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ASHES
TO
ASHES

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

America's Hundred-Year Cigarette War,
the Public Health, and the Unabashed Triumph of Philip Morris

RICHARD KLUGER

ASHES TO ASHES

America's Hundred-Year
Cigarette War,
the Public Health, and
the Unabashed
Triumph of Philip Morris

RICHARD KLUGER



VINTAGE BOOKS

A Division of Random House, Inc.

New York

*With love for Phyllis, my life's companion,
who is all too familiar with the subject*

FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, AUGUST 1997

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the Knopf edition as follows:
Kluger, Richard.

Ashes to ashes : America's hundred-year cigarette war, the public health, and the unabashed triumph of Philip Morris / Richard Kluger.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-394-57076-6

1. Cigarette habit—United States—History. 2. Tobacco habit—United States—History.
3. Cigarette industry—United States—History. 4. Tobacco industry—United States—History.

I. Title.

HV5760.K58 1996

394.1'4—dc20 95-42103

CIP

Vintage ISBN: 0-375-70036-6

Book design by Dorothy Schmiderer Baker

Random House Web address: <http://www.randomhouse.com>

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Tobacco, I do assert . . . is the most soothing, sovereign and precious weed that ever our dear old mother Earth tendered to the use of man! Let him who would contradict that most mild, but sincere and enthusiastic assertion, look to his undertaker. . . .

BEN JONSON

*For thy sake, Tobacco, I
would do anything but die.*

CHARLES LAMB

*Smoke, smoke, smoke that cigarette.
Puff, puff, puff, and if you smoke yourself to death,
Tell Saint Peter at the Golden Gate
That you hate to make him wait
But you've got to have another cigarette.*

"SMOKE! SMOKE! SMOKE!"

1947 SONG BY MERLE TRAVIS
AND TEX WILLIAMS

Foreword: A Quick Drag

AS THE twentieth century wanes, we may marvel justifiably at the triumphs of the human intellect in the course of this span over the visitations of nature at its unkindest. We have largely overcome the savaging effects of infection and contagion, of extreme climates and turbulent weather, of famine and peril from other species. We have attacked the vastness of our planet's distances, even the force of gravity itself, while unlocking the earth's elemental secrets. We have generated creature comforts and pleasures on a scale undreamed of by our forebears and doubled our expected life span.

Yet, as if to reassure the overseers of the universe that we have not attained godlike status but remain in essence creatures of folly and victims of our darker natures, we have also ingeniously crafted fresh forms of misery and death-dealing. We have generated vile effluents with our life-enhancing technology, fouling soil, waters, and skies in ways only beginning to be understood. We have fashioned doomsday weaponry. We have promoted mindless tribal hatreds into genocide and rationalized it in the name of profane statecraft. And worst of all, if we are to credit the number of fatalities as calculated by public-health authorities, twentieth-century man has embraced the cigarette and paid dearly for it.

The stated toll is horrific. Americans are said to die prematurely from diseases caused or gravely compounded by smoking at the rate of nearly half a million a year; a multiple of that figure is put forward as the world toll, approaching several million. The number claimed has risen appallingly as the century has lengthened, population and wealth have grown, and social customs have turned more permissive. No one can make more than an informed guess

at the total loss of life, but those decrying it most urgently assert that the mortality figure from smoking for the century as a whole rivals the multimillions who have fallen in all its wars.

Yet there has been little outrage at the appalling statistics—only a dirgelike, loosely orchestrated, and inconstant chorus of protest over the continuing practice of the custom and, increasingly of late, restrictions on where it may be undertaken. At mid-century, nearly half the adult American population smoked; near the end of the century, despite massive indictment of the habit by medical science, more than a quarter of all Americans over eighteen continues to smoke—nearly 50 million people. And while overall consumption has declined somewhat, those who cling to the custom smoke more heavily than ever: an estimated twenty-seven cigarettes a day on average. Meanwhile, in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe, tobacco is a growth industry. There the cigarette is widely regarded as a sign of modernity, an emblem of advancement, fashion, *savoir-faire*, and adventure as projected in images beamed and plastered everywhere by its makers. And, in a case of supreme irony, not to say perversity, the more evidence accumulated by science on the ravaging effects of tobacco, the more lucrative the business has become and the wider the margin of profit.

Why should this be? Did mankind simply become putty in the hands of the master manipulators who ran the cigarette business? Were we so charmed by the iconography with which these marketing Svengalis enriched our popular culture—a fantasyland populated by heroically taciturn cowboys, sportive camels, and an array of young lovers, auto racers, and assorted *bons vivants* all vibrantly “alive with pleasure”—that we exonerated them from all charges of capital crimes?

