

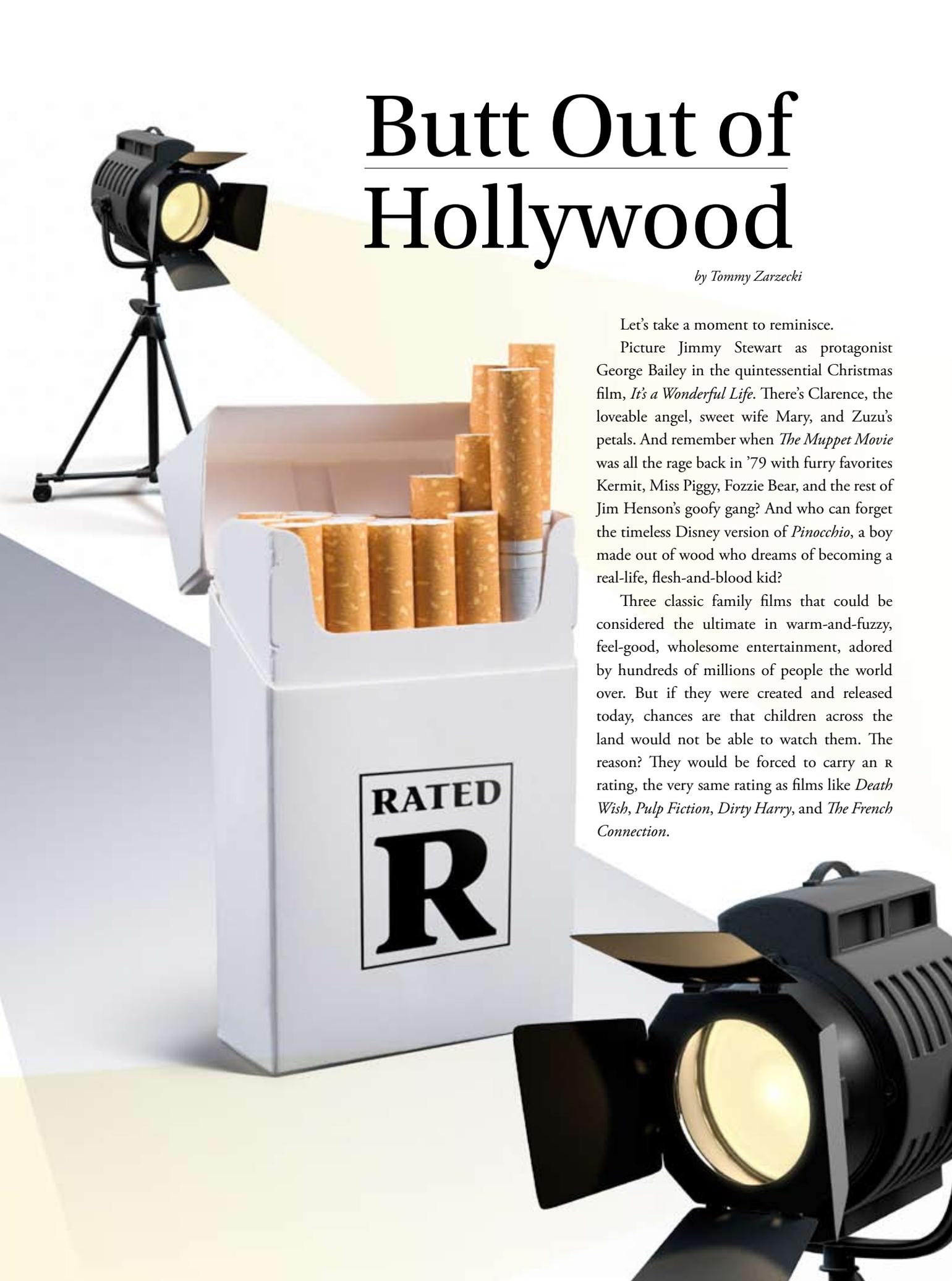
# Butt Out of Hollywood

by Tommy Zarzecki

Let's take a moment to reminisce.

