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HEADLINE: AND NOW, A FEW KIND WORDS ABOUT TOBACCO

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BODY:
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Did you ever notice how people who can't agree about anything else -- abortion, pornography, politics, taxes, Iraq, animal rights, human rights, guns, whatever -- all agree on this: Smoking: bad.

And they're right. Cigarettes are the only legal product manufactured in the United States that, when used properly, kill you. Not guns, not cars, not even French fries dipped in mayonnaise.

Tobacco companies are manipulative, hooking kids early and preying on human weakness. So if you smoke, try to quit. If you don't smoke, don't start. If you use tobacco in any of its other nefarious forms -- as I do -- be aware of the risks involved.

There.

Having said that, I've got a few problems with Proposition A, which will appear on the Missouri ballot Tuesday. It would raise state cigarette taxes 323 percent, from 17 cents a pack to 72 cents. Taxes on cigars, pipe tobacco and chewing tobacco would go up 20 percent. The money raised, about \$343 million a year, would go into a special trust fund to promote a healthier Missouri.

What's wrong with that?

Plenty.

To begin with, it is an incredibly regressive tax, falling most heavily on the poor. The National Center for Policy Analysis estimated in 1997 that families making \$30,000 a year or less pay for more than half of all taxes levied on cigarettes; those making \$60,000 or more paid about 14 percent. As a percentage of income, low-income families paid almost five times the burden that upper-income families did.

Poorer, less educated folks tend to smoke more than richer folks do, and not because they're unaware of the risks. It's because smoking is what they've got, a relatively cheap indulgence. It's why they have more babies than richer folks, too. Maybe we should tax sex.

Folks who can't afford yachts, fancy cars, fancy meals, can -- if they stretch -- afford cigarettes, which make them feel a little less stressed about their lot in life. Of course, they have more health problems, too, and less access to health insurance, making them a burden on the health care system.

Which brings up my second problem with Proposition A. It was placed on the ballot by initiative petition in a campaign mounted by a group called Citizens for a Healthy Missouri. It's not exactly a secret, but that group isn't going out of its

way to advertise the fact that its chief sponsor is the Missouri Hospital Association. Guess who will get most of the dough generated by the tobacco tax?

Yes, the tax money won't go to the state (which needs it badly) but to a trust fund controlled by the special interests that put the measure on the ballot. The money supposedly will support a lot of good causes -- prescription drugs for the elderly, health care initiatives for the poor and children, hospital trauma care, life science research -- but it gives private organizations a lot of say about spending public money.

It should be noted that the principal opponents of Proposition A are convenience store operators, who haven't exactly been up front about their reasons, either. They're talking about taxing the poor when they should be admitting that fewer people run into the Gas 'n Grub to buy Slim-Jims than they do Virginia Slims.

The economics of this are tricky. Sin taxes, if they're high enough, do tend to cut consumption and some people will, in fact, quit smoking. But others will buy cigarettes on the black or gray markets, or over the Internet, thus avoiding state taxes altogether.

If Propostion A passes, those who can't afford a computer, or even to buy cigarettes by the carton, will fork over \$3.75 a pack and light up, huddled against the cold wind in doorways or loading docks, penned up in smoking corrals at the airport, exiled from society like 21st century lepers.

We could tax alcohol out of existence, and pornography and gambling. But a lot of people -- rich and poor -- don't think they're wrong. So as a nation, we take all of our repressed Calvinist indignation and unload it on cigarette smokers, and tell them we're doing them a favor. No wonder they feel persecuted.

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