No One Smokes Cigarettes in Thank You for Smoking

By ACSH Staff — March 17, 2006

One odd thing about the film Thank You for Smoking is the ironic omission of visible cigarette smoking. The ostensible hazards presented for consideration -- alcohol, firearms, cell phones, oil, and fatty foods -- subtly establish the film’s risk-filled milieu, yet we never witness an actor smoke cigarettes.

As members of the audience, we become the silent fourth guest at the public relations experts’ weekly "merchants of death" lunch and are privy to their "morally flexible" conversations, which take place over cocktails, wings, potato skins, and apple pie with a questionable cheddar cheese topping. Most characters use cell phones and drive cars during the film, while the Marlboro Man and Bobby Jay Bliss, a S.A.F.E.T.Y. (read: NRA) spokesman, both carry weapons. In a more dramatic example of showing off the dangers of firearms, both Bliss and a character played by John Wayne in an old movie are shot in short war scenes (ironically, Wayne succumbed to lung cancer in real life).

The character nicknamed the Captain, the last vestige of the old-line tobacco magnates, dies of heart failure, presumably as a result of a lifetime of smoking, but never inhales, although he does brandish a cigar during his final scene, in a hospital bed. The Marlboro man’s raspy voice, veritable pharmacopeia of prescription meds, and oxygen tank can be attributed to his habit, yet his illness apparently now prevents him from smoking. Tobacco lobbyist Nick Naylor reveals his addiction to cigarettes early in the film, yet he suffers a nicotine overdose before he is able to light up on screen.

At one point in the film, Naylor claims that the tobacco industry's recent drop in popularity can partly be blamed on Hollywood because only characters that fit into the "RAV" category (a cynical acronym for Russians, Arabs, and Villains) smoke in contemporary movies. As a viewer, this leads me to wonder whether this theory was played out in the making of Thank You for Smoking itself -- but that depends in part on whether we see the film’s "merchants of death" protagonists as heroes or villains.

Jaclyn Eisenberg is a research intern at the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH.org [1], HealthFactsAndFears.com [2]). Other Fears pieces on Thank You for Smoking appear here [3], here [4], here [5], here [6], and here [7].