Picture Jimmy Stewart as protagonist George Bailey in the quintessential Christmas film, *It's a Wonderful Life*. There's Clarence, the loveable angel, sweet wife Mary, and Zuzu's petals. And remember when *The Muppet Movie* was all the rage back in '79 with furry favorites Kermit, Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear, and the rest of Jim Henson's goofy gang? And who can forget the timeless Disney version of *Pinocchio*, a boy made out of wood who dreams of becoming a real-life, flesh-and-blood kid?

Three classic family films that could be considered the ultimate in warm-and-fuzzy, feel-good, wholesome entertainment, adored by hundreds of millions of people the world over. But if they were created and released today, chances are that children across the land would not be able to watch them. The reason? They would be forced to carry an R rating, the very same rating as films like *Death Wish*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Dirty Harry*, and *The French Connection*.



RATED  
R

Do-gooders believe that, because a character enjoys cigars, the filmmaker's agenda is to *promote* tobacco. When someone in a film shoots a guy, is the studio promoting gun use?



It's hard to imagine that *anyone* could denigrate beloved comedy classics simply because of the appearance of a cigar. But leave it to antitobacco zealots to suck all the fun out of everything.

Photo © John Springer Collection/CORBIS.



“What?” you say. “How can that be? That’s asinine, insane, and over-the-top ludicrous!” I wholeheartedly agree. But the American Medical Association Alliance, the volunteer advocacy arm of the AMA, doesn’t.

You see, the aforementioned movies all feature scenes showing a character smoking. If you remember, Geppetto’s woodenheaded creation smoked a cigar in *Pinocchio*, Orson Welles puffed a big stogie in *The Muppet Movie*, and George Bailey of *It’s a Wonderful Life* enjoyed a fine puro while being coddled by Mr. Potter, the megalomaniac overlord of Bedford Falls.

Plain and simple, the AMA Alliance hopes to have smoking eradicated from films altogether. But, in the meantime, it wants movies that feature smoking to automatically carry an R rating. The reasoning behind this, as given on the AMA Alliance Web site, is to shield children from the perils of onscreen depictions of smoking, which will send the message to our youth that this most evil act is, indeed, okay. But in my humble and possibly skewed opinion, this is nothing more than fear-based, smoke-Nazi, Chicken Little stupidity, with overtones of blatant censorship. Now don’t let me persuade you; I’ll let the fear-

mongering purveyors of political correctness do that. Sandi Frost, current president of the AMA Alliance, hammered the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) after seeing cigar-chomping characters in 2008’s summer blockbusters *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man*, and *The Incredible Hulk*. She actually compiled a study of films from the last six years, and claims that half of the releases geared to children show smoking, while a quarter of them show cigars. “Hollywood has not responded to the call of the public to reduce the images of tobacco,” she said in a November 2008 *USA Today* article. Also noted in that article, the AMA Alliance’s findings were as follows:

- Since 2002, out of 617 movies rated G, PG or PG-13, 57% have featured smoking; since 2007, when the MPAA’s stricter policy took effect, 49% have featured smoking.
- Out of 441 movies rated PG-13, 296, or 67%, have featured smoking of some kind. That number has dropped to 56% since last year.

And, according to Paul Billings, vice president of national policy and advocacy for the American Lung Association, “Hollywood has been bombarding people with smoking messages for decades. But they’re still allowed to send the wrong signal to kids, who are seeing their heroes smoking.”

Now, hold on there, Paulie—what kind of messages have they been sending? You mean the message that some people *smoke*? Yeah, they do; it’s a fact of life. People smoke in *real life*, but movies shouldn’t show what happens in real life because *you* deem it to be “bad”? Crime is bad, yet movies are filled with villains who do things like murder, rob, and perpetrate a multitude of other malevolence, yet you’ve got your panties

in a wad because Hellboy likes his stogies? The latest Batman saga, *The Dark Knight*, was riddled with death and violence (with some serious shit blowing up every two minutes), yet it garnered a PG-13 rating. But a guy puffed a cigar in a film—you know, just like some *real* men do in *real* life—and you get all hell-bent for lonsdales.