Or have we been convinced by these merchants' unyielding insistence that peddling poison in the form of tobacco is no vice if (a) it is freely picked by its users and (b) its dangers have not yet been conclusively, to the last logarithm of human intellect, proven? Or perhaps our complicity in this man-made plague stems from our very familiarity with the subject; the product has become so ubiquitous and the case against it so clear that we are plain bored by the whole matter. Or perhaps it is the circumstances of death from smoking. The toll is slowly exacted, in the form of seven or eight years of lost life to the average smoker, who, like the rest of us, succumbs mostly to the degenerative diseases of old age: cancer, failing hearts, blocked arteries, dysfunctional lungs. Death from such causes comes singly, and usually at hospitals, not in spectacular conflagrations or crashes obliterating hundreds at a time and capturing the world's attention and sympathy. The smoker's death is banal, private, noticed only by family and friends, and, in the final analysis, self-inflicted.

Doubtless there is an element of plausibility in each of these explanations,

but the persistent sway of the cigarette may be equally understood by dwelling not on the consequences of the habit, as its detractors naturally do, and why these people *ought* to have curtailed it, but on the reason for the phenomenon in the first place. Simply put, hundreds of millions worldwide have found smoking useful to them in myriad ways, subconscious or otherwise.

The proverbial visitor from a distant planet would likely find no earthling custom more pointless or puzzling than the swallowing of tobacco smoke followed by its billowy emission and accompanying odor. Told that the act neither warms nor cleanses the human interior, that it neither repels enemies nor attracts lovers, our off-planet visitor would be still more baffled. The utility of the exercise, he/she/it would be informed, is traceable to the changing pace, scale, and nature of daily living in this century. Our lives used to be simpler and shorter, given over largely to the struggle for survival. But the technological marvels of our age have provoked attendant stresses from congested living and our often grating interdependence; from the irksome nature of our duties and lack of time to accomplish them; from a welter of conflicting values and emotions born of unattainable expectations and unmanageable frustrations; and from the often careening velocity of life. Many of us have lacked the inner resources to get through the battle and gain a little repose without help wherever and however we could find it, and no device, product, or pastime has been more readily seized upon for this purpose than the cigarette. It has been the preferred and infamous pacifier of the twentieth century, even as—or if—it has been our worst killer. Its users have found it their all-purpose psychological crutch, their universal coping device, and the truest, cheapest, most accessible opiate of the masses.

Let us consider, then, this protean usefulness of the cigarette, which, practically speaking, *is* the tobacco business in the United States, accounting for some 95 percent of the industry's revenues. The unique value of the cigarette to its users has resided in its perceived dual (and contradictory) role as both stimulant and sedative. Clinically, smoking has been found to speed up a number of bodily functions, most notably the flow of adrenaline, with its quickening effect on the beat of the heart, but the smoker when questioned will most often characterize the cigarette as a relaxant. This seeming paradox is the essence of the product's appeal, for in fact, the smoker uses it to meet both needs.

The smoker smokes when feeling up or in the dumps, when too harassed and overburdened or too unchallenged and idle, when threatened by the crowd at a party or when lonely in a strange place. A smoke is a reward for a job well done or consolation for a job botched. It can fuel the smoker for the intensity of life's daily confrontations yet seem to insulate him from the consuming effects of any given encounter. It defines and punctuates the periods of the smoker's day, and nothing helps as much in dealing on the telephone with

trying people or unpleasant matters. The cigarette, in short, has been the peerless regulator of its user's moods, the merciful stabilizing force against the human tendency to overrespond to the infinite stimuli that inescapably impinge upon us.

Abetting this admirable, if illusory, versatility of the cigarette have been its obvious virtues as an item of merchandise. It is remarkably convenient: small, portable, readily concealable though highly visible, for sale all over, easy to operate and swiftly disposable, a quick fit into respites throughout the day, usable—until recent years—almost anywhere indoors or out, interchangeable with any other brand of like strength, as blindfold tests have demonstrated (despite company claims of unique flavorfulness, smoothness, and goodness), and cheap. Even at ten or so cents apiece, or a bit over a penny per minute of enjoyment—or of relief, perhaps—the butt has ranked as one of life's least costly indulgences.

