

Reviews

Sarah Milov. *The Cigarette: A Political History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. 400 pp. ISBN 978-0-674-24121-3, \$35.00 (cloth).

Manufacturing and selling cigarettes was very big business in the twentieth-century United States. So big that dozens of talented historians have written about the industry, covering business strategy, consumer culture, public health, and the politics of obfuscating scientific knowledge. Sarah Milov has confidently charged into this crowded literature, offering a genuinely original and sophisticated history of the cigarette business from a fresh perspective. *The Cigarette* focuses not on Big Tobacco, but on the southern farmers, federal and state legislators, and anti-smoking activists and business leaders whose ideas about the appropriate place of cigarettes in American life shaped the twentieth-century political economy of tobacco “from seed to smoke” (295).

The book begins by covering territory familiar to many business historians. The cigarette rolling machine enabled James B. Duke and like-minded businessmen to erect an incredibly profitable oligopoly around the mass production of a product previously considered inferior to cigars, pipes, and loose-leaf tobacco. As cigarettes gained favor from the 1920s onward—aided by advertising but also by the addictions of American soldiers provided with cigarettes in their World War I rations—the business of making, buying, and selling tobacco became firmly embedded in the nation’s consumer and political culture.

The heart of the book traces the rise and fall of what Milov, drawing on the work of Brian Balogh, labels an associationalist approach to tobacco politics. Milov explains how New Dealers in Congress and the Department of Agriculture confronted the collapse of tobacco prices during the Great Depression by instituting a production control system. The New Deal farm programs proved popular with growers in tobacco-dependent states like North Carolina, partly because they helped sustain rural economies that otherwise would have collapsed, but perhaps even more so because they were disproportionately beneficial to white landowners. Milov produces a sophisticated analysis of New Deal agricultural programs in action, explaining their myriad effects, both intended and unintended, on the economic fortunes of rural and urban Americans for decades to come.

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As a product of associationalism, tobacco's New Deal relied on private organizations, including big businesses, to achieve farm price stabilization. For decades, private businesses received benefits in turn, including state-supported efforts to drum up export markets for American cigarettes, such as a \$450 million Marshall Plan effort to hook West Germans on American-style tobacco. (The French, preferring their nationalist Gauloises, declined the offer.) Southern tobacco farmers increasingly allied themselves with the interests of the once-reviled big tobacco companies, supporting the firms even in their most outlandish efforts to sow doubt regarding the health hazards of smoking. Southern Democrats in Congress completed the "iron triangle" by ensuring that attacks on the tobacco program would rarely be heard, and certainly not included in legislation.

Cracks in the associationalist order began to appear in the 1960s. Scientific evidence of the harms of smoking mounted, but southern legislators made no move to challenge the status quo. A renegade legal associate named John Banzhaf developed an end-run strategy in 1967, petitioning the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to require television broadcasters to balance the time taken up by cigarette advertisements with public health messages about smoking's hazards. The FCC agreed, blindsiding the tobacco industry, and igniting what Milov calls "the invention of the nonsmoker."

In the 1970s, advocates for nonsmokers increasingly declared a "right" to breathe clean air—in airplanes, offices, and public spaces. Finding few sympathetic listeners in Congress, nonsmoking activists turned instead to the courts. In the 1980s, activists additionally pursued HR departments at major corporations, seeking to convince them that employees who did not smoke were more productive and produced fewer costly liabilities. By that time, even the once-sacred agricultural support system for tobacco was increasingly under attack, with the Democratic Party focusing more on suburban constituents' interests. Reading the signals on the horizon, southern farm legislators rewrote the tobacco support system, first in 1982 to shift funding sources from taxpayers to farmers, then in 1986 to enable cigarette manufacturers to play a stronger role in setting the market price for tobacco. Today tobacco is grown strictly under contract, with prices and all other terms dictated by oligopsonistic tobacco firms.

Nonsmokers thus succeeded in breaking the farmer-business-government collusion that structured the American tobacco economy for half a century. But by insisting on and litigating for individual rights, campaigners also helped undermine political support for New Deal-style regulatory agencies. Symbolic of the ways in which the anti-smoking campaigns undermined government power while bolstering corporate power in the name of individual rights was the 1998 Master

Settlement Agreement, in which tobacco firms paid \$206 billion to U.S. states for twenty-five years in exchange for an end to class-action liabilities. Wall Street greeted the settlement by running up stock prices for tobacco firms, while public health advocates bemoaned the agreement as a death knell for fundamentally transformative attacks on the cigarette business.

By decentering Big Tobacco, Milov's book provides a remarkably original way of understanding how Big Tobacco profited in the twentieth century. The book is thick with fascinating detail and is consistently sharp in its explanation and analysis of complicated political and economic contexts. Some readers will, however, find the book overly focused on the United States, and the state of North Carolina in particular. Indeed, Milov's exploration of the transformation of American politics and business in the twentieth century could have benefited from more comparative analysis and attention to shifting global economic contexts. We learn, for instance, that the United Kingdom banned cigarettes from television as early as 1965, and that Brazil and Malawi became at least as important tobacco producers as North Carolina somewhere along the line, but both points are raised as sidelines to the central U.S.-focused narrative. Nor do we learn how it came to pass that of the top six tobacco firms in the world today, just two are U.S.-based. Perhaps that will be the subject of another great book by Sarah Milov.

Shane Hamilton 

University of York

E-mail: shane.hamilton@york.ac.uk

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Daniel Vaca. *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. 329 pp. ISBN 978-0-674-98011-2, \$39.95 (cloth).

Daniel Vaca's *Evangelicals Incorporated* is an in-depth exploration of the history of evangelical publishing and bookselling. To the uninitiated, this may seem like a niche topic, but Vaca compellingly argues that this industry has been a driving force in shaping commerce, politics, and religion in the United States since at least the nineteenth century. His book should be required reading for any scholar of these subjects.