Something I find amusing is that theaters showing these films happily sell food void of any nutritional value and conspicuously missing from the basic-food-groups pyramid. That fake butter slathered over your popcorn will still be in the ground a century or so after you’re dead while those mammoth boxes of Goobers, Reese’s, and Swedish Fish contain enough



If you don’t believe that smoking by fictional characters is doing terrible things to our society as a whole, maybe a whole bunch of promotional posters from various movie genres will convince you otherwise. *No?* We didn’t think so. Photo courtesy of Associated Press/Nick Ut.

Let's not let Big Brotherisms and political correctness replace parents' accountability and innate common sense.

sugar to throw you into coma, and that Janitor in a Drum-sized Pepsi should completely shut down your liver and pancreas. Now *that* stuff, Paulie, can cause high cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes... but I guess since you're from the *lung* association, it's none of your concern. Do you want to protect our children or don't you? You might think my little analogy (or psycho rant—tomato, tomahto) is comparing apples to bananas, but I'm merely attempting to demonstrate the ludicrous nature of smoke Nazis and their genocidal mindset toward tobacco. There's all kinds of bad in this world, but atop the evil list is smoking, the bull's eye on the target of PC goons everywhere.

Now Hollywood (or Hollyweird, as I refer to it) is, of course, in California, and the governor of that state happens to be both a movie star *and* a lover of premium handrolled cigars. Arnold Schwarzenegger has received a mountain of pressure from watchdog groups that want any movie featuring smoking (unless it's a documentary or an antismoking piece) to carry the R rating, end of story. But, surprisingly, the Governator has drawn a line in the sand by supporting the studios, stating that filmmakers should be granted the artistic freedom to have a character smoke if that's what the story calls for. In a Fox News piece from July of 2008, it was reported that Ahnuld "coffed at the notion that someone would play Winston Churchill, the British wartime leader, without his trademark stogie in hand."

"I personally don't believe that we should erase cigarettes in movies. I don't believe that we should erase when someone smokes a cigar in a movie. I think that we should remind people and kids all the time about the dangers of smoking," the actor-turned-politician said at a news conference. "To all of a sudden tell actors not to smoke a cigarette in a movie when they portray a character... is ludicrous. I think this is going too far."

This is most interesting, as you might think that the tree-hugging, save-the-whales, granola-sucking Hollyweirdos from the land of fruits and nuts would side with the smoke Nazis.

But the Hollywood contingent is being defiant under the guise of preserving their art form and not allowing the do-gooders of the apocalypse tell them how to make a movie. With the kind of money it takes to create a blockbuster filled with wild stunts, CGI effects, pyrotechnics, and mass destruction (let alone the tens of millions it takes to pay top-draw talent), neither producers nor studio executives are going to compromise a \$200 million epic just because some zealot wants to save us all from ourselves. To the movie moguls, I say *bravo*... but then I slap myself for siding with the liberal left-coast loonies.

Superhero movies have drawn the most ire from the health critics, as the smoking of cigars has always been prevalent in that particular genre. Marvel Comics junkies can attest that, well into the late 1980s, several of the publisher's characters were known to puff on cigars. Keeping true to Marvel's earlier days, current onscreen adaptations of these characters puff away as well. Villain Obadiah Stane in *Iron Man*, editor-in-chief of the fictional *Daily Bugle*/thorn in Spiderman's side J. Jonah Jameson, and X-Men's abrasive bad boy, Wolverine, *all smoke cigars*—and there's something to be said there. It's the tough, manly characters who are the stogie-chompers; it speaks loudly about their stature and demeanor. You rarely see wimpy little dudes with a maduro clenched firmly in their teeth.

