

8-4-2000

Trends. Blowing Smoke: Tobacco Machinations and the World Health Organization

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (2000) "Trends. Blowing Smoke: Tobacco Machinations and the World Health Organization," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 5 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol9/iss5/5>

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Title: Trends. Blowing Smoke: Tobacco Machinations and the World Health Organization

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Volume: 9

Issue: 5

Date: 2000-08-04

Keywords: Tobacco, WHO, World Health Organization

"Tobacco Company Strategies to Undermine Tobacco Control Activities at the World Health Organization" has been released, generating a fire storm of comment about alleged machinations of the tobacco industry that are similar to basic covert operations of intelligence agencies. These alleged machinations include (1) writing and placing opinion articles in significant newspapers attacking the World Health Organization (WHO) by authors with undisclosed ties to the tobacco industry, (2) planting moles within the WHO who would work the agenda of the tobacco industry, and (3) developing front organizations to work against anti-tobacco initiatives of the WHO.

Commentary on the report has predictably focused on the lengths to which the tobacco industry would go to further its interests. However, a more interesting story involves the rationales of those people accused of being the industry's agents of influence. These rationales entail that greater focus on the health threat of tobacco inappropriately took away attention and resources from more important health initiatives in the developing world. Yes, one can make a strong case that the tobacco industry was mostly--even totally--interested in its own concerns. Yet in the service of its own needs, the industry might have been doing a service to others--even if unintentionally.

It is easy to deify and demonize, more difficult to deal with ambiguities and complexities. When the smoke clears from the WHO report, the rigorously difficult prioritizing of health needs will still be a challenge. Does one choose not to confront problems--regardless of severity--because of who else might benefit? This moral calculus deserves commentary as well. (See deYoung, M. (1998). Another look at moral panics: The case of satanic day care centers. *Deviant Behavior*, 19, 257-278; Meier, B. (August 2, 2000). W.H.O. says files show tobacco companies fought antismoking efforts. *The New York Times*, p. A8; Narvaez, D. (1998). The influence of moral schemas on the reconstruction of moral narratives in eighth graders and college students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90, 13-24; Tobacco company strategies to undermine tobacco control activities at the World Health Organization, <http://www.who.int>; Teske, N. (1997). Beyond altruism: Identity-construction as moral motive in political explanation. *Political Psychology*, 18, 71-91; Tudin, P., & Straker, G., & Mendolsohn, M. (1994). Social and political complexity and moral development. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 24, 163-168.) (Keywords: Tobacco, WHO, World Health Organization.)