INDUSTRY WATCH

Behind enemy lines

Christopher Buckley

On 2 November 1995, I had the pleasure of sharing the podium with Christopher Buckley at a plenary session on tobacco at the annual conference of the American College of Chest Physicians, held in New York City. Buckley, who is Editor of the magazine Forbes FYI, is well known to tobacco control advocates as the author of the book Thank You for Smoking (Random House, 1994). Thank You for Smoking is a hilarious satirical "novel" about the tobacco lobby; however, as Dr Joel Dunnington noted in a review of the book (Tobacco Control 1994; 3: 278), "in reality, much of the book is non-fiction with the names changed to protect the guilty."

In his remarks, Mr Buckley described his experience in writing Thank You for Smoking. He kindly consented to publication of his speech in Tobacco Control. - ED

Thank you, Joe.* It's a pleasure to be introduced by the only Wall Street bond trader who has a hard time getting a reservation at a good Manhattan restaurant.

It's an honour to be asked to speak to the American College of Chest Physicians. Even at 0800 in the morning.

Is there anyone here from the the Tobacco Institute? I gotta hand it to you - you've got guts.

One of the things I found out while researching *Thank You For Smoking* was that people from the Tobacco Institute actually attend health conferences. It's part of their job. Dirty, lousy, rotten work, I know, but someone's got to do it, I suppose.

I thought I'd tell you a little about my research into their world. You could title my talk "Behind Enemy Lines."

I don't know how many of you have read the book, but before you start throwing stethoscopes, I assure you, the title *Thank You For Smoking* is ironic.

You know you've got a good title when people sue you for it. I'm being threatened with suits by several grassroots smokers' right groups for - as they put it - plagiarising that title from their stationery letterhead. Well, nothing succeeds like success, as Oscar Wilde used to say.

In fact, I did call up one smokers' rights group while I was doing the research. And it provided me with a funny moment, because - and I'm not making this up - the woman who answered the phone said very chirpily, Smoker's Action COUGH COUGH COUGH Network."

I put that sweet little moment right into the book. When Nick Naylor, my anti-hero tobacco spokesman, arrives at his office, he sees the

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receptionist answer, "Good morning, Academy of Tobacco COUGH COUGH COUGH Studies."

"She began to cough. No dainty little throat-clearer, either, but a deep, pulmonary bulldozer. Nick wondered if having a receptionist who couldn't get through 'hello' without a thunderous broncospasm was quite the image the Academy was seeking to project."

I guess the best prompting to satire is anger. I'd been listening to the tobacco companies lie for a long time. I'd been one of their clients myself for many years, and I knew from my own thunderous broncospasms every morning - I was a pack a day Camel man - that their reassurances that there was no direct link between smoking and disease were - a lot of

Christopher Buckley, speaking at the 1995 annual conference of the American College of Chest Physicians

*Mr Buckley was introduced by Joe Cherner, who moderated the session, and who is the leading tobacco control advocate in New York City. Cherner led the successful campaign to pass an ordinance banning smoking in most restaurants in New York City (see *Tobacco Control* 1995; 4: 15-7) - ED.

smoke. I'd spent the last three days at the bedside of a good buddy dying of lung cancer, no pretty thing, I don't need to tell you.

So it wasn't that I woke up one day sounding like Captain Renaud in the movie *Casablanca* saying, I'm shocked, *shocked* to find dissembling going on in here.

But one night I found myself watching – maybe it was the MacNeil Lehrer Show, or Nightline, and there was this talking head from the Tobacco Institute on – I guess in her case I should say, prevaricating head – denying that it's bad for you, technically speaking, and I guess my needle went into the red zone.

She was attractive, well-spoken, intelligent, and persuasive, more or less, despite the fact that her nose kept getting *longer* and *longer*. I thought, *What an interesting job that must be. Get up in the morning, brush your teeth, and go and sell death for a living.*

“The Yuppie Nuremberg defence: I was only paying ze mortgage!”

Do people major in this at college?

What do you want to do when you grow up? I want to work for the Tobacco Institute. I want to make the world safe for RJ Reynolds.

So I thought, I must meet this woman and find out what allows her to take such lickings and go on ticking.

