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THE CIGARETTE CENTURY



*The Rise, Fall, and
Deadly Persistence of the Product
That Defined America*

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A Member of the Perseus Books Group
New York

To the Princess, it was an enigma why anyone would smoke, yet the answer seems simple enough when we station ourselves at that profound interface of nature and culture formed when people take something from the natural world and incorporate it into their bodies.

Three of the four elements are shared by all creatures, but fire was a gift to humans alone. Smoking cigarettes is as intimate as we can become with fire without immediate excruciation. Every smoker is an embodiment of Prometheus, stealing fire from the gods and bringing it on back home. We smoke to capture the power of the sun, to pacify Hell, to identify with the primordial spark, to feed on the marrow of the volcano. It's not the tobacco we're after but the fire. When we smoke, we are performing a version of the fire dance, a ritual as ancient as lightning.

Does that mean that chain smokers are religious fanatics? You must admit there's a similarity.

The lung of the smoker is a naked virgin thrown as a sacrifice into the godfire.

TOM ROBBINS, *STILL LIFE WITH*
WOODPECKER, 1980

Introduction

The Camel Man and Me

IN 1961, WHEN I was seven years old, my parents took me to New York City for the first time. In this, my introduction to the city's many sights and attractions, nothing elicited my attention and fascination more than the famous Camel billboard looming above Times Square. The Camel Man blew endless perfect smoke rings into the neon-lit night sky. I was quite simply amazed. The sheer size of the display, the wafting of the smoke, and the commercial tumult left me in a state of awe. Certainly I was already aware from my parents' warnings that smoking was "bad for you." Perhaps this threat was yet another reason why the Camel sign held my attention in ways that the art at the Metropolitan Museum could not. Someday maybe I would blow giant smoke rings. Not.

The Camel Man had gone into operation to great fanfare just days after Pearl Harbor, on December 11, 1941. The brainchild of billboard designer extraordinaire Douglas Leigh, the sign was located above the Hotel Claridge at Forty-Fourth Street and Broadway. At the time of its construction, the billboard cost some \$35,000, and Reynolds paid nearly \$10,000 a month to rent the space from Leigh. He designed the sign and invented the steam machine that would metronomically expel fifteen rings per minute, each two feet in diameter. Among other accomplishments, Leigh would also design in Times Square a steaming coffee cup for an A&P billboard and a block-long waterfall on a Pepsi-Cola billboard, as well as the lights that topped the Empire State Building. Widely recognized as the greatest billboard impresario of the twentieth century, Leigh rejected the common term *billboard*; he was constructing *spectaculars*.¹ At seven, I could attest to Leigh's success.

Here, at the crossroads of the world, the Camel billboard signified the triumph of the cigarette in the mid-twentieth century as well as the success of modern American marketing and commerce. In 1941, cigarette use was on a steeply rising trajectory, a behavior with almost universal acceptance and appeal. The Camel Man, confidently blowing his perfect rings into the Great White Way, marked just how far the cigarette had come in a relatively short span of time. At this American center of sales, shows, and sex, the Camel Man performed for the multitudes below. During the war, he was typically found in uniform (Navy, Army, Marines). Even when the Times Square lights went down in a blackout during the war, he continued to smoke.² He returned to civilian life following the war, often appearing in boating garb. During my visit in 1961, he appeared in uniform again, this time as a football player. No doubt, such powerful male icons had particular appeal to seven-year-old boys.

The Camel Man had earned his dominating view of Times Square through determination, hard work, and brilliant innovation in marketing and promotion. As recently as 1900, the cigarette had been a stigmatized and little-used product constituting a small minority of the tobacco consumed in the United States. Its rise to cultural dominance by mid-century marked a remarkable historical shift that brought together developments in business organization and consumer behavior as well as deeper changes in the morals and mores of American society. The movement of the cigarette from the periphery of cultural practice to its center encompassed critical innovations in production technologies, advertising, design, and social behaviors. The tobacco industry both utilized and helped to foment deeper changes in the culture that served to promote cigarette use. The ability of the industry to both read and shape the emergence of these new cultural forces was striking, and it distinguishes the cigarette as the prototypical—indeed emblematic—product of the century. The cigarette came to be a central symbol of attractiveness, beauty, and power. This transformation engaged social values about pleasure, leisure, sexuality, and gender.

