

The logo for The Cancer Letter, consisting of the letters 'TCL' in a bold, white, sans-serif font on a red background.

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## MENTHOL BAN HAS BEEN A NO-BRAINER FOR DECADES— WILL IT FINALLY HAPPEN?

Mainstream tobacco control advocates are celebrating the recent announcement that the Food and Drug Administration is poised to restrict the manufacture and sale of mentholated cigarettes and cigars.

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GUEST EDITORIAL

# The unKOOL, unfiltered history of menthol cigarettes

Quick, what color is menthol?



**By Alan Blum, MD**

*Professor and Gerald Leon Wallace Endowed Chair in Family Medicine,  
University of Alabama School of Medicine;  
Director, Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society*

No, it's not green. That's the color of the KOOL, Newport, or Salem cigarette pack. Get it? Green is cool. Red is hot.

Menthol, a component of peppermint oil, is a colorless topical pain reliever like Novocain that the dentist uses to numb a tooth.

The idea of adding menthol to reduce smoking's harshness on the throat came to Lloyd "Spud" Hughes in the 1920s, after he'd stored his cigarettes in an old tin of menthol crystals that his mother insisted that he inhale for his asthma.

He patented the process in 1924, and three years later the Axton-Fisher To-

bacco Company acquired the patent and began manufacturing "Spud Menthol Cooled Cigarettes."

Today, as the Biden administration targets mentholated cigarettes, it behooves us to review the history of the tobacco industry's marketing campaigns that target Black Americans.

I first presented such an illustrated overview of the impact of smoking on minority populations on March 31, 1987, at a meeting of the Surgeon General's Interagency Council on Smoking and Health. A month later, I presented it at the First International Conference on Realities of Cancer in Minority

Communities, held at MD Anderson Cancer Center.

That presentation, now included in an online exhibition I curated in 2018, "Of Mice and Menthol: The Targeting of African Americans by the Tobacco Industry," can be viewed on the website of the University of Alabama [Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society](#).

## Lighting up with Willie the Penguin

Brown & Williamson's KOOL cigarettes became the best-selling mentholated brand beginning in the 1930s. Fifty years

before Joe Camel was born, KOOLs were promoted by a cartoon mascot, Willie the Penguin, who appeared in comic books, baseball scorecards, and the Sunday funnies.

In 1956, R. J. Reynolds launched its menthol brand, Salem, and in 1957 Lorillard introduced Newport. Philip Morris produced its first menthol brand, Alpine, in 1959. Through corporate mergers, Newport, Salem, and Kool are all now marketed by Reynolds-American, the U.S. subsidiary of British American Tobacco.

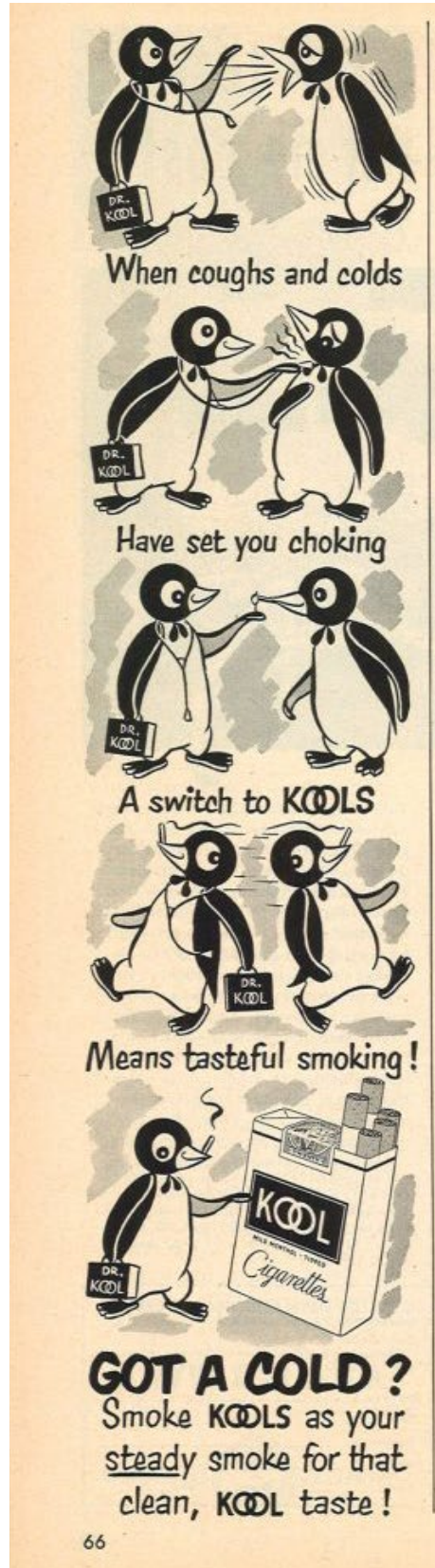
The rise of the civil rights movement led the tobacco industry to advertise heavily in the Black press, and menthol brands were the ones most advertised. Partly as a result, since the 1960s Newport has been the leading cigarette brand among African Americans.