I wrote her a letter. I was only *slightly* disingenuous, which is pretty good for a journalist. I told her I was fed up with the Neo-Puritanism sweeping America – with the Joe Cherner's of the world – and was researching on a book about it. (True enough. I live in Washington. I can spin with the best of them.)

Boy was she glad to see *me*.

She was perfectly pleasant, and, I couldn't help but notice right away, very *tall*, six feet, one inch [185 cm].

Now, I'm no psychiatrist, but we novelists deal with the world as we know it, and this aspect of her interested me. I once saw an interview with my hero, John Cleese, the British comedian of *Monty Python* and *Fawlty Towers* renown. He said that he had reached a height of something like six feet, six inches [198 cm] at the age of 13, and that it had left him with a lot of anger. Cleese had channelled that into being the most brilliant, and sharp-edged comedian of his generation.

So naturally I wondered if this lady was channelling *her* anger by fronting for an industry that kills half a million Americans a year. Unfortunately, I was raised to be polite, so I did not put it to her that way.

But the second thing I learned about her was that she'd gone to Catholic schools. Having gone to those myself, I knew right away that she must have a *major* problem with authority.

The third thing I learned about her was that her *previous* job had been at the Department of

Health and Human Services (HHS). Tobacco Institute people refer to HHS among themselves as Helpless, Hopeless, and Stupid". They don't call it that on MacNeil-Lehrer. Not yet, anyway.

"At my going-away party there," she told me, "they were going to give me signed copies of the Surgeon General's report. But," she added with a laugh, "I thought better of it." She has a good sense of humour, this lady. In her job it helps.

I was very curious to know from her what it's like being a merchant of death. I didn't use that exact phrase. I sort of fumbled. I'm a terrible interviewer. Sometimes, in journalism, this works in your favour because they assume you're an idiot – safe assumption in my case – and they sort of take pity on you and are honest. And hang themselves.

"Well," she said, "it's not easy, tobacco."

"No," I nodded, "I imagine it isn't."

"I get a lot of death threats," she told me. "Really?" I said.

I thought about this and imagined something awful like this happening to my anti-hero Nick. So it was that she gave me the germ of inspiration for Nick Naylor's kidnapping in the book. It's not a usual sort of kidnapping. His abductors cover his body with dozens of nicotine patches.

By the way, a detail that might interest this audience: I showed the draft to a cardiologist friend of mine and asked him what the medical effects would be if you covered someone head to toe in nicotine patches. My cardiologist friend, Dr David Williams of San Diego, laughed. "Death," he said. "In about five minutes."

That wouldn't do, as I need Nick to escape. "Well, how many could you tolerate?"

He thought for a moment. "Five," he said, going on to teach me all about something called paroxysmal atrial tachycardia, which didn't sound like much fun *at all*.

But for visual purposes, I really needed Nick to be entirely covered with patches, at least from the chest up, for a scene where he's found by two Park Police running about half-naked, crazed, at night near the Washington Monument. So I took a little medical liberty there.

Which turned out to be a good move, because it was that scene in the book that persuaded the actor Mel Gibson to buy the film rights.

Those of you who saw his latest movie *Braveheart* know that he has a fabulously hairy and big chest. *You* people could have a *field day* inside that chest. Me, I merely hope to see it covered with nicotine patches one day on the big screen. Maybe they'll call the movie *Bravelungs*.

At any rate, *Thank You For Smoking* came out in May.

In July the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that a man in Milwaukee attempted suicide by sticking seven nicotine patches on his chest and smoking cigarettes two at a time, hoping to induce a heart attack. It had a happy ending when he panicked and ripped off the patches, along with a lot of chest

hair. Is this going to be the new suicide of the 1990s? Did this guy read my book? Awesome responsibility, being a novelist.

Now, back to my Tobacco Lady.

She told me over lunch that she'd gone to a health symposium once – and what a warm welcome she gets. She was standing next to C Everett Koop, the scary-looking former Surgeon General. And someone said to him, within her earshot, that she used to work at Health and Human Services. And he said, "I wish she'd gone to be a prostitute on 14th Street instead." "That hurt," she said.

"Yes," I said, "it must have."