But the cigarette's iconic position in the consumer culture represents only one prong of its historical significance. Indeed, there are few elements of American life in the last century that examining the cigarette leaves unexposed. It seems striking that a product of such little utility, ephemeral in its very nature, could be such an encompassing vehicle for understanding

the past. But the cigarette permeates twentieth-century America as smoke fills an enclosed room. There are few, if any, central aspects of American society that are truly smoke-free in the last century. This book centers attention on how the cigarette deeply penetrated American culture. We have witnessed the remarkable success of smoking as a social convention, as well as its ignominious demise. These shifts in cultural meanings and practices have profoundly altered patterns of human health and disease through the twentieth century. As a result, this book attempts to link meaning to materiality. The cigarette fundamentally demonstrates the historical interplay of culture, biology, and disease. As we now know, the rise of the cigarette was sustained not only by convention and personal psychology, but by the powerfully addictive properties of the nicotine in tobacco. The Camel Man was the ultimate chain-smoker.

As I followed his circular exhalations into the night sky, medical science had only recently, in the previous decades, attained a fundamental determination of the often deadly harms smoking posed for health. The cigarette had drawn fire from critics ever since its popular introduction in the nineteenth century, with many of those opposed to smoking having voiced important health concerns. The medical literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is replete with testimony to the multiple perils of tobacco. Nonetheless, the cigarette had largely trumped these objections by the 1930s as it became ubiquitous. Smoking came to be considered a behavior of medical discretion, an issue requiring the clinical judgment of physicians treating patients who might exhibit the telltale symptoms of immoderate use, smoker's cough, or smoker's heart.

A steep rise in lung cancer—a disease virtually unknown at the turn of the twentieth century—had, however, ominously followed in the wake of the rise of the cigarette. In the early 1950s, the relationship of these two trends would be explicitly and scientifically linked. When I visited with the Camel Man in 1961, substantial scientific investigations had concluded that smoking caused lung cancer and other serious disease. Although medical concerns had percolated as the cigarette rose to prominence, it had been difficult to achieve this scientific knowledge. Physicians and public health officials had long debated the impact of smoking on health and the best methods to assess its risks. Even though the relationship of cigarettes to disease is today perhaps the epiphenomenal fact of modern medicine,

demonstrating this connection required a fundamental transformation in medical ways of knowing in the mid-twentieth century.

Research into the harms of cigarette smoking in the 1940s and 1950s generated breakthroughs in modern epidemiological thought, as well as technical innovations upon which subsequent medical knowledge would firmly rest. Although many clinicians had concluded that smoking could cause disease and death based on their experiences with patients, individual doctors lacked the capacity to demonstrate conclusively this connection in the 1940s. The historical application of innovative methods of causal inference is inextricably tied to proving the harms of smoking. At the core of this narrative are critical questions about the processes by which new scientific knowledge is ultimately achieved. All the while, the tobacco industry worked diligently to disrupt the course of this scientific investigation. The industry's strategic campaign to obscure and confuse the ongoing scientific enterprise would significantly impede public acceptance and understanding of these important findings. Fundamental questions about knowing, and about *how* we know, are illuminated by examining the obstacles that medical science and the public confronted as cigarettes came to be indicted as a powerful cause of serious disease and death.

In January 1966, two years after the historic news conference held by Surgeon General Luther Terry announcing—unequivocally and with the government's seal of approval—that cigarette smoking in fact causes lung cancer, the *Camel Man* quit smoking; the billboard came down. When R.J. Reynolds announced that “the longest running hit on Broadway” would be dismantled, its advertising agency, the William Esty Company, denied any connection to the rising public concerns about the impact of cigarettes on health.³ Yet another example of a disingenuous industry denial; at that time the industry continued to insist vigorously that there was “no proof” that cigarettes were harmful. Despite the pathbreaking scientific research demonstrating the hazards of smoking, the industry continued to argue for the next three decades that the evidence indicating smoking was neither scientific nor convincing.