One of the effects of the removal of cigarette commercials from television in 1971 was an increase in cigarette advertisements in minority-owned newspapers and magazines.

Few magazines have been aimed exclusively at an African American readership, but the two with the largest circulations, reaching a third of the adult Black population, were the monthly *Ebony*, founded in 1945, and the weekly *Jet*, founded in 1951, both published by Johnson Publishing Company in Chicago until the company was sold in 2016. (Both publications are now online only.)

Up to a third of the ads in many issues of *Ebony* and *Jet* were for cigarettes. By my count, neither magazine ever published an article focusing on the impact of cigarette smoking in the African American community.

A similar situation existed in the approximately 100 African American-oriented newspapers in the United States and Caribbean region. This advertising not only recruited new users, but also in-



1952 Kool ad published in *Time*.  
Image courtesy of The University of Alabama  
Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society

creased the complacency of those who did not smoke by normalizing smoking.

The result was that in the latter half of the 20th century, a substantial portion of the African American press never published news articles or editorial comment antithetical to tobacco use and promotion.

To the contrary, an advertisement in *Ebony* in June 1992 for Nabisco Foods Group, a subsidiary of RJ Reynolds, saluted the magazine's publisher and seven other African American entrepreneurs as "role models to our nation's youth and as inspiration to all of us."

## A "liberation cigarette"?

Beginning in the 1940s, cigarette manufacturers appealed to African Americans through endorsements by athletes, including former world heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis and baseball players Jackie Robinson, Elston Howard, and Hank Aaron.

When cigarette ads were banned from TV, beginning in 1971, to circumvent the intent of the ban, the tobacco companies increased their ad spending on billboards in sports arenas and stadiums that were visible at key camera angles.

In the 1980s, packaging for cigarette brands most favored by African Americans became the focus of several advertising campaigns. Examples included striking graphics on packs of R. J. Reynolds' Salem ("The Box") and the company's short-lived, controversially named Uptown brand.

Deloyd Parker, executive director of SHAPE (Self-Help for African People through Education) Community Center in Houston suggests that the redesign of the Salem brand to include the colors of the flag of African unity—red, black, and green—was a cynical attempt by



N.Y. YANKEE STAR ELSTON HOWARD  
Smokes **KOOL!**

*I Like that Clean Taste and Smooth Feeling in my Throat*  
Elston Howard

**ONLY KOOL BRINGS YOU REAL MENTHOL MAGIC!**

You feel a new coolness deep in your throat!

You'll agree with Yankee star Elston Howard. When you come up to the Mental Stage of KOOL, you have a new choice, feel a wonderful smoothness deep down in your throat! Especially, try KOOL, the regular filter cigarette, in your menthol cigarettes.

Now you can Menthol Magic, Taste Elston Howard's Choice. Come to the way up to the Mental Stage of KOOL.

**ALSO AVAILABLE WITHOUT FILTER**

©1961 B&W T. WILKINSON TOBACCO CORP. THE MARK OF QUALITY IN TOBACCO PRODUCTS

**BOLD COLD**

Newport

A whole new bag of menthol smoking

filter kings & 100's

20 FILTER CIGARETTES MENTHOL 100'S

**More**  
at the Ebony Fashion Fair...

©1961 B&W T. WILKINSON TOBACCO CORP.

**Taste extra coolness as you smoke**

Isn't it time you made Kool your steady brand? Come up to Kool Filter Kings. Taste the most refreshing coolness you can get in any cigarette.

©1966 B&W T. WILKINSON TOBACCO CORPORATION THE MARK OF QUALITY IN TOBACCO PRODUCTS

**VIRGINIA SLIMS**  
You've come a long way, baby.

**MENTHOL**

Slimmer than the fat menthol cigarettes men smoke. And rightly so.

