased the excise tax, and prohibited smoking on commercial airline flights. However, tobacco is still exempt from comprehensive laws regulating consumer product safety, product packaging and hazardous and toxic substances.

"Members of Congress are as addicted to large campaign contributions as smokers are to nicotine," according to Ann McBride, president of *Common Cause*. In the 1993-94 election cycle, tobacco industry Political Action Committees (PACs) gave \$2,759,497 to congressional candidates and political committees, a 110 percent increase from

the 1985-86 election. In the 103rd Congress, several bills affecting the manufacturing and taxation of tobacco products, and indoor public space with ETS died in three key House committees whose members received, on average, twice as much tobacco industry PAC money as other House members in the past decade. It should be no surprise that lawmakers who accept money from the tobacco industry are less likely to support tobacco control legislation than their colleagues who eschew such support.

Near the 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of the tobacco plant, tobacco -- "the brown plague" -- is adding \$68 billion a year to the cost of health care in the United States. Whatever its value to America in the past, it has no place in our future. Thirty-one years have passed since the Surgeon General's report linking tobacco use to heart and lung diseases. Since then we have identified the menace of Environmental Tobacco Smoke (ETS). Let's bury tobacco in the dust of 20th century history!

ARTICLE	Lbs. Sterling
Tobacco	906,638
Bread/flour	504,553
Rice	340,693
Indigo	131,552
Wheat	131,467

Figure 1. Top five exports from Continental Colonies: 1770

ARTICLE	PERCENT BY VALUE
Cotton/Cloth	27%
Wheat/Flour	22%
Meat Products	12%
Auto Parts & Machinery	9%
Petroleum & Products	9%
Animal Fats & Oils	6%
Copper & Manufactures	6%
Wood & Products	5%
Iron & Steel Mill Products	4%
Tobacco	3%
Coal & Related Fuels	2%

Figure 2. Major U.S. Exports 1900