Dianne Fenyk, the AMA Alliance's president for the 2007–2008 term, got her nose all out of joint when 2008's *The Incredible Hulk* broke, as the green monster's nemesis, General "Thunderbolt" Ross (played by William Hurt), gnawed on a stogie for the entire film. According to a *New York Times* article from last June, Fenyk spent the entire week before the film's debut pushing the Alliance's 27,000 constituents to contact their local media regarding this issue. "Hollywood studios should be especially embarrassed for using comic-book movies, which they market to children and know youth will want to see, to promote tobacco," she told reporters.

Will the American Heart Association come down on the MPAA if a character is eating a strip of bacon or a side order of fries?

Okay, here's where I get angry (and you wouldn't like me when I'm angry). Why do these perennial do-gooders believe that, because a character enjoys cigars, the filmmaker's agenda is to *promote* tobacco? When someone in a film shoots a guy, is the studio promoting gun use? No, but looking back at *The Dark Knight*, people were shot, burned, run over, blown to bits, and had their throats slit... but a *cigar* caused a frantic woman to spend seven days e-mailing Turkey Lurkey, Goosey Lucy, and all of her friends that, yes indeed, the sky was falling.

In the previously mentioned Fox News piece, California Health and Human Services secretary, Kim Belshé, claims that "research shows kids exposed to images of smoking in films have a higher likelihood of using tobacco." I don't know about you, but when I was a kid, an onscreen hero's ability to smoke was *not* what I envied about the character. Flying, slinging webs, and climbing buildings, maybe. Smoking, no. Tom and Jerry smoked cigars, for crissakes, and all I thought was that it was funny that a little mouse outwitted a cat *every single time* (not that this is much of an issue anymore, as smoking scenes in classic cartoons have been under attack since 2006).

But back to Ms. Belshé's research. It's a load of Shinola to believe that *everything* that a popular figure does onscreen will be emulated by children everywhere. When I was a teen, I saw *The French Connection*, *To Hell and Back*, *High Plains Drifter*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *Blazing Saddles* and not once did I ever drive through city traffic at 100 miles an hour, shoot Japanese people, kill outlaws from the comforts of a barber's chair, or attempt to part a sea (though I do admit to farting around a campfire). Sure, those analogies are half-cocked and pretty darned stupid—every bit as stupid as the assumption that children will immediately begin to smoke cigars because a surly make-believe general or an acerbic newspaperman does. And just wait until the whiners get a load of Nick Fury, an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., who will most likely pop up in the next *Iron Man* or planned Avengers film. In the comic (before the days of political correctness), the guy might as well have had a stogie-butt permanently Krazy Glued to his lower lip, so one wonders how the hell Marvel is going to handle that one (it is interesting to note that, in each of the news articles cited here, Marvel representatives have declined to comment).



Picture it: if today's crazed crusaders had their way, these guys would have carrot sticks clenched between their teeth. Now *that* would be odd.

Photo © John Springer Collection/CORBIS.

There's all kinds of bad in this world, but atop the evil list is smoking, the bull's eye on the target of PC goons everywhere.

Not only is the AMA Alliance pressuring the MPAA to brand every movie in question with an R, but is also insisting that studios issue warnings that each of these films “glamorizes smoking,” essentially alleging that anyone onscreen—hero or villain, main character or mere extra—who casually puffs is doing the equivalent of staring straight into the audience and saying, “Hey, everybody, look at me! I’m smoking! Come on, kids—nab your daddy’s Camels and light ‘up!”

Isn’t this the same kind of censoring that was done under Communist regimes—you know, those images of Soviet workers smiling joyously as they lined up in 10-degree weather to snag a half a roll of toilet paper? Forcing Hollywood to remove all forms of smoking is fascist censorship in every sense of the word—where does it end? How far will Big Brother ride this crazy train? Since obesity and diabetes have become an epidemic, will moviemakers be punished for showing someone drinking Coke or enjoying a Twinkie? Will the American Heart Association come down on the MPAA if a character is eating a strip of bacon or a side order of fries? How far will this go before every one of our creative freedoms is stripped away, leaving us all bald-headed, gray-jumpsuit-wearing drones like in the famed Macintosh 1984 commercial? These are good questions, people; we need to take heed before Mr. Orwell laughs and utters an “I told you so” from the great beyond.