Though a mere article of merchandise, the cigarette is a uniquely intimate possession. It is everywhere about you—in your hand, in your mouth, in your pocket close to your heart, and its smoke is down your throat, in your lungs, in your hair, on your skin, and ineradicably on your clothes, not to mention breath unless you are an equally assiduous consumer of mints or mouthwash. Necessarily, one's cigarette has come to take on a persona, a character, a standing as a companion, and an especially valued one at that: it is always on call, reliably there when needed, a friend who never answers back or slaps you around. How many other stress-free friendships are there in life—unless, of course, one grasps the antitobacconists' killjoy contention that smoking compounds rather than allays stress. The cigarette has been perhaps most gratefully embraced when the smoker is alone and afraid, to fill "all the dreadfully ordinary intervals and the great gulfs of silence before the Showdowns," as the poet-smoker John Hollander has written. And in that ultimate loneliness of wartime, it has been the soldier's solace as he endures boredom, fatigue, and the prospect of imminent obliteration.

Whatever its utility otherwise, smoking is essentially a physical and highly sensual experience. Among the senses, that of touch is most apparent. Tactility begins with the snug fit of the pack in the palm, followed by all the little rituals of crackling off the wrapper, neatly tearing open the pack, surgically extracting the first snow-white tube, percussively tapping its tobacco end against the wrist or any convenient flat surface, deftly inserting it between barely parted lips, and lighting it with the absolute minimum of pyrotechnics—the quintessence of cool. It is, of course, the perfect plaything for nervous hands that cling to it like an anchor, fondle it, and wave it about as a prop to enhance one's words or dramatize one's feelings. Add, then, its raptures to the taste (bittersweet, acrid, tingling), the smell (an autumnal pungence, an organic mellowness), the feel (the small, sharp hit at the back of the throat, teasingly raspy and

enlivening on the way down, the sudden fullness and completeness deep within, the final swift, satisfying surge of emission), and the sight (the little blue-gray cloud proclaiming one's *Lebensraum* and, between puffs, the lazy, sinuous ribbon wafting upward, signaling that the smoker exists). Here, for the habitué is the very meaning of instant gratification. And was there ever a more ideal complement to those other two sinful non-nutrients, coffee and booze, or a perfect nightcap following an exquisite meal or even average sex?

That smoking is equally a boon to the soul as to the body, few partakers would claim, but most believe it helps them think. Samuel Johnson, among the eighteenth century's more celebrated pipe-puffers, modestly praised the practice as "a thing which requires so little exertion and yet preserves the mind from total vacuity." Freud went a good deal further: "I owe to the cigar a great intensification of my capacity to work"—this was written in his seventy-second year after thirty agonizing operations for cancer of the jaw, by which time the connection between the two was not likely lost on him. Molière, with a certain Gallic vagueness, waxed most rhapsodic of all on the transcendent efficacy of smoke: "It not only refreshes and cleanses the brain, but also leads the soul to virtue and teaches honesty."

Is there clinical support for smoking as brain food? Some experimenters have found, though the evidence is equivocal at best, that nicotine, tobacco's psychoactivating ingredient, excites the brain waves, can increase vigilance in the performance of repetitive (one might say mindless) tasks, and may improve the processing of sensory stimuli—provided, that is, one keeps on smoking. Does any of this amount to a boost in productive mental energy? Some scientists have theorized that smoking creates an apparent heightening effect by neutralizing (one might say numbing) the edges of one's consciousness and thereby reducing distractions. Translation: Smoking may help you concentrate by emptying the mind of all but the subject of the moment.

In the even murkier realm of the subconscious, smoking has been arguably credited with filling needs and registering impulses not conceded or even guessed at by the smoker. The cigar-loving Freud contended that smoking was an oral autoerotic manifestation of inadequate breast-suckling, presumably in infancy, and likened it to thumb-sucking. Lesser sages have ascribed overeating to this same "orality," but the smoker is far busier with his fix if measured in mouth-hours. Some Freudian followers, licensed and otherwise, have hypothesized that cigars, cigarettes, and pipes are all phallic substitutes, or possibly supplements, and smoking a surrogate form of sexuality. Higher-minded cultural anthropologists have attributed to male smokers a yearning for the primal power of Man as Fire-Conqueror or for the magical potency of the fire-breathing shaman or, when not on those particular power trips, for the comforts of hearth and home evoked by their little portable tobacco furnaces. And many social commentators have concluded that smoking for women is

both a badge of would-be equality with smoky men and a sanctioned outlet for the frustrated expression of combativeness and other impulses that men are allowed to vent but that are forbidden to the female of the species, always supposed the gentler and more nurturing of the two.

