Tobacco Industry Documents and the African American Community

Joint Project of
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Blacks and the Tobacco Industry

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"They used to make us pick it. Now they want us to smoke it." -Rap song used in California public-advertising campaign

According to a study by the University of California at San Francisco, Willie Brown, the black Democrat who is the speaker of the California Assembly, pocketed $221,367 from tobacco interests during 1991 and 1992 - four times more than Sen. Wendell Ford (D-Ky.), the largest congressional recipient during the period.

The industry gave the money to Brown as it girded for battle against a bill to ban smoking in virtually all enclosed public spaces in California, the state where one in eight Americans lives. Its supporters blame Brown for the measure's failure.

(Brown declined to comment on his industry contributions or his role in the smoking ban's defeat.)

His relationship with the tobacco industry exemplifies a decades-old interdependence between tobacco and black America, ties few have challenged in the past. That's changing now, as awareness grows of the heavy toll tobacco takes on minorities - and of the industry's heavy-handed efforts to lure more of them to smoke. Increasingly, black physicians and other minority leaders are denouncing tobacco, an industry that has done more both to benefit and bury African-Americans than perhaps any other enterprise.

Last July, the National Medical Association and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention launched one of the biggest public anti-smoking projects ever aimed specifically at blacks. The $200,000 public-advertising campaign encourages individual blacks to kick cigarettes. It also calls on African-American organizations to re-examine their ties to tobacco, and to take a more active part in the anti-smoking movement.

"Young people in the African-American community are being targeted by the tobacco industry; their neighborhoods are filled with billboards showing smoking as pleasant and glamorous," says Dr. Leonard E. Lawrence, president of the National Medical Association, which represents 17,000 minority physicians.

"We've asked some of our brother and sister organizations to take a look at the financial support they may receive from tobacco corporations, and to consider that this may give a double message to young people in our community about what is and isn't acceptable."

The double-edged sword of tobacco's largesse toward blacks dates at least to 1938, when William Reynolds, R.J.'s brother, donated money to found the Kate Bitting Reynolds Hospital for

blacks in then-segregated Winston-Salem, N.C., home of the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. The industry has been killing African-Americans with kindness ever since.

Cigarette companies put black models in ads well ahead of most of corporate America. They were among the first national companies to advertise in black-oriented media. Long before the term "affirmative action" was coined, they boasted a better-than-average record of hiring and promoting blacks.

And white supremacists took notice. In the 1950s, they singled out Philip Morris products for a boycott, attacking the company for, among other "race-mixing" activities, placing blacks in executive jobs.

The boycott did not dissuade tobacco's wooing of blacks, and in 1950, the proportion of black male smokers exceeded that of white men for the first time. In 1960, smoking rates among black women overtook white women's.

Epidemiologists estimate that by the year 2000, smoking prevalence among African-Americans will be 25 percent, compared to 21 percent for whites, in part because blacks have less success quitting smoking than whites. An estimated 29 percent of blacks and 25.5 percent of whites smoke today.

The tobacco industry has invested millions to identify itself with civil rights causes and black America's best-loved music, arts and sports, according to more than a decade of research by investigative reporters and anti-smoking activists at Doctors Ought to Care (DOC), the Advocacy Institute and elsewhere.

Among the outreach efforts disclosed by their research: Philip Morris has supported Operation PUSH, the Rev. Jesse Jackson's civil rights organization. The tobacco giant has brought together presidents of black colleges for a Martin Luther King Jr. birthday remembrance, produced half-hour radio programs to celebrate Black History Month and commemorated a Bill of Rights anniversary with ads featuring prominent African-American leaders. It backs the Dance Theater of Harlem and sponsors rhythm-and-blues concerts in cities with large black populations.

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco, an RJR Nabisco subsidiary, has saluted black scientists and inventors in magazine ads, sponsored African-American golf, bowling and softball tournaments, and provided entertainment at street festivals in black communities.

Brown and Williamson, manufacturer of Kool cigarettes, has backed the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, the country's most prominent black think tank. Kool Achiever Awards, launched in 1990, honor those who make a difference in inner-city neighborhoods: The company donates $2,000 on behalf of each finalist to a nonprofit community-service organization.

"Early on, the industry began to offer money when no other was there, and now these groups are just as addicted to the money as smokers are to the cigarettes," says Dr. Harold Freeman, chief of surgery at Harlem Hospital in New York and a former president of the American Cancer Society.

Despite their generosity, tobacco companies contend they have not specially targeted minorities.

"All of our promotions in marketing are geared to adults who smoke, and that certainly includes minority markets. They are consumers," says Sheila Banks-McKenzie, a Philip Morris spokeswoman. "But we have no programs specifically geared to the minority community."

