

“The Busybodies Are At It Again”

by John Stossel

11/30/05

Smoking can kill you. That's why I don't smoke, and it's why you shouldn't, either.

There. I've just done the only things that should be done in a free society to stop people from smoking: I've told you that it's dangerous, I've urged you not to do it, and I've even set a good example. If you'd like other people to be healthy, you should also discourage smoking, too.

But if you'd like to be free, and you'd like your neighbor to be free, that's all you should do. It isn't my business to come into your home or business and stop you or your guests from smoking. If you like smoking so much you're willing to give up years off your life -- 6.6 years for the average man -- that should be your choice. I have no right to force you to stop.

The busybodies, however, want to force you to stop. When they get themselves elected, they can. Sadly, it's the busybodies who most often run for public office. Most of us want to run our own lives, and help people by selling them things, or offering them charity or advice -- any of which they can take or leave. People who want to run other people's lives are ... different. They are the people we should be most worried about.

I once interviewed the mayor of the tiny community of Friendship Heights, Md. He got his town to pass the most stringent anti-smoking law in America. It banned cigarette smoke outdoors.

"We're elected to promote the general welfare, and this is part of the general welfare," he told me. After I interviewed him, he was arrested for touching a 14-year-old boy's genitals in a bathroom at Washington National Cathedral. The village council finally repealed his law. Finally, we know what it takes to get an anti-smoking law repealed.

Unfortunately, the busybodies keep running for office and, once elected, keep imposing new restrictions on our freedom.

So far, they haven't prohibited smoking entirely. So far. But Tom Constantine, who ran the Drug Enforcement Administration under President Clinton, once told me: "When we look down the road, I would say 10, 15, 20 years from now, in a gradual fashion, smoking will probably be outlawed in the United States."

That is the road we're moving down. New York and California already ban smoking in restaurants and bars.

All but two counties of West Virginia have some sort of anti-smoking law. Two cities in Georgia have, like Friendship Heights, banned smoking in public parks. This week, Chicago's city council may ban smoking in most public places.

The excuse is secondhand smoke. But there's only flimsy evidence that secondhand smoke is harmful. Studies were done on people who lived with smokers and were exposed to huge amounts of secondhand smoke at home and in cars. The idea that restaurant patrons are threatened is silly, and it's even sillier to fear exposure outdoors. But the politicians have become zealots.

Granted, secondhand smoke is a nuisance. But so are many other things.

If I don't like secondhand smoke -- and I don't -- I can choose to go to restaurants that don't have smoking, just as I can choose restaurants that don't have bad music. If I don't want to work in a smoky place, I don't have to.

But when the politicians ban smoking in bars, people who actually like old-fashioned smoky bars are stopped, by force, from enjoying the kinds of establishments they like. Smoky bars cease to exist. Workers who don't mind smoke are deprived of jobs. Can't the smokers have some bars?

Most Americans don't smoke. If we make it clear we want smoke-free restaurants, many existing businesses will choose to go smoke-free and new ones will open. That's a much better idea than politicians imposing force on everyone.

Some people think the government must decide everything. But when government decides, minorities, even large minorities, lose rights.

When we get to make our own decisions, we don't all have to make the same decisions. Some of the time, at least, we can all get what we want -- even when we don't all want the same thing.

Source: <http://www.townhall.com/opinion/columns/JohnStossel/2005/11/30/177151.html>