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Ashes to Ashes

*** Suppose America Just Said No to Tobacco--What Then? Here's a Hypothetical Look at the Probable Impact on Everyone and Everything From Smokers and Farmers to Tax Coffers and the Tobacco Companies Themselves.**

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Linda Nuckolls, a likable middle-aged woman who looks her age, unapologetically lights a generic cigarette. From her perch on a bar stool at the Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood, she contemplates the awful scenario: a nation without tobacco.

The smile fades. A look of horror pierces the smoky blue cloud. "Ugly," she surmises. "It would be real ugly. It would be war between the smokers and the 'You're Bad and I'm Good' people. There would be a huge underworld. There would be fighting in the streets."

The most massive legal settlement in the nation's history has concluded, for now. Big Tobacco has been punished, though some say not enough. As Congress debates the \$368.5-billion payout and physicians and attorneys general inhale the prestige, edgy tobaccophiles ponder their fate and slink back to their endangered hiding places for a smoke.

But wait. What if there weren't any tobacco at all? Poof. Gone. Finis. What would a world without tobacco look like?

About 400 miles up the coast, in San Francisco, Stanton Glantz is not smoking. He dwells in the smoke-free chambers of California politics and health. He is one of the nation's most outspoken anti-smoking crusaders and the state's recently appointed tobacco czar. It's his job to advise the Department of Health Services how to spend its \$100 million annual budget for anti-tobacco ads, education and research.

"Smoking will eventually become a private, socially unsanctioned behavior, involving only a few sleazy people," he declares.

Others, even those who have been allies in the raging tobacco wars, visualize very different consequences.

Walker Merryman, tobacco lobbyist: "A million jobs and billions of dollars would be lost."

Kenneth Warner, medical economist: "We can live handsomely without tobacco."

Lester Breslow, public-health professor: "There would be a considerable, measurable increase in longevity."

Peter Berger, sociologist: "The anti-smoking thing is a Protestant business."

William McCarthy, psychologist: "People would eat more fruit."

Mark Twain, writer: "If I cannot smoke in heaven, then I shall not go."

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To visualize a nation in which tobacco is banned, a concept no one is seriously advancing--including former U.S. Surgeon Generals David Kessler and C. Everett Koop--one must begin in the rural South, where tobacco is the gilded leaf, nature's most prodigious gift.

North Carolina produces 52% of all domestically grown tobacco. Keith Beavers raises cattle and corn, soybeans and sweet potatoes on his 1,000-acre spread in Mount Olive. But tobacco is the cash cow, the crop that delivers the farm's most stable profits. Here in Duplin County, the ubiquitous weed has built the libraries, the parks, the operas, the museums, the schools, the churches. For five generations, members of the Beavers family have planted and harvested tobacco.

"Tobacco is my lifeblood," Beavers says. "Always has been. Always will be." If tobacco were suddenly outlawed, he predicts many farmers in the South would be wiped out. But not him. "It would be a matter of making a few adjustments," he says. "I'd just grow it for export."

In California, where about 18% of the adult population smokes, it's easy to visualize a tobacco-free society (in Davis, you can be arrested for smoking in outdoor restaurants). But in the Southeast, hundreds of communities haven't gotten around to banning smoking in elevators. No surprise, then, that Beavers finds the concept of a nation without tobacco preposterous and unfathomable.

But the elder of his two daughters, Jeanette Creech, does not. She broke with tradition and left the family tobacco fields for a smoke-free office. Now 30, she works for the North Carolina Farm Credit Assn., which provides financing to farmers. Creech senses that the region's thrall with tobacco may be at an end. "I'd say something serious is going to happen by the time I'm 50," she says. "I don't know if it's going to happen in five years or 20 years, but I definitely see change."

Adds Larry Wooten, a spokesman for the North Carolina Farm Bureau, "A country without tobacco is not a pretty thought. It's the lawyers who would gain. It's the farmers and retail merchants who would be devastated."

As politicians and lawyers ponder payoffs of multibillion-dollar settlements, Don Richardson is talking to tobacco farmers about diversifying into crops like cabbage and tomatoes. The director of the Agricultural Experiment Station at the University of Tennessee, Richardson works with agronomists and food scientists to help farmers make a better living. Small tobacco farmers, many of whom have already been gobbled up by larger growers, are learning new ways of growing vegetables and fruits, new methods of pest control and new harvest technology. There are plenty of ways for farmers to make a living besides growing tobacco, Richardson insists. "It's already happening."