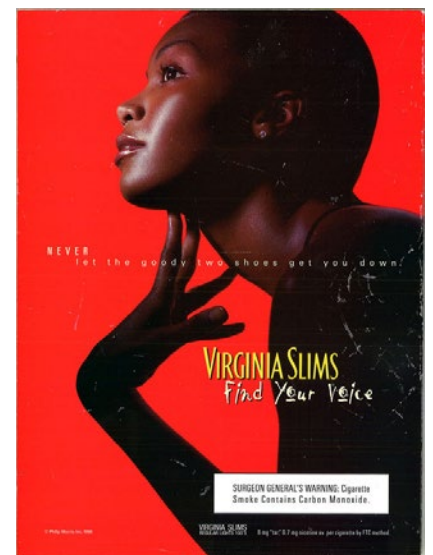
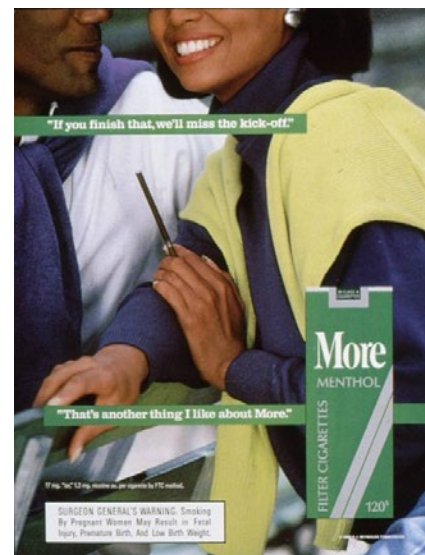
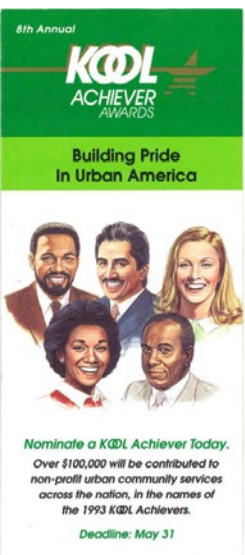
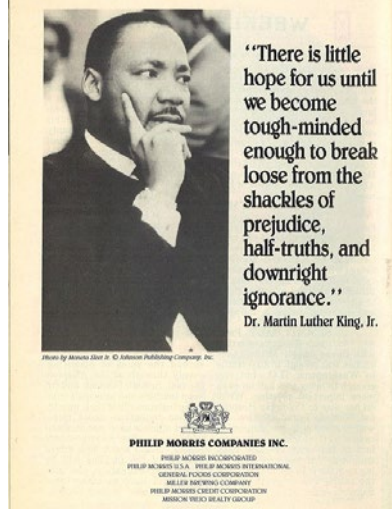
Menthol: 14 mg "tar," 0.9 mg nicotine—Lights Menthol: 8 mg "tar," 0.6 mg nicotine av. per cigarette, FTC Report Feb.'85.

**SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Smoking By Pregnant Women May Result in Fetal Injury, Premature Birth, And Low Birth Weight.**

© Philip Morris Inc. 1988

Ads for menthol cigarettes from 1960 to 2000. All images courtesy of The University of Alabama Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society







R. J. Reynolds to create a “liberation cigarette.”

In the early 1990s, as rap music's popularity among African-American adolescents grew, R.J. Reynolds created a glistening metallic-foil outer wrapping for Salem, which the company called “The Wrap.”

Salem video vans roamed minority neighborhoods, showing rap videos and giving out free cigarettes. Brown & Williamson's “Kool Mixx” hip hop campaigns saturated the Black media in the early-2000s. Newport's “Alive with Pleasure” advertising slogan in advertisements featuring vibrant 20-somethings remained essentially unchanged throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

But magazine and newspaper ads, billboards, and cigarette pack designs for menthol cigarettes were not the only means of targeting African Americans by the tobacco industry.

Cultural events such as the *Ebony* Fashion Fair, an annual national tour hosted by Black sororities in dozens of cities, was sponsored by R.J. Reynolds' More cigarettes throughout the 1980s.

Brown & Williamson's KOOL Achiever Awards gave cash grants to Black community leaders throughout the nation. Philip Morris, which targets menthol versions of Benson & Hedges, Virginia Slims, and Marlboro to Black smokers, was a prominent sponsor of meetings of Black newspaper publishers and Black journalists, as well as of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, and the United Negro College Fund.

Cigarette makers attempted to appeal to minority community markets by co-opting their art, music, and dance. From the 1960s to the 2000s, the musical genres of jazz, rock and roll, funk, disco, rhythm and blues, and hip-hop

became inextricably linked to smoking through tobacco-sponsored concerts.

Although cigarette smoking was found to be the major preventable cause of lung cancer, emphysema, and heart disease by the 1950s, a significant decline in smoking among minority groups did not occur in the 20th century. The fact that cigarette smoking became less fashionable among upper-income and middle-income groups lulled the public into believing that the United States was well on its way to ending the enormous toll taken by smoking.