The debate about smoking and its regulation would turn explicitly to the political arena in the years following the release of the surgeon general's report. The history of efforts to regulate the cigarette—and their relative ineffectiveness—demonstrated the power of the industry to disrupt public

health, just as it had disrupted science. If the tobacco industry did not invent special interest lobbying, they raised it to a new art form in the establishment of the Tobacco Institute in 1958. Each time Congress took up the question of tobacco and public health, proposed regulations were either fully dismantled or had the not-so-ironic impact of actually favoring Big Tobacco. Following the surgeon general's findings that smoking caused lung cancer, the first required warning labels simply proclaimed: “Caution: Cigarette Smoking May Be Hazardous to Your Health.” Attempts to develop public health approaches to reduce the prevalence of smoking were stymied in Congress repeatedly. Although public anxieties about the cigarette rose in the immediate aftermath of the report, by the time the *Camel Man* abandoned Broadway in 1966, Americans were again smoking in record numbers. Nearly half of all adults were regular smokers in the years before 1970.⁴

Not only did the tobacco industry effectively thwart tobacco regulation, they also shaped the public meanings of smoking to their benefit. Even as the health risks of smoking came to be more widely recognized and understood, it was still possible to argue that to smoke or not to smoke was simply an issue of personal agency. According to this logic (strongly endorsed by the industry): once apprised of the risks (with labels on every package beginning in 1966), the “decision” should be left to the individual. Anti-tobacco efforts faltered for at least two reasons. First, they could not compete effectively with the massive resources of the industry. And second, deep cultural sentiment (encouraged and sustained by the industry) viewed tobacco regulation as offensively paternalistic.⁵ After all, wasn't smoking a matter of individual choice? In the great marketplace of ideas and products that constituted American consumerism, individuals could and should make their own decisions about smoking. The companies successfully utilized a deeply traditional American cultural norm that held individuals uniquely responsible for their health. As the knowledge of smoking's harms came to be widely disseminated, rather than drawing attention to the actions of the industry, many came to agree that individuals should either quit or bear the consequences. To hold the industry responsible for such individual failings seemed to violate core American values of individual agency and responsibility. Powerful American images of independence and autonomy came to be reflected in cigarette promotion and advertising.

Philip Morris, for example, sought to link the Marlboro Man—an invention of the mid-1950s—with the lone cowboy and the myth of the frontier. Tobacco regulation faltered on the shoals of American individualism, with its consequent hostility to governmental paternalism.

When public health advocates failed to breach the well-fortified ramparts of Washington politics, they soon looked to open up new fronts in the tobacco wars where grassroots guerrillas might have greater success. At some distance from K Street where lobbyists held court at the Tobacco Institute, antitobacco forces deployed new evidence of the harms of passive smoking to considerable success. In this way, they began to reshape the politics of regulation. The growing evidence that smoke harmed nonsmokers, who did not “assume” the risks of smoking, began to erode traditional arguments. If Americans had high tolerance for “assumed” risks, they had low—to no—tolerance for unwanted “exposure.”

Still, having lost most battles in the halls of Congress, antitobacco leaders also opened a new front in the courtroom. The tobacco companies had at first defended against such suits, claiming that there was no compelling scientific evidence of smoking’s harmful impact. And while they never quite abandoned this argument, as time went by they increasingly relied on the assertion that individuals who smoked must take responsibility for their own “decision” to smoke—that smoking was the preeminent “voluntary” health risk. The fundamental question adjudicated in litigation was: who is responsible for the harms of smoking? In a rising tide of litigation, as individuals came forward to sue the industry for the harms they incurred as a result of smoking in a rising tide of litigation, the industry would assert the plaintiff’s individual responsibility. From the 1950s, when the first litigation was brought, until the late 1980s, this argument consistently trumped the claims of smokers. By the early 1990s, the industry had never paid a cent in litigation, a record that they widely publicized as a means of discouraging prospective plaintiffs and their lawyers.