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Despite incendiary political wars and conclusive evidence that smoking kills, the tobacco business still generates astonishing profits. Philip Morris, maker of about half of all cigarettes sold in the United States, earned \$6.3 billion in profits last year, the third most profitable business in the country after Exxon and General Electric. (The figure includes non-tobacco Philip Morris products such as Miracle Whip, Velveeta cheese, Kool-Aid and Miller beer.) PM's tobacco division last year took in \$12.5 billion in the United States; if its sales were broken out, the Marlboro brand alone would rank as about the 100th-biggest corporation in the country.

In the United States, about 25% of the adult population smokes, nearly half as many as in the 1950s. That's still 50 million people, more than voted for President Clinton in the last election. And the number of smokers is increasing dramatically in developing countries in South America, Asia and Eastern Europe. While China is the largest tobacco grower, producing 40% of the world's supply, the top three multinational companies--Philip Morris, R.J. Reynolds and British American Tobacco--account for a full third of the 5.5 trillion cigarettes sold annually worldwide. Regardless of what happens in Washington, the universal desire for the prized American leaf persists from the cafes of Copenhagen to the temples of Angkor Wat.

Nevertheless, the Tobacco Institute, the industry's key lobbyist, estimates that California would lose 17,000 jobs directly, 12,000 indirectly, if tobacco were banned; nationally there would be 662,000 fewer jobs and \$15 billion less in paychecks. Kenneth Warner, an economist at the University of Michigan who is considered the country's most astute public health researcher, has devoted a considerable chunk of his career to analyzing how the absence of tobacco would affect the nation's economy. His conclusion: "I'd bet my bottom dollar that if tobacco consumption declines, it will actually increase employment in at least 40 of the 50 states." If spending was reallocated from tobacco purchases to other items, most states would gain jobs because tobacco dollars would remain within the local state economy.

The economic-hardship issue is genuine for some states in the South, Warner says, but has been grotesquely exaggerated by the tobacco industry. The industry, he argues, has been largely responsible for the drop in employment in tobacco-related fields because of mechanization and the buying of tobacco overseas. "Health, not money, motivates the call for a tobacco-free society," Warner says, adding that cigarette smoking causes more premature deaths than those from AIDS, cocaine, heroin and alcohol abuse, fire, automobile accidents, homicide and suicide combined.

Ultimately, the economic repercussions of a tobacco-free society are neither as dire as the tobacco industry implies nor as "profitable" as some members of the anti-tobacco community believe. If there were a ban, lost jobs would be made up elsewhere in the economy. "The tobacco industry implies that if there were a prohibition, tobacco money would disappear," Warner says. "What everyone fails to mention is that the money would be spent on other things."

It's the kind of conclusion that angers and confuses those dependent on tobacco money. The tobacco-withdrawal industry--those who make nicotine patches and gum, for example--would eventually be sunk. Other possible losers would be magazines like Rolling Stone and Details, which rely heavily on cigarette ads for income, and retail stores that sell tobacco products. Without cigarettes, chewing

tobacco, cigars and pipe tobacco, the neighborhood 7-Eleven would be a markedly different place. To say that convenience stores aren't dependent on tobacco is like saying smoking doesn't tar the teeth or blacken the lungs. For sheer volume of tobacco sales, the mini-mart is king. Cigarettes account for one-quarter of merchandise sales at the nation's 95,000 convenience stores, the National Assn. of Convenience Stores estimates. But last year, for the first time, income from cigarette sales in convenience stores declined, partly because small, low-cost tobacco shops like Cigarettes Cheaper! are growing like, well, weeds. Since its first store opened in California in October 1994, the chain has sprouted into a \$250-million-a-year bonanza, with 393 branches in eight states.

Convenience stores are by no means frozen in their tracks waiting for the hatchet to fall. Millions of Americans may have quit smoking, but their addiction to fast food appears insatiable. "Americans shop for lunch and dinner," points out Lindsay Hutter of the convenience store association. "They don't shop for food anymore. We are not walking away from the tobacco customer. But we have to reach out to new consumer bases."