I asked, "How do you introduce yourself to strangers?" "Well," she said, "you never come straight out and say, 'I work for the Tobacco Institute.' You say, 'I work in public relations.' If they press, you say, 'I work for a trade association.' If they still press, you say, a trade association 'for a major manufacturer.'" She added, "You never know if this guy's mother has just died of lung cancer."

At this point, I was fumbling. "What's..."

"A nice girl like me doing in a place like this?" she finishes my sentence. "Exactly," I said gratefully.

She exhaled her smoke – like Lauren Bacall. Lauren Bacall, whose first words on-screen to Humphrey Bogart were, "Got a match?", is now a celebrity endorser of nicotine patches. "Well," she said, "I'm just paying the mortgage."

Of course – the Yuppie Nuremberg defence: *I was only paying ze mortgage!* Paying the mortgage seems to be the first refuge of the scoundrel. So much of the bad done in the world is laid at the feet of a mortgage. Sometimes I think the world would be a better place if everyone just rented.

But at the time, I was in *awe* of this woman's powers of rationalisation. It was clear that in the kingdom of the morally blind, this woman could echo-locate like a bat.

As I walked out of her office, she pointed to a booklet on her credenza. Next to the booklet was a packet of the Death brand cigarette. That's an *actual* brand of cigarettes, no name on the front of the pack, just a white-on-black skull. They're made in England, by the **Enlightened Tobacco Company**. Their ads say, **DON'T SMOKE DEATH CIGARETTES**. They've made a fortune on them. They're so popular that they're bringing out a new brand called – Sudden Death. Go figure. But as *tchotchkes*, a pack of Death cigarettes was made to order for the Tobacco Institute.

My eyes were drawn to the booklet next to it. It said, "Helping Youth To Say No To Tobacco." She said to me, "That's what I'm proudest of."

Now this *was* an impressive statement. My admiration for her faculties of cognitive dissonance, already large, swelled.

Much in the news back then was the controversy about Old Joe, Camel cigarette's famous dromedary with the nose that seems to remind everyone of a penis – I guess I can say that word in front of 2000 doctors. I never saw

it, myself, but everyone else did. Camel's big ad campaign showed Old Joe being generally cool, wearing sunglasses, playing the saxophone, shooting pool, checkin' out the babes. Sounds a bit like the current White House, actually. RJ Reynolds was putting out \$75 million worth of Old Joe ads a year. The result – Camel's share of the illegal children's cigarette market climbed from 0.5% to 32%. Outraged mothers howled. Even *Advertising Age*, Mammon's own trade journal, editorialised against the Old Joe campaign, to little avail. Old Joe is still among us, playing his saxophone. Indeed, he has since been joined by his girlfriend, Old Josephine, though it's a matter of debate whether *her* nose is supposed to remind people of a penis. So I left the tobacco lady's offices feeling all warm and fuzzy inside.

In time my book came out. She was smart enough not to come to the book party in Washington, though we did invite her. She might even have had fun. We had two smoke machines going and the fire department came twice.

"In the kingdom of the morally blind, this woman could echo-locate like a bat."

She's been very demure about not commenting on the book, which is the smart thing to do, from her perspective. I was amused to read the chairman of Philip Morris, Geoffrey Bible, telling *Business Week* that he found *Thank You For Smoking* "very amusing. I was surprised that people would think of us that way."

Very cool response. Very smart.

Bible. You know, if I'd put a tobacco company chairman named Bible in my book, people would have said, "Oh come on. You're painting the lilly."

But then, suppose I'd put in the book a scene where the CEOs of the Big Seven tobacco companies say under oath, before a congressional subcommittee, "I do not believe nicotine is addictive"? Would you have said, "Oh, come on"?

Or suppose I'd put in that two years later, the chairman of that same committee was replaced by a congressman from Richmond, Virginia who, before he went to Congress was – a mortician?

Would you have said, "Oh, come on"?

You can see that the hardest part of writing satire in America is improving on America as she is. Still, one must soldier on.

As for the Tobacco Lady, she soldiers on with her work for the Tobacco Institute. She has other things to occupy her now, such as the twin children she bore about a year after we met. I read that she is smoking, still.

But I have hope for her. In time, her two children, in no small part because of the efforts of people in this room, may help *her* to say no to tobacco. And then they will be able to say, "That's the thing we're proudest of."