So, what about smoking in television? Is that on the endangered species list as well? Sure, I’m focusing on movies, but it is definitely a noteworthy inquiry. Picture classic cigar-loving characters like John Astin’s Gomez Addams, Jack Klugman’s Oscar Madison, Carroll O’Connor’s Archie Bunker, and Peter Falk’s Lieutenant Columbo; can you even fathom these small-screen immortals without a leafy brown beauty hanging from their mandibles? The abrasive Sergeant Rizzo from *MASH* always had the wet, chewed butt in the corner of his puss. Al, the angel from the series *Quantum Leap* constantly held a lit Churchill, and let’s not forget Jerry Seinfeld’s eccentric, wild-haired neighbor, Mr. Cosmo

Kramer—not to mention several guys from HBO’s *The Sopranos*. No matter the role or the series, the point is the same: cigars played an important part in the personae and believability of these characters.

Hey, I’ve got a devilish thought (in fact, one of those cartoon light bulbs just appeared over my head): Let’s start an advocacy group that makes absolutely certain that every movie and TV show has characters that smoke! Gosh, ya think that might cause a little shake-up with the Nazi regime? Buzz Lightyear and Woody love a good Nicaraguan box-pressed, and all 101 Dalmatians dig maduro. And, wouldn’t it be great to see Sesame Street have a character named Cigar Monster? (*C is for cee-gar, dat’s good enough for me!*) Why not even develop a script about a family of Cubans who came over in the Mariel Boatlift and rolls stoags on South Street? Or a pair of twin teen cigar rollers who yuk it up in a sitcom called *That’s, Like, So Smokin’!* There’s so much possibility here.

Uh, wait a minute... *stupid*, you say? You think this last part was kind of ridiculous? I’ll give you that, but you gotta admit it’s no more asinine than the tyrannical BS that the American Medical Association Alliance is proposing. The point is that *neither* extreme makes much sense in the world of entertainment.

Okay, people, it’s time to get to maybe the biggest point of all: shouldn’t we *parents* be held accountable for helping our children discern the difference between good and bad, right and wrong? Shouldn’t we as a society teach our kids to be responsible, to think before they act, as they will be held responsible for their actions? Isn’t it *our* job to help strengthen their minds so they won’t be easily influenced by questionable behavior, whether presented in movies, television, or video games, or in person? Isn’t it about time we stopped blaming children’s behavioral issues on others? Do we really need to spend countless hours, lathered up in a hissyfit, e-mailing 27,000 people, when we *could* just spend that time teaching our own kids about the world?