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The beautiful blond in the long, vampy black satin dress puffs on a cigarette and inhales with slow, rapturous sensuality. A dapper gentleman, brandy snifter in one hand, cigar in the other, holds court at an oak-paneled bar, reeking confidence and charm.

The scenes are increasingly common. Entire Web sites, magazines, newsletters and videos devoted to the pleasures and erotic delights of smoking are flourishing. As the mainstream smokes less, smoking is entering a nether realm of cultural seduction.

Social scientists couldn't be less surprised. Withhold tobacco and people would lust for cigarettes like never before. Smokeasies would thrive.

"The more tobacco is a taboo, the more it is eroticized," says Richard Klein, a professor of Romance studies at Cornell University and author of "Cigarettes Are Sublime." He argues that the more you interdict cigarettes, the more people will enjoy the danger of transgressing--particularly young people (smoking has increased among high school students for the past five years). Before it is possible to visualize a smoke-free society or even help smokers quit, Klein says, we should pay attention to why people smoke in the first place. For all their lethal properties, cigarettes also mitigate anxiety, cut appetite, promote camaraderie and provide consolation. "The most precious quality is the beauty they bring," says Klein, who wrote his ode to cigarettes as a way of quitting, which he did. "Fire, cinder and smoke have always struck people as powerfully beautiful."

Adds Peter Berger, a sociologist at Boston University: "In France there was an attempt to regulate smoking and the French people said, 'Go to hell.' France is an individualist culture. We think we are, but we aren't. This is a conformist culture. The anti-smoking thing is related to the American puritan anti-pleasure ethos."

For many, particularly health advocates, it's enough to say that without tobacco everyone would be happier and healthier. End of story. But humans are complex creatures, and smoking is a complex social behavior. In his book, Klein raises the

question: If tobacco were banished, would anything be lost? Smoking is a pleasure that is democratic, popular and universal, he says. "There is nowhere in the world where people do not smoke if they are allowed to." A nation without tobacco might indeed become a more repressed, intolerant and regimented place, Klein says. No society has succeeded in getting along without smoking tobacco, he adds, which suggests that the practice will outlive the current wave of intolerance. "Without tobacco, people will seek substitutes. Maybe we'll get back to hemp."

Norman Sharp, president of the Cigar Assn. of America, a tobacco industry trade group, says smoking is one of the great pleasures of living. A cigar after a fine meal creates a bond, a fellowship between men and women. Without tobacco, people would be more uptight--and selfish. The popularity of cigars is, in part, an antidote to the culture's competitiveness and aggression, its obsession with youth and health, with living right, eating right, exercising right, he says. "In this country, the first crime is getting old. The second is to die. The anti-tobacco people are puritans searching for the fountain of youth."

From his crystalline, tobacco-free office at the Pritikin Longevity Center in Santa Monica, health psychologist William McCarthy is surrounded by an exclusive world of fitness, where people shell out \$7,000 for a two-week health camp. Apart from citing the obvious physical benefits, McCarthy can come up with plenty of examples of how society would benefit without tobacco. Among them: cleaner walls and ceilings, fewer holes in clothes, fewer fires, lower insurance rates, less smoker guilt, "a better olfactory environment."

"People who smoke smell," he says flatly.

McCarthy is a health nut who will probably live to be 120. He predicts the day will come when the government will play a larger role in public health, urging better diets and more exercise, and "the huge societal importance of understanding the dangers of too much salt and fat." He knows there are those who fear governmental regulations on tobacco could be just the beginning. Next could come a crackdown on caffeine, alcohol, even potato chips. "There's some truth to the fear," he says. It's the kind of statement that makes tobacco lobbyist Walker Merryman go ballistic. "These are the people I call society's shower adjusters. If you didn't lock your bathroom door, they would be in there setting the temperature of your bath water because they know what's best for you. The connotations are frightening."

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Entire careers in medicine and health care are devoted to the impact of tobacco-- from the instructor who teaches the smoke-cessation class to the doctor who treats emphysema, the bureaucrat who doles out grants to the researcher who studies the relationship between teenagers and Joe Camel.

