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About 1,500 Americans are killed each year in cigarette fires, according to government estimates, making cigarettes the country's leading cause of fatal fires. These fires have caused up to 7,000 serious and \$ 400 million a year in property loss. Yet research shows that small design changes in cigarettes would make them less prone to ignite furniture and bedding. Lawmakers in increasing numbers have called for legislation to set a fire-resistance standard for cigarettes. But no such laws have yet been passed.

Determined to prevent regulation of their products, the cigarette makers several years ago launched a sophisticated Campaign to defuse the issue. They quietly began doling out grants and contracts to fire departments and fire safety organizations, hoping to buy the favor of those whose credibility on the subject would be unquestioned. This outreach to the firefighters is part of a wider effort by the industry to improve its image and court sympathetic groups - including arts, labor, women's and minority organizations - whose support or at least neutrality is politically vital.

By last year the tobacco industry was, according to one of its lawyers, underwriting "the largest privately financed fire education/fire prevention program in the United States." Although industry officials refuse to give a specific figure, they say this investment is in the millions of dollars.

And the investment is paying off. Exploiting its ties with firefighter leaders, the tobacco industry has been able to get about twenty state and national fire-prevention groups to snub a tough bill, now before Congress, that deals with cigarette fires and to endorse instead toothless legislation promoted by the industry. In some cases, the cigarette companies drafted the statements made by those endorsing their bill. Burdened by public mistrust, the tobacco

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industry has thus managed to work its will through credible organizations dedicated to saving lives.

The industry's fire-prevention allies have denied trying to repay their tobacco benefactors. Indeed, the cigarette makers' campaign has been so successful that some fire groups have no idea that the misleadingly named Fire Safe Cigarette Implementation Act was in fact drafted by the tobacco industry in order to deny passage of stronger legislation. The industry bill sounded "like motherhood and apple pie," said Mark Kammers, a former president of the Washington State Fire Fighters' Association, which endorsed the bill without discussion.

Although the notion of fire-safe cigarettes has been around for decades, the current battle started with legislation filed by Massachusetts Representative Joe Moakley in 1979, after a cigarette fire killed a family in his district. Moakley and Senators Alan Cranston and John Heinz at first made little headway, but their chances improved as several state legislatures took up similar measures to require fire-safe cigarettes. Leading the countercharge for the industry was the Tobacco Institute, a political research and lobbying organization with an annual budget of at least \$ 29 million, according to Internal Revenue Service disclosures under the Freedom of Information Act.

The industry's resistance is partly due to its fear of the unknown. Despite a drop in smoking, cigarettes remain among the most profitable of all consumer products, generating about \$ 35 billion a year in domestic retail sales. Firesafe cigarettes might prove no less popular, but with billions of dollars at stake, the industry doesn't want to take chances and has preferred to focus on the problem of individual carelessness instead. The industry also fears the encroachment of government regulation. Although subject to advertising restrictions, tobacco has been exempt from the types of health and safety regulations imposed on other hazardous products. In the eyes of the cigarette makers, a fire-resistance standard would shatter that immunity and perhaps lead to even more regulation.

In the early 1980s the cigarette makers were successful in holding off fire-safety legislation in Congress and at the state level, but they knew the dam might one day break. The time had come to "position the tobacco industry as a concerned (part of the solution' to influentials," the public relations firm Burson-Marsteller told the Tobacco Institute several years ago in a private internal memorandum. The industry had long contended that fire-safe cigarettes weren't technically feasible, but even some in the industry did not believe this. The argument was "politically inadequate," said Mike Kerrigan, a Tobacco Institute official, in a 1982 memo. "The technology does exist as reflected in certain European cigarettes, as well as More and Sherman cigarettes." The memo recommended "a program of working with Firefighters in matters of public

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education, fire safety, etc."

As fire-safety bills gained momentum in several states, the industry struck a deal with Congress that held off the states and bought time for its agenda. Compromise legislation, passed in 1984, created a Federal task force including industry representatives to determine through a three-year study if fire-safe cigarettes were technically feasible.

By then the Tobacco Institute had already begun providing millions of dollars' worth of grants, equipment and P.R. services to thousands of fire departments and groups across the country. Scores of metropolitan fire departments got audio-visual equipment and educational materials to run community fire-prevention workshops; the Milwaukee Fire Department got smoke detectors to give to the poor; the San Francisco Fire Department was given a Chinese-language television spot urging use of smoke alarms. The institute also paid fire officials and experts to develop fire-safety curriculum materials and paid tens of thousands of dollars to underwrite training courses by the International Society of Fire Service Instructors (I.S.F.S.I.). For the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the institute produced membership brochures. For the National Volunteer Fire Council (N.V.F.C.), the institute produced fund-raising and membership recruiting kits that have been distributed to about 5,000 volunteer fire departments.

Many beneficiaries saw no problem in taking tobacco lucre. "If they're part of the problem, I think they should be part of the solution," said Edward McCormack Jr., chief executive officer for the I.S.F.S.I. The tobacco companies "have done an admirable job," McCormack said. "I think they have become responsible corporate citizens."

Not everyone agrees. "It would be like the international chiefs of police getting funding from the Mafia to fight crime," remarked Andrew McGuire, who heads the Trauma Center Foundation in San Francisco and has campaigned for years for fire-safe cigarettes.