By the 1980s and 1990s, however, these arguments had begun to wear thin. And a series of forces radically destabilized the industry. American smokers had begun to give up their cigarettes in record numbers as the cigarette underwent a cultural transformation. In an age of considerable skepticism about the ability to change behaviors in the name of health, Americans quit smoking in record numbers. On the twenty-fifth anniversary

of the first surgeon general’s report, the current surgeon general, C. Everett Koop, announced that as a result of reductions in tobacco use and lower rates of initiation among children and teenagers, over 750,000 lives had been saved.⁶ By the early 1990s, smoking rates—spurred by powerful shifts in the social meaning of cigarette use—would dip in the United States to approximately 25 percent, the lowest rates since the 1920s.

These changes in smoking prevalence did not go unnoticed within the tobacco industry. At R.J. Reynolds, for example, it became clear that their most popular brands, Winston and Salem, principally appealed to older smokers, those between forty-five and sixty, a market segment in decline from both quitting and deaths. R.J. Reynolds, evaluating these portentous changes, came to the decision to reinvest in the Camel brand, which had fared especially poorly in the years following the disappearance of the Camel Man from Times Square. As one R.J. Reynolds executive explained, young smokers, between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four “represent tomorrow’s cigarette business.”⁷ As part of their new campaign, a Camel billboard returned to Times Square to much fanfare in June 1989, now in the form of a 37.5-foot-high cartoon camel named Joe, rendered in green, blue, and white neon. Joe rivaled the Camel Man in the deployment of high-tech promotion. The new sign would cost R.J. Reynolds more than \$1.6 million to design and erect, and nearly \$45,000 per month to operate. “The billboard will make an even bigger impact than the original smoking Camel billboard, which was a Times Square landmark for many years,”⁸ explained one R.J. Reynolds executive. The Joe Camel billboard, R.J. Reynolds proudly explained, required 8.5 miles of wiring and more than a mile and a half of neon.⁹

This billboard was only one especially extravagant facet of a much broader campaign using the Joe Camel cartoon figure. Joe promised to meet R.J. Reynolds’s objective of “youthening” the brand. From its inception, the new campaign drew intense fire from the increasingly well-organized antitobacco movement. It was no surprise that the offensive launched by R.J. Reynolds in the Joe Camel campaign immediately provoked defensive maneuvers by tobacco control advocates and public health officials. Both his cartoon image and the tone of the ads easily pointed to kid appeal. The antitobacco campaign, since its inception, had focused on preventing children from taking up smoking. R.J. Reynolds, no doubt, understood that Joe

would be the center of a vocal protest. And they devised a clear strategy to respond to critics of the campaign. Cartoons, they suggested, promoted many products from household cleaners (Mr. Clean) to motels (Garfield). Did the Jolly Green Giant convince youngsters to purchase green vegetables? According to industry apologists, no one could claim that these promotions were directed principally at children. For executives with experience in the tobacco wars, responding to critics marked a challenge to be met rather than a moral or ethical dilemma restricting action.¹⁰

Sophisticated critics within the antitobacco movement understood that simply claiming that Joe appealed to kids would be inadequate in any successful attack on the industry. These activists duly recognized the importance of translating public assumptions about the goals of the Joe Camel campaign into research findings. Just as researchers in the 1940s and 1950s had sought to causally link cigarettes and disease, researchers in the early 1990s sought to causally link advertising with the use of cigarettes among underage children. Soon a series of studies designed to evaluate the appeal and impact of the Camel campaign on young smokers appeared in the influential *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. Publication in *JAMA* promised widespread media attention of several investigations designed to assess the impact of the campaign. In these studies, researchers sought to attack a series of traditional tobacco-advertising defenses. Since the 1950s, tobacco companies had insisted that advertising was designed merely to encourage patrons to maintain (or switch) brands, not to seek new smokers; that tobacco ads did not increase the overall use of tobacco products; and that tobacco promotion did not encourage the initiation of smoking among children and adolescents. One of the studies compared the recognition of Joe Camel among high school students and adults. Not surprisingly, the students were more likely to have seen Joe, associate him with R.J. Reynolds, and have a positive evaluation of his pitch. This same article concluded that Camel's share of the underage market had gone from 0.5 percent to 32.8 percent since the inception of the campaign. According to this report, the illegal cigarette market accounted for \$476 million in the United States each year.¹¹