An estimated 420,000 American smokers die prematurely every year from smoking. The World Health Organization reports the global figure is 3 million. Dorothy Rice, an economist at UC San Francisco and a pioneer in the study of the economic impact of smoking, says the direct cost of smoking in California--for physician services, medications, hospital and nursing home expenditures--is \$3.6 billion a year. Add the indirect costs, largely from lost productivity in the workplace due to smoking-related

illnesses, and the total is \$10 billion. Nationally, Rice says, smokers cost the country \$50 billion a year in direct costs.

Yet others argue that smokers are an economic boon. Since they die prematurely, they aren't around long enough to collect retirement benefits or linger in nursing homes. Stanford University tobacco researcher John Shoven, now dean of humanities and sciences, estimates that male smokers lose about \$40,000 and female smokers \$20,000 in future Social Security benefits, and he disputes research that claims smokers are such an enormous drain on the economy. If people were healthier and lived longer, major adjustments would have to be made to Social Security, he says. "People would simply have to work longer."

Ruth Roemer, a UCLA professor who specializes in laws relating to public health, studies the impact of smoking on health worldwide. In a report she conducted for the World Health Organization on international substance abuse and tobacco control legislation, Roemer argues for an international treaty to control tobacco--"the largest single cause of preventable, premature death and disease." By the year 2025, she says, 10 million people will die each year from smoking--particularly in developing countries where tobacco companies are concentrating their attention. "A fierce tobacco epidemic is taking place all over the world," Roemer says. "The problem is staggering."

If poor countries were freed from addressing smoking-related illnesses, she adds, they could address other urgent personal and environmental health issues ranging from childhood disease to sanitation and pollution. Further, if families were not spending money on tobacco, they would have more money for food.

Lester Breslow, a professor and dean emeritus at the UCLA School of Public Health and leading anti-smoking advocate, predicts that without tobacco there would be a shift in the kinds of diseases doctors treat and a subsequent shift in the medical specialties doctors pursue. If people live longer and healthier lives, Breslow says, there'd probably be more need, say, for gerontologists. The medical establishment would have far fewer patients. More attention could be paid to maintaining health throughout a person's life, into and through old age.

"It would bring the population closer to whatever the human life span really is," says the 82-year-old physician. "A mouse lives about two years. An elephant, 80. If there's no accident or disease, the human life span is probably between 85 and 100."

Dr. Michael Steinberg, an oncologist at the Santa Monica Cancer Treatment Center, isn't planning any career moves. "Cancer is a disease of aging, as well as carcinogens," he says. In the past 40 years, he points out, the availability of pap smears has significantly decreased the number of advanced cervical cancer cases. On the other hand, more women are now being treated for breast cancer because they are living longer with the disease. What is certain, Steinberg says, is that in a tobacco-free society there would be much less illness and much better health. It wouldn't happen overnight. When smokers quit, health risks associated with smoking gradually decline. After seven years, the risks drop dramatically but don't completely disappear until many years later.

Smokers often say half-jokingly that without tobacco, they might be healthier physically but basket cases emotionally. Enoch Ludlow, spokesman for FORCES

(Fight Ordinances and Restrictions to Control and Eliminate Smoking), says Americans already are stressed to the max. "People don't hang out and talk anymore. They drive like maniacs," Ludlow says. "Without tobacco, things would be worse than they already are. The decline in civility is directly related to the decline in smoking."

Indeed, the medicinal value of nicotine has been well known to physicians and religious leaders for centuries, says Murray Jarvik, a psychiatrist at the UCLA School of Medicine and inventor of the nicotine patch. Nicotine, he says, is probably used as a way of self-medicating. He cites a University of Colorado School of Medicine study that found that people with mental illnesses were much more likely to smoke than the general population, and that from 70% to 90% of schizophrenics smoke. Without tobacco, Jarvik predicts, mentally ill and depressed people might worsen and seek something else to modulate their mood: "Maybe there would be more antidepressant drug use."

Adds the Pritikin center's William McCarthy, "Without tobacco, suicide rates would go up."

