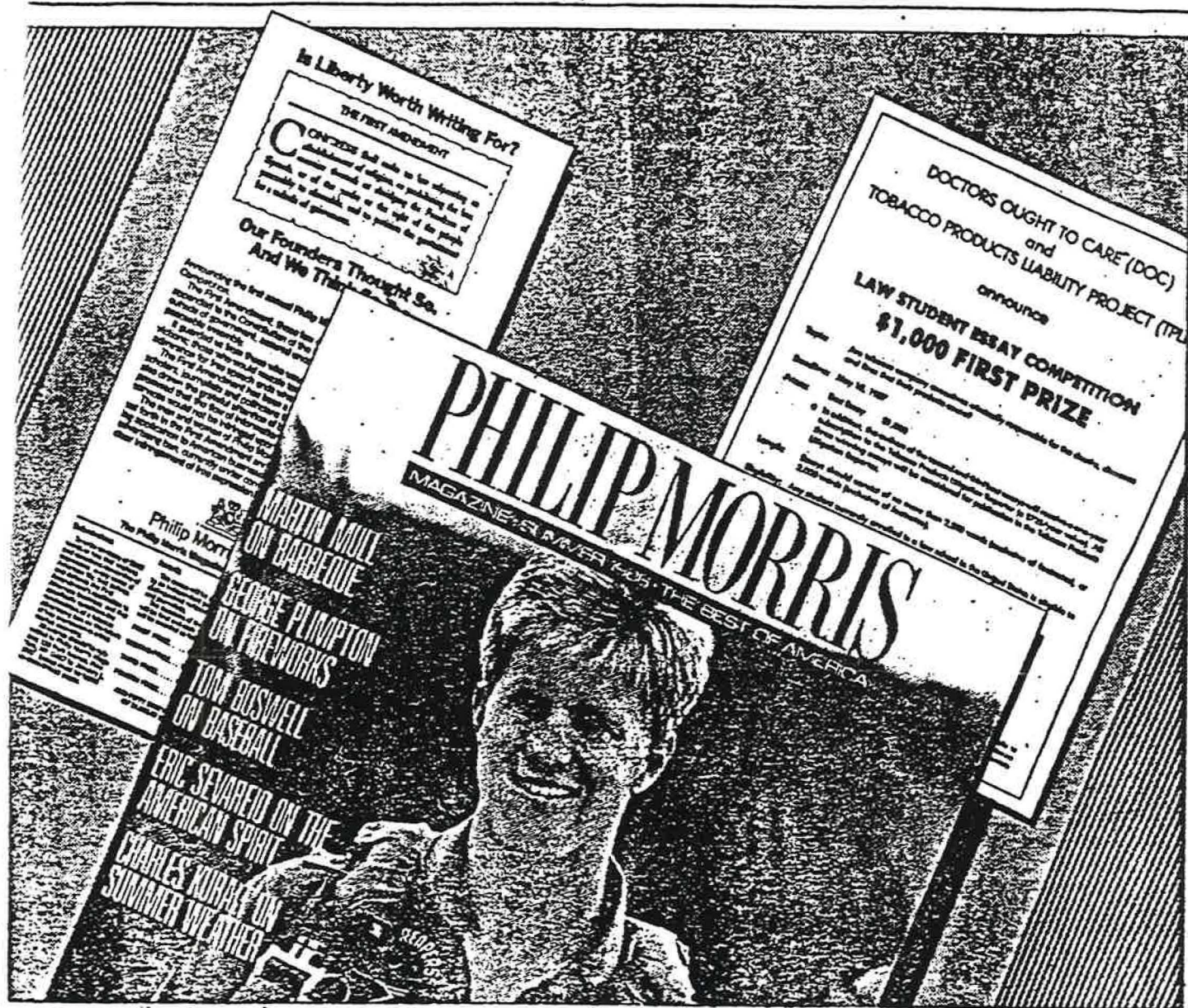


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Essay Contest Touches Off Ethics Contest

It is not the type of ad that wins contests. No picture. No slogan. Not even one dancing raisin.