Nor to be minimized, either, has been the usefulness of smoking as coded defiance—of authority, of the hand fate has dealt you, of sweet reason itself. It is most favored, in the first instance, by juvenile smokers as an initiator into the mysteries and empowerment of the adult world; the accompanying displeasures of nausea and dizziness assaulting the novice inhaler are tolerated as rites of passage and the price to be paid for partaking of forbidden fruit. And how easy to defy the tyranny of grown-ups by illicitly taking up a favorite habit of theirs, all the better for its reek of sensuousness with no risk of rejection by a pined-after sex object. For youth or adult alike, the habit may serve to compensate for profound feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, or an abiding bitterness that stems from degraded social status, low occupational achievement, certifiable injustice, or paranoid delusion. Such victims of social pathology are suspected of smoking not in spite of the hazards associated with it but *because* of them.

Even better-adjusted smokers, though, are susceptible to the perverse condition that behavioral specialists call “cognitive dissonance,” acting in direct and self-destructive contradiction of known truths or indisputable fact. And all smokers are gifted at rationalizing their habit. Many smokers, for example, readily acknowledge, even insist, that they are hopelessly hooked. But as addictions go, they may argue, it is pretty benign. Even as the mild kick of the inhaled cigarette does not compare with heroin’s euphoric high or the giddiness induced by marijuana or the sudden brightening of spirits that alcohol can bring on, neither does smoking result in any of the acute physical impairments or social disruptions of those more powerful narcotics. Smokers, moreover, rarely rob to feed their entirely legal habit or in a crazed trance beat their families. Yes, tobacco seduces you to a dependency upon it, but just as surely, the knot can be undone; millions, after all, have freed themselves.

For those millions enslaved by nicotine, the weightier charge that the addiction can ultimately prove lethal inspires a lot of fast talking and whistling by the graveyard. The catechism of the hopelessly habituated runs something like this: (1) Even if those busybody biostatisticians are right, only one of four smokers will die due, more or less, to smoking, so the odds are on my side. (2) Besides, you’ve got to die of something, so why not from a source of pleasure? (3) Anyway, it takes decades for the diseases linked to smoking to develop, and those years I might lose aren’t exactly quality time, coming late in life when many human faculties and the yen for living are diminished. (4) Life is full of dangers—to live is to take risks of all sorts every day; I may get hit by

a truck tomorrow. I'm here and want to enjoy myself to the fullest extent possible, and cigarettes help me do that. And (5), let's face it, I might have gone cuckoo a long while back without smoking or stressed out terminally, as they say. So, (6) if you don't mind—or even if you do—please get out of my face and tend to your own garden. P.S. (7) When your number's up, it's up; you can't mess with your karma.

Why, given the enormity of the crimes against humanity with which it has been charged, the cigarette has not been outlawed or its ingredients and design modified by government command is thus explainable in the first place by the immense and continuing consumption of the product for all the above uses and excuses. It must then be added at once, without excessive moralizing, that the tobacco industry, understandably devoted to its own survival ahead of all others', has labored prodigiously to reassure its customers, disarm its foes, purchase allies in high places, and minimize government intrusion into its gravely suspect business. But the success of that industry cannot be facetiously dismissed as greedy capitalism at its most predatory, for in many nations, capitalist and socialist alike, the manufacture and sale of tobacco products have been reserved as an operation of the state, carried out in the name of the public interest if not the public health. Among these nations have been China, Japan, the constituent states of the former Soviet Union, France, Spain, Italy, all the Eastern European countries before their liberation from totalitarian rule, Kenya, both Koreas, Taiwan, and Thailand.

Around the world, moreover, the pro-smoking cause is championed by millions dependent on the tobacco industry for their livelihood. Most numerous among these are the growers of what the industry claims is the most widely cultivated non-food plant on earth. In the United States, tobacco remains the most profitable cash crop on a per-acre basis, and in many places throughout Latin America, Africa, and Asia, where subsistence farming is the obligatory way of life for the masses, pending the creation of viable domestic industry, tobacco has been considered a godsend. Even in Japan, every leaf grown was long guaranteed purchase by the state-backed tobacco enterprise, and the American government has vitally helped support tobacco cultivation since the 1930s. Can all these national governments be justly accused of callous indifference to the well-being of their peoples, or might it be argued instead that, in Darwinian terms, economic survival has gained priority over mere physical fitness, to the chagrin of public-health advocates?