The industry has lost no chance to win points. In 1982, when the U.S. Fire Administration was imperiled by Reagan budget cuts, tobacco lobbyists helped rescue it. "Our efforts in cooperation with fire groups to save the U. S. Fire Administration continue to be welcomed by the fire community," boasted an internal Tobacco institute memo in 1986. Meanwhile, the industry sent forth its newfound allies to put out brushfires in the states. When adverse legislation on cigarette fires was introduced in Massachusetts, the institute lined up fire officials to oppose it and "drafted appropriate testimony for the fire chiefs," an internal memo said. By 1986, according to another memo, the institute was "68 percent toward our goal of 200 working relationships within the fire community."

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Once the Congressionally mandated Federal task force issued its findings late in 1987, the cigarette makers needed all the working relationships they could get. Through ignition tests of experimental cigarettes, the panel concluded that cigarettes would be more fire safe if they were thinner, with looser-packed tobacco, in less porous paper. Tobacco officials had long contended that if fire-safe cigarettes were possible, they would burn differently and produce more toxic smoke (an interesting argument from people who deny that smoking causes disease). However, the task force found that fire-safe experimental cigarettes produced "tar, nicotine, and carbon monoxide yields . . . within the range of yields from the best-selling commercial cigarettes."

Moakley, Cranston and Heinz pounced on these findings, introducing new legislation. Their bill would give the Consumer Product Safety Commission (C.P.S.C.) a year to establish a fire-safety standard for cigarettes and a method to test compliance. The tobacco firms would have another year to bring their products into line.

The Federal task force had listed potential areas for additional study, including research into the commercial potential of fire-safe smokes. So the industry countered with the proposed Fire Safe Cigarette Implementation Act, which calls for three more years of studies with no provision for action later. Virginia Representative Rick Boucher, a principal sponsor of the industry measure, complained that the Moakley bill called on the C.P.S.C. "to set a standard now for something that science hasn't said a standard can be set for." The industry "could stretch this thing out to the year 2000," with "study upon study upon study," complained Jeanne Weigum, president of the Minnesota Association for Nonsmokers. "When you're talking about innocent children dying in cigarette-caused fires . . . you've got to go after solving the problem as quickly as possible," said the Trauma Center's McGuire. "Clearly the industry bill does not have that as its goal."

Boucher's main co-sponsor is another Virginia lawmaker, Representative Thomas Bliley Jr. Federal records show that from 1985 to 1988, Bliley - whose constituents include thousands of employees of industry leader Philip Morris - was given \$ 34,500 in campaign contributions from tobacco industry political action committees, while Boucher received \$ 16,700. Tobacco companies also paid Bliley \$ 20,000 in speaker's fees from 1985 to 1987.

Indeed, tobacco officials apparently drafted the Boucher - Bliley bill. Boucher denies this, but a Bliley aide said the industry "came up with . . . basically the legislation that we introduced, at our request."

With the issue back before Congress, the Tobacco Institute anxiously scanned the horizon, identifying several of "the potentially more zealous" firefighter

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leaders in a 1988 memo, which went on to say, "Each of these people could be preempted by others from their organizations (which should be encouraged.)" But in fact few of the fire organizations have given cigarette makers any trouble. The National Fire Protection Association, the international Association of Fire Fighters and the International Association of Fire Chiefs have endorsed the Moakley bill, but the tobacco industry boasts about twenty fire-service endorsements.

A key industry ally has been Janes Monihan, chair of the National Volunteer Fire Council and president of the Joint Council of National Fire Service Organizations, a sort of steering committee for the major fire groups. Outspoken supporters of the Boucher-Bliley bill, Monihan and the N.V.F.C. have arranged endorsements by state groups.

Monihan expressed appreciation for the efforts of the tobacco industry, but denied any undue influence on his group. He said the industry bill recognized the need for cooperation among all parties, including the cigarette manufacturers. "There's a simplistic answer to things and there's a practical answer," he said. "Going head-to-head hasn't gotten us anywhere."

But the N.V.F.C.'s ties with the industry go beyond a simple meeting of the minds. When I first called Monihan more than a year ago, he told me he consulted a Tobacco Institute official before deciding to call back. And in a recent interview, Monihan acknowledged that drafts of his group's press release and fact sheet endorsing the industry bill were prepared by the Tobacco Institute.

Moreover, the N.V.F.C. has allowed a Tobacco institute consultant, Peter Sparber, to double as one of its officials. Sparber is a former Tobacco Institute vice president and was for years coordinator of its strategy on the fire issue. Sparber joined members of Congress and fire-service leaders in Washington, D.C., at a February press conference to promote fire sprinkler legislation, going by the title of legislative director of the N.V.F.C. Recently, five different Pennsylvania fire-safety organizations endorsed the industry bill in identical letters to members of Congress, right down to the "cc: Peter Sparber" beneath the signature.

Iowa Firemen's Association President Robert Platz, who signed that group's endorsement, said he was not aware of the Moakley bill. The president of the Oregon Fire Chiefs' Association, which also endorsed the industry bill, referred questions to the Oregon state fire marshal, whom he identified as his group's main source of information. But Fire Marshal Olin Greene, who also endorsed the industry bill, said he had not known at the time that the Moakley bill existed. Greene also said he did not recall who briefed him on the issue, although a notation at the bottom of his endorsement letter showed that a copy went to the Tobacco Institute.

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In February, Roger McGary, past president of the International Society of Fire Service Instructors, wrote the leader of another group to request its endorsement of the industry bill. "Should you have any specific questions please contact Peter G. Sparber," McGary wrote, giving Sparber's phone number. McGary himself was not up on specifics of the bill: "Some of this stuff is a little foggy for me," he said.

With Congressional hearings on the two bills pending, prospects for passage of the Moakley legislation are not the best. Said Andrew McGuire: "Muddying the waters is the goal of the tobacco industry, and they are doing a wonderful job."

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