But the ad, which appeared last week on the back cover of the Nation, is raising eyebrows within the advertising industry. And it is helping to bring a seldom discussed issue to the forefront of the multibillion dollar advertising arena: ethics.

The ad offers a \$1,000 prize for an essay. Nothing earthshaking. But the topic is enough to shake up some tobacco industry executives. In 2,500 words, contestants are asked to answer this question: "Are tobacco company executives criminally responsible for the deaths, diseases and fires that their products cause?"

The competition, sponsored by the New York-based anti-tobacco activist group Doctors Ought to Care (DOC), is a reaction to a much more widely advertised essay contest sponsored by Philip Morris USA.

For three months, the maker of Marlboro has been aggressively soliciting essays that link the First Amendment with the rights of cigarette makers to advertise.

This, however, is more than just another essay contest. It is also an ethics contest.

Some hardened television viewers might say that placing ethics and advertising in the same sentence is akin to plopping Mother Teresa and Joan Collins on the same talk show couch. And some ethical issues, such as the right of cigarette makers to advertise at all, have two sides that can sound equally convincing. But the question here is not

basic right of Americans to exchange ideas.

The issue is not so clear-cut. Indeed, few publications saw anything wrong with the Philip Morris ad. In fact, ads for the contest have appeared in dozens of publications nationwide, including the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. Even the New Yorker, a magazine that has rejected all cigarette advertisements since 1971, ran the ad last month. "We

thought they should have a forum," explained New Yorker Publisher Steven T. Florio.

"They were not trying to sell cigarettes. They were trying to

get people to think." More than 30 magazines nationwide do not accept tobacco advertising, among them Reader's Digest, Good Housekeeping, National Geographic and Scientific American.

Still, cigarette makers spend \$2 billion annually to advertise and promote a product that the Surgeon General says kills upwards of 300,000 Americans every year. With the number of smokers declining, overall sales of tobacco products have flattened at about \$30 billion annually, according to the Tobacco In-

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whether tobacco ads should be deep-sixed.

Instead, the ethical dilemma is whether Philip Morris is using the First Amendment—which guarantees free speech—as a false rallying point to further promote its products.

Critics contend that Philip Morris is masking its ambition to sell more cigarettes under the guise of a patriotic zeal for the Bill of Rights. The company, of course, dismisses those charges as a lot of smoke. It says that virtually any ban on advertising is a threat to the most

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stitute, a trade group. That translates into a more aggressive marketing scramble for a shrinking market.

The Philip Morris contest—which comes on the heels of proposed federal legislation to clamp a lid on most cigarette advertising—takes a new tack that other cigarette makers are expected to eventually follow: patriotism. It somehow wraps Old Glory around its wares.

"Philip Morris is expecting to get essays crammed full of careful defenses of the First Amendment," said Ben Enis, professor of marketing at the University of Southern California's School of Business. "But they are clearly sidestepping the ethical implications in their product marketing. It's almost like they're shouting 'Fire!' in a crowded theater."

"Philip Morris has one of the most creative marketing groups in the U.S.," said tobacco industry critic Alan Blum, a New York-based MD who founded DOC. "Their contest is designed to simply cloak cigarette advertising within the aura of the First Amendment."

Not so, says Guy L. Smith IV, publisher of Philip Morris magazine, a year-and-a-half-old quarterly. The free publication already ranks as the 11th-largest circulation magazine in the nation. "The purpose of our contest is to show why censorship is a bad idea," said Smith, who is also a vice president of Philip Morris.

The contest ends Jan. 1, and the winner gets \$15,000. An additional \$65,000 will be divvied among the also-rans.

Sometime after that, the Marlboro Man may find his face temporarily replaced by the words of some pack-a-day puffer in Poughkeepsie whose essay touches the hearts of the contest judges. "All the fears of the anti-smokers will probably come to fruition," Smith said, "because we will take the best ideas and present them to the American people."