Beyond growers, the ranks of those with a prominent vested interest in sustaining smoking are swollen by machinists operating state-of-the-art cigarette makers that spit out 10,000 units per minute; by distributors and vendors, including supermarket managers who hawk Marlboros by the carton, state-store operators in Burgundy pushing Gauloises by the pack, men on bikes traveling

the Ugandan bush country, and street urchins in Calcutta selling smokes by the single stick; by Madison Avenue dream merchants dependent on the U.S. tobacco trade's more than \$5 billion annual advertising and promotion outlay as well as by newspaper and magazine editors keenly aware that cigarette ad lineage helps determine the size of their news hole; by auto-racing drivers and their pit crews, dance troupes and symphony orchestras perennially on the edge of extinction; by professional women tennis players (until recently); by museum directors, colleges, and minority-member social action groups, all gratefully accepting cigarette manufacturers' largesse without perceptible qualms of conscience.

With such a mammoth and influential constituency in place, it is no surprise that would-be tobacco regulators are scarce in the political arena. Governments, furthermore, have themselves become addicted to the cigarette because of the taxes it harvests for them. Cigarettes are the most heavily taxed consumer product in the world. About twenty industrialized nations tax cigarettes more heavily than the U.S., some of them five times more. In China, they have been the largest source of capital formation for broadening the country's industrial base. Few politicians have been willing to forgo such revenues, as well as the votes and support of smokers and all those battenning on the habit. Even the World Health Organization, a unit of the United Nations, has been hamstrung in its efforts to combat tobacco by the indifference of member-nation governments and the pressures applied by the private international goliaths, Philip Morris Companies, Inc., British-American Tobacco, RJR Nabisco, and Rothmans.

And so, near the end of the century, the debate over smoking rages on. The cigarette makers argue that the smoking of tobacco has persisted in civilized places for 500 years now, never without its loud detractors; that science may have incriminated the practice but has not found it guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt—and that, regardless of how definitive the findings to date, every smoker knows, whether from warning labels, public reports, media attention, or word of mouth, that there are risks attached. Antismoking activists respond that most smokers begin at an immature and suggestible age—90 percent of them in the U.S. by the time they are twenty—when they are incapable of weighing the prospect of an early grave and believe they can break the habit at will; that the perceived benefits of smoking are in reality a delusion induced by a drug, which when consumed at the rate of 70,000 or so hits a year (twenty or twenty-five cigarettes a day X eight or ten puffs each X 365 days) causes deeply conditioned behavior and a corrosive effect on human tissue, and that the medical case is proven—except to the extent that science is only just beginning to grasp the precise mechanics by which all diseases assault the body's intricate defense and immune systems. But that tobacco smoke is a ruthless pathological agent provocateur, there remains no doubt.

The question, then, is whether cigarette merchants are businessmen basically like any other, selling a product judged to be highly hazardous long after its usefulness to millions was well established, and are now sorely abused by "health fascists" and moralizing busybodies, or are they moral lepers preying on the ignorant, the miserable, the emotionally vulnerable, and the genetically susceptible?

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Adoring the Devil's Breath

TOBACCO is a hard plant to love. Man-sized or taller, demanding at every stage of its growth, sticky to the touch during hot weather, highly inviting to unsightly and voracious pests, tobacco prompted one of its more eminent growers, Thomas Jefferson, to call it “a culture productive of infinite wretchedness” in view of the hundreds of hours of backbreaking labor per acre that it required—and still does, despite advances in mechanization and agronomy.

The tobacco plant is something of an anomaly of nature in that its unprotected leaves rather than its blossoms, fruit, or shielded seed are what man values. Native to the Western Hemisphere but now grown worldwide, *Nicotiana tabacum* is rarely found in the wild. It has a limited life expectancy without cultivation but sprouts spectacularly when tended. If unchecked, the plant grows as high as nine feet, with wide-spreading leaves in the shape of a rounded arrowhead, sixteen to eighteen inches in length and attached to the wrist-thick stalk in an ascending spiral so that the ninth leaf overlaps the first. The leaves and stalk are covered with soft, downy hair that emits gums and aromas; these oils, resins, and waxes increase as the leaf matures and accumulate on the surface in a viscous sheen. The whole point, when raising it commercially, is to force the growth into no more than fifteen or twenty leaves per plant, which, if properly selected, harvested, and cured, will bulk nicely and prove rich in nicotine, a potent compound that, unless absorbed in small doses, can be lethally toxic and is generally acknowledged as the source of the habit-forming property of inhaled tobacco smoke. Just how it addicts, nobody knows for certain.