Cigarettes and Politics

By Mel Lavine

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I smoked my last cigarette in 1962. Kennedy was president. Back then everyone smoked, especially newspapermen. No newshound worthy of the name would be caught without wearing a soft felt hat with a brim, the crown creased lengthwise – we called them fedoras. And smoking a cigarette. You couldn't find the murderer without one. Back then journalists may have smoked more than almost anybody else, but almost everybody (it seemed) smoked.

These days smokers are treated like untouchables, banned from newsrooms and public places. Spot a smoker lighting up and he looks like a deer caught in the headlights. The numbers of smokers, however, are large - an estimated 45.3 million or 19.3% of all adults (18 and older) in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Most are men (21.5 %) than women (17.3 %) and the leading cause of preventable disease, about 443,000 deaths, or one of every five deaths in this country each year.

20.1% in the 18-24 age group

22.0% in the 25-44 age group

21.1% in the 45-64 age group

9.5% in the 65 and older age group

Since 2009 the Food and Drug Administration was given the power by Congress to regulate cigarettes.

But CQ Weekly, published by Congressional Quarterly, reminds us that the Food and Drug Administration has done next to nothing about the purpose of the law, “which gave it authority to regulate ingredients in cigarettes, including nicotine.” Instead the agency has focused on establishing a department to undertake more research on cigarettes.

Although a worthy cause, public health proponents are more focused on calling for new graphic warnings on cigarette packaging. They want the government to “do much more to make cigarettes less addictive.”

If you think the tobacco lobby has been in retreat since 2009 think again. As CQ points out, the agency is barred by that same law “from eliminating nicotine, a chemical found in tobacco leaves that is addictive when smoked.” (A survey by the American Journal of Public Health found “that almost half of U.S. adults say the FDA should limit the amount of nicotine in cigarettes...17 percent disagreed and 37 percent weren’t sure.“)

Public health advocates have another concern. In 2010 the FDA’s panel of advisors recommended banning menthol flavored cigarettes, but the FDA has yet to move. The 2009 law banned all other flavorings, but let the agency decide about menthol. CQ says the brand is particularly popular in African-American communities.

As for the FDA’s hope to require powerful warning labels on cigarettes, don’t hold your breath. CQ reminds us that a federal appeals court took the side of the cigarette makers, declaring the labels “violated the companies’ First Amendment rights.” The Supreme Court is the next, last stop for the Obama administration if it decides to appeal the ruling.

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.