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Smoking and Politics: Policymaking and the Federal Bureaucracy

A. Lee Fritschler

William Clayton Kimball

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Reviewed by William Clayton Kimball, a doctoral candidate in government at Harvard University and assistant professor of government at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts.

While the typical Latter-day Saint's interest might light up at the title of this little book, it is less about lighting up than about politics. In the author's own words, "the study illustrates generally the procedures and politics of bureaucratic policy formulation in contemporary American government." The vehicle of the study is the tangle of policy and politics which surrounded the passing of the Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act of 1965. While this act (which required the warning label on the sides of cigarette packages) was billed by its proponents
as a public-regarding health measure, it was actually one of the most blatant power plays against the public interest in the past decade.

The principal villain in the play was the tobacco subgovernment. This group included not only the tobacco companies and growers, but also the tobacco bloc in Congress (in effect the entire Southern delegation), various elements of the bureaucracy involved in tobacco subsidy and production, representatives of the advertising and broadcasting industries, and large anti-governmental regulation forces. Its power was aided and abetted by public and legislative ignorance and indifference. The hero of the book (although not necessarily of the play) was the Federal Trade Commission (Ralph Nader take note!) which was supported by various health groups and aided (presumably) by the spirits of those who literally had the time of their lives smoking. In the best line in the book, Mr. Fritschler quotes David Cohen, then a lobbyist for the Americans for Democratic Action, who assessed the line-up as being "similar to a match between the Green Bay Packers and a high school football team." Unfortunately, the public interest was represented by the high school team.

This book appears at a time when the controversy over just what the government should do about smoking and health is heating up again. But its purpose is not merely to detail or document that controversy as much as to illustrate how policy is made by the federal bureaucracy. And to say that the account of that process is not very interesting is probably to say more about the process itself than about this book or Mr. Fritschler's style. For those who are interested in the politics of the controversy presented in a less academic manner they would be well-rewarded by looking up and reading two articles by Elizabeth Brenner Drew: the first, "The Quiet Victory of the Cigarette Lobby: How it found the best filter yet—Congress," Atlantic Monthly, September 1965; and the second, an article in the New York Times Magazine of May 4, 1969, which updates the earlier account. Mr. Fritschler leans heavily on Mrs. Drew's work, perhaps more than he is aware judging from his citations which are limited to direct quotations. The most interesting sections of his book are those influenced by Mrs. Drew's story.

His discussion of administrative policymaking procedures—of the differences and interrelations of rulemaking and ad-
judicatory authority—is very good. But it might leave the average reader confused, not because the description is not clear, but because it is a very complex process. Unfortunately, complex subjects are not always made less complex by the use of simple words. The choice of the cigarette controversy as a means to convey some of the complexity is a good one, however. Mr. Fritschler tells us that he chose this issue because the various positions were far less complex than usual. When compared with some of the classic case studies in public administration courses this is true. But the simplicity is confined to the bureaucratic action. The politics were very complex, and the study is deadened somewhat by its concentration on bureaucratic procedure. It is true that a book can only be about a few things and not about everything, but without lengthening the book too much, Mr. Fritschler might have made it more interesting by including more of the political complexity which surrounded the bureaucratic policymaking.

Throughout the book one finds excellent observations and insights concerning the administrative process and the practice of policymaking, but these are often buried in the midst of paragraphs which muffle the impact of the statements. The typical college student would miss many of these insights which are well worth his while. Mr. Fritschler's book gives evidence that many of our notions of representation and responsibility need urgent reconsideration.

One of the central problems in our country is just what relationship the governmental bureaucracy should have to the "private" or business sector. Can business be trusted or allowed to mind its own store? Can we believe that advertising abuses will be self-correcting, or that shoddy or harmful products will not be foisted on the public by producers? The record of rising consumer irritation in the past few years demonstrates that the most serious problems in our polity come not from aggressive governmental action but from private aggression and governmental inertia. Just in the area of air pollution—no matter whether you are referring to pollution of the air currents by industry (and smokers), or of the air waves by television and radio—it should be clear that a reliance on private action is no reliance at all.

Mr. Fritschler points out the problems which arise when an agency of the very bureaucracy which we curse daily seeks to represent the "public interest." The nature of our system
is such that this type of representation brings the agency into conflict with powerful economic interests whose basic concern is for profit and whose lack of concern for the public welfare is obvious. The example of the tobacco lobby which has sought to mislead the public for many years as to the nature and results of using their products is not an isolated case. Perhaps if more people were informed as to the way policymaking takes place in the national (or local) government, it might be far less easy for private interests to ignore the public interest.

Current conservative political writers, of which the Church has more than its fair share, do us a disservice by drawing our attention away from the realities of power politics. They seek to focus on nonissues which soothe their ideological itches, but which do nothing to improve the quality of life in our society. A study like Smoking and Politics gives us a glimpse of a complex and disturbing reality. The success of the tobacco lobby and the incredible social cost of this success in terms of human suffering and death should lead us all to question the theoretical labels we use. But we become so attached to them we’d too often rather fight than switch.