

*Henry A. Waxman*

# The Real Marlboro Country

The most recent surgeon general's report on smoking is a reminder that Marlboro Country is more likely to be found in a hospital's cancer or cardiac ward than in a verdant valley or on an open plain.

This year, 340,000 Americans will die from smoking-related cancer and heart disease. Thousands more will be disabled and undergo expensive and often painful medical treatment.

The figures are numbing. Yet many Americans—particularly smokers—have chosen to believe the myth that the relationship between smoking and life-threatening diseases has not been proven. They don't know, or choose not to believe, that smoking is addictive, that smoking is the leading cause of lung cancer and a major cause of heart disease, that smoking during pregnancy increases the risk of stillbirth and miscarriages and that smoking by women using birth control pills substantially increases the risk of stroke or heart disease.

And each day, a large number of new smokers will be hooked. The majority of these smokers are young—many of them children. Many new smokers will take their first step toward Marlboro Country even before their teen-age years, and young girls seem to be picking up the habit in greater numbers than boys.

Cigarettes are unlike any other food, drug or consumer product. Ironically, they are so dangerous that they are virtually unregulated. One of the only regulations Congress has managed to impose is the mandatory warning on cigarette labels and advertising.

The current warning has been in place since 1970 and is worn out. Studies reviewed by the Federal Trade Commission in a staff report issued last May indicate that fewer than 3 percent of persons who view a cigarette ad actually see, let alone read, the

health warning. It's not hard to see why. The bland, inactive warning hasn't changed in 12 years. Further, cigarette ads do an excellent job of disguising the warning with clever, thematic imagery suggesting the youthful, healthy or athletic attributes of smoking: the smoking myth.

Only Congress can restore the novelty and, therefore, the effectiveness of the cigarette health warning. I have introduced the "Comprehensive Smoking Prevention Education Act." It would increase public knowledge about the health risks of smoking and help many Americans to break the smoking habit or avoid striking that first match. The legislation would replace the current health warning label with a series of specific warnings spelling out, in a clear, straightforward fashion, the health effects of smoking.

The new warnings would include statements about the relationship between smoking and cancer, heart disease, emphysema, fetal health and addiction. Each statement would be assigned randomly to cigarette packages and advertising.

The rationale for this system is simple. Even the casual viewer of cigarette advertising knows that ad formats are changed frequently. Madison Avenue recognizes that prospective purchasers tire quickly of advertising once the novelty wears off.

The tobacco industry is one of the most powerful lobbies on Capitol Hill. Yet, despite the conservative bent of the 97th Congress, 1982 offers public health advocates the best opportunity in years to give a major boost to smoking prevention.

This year the industry will be challenged by a formidable opponent: Voluntary organizations such as the American Cancer Society, American Lung Association and the American Heart Association have formed a new Washington group, "The Coalition on Smoking OR Health," to secure passage of this legislation.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the smoking and health controversy are the faces behind the chilling statistics. In recent testimony before my subcommittee, actress Amanda Blake, "Miss Kitty" in the long-running TV series "Gunsmoke," told the story of her successful fight against oral cancer caused by smoking. She said:

"Clearly, had I known what it was going to cost me to be a smoker when I lit the first cigarette, I would never have struck the match. . . . I would not have smoked had I seen a label on a cigarette package or in a cigarette ad that said, 'Warning: Cigarette smoking may cause death from heart disease, cancer or emphysema.' That simple message would have saved me years of grief in dealing with an illness that jeopardized my career and my life."

More specific health warnings about the health effects of smoking are a modest but long overdue challenge to the cruel myths perpetuated daily by the cigarette industry. At stake are the lives of thousands of Americans.

The debate in Congress is likely to be hotly contested. But I hope that the days of plantation politics, when tobacco was king, are on the wane.

*Rep. Waxman (D-Calif.) is chairman of the House's health subcommittee.*