Even more damning, however, was another study reported in this same *JAMA* issue that found that among children between the ages of three and six, Joe's recognition rate approached that of Mickey Mouse. Dr. Paul

Fischer, a pediatrician at the Medical College of Georgia, devised a study in which children were asked to pair cards representing popular advertising logos and figures with their products. This study galvanized the media and generated new outrage among the public. It rates as one of the most influential studies in the history of the modern tobacco wars.¹² R.J. Reynolds's marketing entered a new phase of intensive scrutiny and calls for regulation. Even if R.J. Reynolds continued to declare that it had no interest in underage smokers, this research into the recognition and appeal of Joe Camel worked to subvert such claims. Further, the study revealed a critical aspect of tobacco advertising: it was not specifically directed at teens about to try cigarettes for the first time; its appeals went much younger. One could easily conclude from such a study that R.J. Reynolds was eager to create appeals for tobacco that would hold a sympathetic audience from very young ages. Although the authors of these articles had strong advocacy positions in the tobacco wars, their publication in peer-reviewed *JAMA* had the desired effect of turning their critiques of the Joe Camel campaign into medico-scientific data. R.J. Reynolds's denials and defenses inevitably appeared self-interested in this context. And it became much more difficult for the company to claim that smokers were responsible for "choosing" to smoke.

The very prominence of Joe Camel and the aggressiveness of his campaign in the face of such vocal criticism led to the demise of the latest R.J. Reynolds's Times Square spectacular. In August 1994, after sustaining much calumny, Joe finally relinquished his spot high above the Marriott Marquis. R.J. Reynolds spokesperson Peggy Carter insisted that the decision to dismantle the billboard was unrelated to antismoking advocates' pointed criticism (echoing R.J. Reynolds's denials when the Camel Man came down in 1966). Describing the decision to erect the billboard in the late 1980s as part of R.J. Reynolds's "marketing strategies developed . . . to reposition the brand's image among adult smokers," she insisted, "the board did the job we wanted it to do, and now it's time to move on."¹³ In large measure, R.J. Reynolds could put Joe out to pasture, having accomplished the critical goal of rehabilitating the brand and, more importantly, regaining market share among new initiates to the cigarette. In 1986, Camel had less than 3 percent of the underage market; by 1993, it had at least 13 percent.¹⁴ Although R.J. Reynolds had succeeded in increasing its market share, the

blows to the already tarnished image of the tobacco industry were significant. The Times Square Joe Camel billboard was not only a blight on R.J. Reynolds's reputation, it also appears to have made cigarette billboards vulnerable to regulation more generally. Ultimately, the industry would, under pressure from activists and litigation, pull all outdoor advertising in 1999. And so ended—once and for all—the cigarette billboard.¹⁵

Joe had, in part, exposed the complex risk-reward structure of the tobacco industry late in the twentieth century. The camel had succeeded in building market share in a critical segment, but he exposed the previously invulnerable tobacco industry to new legal attack.¹⁶ In late 1991, after the publication and publicity associated with the *JAMA* articles, Janet Mangini, a family law attorney in San Francisco, decided to sue R.J. Reynolds for targeting minors. "When I read press reports about the *JAMA* articles, I was stunned," explained Mangini. "I mean, Mickey Mouse is a pretty important character and to think that six-year-olds find Joe Camel just as popular, well, I was outraged."¹⁷ Soon assisted by additional counsel, Mangini's suit focused on the targeting of minors and the general duty not to engage in advertising against public policy. Mangini asked for the court to issue an injunction to bar the campaign in California; a corrective ad campaign to be paid for by R.J. Reynolds and supervised by the court; and the refund of all monies earned from the Camel campaign to be used for court-supervised charitable and research activities.¹⁸ As the case neared trial in the fall of 1997, R.J. Reynolds agreed to settle the suit by pulling the Camel campaign in California, releasing a spate of previously confidential industry documents detailing the plans for the campaign, and paying \$10 million for antismoking activities in California.¹⁹

The Mangini case demonstrated an important and increasingly significant vulnerability for the tobacco industry: the newly effective and creative use of litigation by antitobacco advocates. Such legal maneuvering took place in a radically altered social and cultural context in which the activities of the industry had now come under intensive public scrutiny. The Mangini settlement also resulted in the exposure of the planning and execution of the Joe Camel campaign to unprecedented public review by the court-mandated release of previously confidential documents. These records revealed the central goals and approach of R.J. Reynolds to youth smoking. Revelation of secret documents through litigation became a key

strategy among tobacco control activists eager to encourage public outrage toward a hypocritical industry. Litigation forced the industry to reveal its most intimate corporate strategies in the tobacco wars.