**From the 1960s to the 2000s, the musical genres of jazz, rock and roll, funk, disco, rhythm and blues, and hip-hop became inextricably linked to smoking through tobacco-sponsored concerts.**



By 1985, the Task Force on Black and Minority Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that there were 58,000 excess deaths annually among African Americans, compared with the death rate for the white population.

Principal among the rising causes of death were cardiovascular disease and lung cancer—two major consequences of cigarette smoking, which is the only

risk factor that is both entirely avoidable and actively promoted.

Despite smoking's devastating health and economic toll, few state or county health departments had programs or personnel dedicated to countering the tobacco pandemic.

The first conference on smoking by the National Association of State and Territorial Health Officers did not occur until 1990, the first year that every state health department could say that it employed at least one individual assigned to reduce smoking.

The game-changing publication of the 1986 Surgeon General's report on involuntary or passive smoking gave credibility to the efforts of grassroots activist organizations such as ASH (Action on Smoking and Health), GASP (Group Against Smoking Pollution), ANR (Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights), airline flight attendants, and others to step up their lobbying for clean indoor air laws, which they had begun to do in the 1970s.

The tobacco industry didn't sit in silence.

In the mid-1980s, Philip Morris ran advertisements in New York City's leading Black newspaper, *The Amsterdam News*, warning that Mayor Ed Koch's proposed restrictions on smoking in the workplace would promote “a perfect backdrop for employers who wish to discriminate against minority employees,” presumably because, compared to whites, a higher proportion of African Americans smoked.

The extensive public relations campaign by the cigarette companies may explain the paucity of Black leaders who denounced the targeting of African Americans by the tobacco industry. Grassroots African-American anti-smoking activism gradually emerged only in the late-1980s.

These pioneers in in-the-streets prevention include the Reverend Jesse W. Brown, Jr., Alberta Tinsley-Talabi, and Henry McNeill “Mandrake” Brown, Jr. are discussed in the [exhibition](#).

## Targeting minority groups

For their part, Philip Morris executives would accuse critics of paternalism, suggesting that it was patronizing to think that African American consumers were incapable of making a free choice of whether or not to smoke.

In a CBS Nightly News story in 1985, Philip Morris CEO George Weissman was given an opportunity to defend his company's support of leading Black civic organizations, dance companies, and arts groups. Weissman said the company had a variety of other national and local sponsorships, including the Boy Scouts, the YMCA, museums, and hospitals.

In other words, “We advertise to everybody.”

Although the tobacco industry disproportionately targeted minority groups, there was also a decades-long indifference to reducing smoking in minority communities—and in some quarters, outright hostility by minority leaders to addressing the problem.

Here is the transcript of the [introduction](#) by the Rev. Benjamin Hooks, longtime leader of the NAACP, of the keynote speaker at the NAACP's annual [Spingarn Medal Dinner](#) in 1990:

I'm pleased to acknowledge tonight, that one of our greatest contributors across the years have been the Philip Morris Companies.

The Philip Morris Companies today sponsor this dinner. Philip Morris is a long-time friend of the NAACP, and a supporter of equal opportu-

nity. They did not just come to the table lately; we can remember when Philip Morris was a target of white supremacist boycotts because back in the 1950s, they insisted on having an integrated workforce and because of its support for Black organizations.

We remember when Philip Morris was a pioneer in hiring Blacks for non-traditional jobs in Industry. Today, we know that Philip Morris is a leader in corporate support for community organizations, minority businesses and affirmative action. Phillip Morris has been regularly cited by *Black Enterprise* magazine as one of the country's best places for Black people to work. Philip Morris is a major supporter of Black colleges. It's a company that cares, and I want to tell you something: We're happy that they're sponsoring this dinner tonight. This means that we can use the money to increase and enhance our programs.

It's appropriate also because the Spingarn Medal honors achievers who are models for our youth, and Philip Morris is a high-achieving company that is a model for corporate social responsibility.

I want to say two things that are not on this script. But some reporter asked me, were Black leaders afraid to speak out because tobacco and alcohol companies give us some money? And without any disrespect to anybody here, I said, “Why don't you go and ask the publisher of *The New York Times*? Why don't you ask the publisher of *TIME Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *BusinessWeek*? Why is it that when Black folk get a dime, somebody thinks we're selling out and white folk get a million dollars, and nobody ever asked them are they selling out?” That's a damned racist question and I want

you to know, members of the press, that I consider it so.

I'm not for sale to anybody. Jesse Jackson's not for sale. John Jacob, Andrew Young, all the rest of the black leaders, Coretta Scott King, we're not for sale. But if the tobacco companies want to give us some money to help us move Black people forward, in the name of God give it. We're going to pray over it, and accept it, and receive it, and use it to build a stronger, stronger America. I want that clearly understood, and anybody that asks that question, you tell them they're racist.

