

King James for Surgeon General

At the heart of the major tobacco industry settlements in the late 1990s was the claim, put forward by lawyers litigating against cigarette companies, that the industry deceived the public about the dangers and addictiveness of smoking. No doubt many companies behaved shamelessly, but it remains hard to believe that smokers were really clueless about the hazards of their habit.

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the publication by U.S. Surgeon General Luther Terry of his office's landmark 1964 report on smoking and health, announcing that cigarettes were linked to cancer and heart disease. The report, Terry remembered later, "hit the country like a bombshell. It was front page news and a lead story on every radio and television station in the United States and many abroad." A year later, Congress passed a law requiring health warnings on cigarette packages.

This year also marks another anniversary—the quadricentenary of "A Counterblaste to Tobacco," a 1604 anti-smoking tract from no less an authority than King James—he of the King James Version of the Bible, he for whom Jamestown was named. The fumiphobic monarch sternly brought his citizens to task:

Have you not reason then to bee ashamed, and to forbear this filthie noveltie, so basely grounded, so foolishly received and so grossely mistaken in the right use thereof? In your abuse thereof sinning against God, harming your selves both in persons and goods, and raking also thereby the markes and notes of vanitie upon you: by the custome thereof making your selves to be wondered at by all forraine civil Nations, and by all strangers that come among you, to be scorned and contemned. A custome lothsome to the eye, hatefull to the Nose, harmefull to the braine, dangerous to the Lungs, and in the blacke stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stigian smoke of the pit that is bottomelesse.

The difference between the King's warning and the Surgeon General's is telling. King James cast the problem of smoking in human terms: vanity and lust, respect and shame. He understood the complexity and the context of the smokers' desires, and judged them to show "a great contempt for God's good gifts." By contrast, the language we use to discuss smoking today is sterile and medical: we speak of nicotine addiction instead of lusts, we worry about emphysema instead of iniquity, and we reduce the complexities of camaraderie to "peer pressure." It is the peculiar vice of our age to deny virtue and vice and replace them with terms that sound more technical, and therefore demand less of us. But smoking is clearly a vice (and a pleasure) not peculiar to this age at all. And even the surgeon general is unlikely to eliminate vice (and pleasure) from the human scene, no matter how hard he tries.