



For Your Own Good: The Anti-Smoking Crusade and the Tyranny of Public Health

Jacob Sullum

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The tobacco controversy is usually portrayed as a battle between selfless defenders of public health and greedy merchants of death. In "For Your Own Good", award-winning journalist Jacob Sullum argues that such a view conceals the true nature of the crusade for a smoke-free society. As Sullum demonstrates, this struggle is not about the behavior of corporations; it's about the behavior of individuals. It is an attempt by one group of people to impose their tastes and preferences on another.

"For Your Own Good" shows that long before Philip Morris or R. J. Reynolds existed, tobacco's opponents condemned smoking as disgusting, immoral, addictive, unhealthy, and inconsiderate. In recent decades, they have used scientific evidence that smoking is hazardous to enlist the state in their crusade, arguing that the government has an obligation to discourage behavior that might lead to disease or injury. Given this country's tradition of limited government, however, Americans tend to be skeptical of this argument. Sullum justifies their misgivings, noting that achieving a "smoke-free society" in a nation where tens of millions choose to smoke is necessarily an exercise in tyranny. It therefore comes as no surprise that tobacco's opponents resort to censorship, punitive taxes, violations of property rights, and other coercive tactics. Sullum argues that such uses of state power are illegitimate and dangerous, threatening the freedom of anyone who dares to trade longevity for pleasure.

In response to this charge, tobacco's opponents have offered various rationales designed to overcome suspicions of paternalism. They have portrayed tobacco advertising as an insidious force that seduces people into acting against their interests. They have said that smoking imposes costs on society that need to be recouped through special taxes. They have claimed that secondhand smoke poses a grave threat to bystanders, so smoking should be confined to the home. They have accused the tobacco companies of hiding the truth about the hazards and addictiveness of smoking, preventing their customers from making informed decisions. They have described nicotine addiction as a compulsive and possibly contagious illness, fitting nicely with the public health mission to control disease. Often these arguments are combined with appeals to protect children, as when former FDA commissioner David A. Kessler called smoking "a pediatric disease".

Sullum refutes each of these claims and shows that the anti-smoking crusade in fact rests on two complementary beliefs: that the government should stamp out the use of hazardous drugs and that it should deter activities that impair "the public health". He argues that the dangerous implications of these ideas extend far beyond tobacco.

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