This book is based significantly on the wide range of documentation that emerged in the context of such litigation. When I first began investigating the history of cigarette smoking, I quickly realized there would be a remarkable range of documentary evidence to sustain this work. The medical literature on tobacco alone had come to fill shelves in medical libraries; a vast popular literature in magazines and newspapers would assist in tracing changing social norms and values regarding smoking; and the large number of advertisements offered additional primary material for evaluation and analysis. Even before the governmental evaluations of smoking and health in the 1950s and 1960s, public health officials had explored the relationship of tobacco and disease, archiving large caches of additional documents for future researchers. As I made my initial research forays, I quickly came to understand that the wide diversity of historical materials would make this project both exciting and daunting. But there was one important exception: I knew I would be unlikely to gain access to materials revealing the internal dynamics of the tobacco industry. The tobacco companies were already facing challenges in the courts, and in the court of public opinion, regarding the rectitude of their business practices and their ongoing denials of the harms of smoking. As a result, I assumed my investigation would center on public meanings, behaviors, and debates about smoking rather than on industry strategy and activity. Nonetheless, in 1986 I paid a visit to the Tobacco Institute, having read about their extensive library and historical collections. Quickly and without fanfare, I was politely shown the door. I do remember, however, being impressed by the prominence of ashtrays throughout their offices. Thus, I began my work with the expectation that the inner sanctums of the tobacco industry would not be part of my investigation. I was both disappointed and a bit relieved. There was plenty to do without industry materials. The availability of materials limits every historical inquiry, and this study would be no exception.

At the time of my brief field trip to the Tobacco Institute, I could never have anticipated that in the next decade I would have access to millions of pages of internal and confidential industry correspondence, reports, and memoranda. Now, rather than staring up at the Camel Man, I can examine

his personal papers—the very contracts, plans, and letters that made him a reality. The “discovery” process in the tobacco litigation, coupled with the revolution of the Internet, makes this access possible. I can now sit in my office, downloading thousands of pages of documents evaluating the industry’s approach to the science and politics of marketing cigarettes. The industry strategy of avoiding liability by vetting internal materials and policies with legal counsel to claim attorney-client privilege ultimately backfired in the 1990s in the course of litigation. It is one of the great ironies of modern corporate history that we have come to know more about the internal operations of the tobacco industry than perhaps any other American big business in the last century. The tobacco industry fought diligently in many instances to keep these confidential documents from public scrutiny. Today, there are over 40 million pages of tobacco documents, searchable and downloadable, online. The story of how these materials became available through whistleblowers and the legal process of discovery constitutes yet another central aspect of the history of tobacco. Following the revelations of these documents, the social standing of the industry—once an icon of American entrepreneurialism—sunk to new depths.

The cigarette century reveals the drama of historical change, the transformation of smoking, its meanings, and impacts. Today, we talk of the stink of cigarettes penetrating clothes and hair, not to mention the disgust engendered by nicotine-stained fingers and teeth. There was a time, not so long ago, when people thought cigarette smoke was fragrant. This book seeks to account for the meaning and pace of such radical transformations. Now, when smoking is so fundamentally contested and often publicly deplored, it may be difficult to remember that time when it signified beauty, glamour, and attraction; when being an executive at a tobacco company commanded status rather than shame. Sometimes, watching Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall light up in *To Have and Have Not*, we return to a time when smoking held allure and people smoked everywhere and at anytime.

