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Dangerous Behavior

According to the [American Lung Association](#), in 2018 (the most recent year for which data are available), 13.7% of the adult population smoked cigarettes. This is the lowest post World War II percentage since data have been collected. When your blogger (YB) turned 18 in 1965, the rate was 42.4%.

Although data on cigarette harm had been available since the 1920s, the fight to reduce cigarette smoking was long and drawn out. The Tobacco Institute (funded by the tobacco companies) produced research purporting to show that there were no harmful effects from smoking cigarettes. Spokesmen and women repeatedly denied the harm of cigarettes. The industry fought the effects of “second hand smoke” even further into the Twentieth Century. The economies of states such as Kentucky, Virginia, and North Carolina had a considerable dependence on the tobacco industry, and YB was amazed as a high school camper in North Carolina to discover that students were allowed to smoke at the camp. We know that cigarettes kill people through lung cancer and respiratory ailments, so why don't people stop, and why on earth do they start?

The answer is that some people like to smoke. They like how it makes them look (urbane and mature), they like that it gives them oral satisfaction and helps them lose weight. They may not like every cigarette that they smoke, but they get pleasure from the habit, or else they wouldn't do it. Many, if not most of them, are addicted to the nicotine that they ingest while smoking. YB was amazed (that word again), that at a Kentucky hotel, on his trip from Florida to Michigan in 2020, during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the motel manager, a woman in her thirties, who had been wearing a mask inside the motel, stepped outside, took off her mask and lit up a cigarette.

We would be surprised today if a state were to threaten a political jurisdiction with loss of funding because that jurisdiction banned smoking in theaters, supermarkets, concert venues, or schools. That debate has largely been settled. Yet it is surprising that several states (most notably Texas and Florida) have been expending major legislative (and judicial) effort to prevent states from requiring COVID-19 vaccinations or safety masks in their offices, commercial buildings, and schools.

Cigarette regulation can provide a useful simile. We have not made cigarettes illegal, but we have taken steps to protect users by having them smoke fewer cigarettes, largely by making it more expensive and inconvenient to smoke. Restaurants, concert venues, and sports venues do not permit smoking. Most employers do not allow smoking at work. Insurers charge more (and rightly so) to smokers because they get sicker and die earlier than others.

Cigarette smoking pollutes the lungs and pollutes the air. It kills the smoker, and it harms those around the smoker. COVID-19 pollutes the body and

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pollutes the air. It has killed 644,807 Americans in less than 18 months (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/us/>). This past week, even with the availability of vaccines, the number of people hospitalized and in ICUs is reaching levels not seen since February 2021 (<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/current-covid-patients-hospital?country=USA>). The numbers are soaring in Florida and in Texas.

We have effective COVID-19 vaccines, and we have effective safety behaviors (masking and quarantine). YB cannot explain why some people wish to engage themselves, their children, and their neighbors in risky behaviors, any more than he can explain why people choose to smoke, and expose their families and their neighbors to smoking. YB cannot explain why some politicians take actions that increase their supporters' risks of dying.

It is hard to imagine that some people "like" COVID-19. It has turned everyone's world upside down. Rather, those who resist public measures to fight COVID-19 do not think it affects them or their families, or the people around them, and they do not wish to be inconvenienced by rules that they do not like.

We have fought the problems brought on by cigarettes by raising the price of smoking, educating the public about the problems from smoking, and protecting others from second-hand smoke. People still smoke. Vaccines, quarantines, and mask mandates will reduce the damage from COVID-19, but like smokers, many who refuse to take these simple preventative actions will die needless deaths while we fight the pandemic.

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