To critics, the tobacco industry is buying innocence by association. But others argue that minority groups should take the money, as long as no strings are attached.

What's more, they accuse their critics of hypocrisy, pointing out that several women's groups long welcomed contributions from Playboy magazine, while environmental groups have accepted money from the likes of Exxon Corp.

Some charitable and health organizations also take money from tobacco companies.

For example, the RJR Nabisco Foundation's 1990 tax return lists a $900,000 contribution to Bowman Gray School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, named for an early Reynolds tobacco executive. United Way chapters took more than $700,000 from Philip Morris in 1990, according to internal corporate documents obtained by Dr. Alan Blum, founder of the anti-tobacco group Doctors Ought to Care. The same documents show that the Bronx Lebanon Hospital in New York City received $25,000, the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation and American Red Cross accepted $20,000 apiece, and the Medical College of Wisconsin accepted $10,000.

The American Medical Association, which does not accept tobacco-industry money, does take funds from tobacco-company subsidiaries for public-health campaigns.

The African-American groups seem reluctant to discuss tobacco contributions.

The United Negro College Fund declined numerous requests for comment.

At the National Urban League, president and chief executive officer John E. Jacobs issued a prepared statement:

"The National Urban League accepts voluntary contributions from many sources, including a wide range of corporate supporters. We hold all corporations socially responsible for the support of programs to assist African-Americans in the achievement of social and economic equality. The alcohol and tobacco industry is not exempt from this responsibility as long as it is legal in the United States."

Of the three groups, only the NAACP agreed to an interview. "You don't slap your friends around, because it's been a tough go to get corporate friends," says Gilbert Jonas, director of program resources.

Jonas concedes, however, that tobacco contributions are increasingly problematic as the NAACP steps up efforts to improve African-American health. He says the group is hiring its first health director and has a new health committee, headed by two physicians, who report to the board of directors.

To health advocates, the choice is clear.

African-American groups should actively pursue alternate funding sources to replace tobacco money, says Dr. Reed V. Tuckson, president of Charles R. Drew University of Medicine & Science, a predominantly black medical school in Los Angeles.

"It is a reality of American life that institutions that are concerned with African-Americans and other minorities are almost always institutions that struggle for daily survival," Tuckson says. "But there can be no question that cigarettes and tobacco-related illness accounts for a devastating health consequence to black and other minority communities."

John Wiley Price, Dallas County commissioner and leading anti-tobacco activist, puts it more bluntly: "I've been very critical of these organizations. To me, it's clear-cut. They're whores. And they're taking blood money."

The new black backlash against tobacco ignited in 1989 after R.J. Reynolds Tobacco spent a reported $10 million developing Uptown, a new brand of high-tar, high-nicotine menthol cigarette tailored to the tastes of many black smokers.

When the Rev. Jesse W. Brown Jr., a black Philadelphia pastor, discovered that the cigarette would be test-marketed in his city's black neighborhoods, he was outraged. Brown founded the Uptown Coalition for Tobacco Control and Public Health, which succeeded in killing Uptown.

"What an industry has done in the past may be laudable and applaudable, but it does not give them permission to kill us today," he says. "I have to bury enough people in my community who

die of cancer because of the tobacco industry."

In 1991, fresh from their Uptown victory, Brown and other members of the Uptown Coalition organized a meeting in Greensboro, N.C., of black anti-tobacco and alcohol activists from Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Greensboro and Milwaukee. A new organization, the National Association of African Americans for Positive Imagery (NAAAPI), was formed.

Surveys of cities from Seattle to St. Louis consistently find greater numbers of tobacco billboards per square mile in minority neighborhoods than in white neighborhoods. In one 19-block stretch of a poor black area in Philadelphia, Brown counted 73 billboards, all but seven of which advertised tobacco and alcohol.

In New York, the Rev. Calvin D. Butts III, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church and an NAAAPI member, pickets Philip Morris headquarters and whitewashes tobacco billboards.

The backlash ignited by Uptown culminated with the announcement of the NMA-CDC media campaign, which uses images of civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, drawing contrasts between their heroic lives and the needless deaths caused by smoking. The ads feature a toll-free number, (800) CDC-1311, people can call to get a free booklet on how to quit.

"It is hard to fight an industry that gives money and jobs to black people, because we need money and jobs," the booklet says. "But we must think about the cost to us in sickness and death."

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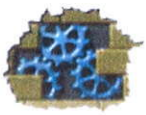
Subsequent Pages: [Home] [Up]

Previous Pages: [Home] [Tobacco Document's Update] [Tobacco Industry Documents Online] [Other Interesting Links]

Back Home Up



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