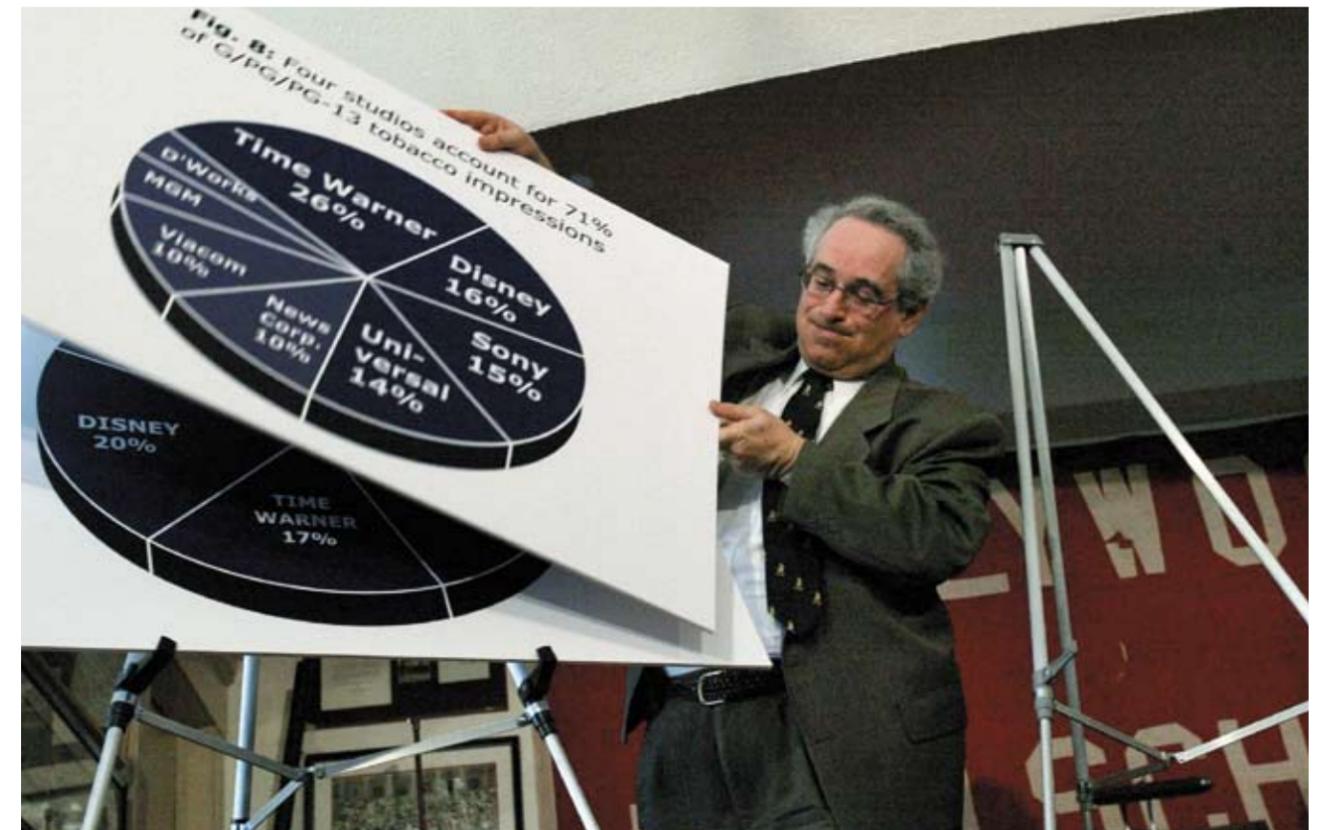
In the movie *Independence Day*, Will Smith’s character, upon completing a mission, broke out a metal tube, popped a cigar into his mouth, and celebrated a job well done. How about onboard James Cameron’s *Titanic*, where men gathered after dinner for brandy and cigars while waxing poetic about life? In the James Bond thriller *Die Another Day*, 007 enjoys a good smoke in Havana. Now, how would it look if Will Smith climbed out of the cockpit and pulled out a celery stick? I mean, celery sticks are good for you, right? And did anyone in *Titanic* say, “No thanks, I don’t smoke. However, I will take part in a brisk jog around the deck.” No, because it’s a time-period piece; the depiction of men enjoying their stogies is an accurate one. And 007 smoked a cigar because that’s what you do in Havana; showing people in a Cuban setting completely absent of handrolled Havanas would lack all realism. And just

how many movies or television shows throughout the years have featured a scene where a proud new dad hands out cigars after his baby is born? Too many to name.

To suggest that the above situations were written into scripts as an agenda to promote smoking is thoroughly absurd. To claim that Hollywood glamorizes smoking with secret messages aimed at our youth, well, that’s just a pitiful accusation. Let’s not let Big Brotherisms and political correctness replace parents’ accountability and innate common sense. Let’s not utilize censorship just because the end supposedly justifies the means.

When walking down the street with a child, are we to throw our hands in front of their eyes if we spy someone smoking? No, that’s completely unrealistic.

As are the demands made by the zealots who think they know what’s best for everyone. **CM**



For years, public health advocates have relied on scare tactics (and PowerPoint presentations) to help them stage conferences charging Hollywood’s major media conglomerates for “glamorizing” smoking. Photo courtesy of Associated Press/Nick Ut.

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