Jarvik notes that one of the main virtues of nicotine is that it makes people feel good, a fact nonsmokers and members of the public-health community tend to discount. The notion that a drug might be used for pleasure is anathema to many in our society, Jarvik says. "If an average person finds a drug that will make him happier, brighter, thinner and richer, it would be hard to resist even if his doctor would not prescribe it," he says. "Nicotine might be just such a drug."

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There is no sector of society more hooked on tobacco than the government. Tobacco is America's most profitable cash crop, one of its most popular exports, a source of huge tax revenues and the American politician's most generous benefactor.

At the state level, tax revenues on tobacco are manna from heaven. Americans pay an average 34 cents in state tax every time they buy a pack of cigarettes, the product that constitutes 93% of tobacco sales. Washington state imposes the highest tax--82.5 cents a pack--Virginia the least at 2.5 cents a pack, but it allows cities and towns to levy their own taxes. Californians pay 37 cents a pack. When levies on other tobacco products such as cigars, chewing tobacco, pipe tobacco and snuff are added, smokers have contributed \$646 million so far this year to California's coffers. (Taxes on alcohol reaped \$264 million.) Without tobacco tax revenues, the state would have a lot less money to spend on state services ranging from housing prisoners to educating children, says Sean Walsh, Gov. Pete Wilson's spokesman.

Walsh is reluctant to speculate how California, which grows no tobacco, would fare economically without it. "The question is complex, to put it mildly," he says. Susanne Hildebrand-Zanki is less equivocal. "California would be vastly better off," she maintains. "The net benefits would far outweigh what we'd give up in taxes." Hildebrand-Zanki is head of the Tobacco Related Disease Research Program at the University of California system, which decides which researchers at private and public California institutions get funding to study the health and economic tolls of tobacco. The state's budget for tobacco research programs has fluctuated wildly since Gov. Pete Wilson began diverting tobacco tax money to other state programs.

Hildebrand-Zanki's budget, for example, has plummeted from \$25 million to \$4 million. In any event, she says, "from the very beginning, we realized that if the program was successful, we would be out of a job."

Patrick Reynolds, grandson of tobacco tycoon R.J. Reynolds, broke rank with his family and testified in 1986 against the tobacco industry before a congressional committee. He now devotes most of his energies to his Beverly Hills-based Foundation for a Smokefree America. Political reform would be much more likely, Reynolds says, without the "shameful, filthy alliance Big Tobacco has with politicians." Though he doesn't advocate a tobacco ban, he believes a lot of smokers might actually like to see cigarettes snuffed out; it would force them to quit. Referring to the toll of tobacco-related deaths worldwide, he says: "It's the greatest crime of the 20th century, by far."

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In the United States, tobacco has created unfiltered chasms between people. Even if it were banished, no one close to the bruising debate suggests it would vanish. With cigarettes on the verge of becoming a regulated drug, they could eventually become so nontoxic and respectable they'd just disappear, or so hot they'd be smuggled in from as far as Brazil and Zimbabwe. Smoking would become all the more alluring, says the Tobacco Institute's Merryman, who compares the anti-smoking zealots of today with "the pursed-lipped moralists" from the turn of the last century, the architects of Prohibition. Then, as now, there was a free-floating social intolerance, a suspicion fostered by religious leaders that pleasure is immoral and the world a scary place. "If there wasn't any tobacco, there would be no end to the social engineering," Merryman says. "It would do great damage to the entire notion of what freedom means. Where do you draw the line?"

While President Clinton and Congress consider landmark tobacco legislation in the coming months, Denny Manning will be selling a full line of tobacco products at Cigarettes Cheaper! in Long Beach, a job that pays \$6 an hour.

Manning is 50. He says smoking is the only vice he's got left. He's a loquacious fellow who makes the customers stopping by the smoke-friendly island feel a little less dysfunctional. A big, ugly ashtray beside the cash register overflows with butts; a 6'5" Marlboro Man lights a cigarette from a display sign near the doorway.

Manning doesn't pay much attention to national tobacco talk. He doesn't know whom to believe anymore. He does wish people on both sides of the tobacco war would lighten, if not light, up. From his spot behind the counter, he takes a long drag from a Marlboro and greets a regular customer as if he were a brother from the trenches. Then he issues this warning from behind a haze of smoke: "Drive careful, young man. There's maniacs out there."

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