

Clinton vs. teen smoking

DRASTICALLY CUTTING the rate at which adolescents take up the health-sapping addiction of tobacco smoke is a clearly worthwhile goal of public policy. So President Clinton's plan for the Food and Drug Administration to act aggressively on this front cannot be faulted for its benign intent. Few will argue with his observation that it is "wrong as well as illegal to hook 1 million children a year on tobacco."

Success in keeping more teenagers from becoming smokers would save millions of lives in decades to come, and spare the nation some of the massive medical costs associated with long-term tobacco use.

Specific steps contemplated by the president, however, raise questions of practicality, and could be vulnerable to legal challenge. For instance, preventing sales of cigarettes to minors is a good objective. But how much the teenagers' supply of contraband tobacco can be pinched by requiring them to show ID cards in stores, and by outlawing vending machines, is another matter. We are pessimistic on that point, considering how rampant the distribution of wholly illegal drugs is among youths.

The targeting of cigarette advertising and other promotions aimed at recruiting new young smokers (e.g., banning billboards near schools and brand names on T-shirts and gym bags) seems to make

sense, but might incur First Amendment challenge by advertisers and promoters.

Sales of tobacco products to adults would remain legal, however unwise from a health standpoint. So distinctions as to who is addressed by an ad campaign — even if it is cartoon-character cute or focused on youthful (over 18) activities — will be hard to draw.

Requiring the tobacco industry to fund a \$150 million-a-year educational campaign against teen smoking evokes California's tax on cigarette sales for tobacco education and other purposes. Perhaps the administration can require such an outlay without legislation, or shame the tobacco companies into contributing. Clinton offers to withdraw his contemplated regulations if Congress passes laws against teen smoking. That would take the heat off federal regulators.

We are convinced that the salvation of young Americans from the dangers of tobacco addiction depends primarily on the teens' voluntary response to effective education on the question. Some will not get the message, or will be guided instead by peer pressure to smoke and look like adult addicts of the weed. The truth about smoking and health must eventually save them — rather than a ban on billboards, Joe Camel and vending machines.

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