Today, living in a society in which cigarette smoking has become so culturally marginal and stigmatized, it may be difficult to recover that time in which it played such a prominent and popular role in the rise of a consumer age. Today, when it is so clear that smoking constitutes a momentous risk to health, it may be difficult to recover that time in which these

harms were the subject of debate, confusion, and obfuscation. The strategy of this account is to layer temporally those forces that serve to explain the changing dynamics of tobacco use and the development of a massive pandemic in the twentieth century. It is in this very method of integrating historical inquiry—which is typically isolated by field and approach—that I believe we may learn the most not only about smoking, its meanings, and its material impact on the health of individuals and populations, but also deeper changes in culture and society. Ultimately, historical exploration of the cigarette reveals the advantages of problem-centered histories that call for disrupting some of the traditional boundaries of disciplinary inquiry. By examining cigarette smoking in the context of culture, science, politics, and law, critical elements of American society in the last century emerge. Without resorting to a set of fantastical counterfactuals, it is clear that the history of tobacco might well have followed different routes and taken decidedly different turns. Following the cigarette through the century offers a fundamental opportunity to evaluate the contingent nature of historical change.

The fall of the cigarette that marks the second half of the twentieth century may only be considered provisional at best. More than one in five American adults still smoke regularly, and today tobacco still kills more than 435,000 U.S. citizens each year (more than HIV, alcohol, illicit drugs, suicide, and homicide combined). Former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, eager to translate these numbers for greater public impact, repeatedly explained that tobacco deaths equaled three 747s crashing daily for a year, with no survivors. But smokers don’t die such sudden and traumatic deaths—they die, typically in hospitals, slowly, one at a time; often after extended illness and suffering, and now often ashamed, convinced that they have sown their own fate. It is the precise character of the slow risks involved that, in part, have impinged on more aggressive public health interventions. Among the questions at the heart of this book is the examination of those particular social processes by which a culture constitutes and assesses the risks of life—and death.

The numbers of deaths in the United States, however, are dwarfed by those now occurring around the world. And while many American smokers have tried to quit with some success, smoking has been on a steep increase, especially in poorer nations. As the tobacco companies lost ground

in the developed world they aggressively sought new smokers in developing nations. The final section of the book explores the historical process—currently underway—in which cigarette consumption and its consequent burden of disease are transferred to the developing world. The imposition of this burden, along with its social and ethical implications, casts a shadow of genuinely enormous proportions over the coming century. It is now projected that in the course of the twenty-first century, one billion people across the globe will die of tobacco-related diseases. This figure represents a ten-fold increase over the deaths associated with the cigarette in the last century.²⁰ And these deaths are intricately linked to the social processes of redefining the cigarette in the United States over the last three decades. Originating in the flora of the Western Hemisphere, tobacco has come in modernity to wreak havoc on the health of nations across the globe. In this respect, it is a sobering tale, as many histories are. As medicine and science achieved new mastery over disease and human suffering during the last century, so too have we produced new, powerful vectors of disease and death, and developed techniques for spreading them widely among populations across the globe.

Even in 1961, at a seven-year-old, I knew that smoking was dangerous. In this sense, the billboard presented a paradox that I surely could not have articulated at that time. How could something so great, so remarkable, so public, be promoting something that I had already learned was so profoundly bad? The “badness” of smoking was constituted by more than its effect on health. Embedded in the cigarette were the complex historical meanings of rebellion and idleness, independence and attraction. All kids were told smoking was bad—and was only for adults—which created, in part, its impressive appeal. And this appeal was anything but “natural.” It was the studied and meticulous invention of an industry that would come to understand—and exploit—critical aspects of motivation, psychology, and human biology. This book marks my attempt to resolve a child’s paradox—a paradox of pandemic proportion.

The Cigarette Century looks both inward and outward at the cigarette. It uses the cigarette to explore central aspects of American culture. But it also hopes to utilize this cultural investigation to better understand strategies to reduce the massive pandemic we now understand cigarette smoking to produce. Our ability to control this pandemic will no doubt require new in-

sights from the realms of both science and culture, and new strategies from law and politics. This book ultimately rests on a premise at the core of historical practice and method, that the past may offer particular insight into contemporary policy and cultural change. Understanding the cigarette century will provide no simple answer to the potential health catastrophe we face. But understanding more deeply the meaning and significance of the history of cigarette smoking in modern life may well provide us with a modicum of insight into how best to limit, if not control, the global harms of smoking.