

When the Foxes Watch the Henhouse

News reports are full of little else these days than our efforts to combat terrorism at home and abroad. We are consumed and focused, and rightly so. I do not see this changing in the foreseeable future, which makes it even more important to remind ourselves of the campaigns we were waging before the tragedy so that those goals do not get lost in the news stories of the World Trade Center and the anthrax scares.

Only one month before September 11, reports surfaced in the newspapers about the latest, and perhaps most egregious, ploy by big tobacco companies to maintain their bottom lines. The Phillip Morris Company released an advertising campaign in Czechoslovakia based on a set of research results that it commissioned. Smokers, according to the report, actually *saved* the government \$30 in 1999—a net positive gain of \$151 million from the sale of approximately 200 billion cigarettes each year. They did this by dying from smoking-related illnesses, thus reducing costs for health care, pensions, and housing for these elderly citizens. The ad campaign gave new meaning to the term “truth in advertising,” essentially telling the Czech people that smoking was really a win-win situation: the government gets a substantial amount of revenue from tobacco taxes *and* has upward of 22,000 fewer citizens to support, thanks to smoking-related deaths. In the view of one analyst, because these figures involved elderly citizens, those in their “post-productive years,” the impetus for government efforts to strengthen tobacco controls would be greatly diminished.

The hue and cry from Czech media and U.S. antismoking groups to these ads was only slightly quicker than the Phillip Morris Company’s maneuvering to salvage this public relations nightmare. They pulled the campaign and apologized profusely for their “ter-

rible judgment and complete disregard of basic human values.”

Phillip Morris Company these days is more than just tobacco. In what can only be described as a schizophrenic corporate business plan, the company has diversified its holdings to include all kinds of acceptable products, from macaroni and cheese to cookies. Take a minute to picture yourself sitting in the same rooms as the corporate leaders as they prepared this and other wrong-headed ad campaigns. In one room, you have those marketing whizzes who are cooking up all the ways in which they will tell the American people that Phillip Morris is not the big, bad corporate ogre we might think. You have all seen the images of humanitarian air drops of food into Bosnia and relief projects here in the United States, accompanied by comforting music and the warm, supportive voice of actress Mimi Rogers telling us how responsible the company is to the world at large.

I think a good deal of baloney is being passed out with the powdered milk.

They also have produced little posters that shop owners can point to if someone under the age of 18 tries to purchase cigarettes. The sign, presumably, gives shop owners some sort of “ammunition” so they can avoid breaking the law.

Now, sneak over to the another board room and listen to them cook up the Czech ad campaign. I imagine them having a good chuckle over the idea of actually trying to sell cigarettes based on the premise that a positive spin can be placed on the mortality figures. After everyone has a good laugh, it begins to sink in that maybe they can get away with it. Ever so slowly, a serious plan emerges . . .

Let’s acknowledge that smoking kills people, but, hey, it’s not all bad! Every-

one who dies is one more person off the government dole, one less person to care for! The money that would have been spent on that person can be spent elsewhere! Everyone has to die sometime anyway, so let’s focus instead on what we can do with the money we save. What a concept!

What is truly chilling is that apparently no one in the room or higher up in the organization ever looked at this plan and said “ARE WE CRAZY?” That it was allowed to proceed speaks volumes about these companies and even more about the corporate leaders and their approach to the world at large.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration failed in its recent efforts to gain regulatory control over tobacco. The government continues to wage an expensive legal battle against the infinitely deep pockets of the tobacco industry. These efforts must continue and not be set aside as we focus our energies and budget on terrorism. Congressional leaders need to hear that these battles must continue to be fought. We must urge our government to do the right thing because we cannot rely on big business to act responsibly. Curbing the big business of tobacco will be even harder in the poor economic climate this country faces, but it is time to stop kidding ourselves. Tobacco has no “upside”! We must make the tough decisions to protect the health of all Americans. So take a minute and focus some of those frustrating feelings of anger and powerlessness that we are all feeling these days on an enemy we know only too well. Contact your U.S. Senators and representatives. Thank them for the long, hard hours they are putting in to protect our country’s security from the enemy abroad, and remind them that our domestic enemies still need our attention. 