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Nothing New Under the Sun: Anti-Tobacco Campaigns of the Early Twentieth Century

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Cassandra Tate. *Cigarette Wars: The Triumph of "The Little White Slaver."* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999 (cloth), 2000 (paper). 204 pages. Appendix, notes, index. $45.00 (cloth); $18.95 (paper).

As we enter a new century, we can look back on a decade when cigarettes were the target of much opposition: high taxes, advertising restrictions, expanded no-smoking areas, education aimed at abstinence, and even suggestions that cigarettes be banned from federal buildings and regulated as drugs. The list sounds familiar, but the decade in question was the 1920s.

In this fascinating book, historian Cassandra Tate traces the origins of the anti-cigarette movement, primarily in the years 1890-1930. She concludes that this earliest attack on what Henry Ford called "the little white slaver" failed, largely because of the complicity of some unusual suspects. The premise of her book is that "patterns of tobacco use are influenced less by physiology than by culture" (6). Students of public relations, social movements, campaigns, and American public address will all find lessons here, but even communication students separated from those areas will at least find the book interesting. Tate has compiled a dizzying array of information about cigarette opposition that eerily mirrors efforts today. Her work on both sides of the debate includes some familiar references, such as those to the Creel Committee for Public Information in World War I and Edward Bernays' "Torches of Freedom" stunt promoting women's smoking, but it also uncovers lesser known participants in pro- and anti-cigarette campaigns, including personalities such as Will Rogers and W. C. Fields as performers who raised money for cigarettes in the war effort.

The biggest differences between 1920 and 2000 are increased attention to medical science and passive smoking. Even these changes, however, had their origins in the first anti-cigarette campaigns. "Second-hand smoke" existed as a phrase in 1923 (154), and early cigarette opponents predicted (with no scientific evidence) almost all of the maladies known to affect smokers today, including emphysema, heart disease, and danger to pregnant women. Some of the effects not predicted in the early twentieth century were practically unforeseeable--lung cancer, for instance, was not formally recognized as a disease until 1923. The earliest medical studies of cigarette smoking's effects began in the early 1920s, but even the *Journal of the American Medical Association* concluded that the benefits of smoking outweighed the risks--as late as 1948 (54). The first recognition of smoking's detrimental effects on life expectancy came not from the medical profession, but from the insurance industry--a New England Life Insurance Company study in the 1920s first made the connection, finding a seven-year shorter life expectancy among smokers when compared to non-smokers (143).

Cigarettes were not a major factor in American tobacco until James B. Duke helped perfect a cigarette-rolling machine. That development, coupled with a reduction in the federal cigarette tax, allowed cigarettes to zoom past pipe and chewing tobacco in popularity: in 1900, only 2% of Americans smoked cigarettes. By 1930, 40% of Americans smoked.

Lucy Page Gaston founded the Anti-Cigarette League of America in 1899, but her organization was not alone in opposing cigarette smoking. Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, and John Harvey Kellogg were some of the famed critics of smoking, and organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the YMCA, and the Salvation Army also actively campaigned against cigarette smoking. These campaigns predicted poor health as a result of smoking, but they focused on the moral issues surrounding smoking. Cigarette smoking was perceived to be a character flaw that could lead to even greater depravity--smokers were sometimes referred to as "cigarette fiends" (7). As a result of these campaigns against cigarettes, several state legislatures took action. At least 15 states (mostly in the Midwest) enacted partial or total bans on cigarettes between 1895 and 1921.

But in the midst of all of this crusading and reforming, one event significantly weakened this progressive cause: World War I. The book's most well developed section, in fact, involves the recruitment of cigarettes into the war effort.

General Pershing declared that cigarettes made for better soldiers, and the idea of substituting cigarettes for worse vices (alcohol and prostitution) appealed even to the progressive reformers who had been cigarettes' loudest critics. The fact that cigarettes were easy to buy and ship abroad also contributed to the fact that if you were a patriotic American during World War I, you contributed to tobacco for soldiers. Cigarettes were part of daily rations, but they were also provided by tobacco funds sponsored by newspapers across the country. They were sold or distributed to soldiers by the YMCA, the Red Cross, and the Salvation Army--the very organizations who had been on the front lines of the war against cigarettes. The Creel Committee published numerous photos of relief workers--helping wounded soldiers smoke. Cigarettes were a convenient way to support the troops. Not surprisingly, however, "by wrapping cigarettes in the protective cloak of patriotism, the war undercut the campaign against their use" (65). In today's litigious climate surrounding tobacco, it is interesting to contemplate the kinds of defendants that could have faced suit for the nicotine addictions of American young men returning home--the Red Cross? The federal government itself? A Sacramento newspaper observed, the war "might not have made the world safe for democracy, but it had made cigarette smoking safe for democrats" (92).

After the war, prohibition of cigarettes appeared less and less realistic. And when prohibition of alcohol became a reality, some reformers were content to rest on that achievement rather than pursue other targets. Campaigns began to focus on women smokers (hence Bernays' "Torches of Freedom" demonstration), and the smoking issue changed from a question of morality to a question of personal liberty.

Personal liberty remains a primary idea in tobacco campaigns today, but *whose* liberty has changed. Instead of smokers' rights carrying the day, non-smokers' rights have gained priority. Today, Tate says, there are only two kinds of smokers left: "the young and defiant, and the old and defensive" (4). Still, she warns that contemporary tobacco opponents should not become too comfortable with their inroads, because the first anti-smoking campaigns, after making significant progress, were snuffed out. Tate suggests that perhaps anti-smoking efforts have reached their limits and cautions that "any successful social reform movement carries within it the seeds of a backlash" (155).

Because Tate's book seems to have such extensive implications for health campaigns

today, it is somewhat disappointing that few of these implications are elaborated. Tate also fails to provide an adequate explanation for the rise of tobacco in the war effort; exploring the tobacco companies' roles in commingling cigarettes and patriotism would have been a helpful extension of her otherwise excellent chapter on cigarettes in World War I.

Overall, however, *Cigarette Wars* is full of details of an almost-forgotten reform movement that sounds strangely familiar. It reminds readers that Americans have been warned about smoking for almost a century--perhaps the failures of the 1920 campaign can provide guidance for would-be cigarette reformers in the new century.

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