I'm standing here tonight, holding a check for \$100,000 from the Philip Morris Companies to help us put on this affair. I'm well glad and elephant proud to have it, and I'm not apologizing to anybody from the top side of Heaven to the bottom side of hell. If you don't want to get drunk, don't drink. If you don't want to smoke, don't smoke. But we're going to use that money to help build something to make this nation go forward.

May I present to you our friend, our brother, our comrade in arms, the honorable George Knox, vice president of public affairs for Philip Morris. Give him a great big hand. Give him a great big hand! Give him a great big hand!

Cringe-inducing as these remarks are, Hooks' questioning the criticism of Black organizations and publications for accepting tobacco money is fair and compelling: “Why is it that when Black folk get a dime, somebody thinks we're selling out, and white folk get a million dollars, and nobody ever asked them are they selling out?”

Hooks was spot-on: the tobacco industry's targeting of Black smokers is but

one unseemly aspect of a serious societal problem.

## Biden's proposal in perspective

Since 2000, much of the literature cataloging the advertising and promotion of tobacco products to minority groups has been a rehashing of the same hand-wringing essays. Most articles decry a litany of injustices wrought on these groups by the tobacco industry. The prevailing tone of the authors is one of moral outrage.

Proposed solutions have been few and far between, owing in part to the reluctance on the part of minority opinion leaders to criticize one another and risk creating the appearance of a divided community.

The problem is especially worrisome at the governmental level, where grants are awarded to earnest but inexperienced individuals for ambitious-sounding pilot projects on smoking cessation or prevention, with little likelihood that they can or will be replicated.

Research on the study of tobacco promotion to minority groups is mired in a descriptive phase, which invariably includes counting the number of cigarette signs on convenience store storefronts in minority neighborhoods (as opposed to challenging the existence of racial segregation and inappropriate zoning laws) and reciting the litany of tobacco industry gifts to legislators.

The Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, signed into law by President Barack Obama in 2009, gave FDA the putative authority to regulate the content, marketing and sale of tobacco products.

The problem was that Congress essentially grandfathered in cigarettes. Unlike medications that can be pulled from the market by the FDA for causing severe side effects, cigarettes can't be banned by the the agency. However, Congress did create a 12-member Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee (TPSAC) to advise the FDA, and directed the TPSAC to address the issue of mentholated tobacco products as its first order of business.

In 2011, the TPSAC concluded that the removal of menthol cigarettes from the market would benefit public health, but it did not recommend that the FDA take specific action to restrict or ban menthol. Meanwhile, the tobacco industry claimed, with some justification, that menthol cigarettes were no riskier than regular cigarettes and should not be regulated differently.

Until last week's announcement of its intention to ban menthol, then, the FDA has continued to permit tobacco companies to add menthol to cigarettes.

In the face of this foot-dragging, in 2018, San Francisco became the first U.S. city to ban the sale of flavored tobacco products, including menthol cigarettes, after voters approved a proposition.

Although increased calls for federal, state, and local legislation—on taxes, warning labels, teenage access to tobacco, and advertising restrictions—have stimulated greater public dialogue, these are less effective steps toward reducing demand for tobacco products than are major paid campaigns in the mass media to undermine the tobacco industry and its brand name products.

But tackling the smoking pandemic must also take into account the dynamism of the tobacco industry and its allies, who continue to create ways to

insinuate tobacco products and electronic cigarettes into the social fabric of African American communities.

However belated, the Biden administration's proposed ban on menthol is a no-lose first step for reducing smoking among African Americans.

An even bolder move would be to ban cigarette filters, which are on 99% of commercially sold cigarettes. Introduced by the tobacco industry in the 1950s, following the early studies showing cigarette smoking caused lung cancer, the filters do not confer any level of harm reduction.

The industry has been careful not to claim that they do, but the inference from cigarette ads is that the filters block out all the bad stuff and make smoking, in a word, safer. Thus the major breakthrough by the tobacco industry was to create a gimmick that removed smokers' fears about lung cancer, even while it knew the same dangers were still there.

Nearly 60 years after cigarette smoking was identified by the Surgeon General as the nation's leading preventable cause of death and disease, far more funding still goes to repetitive or redundant research than on action against smoking, such as paid counter-advertising in the mass media.

Although progress has been made in reducing cigarette smoking among African Americans and in restricting cigarette advertising, the problem remains significant, requiring greater commitment—and action—on the part of health professionals, government agencies, academia, and the business community alike to end the smoking pandemic.