

# **Smokers Unite To Fight World Hunger: A Satirical Look At The Philip Morris Company's Humanitarian Diversification**

Sometimes a prophetic event will occur and of course at the time, we have no idea that what we are experiencing is in fact a precursor for things to come. Writing this piece was just such an occurrence. I have always been proficient at using words, either spoken or written, to express my inner thoughts, observations or opinions. When my thoughts/opinions/observations are too long and involved to be reduced to a bit in my comedy routine, I will set them down upon paper in long form. Most times I expect that no one, other than myself, will ever have an occasion to be privy to the in-depth meanderings of my mind. However, as I previously stated, writing this piece in the summer of 2001 was a sign of things to come. Therefore, it is now mandated that its contents be revealed.

I wrote this piece, because I get extremely irritated by attempts at media manipulation or any sort of manipulation for that matter. So upon witnessing such a blatant attempt by the Philip Morris Company, during a commercial for their subsidiary, Kraft Foods, using the backdrop of the misery caused by the war in Bosnia, as my grandfather would say, "my blood got to boilin' and I got to writin'". Little did I know, at the time of furiously pecking upon my computer keyboard, that not more than a month later, I would be diagnosed with lung cancer, as a result of having been exposed to secondhand smoke from all the years I had been performing in smoke-filled comedy venues. If I were an "Oliver Stone" conspiracy theorist type, I would be thinking that the Philip Morris Co. had spies in my computer and somehow turned my "tongue in cheek" ravings, into a very vindictive joke on me. It was not until 2004, before a presentation that I was to give on June 7th at the Women's Tobacco Prevention Network National Partner's Meeting and long after my surgery in 2001 to remove the cancer and along with it--one of the lobes of my lung, did I happen upon an old computer file that said "Misc. Rants-June 01". As I read this "rant", chills went up my spine, made an illegal left turn and then stopped right in the middle of the traffic of my memories. Disbelief flooded my consciousness—how could I have written this with the content hitting so close to my own subsequent tobacco related health crisis and not remembered writing it? How with all that time I spent on my computer, while home recovering from lung cancer. Then calm was restored and traffic on "Memory Lane" unsnarled, because I realized that I wasn't supposed to remember--until now. Now that I'm healed--now that the ordeal has strengthen my spirit and now that I'm using my experiences, talents and that strengthened spirit to bring more public focus to the health related dangers of tobacco, for smokers and non-smokers alike—especially children. I believe the following "rant" to be ethereally orchestrated, so this is not just my usual mind meandering. I wrote the words, but I now realize that I was only acting in the role of the scribe.

I hate being commercially sucked in. I hate advertisers using emotional imagery, familial ties, heartstrings tugging and all around shmoltz to sell their products. It absolutely ticks me off when symbols of trust, compassion, honor, dignity, courage, sympathy, innocence, etc. are connected to a company that exemplifies none of these qualities. We are bombarded with gratuitous fakery for the sake of corporate profits and none more fake or gratuitous as a commercial for the Philip Morris Company, the "Grim Reaper", of the tobacco companies, in which a "representative" of the Philip Morris Co., is seen accompanying an airlift of food to displaced people in war torn Bosnia. This is of course being done using the cover of Kraft Foods, which is a subsidiary of the Philip Morris Co. and serves as a legitimate front for the illicit main source of it's income—"combustible cancer sticks" aka cigarettes.

The image portrays the Philip Morris Co. as a humanitarian and tries to hit on every compassionate cylinder. First, they begin with using a female as the face and voice of the company's profound concern for the health and well being of the people of Bosnia. It's natural for us to accept the image of a woman bringing food in times of crisis and sympathy expressed in a feminine voice just sounds more sincere, more believable. To enhance the image of the nurturing woman, there needs to be a nexus created to children, so it's no coincidence that the first person this "angel of mercy" encounters is a little boy, who happens to speak perfect English, except for what appears to either be an attempt at a slight accent or a slight speech impediment--perhaps to further play on our emotions. The whole scene plays to the voice of the woman extolling the efforts of the Philip Morris Company as a combination of Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Santa Claus and Lassie. At this point, if this were a football game, the ref would have thrown a flag for "piling on". Throughout the entire commercial we are subjected to the Philip Morris Co. being lauded as a virtuous company that gives, so the less fortunate, may live.

After seeing that commercial, I guess you're suppose to feel so guilty that instead of making a donation to the Red Cross,

you immediately take up smoking as a means of contributing to the humanitarian effort. As a non-smoker, you'd have to question your self-worth as a human being, thinking, "Here I am, a selfish, self-centered, inconsiderate, non-smoker--not smoking while people are dying of hunger all over the world and the Philip Morris Co. financially struggles to feed them. I have wasted my life following this smoke-free lifestyle. Why?? So, I could stay healthy...always about me and my needs. I have two good lungs, would it have killed me to risk having to have one removed, due to cancer when it would help eradicate world hunger?? What's a little emphysema, when children are going to bed without having a nutritious helping of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese?? Not only do I not smoke--I scorn those who do. I disdainfully judge all those self-sacrificing individuals who are responsible for the bulk of the Phillip Morris profits that enables them to assist so many starving people. Who's the scum of the earth now, huh, "Pink Lungs"?!? Look at me...sitting here, time after time, taking in unobstructed breaths of air--filling my lungs full to capacity and not caring that there are people in the world, day after day, whose stomachs remain empty, because I'm afraid of some tar messing up the color scheme of my lungs. The fact that pink and black only looks good on hookers is no excuse--nobody's going to see inside my chest to know. The nerve of me, entertaining such petty concerns! I am thoroughly ashamed of myself--totally disgusted. I'm obviously a weak self-indulgent piece of bellybutton lint--not fit to walk the earth with all those chain-smoking martyrs! I make myself sick, just thinking about me. There I go again, thinking about me, when I should be thinking about making myself sick for the benefit of those less fortunate than me.

Then I realize that it's not too late to change, to alter my self-absorption, to stop putting my health before others. Not too late to start caring and smoking, secure in the knowledge that I'm helping to make the world a better place. In fact, I could go out into "my hood" and adopt some underprivileged black kids to help with my humanitarian efforts, after all the tobacco companies spend a large percent of their advertising budget putting up billboards in low income minority neighborhoods, obviously in a selfless effort to indoctrinate them early and often, with a giving...smoking spirit. Just imagine what a "commercial" picture of humanitarian family bliss we could portray, while sitting at the dinner table--eating a meal, of course, totally prepared by using nothing but Kraft Foods products (recipes available on the website). Then to really get across the message of responsibility and setting priorities, instead of me reminding the kids to finish eating their "Velveeta" covered broccoli, I would tell them, "you better smoke all your cigarettes--don't you know there are starving kids in Bosnia and India and Africa and China. There are a lot of cigarettes in that carton left to smoke, before you all go to bed, so I'd get started if I were you and don't just smoke the ones with the filters on them either. If I don't hear some coughing in the next five minutes, somebody is going to wish they were dead."

Then, watching the kids through the haze of the collective family smoke--puffing and gagging, I'd start getting all choked up just thinking about the joy we're bringing to others or maybe I'm just choking on all the secondhand smoke from my underprivileged children's cigarettes. Either way, I'll look right into the camera and with an emotion-laden voice and squinted eyes, because by now, I can't see anything through all that smoke, I'll say, "This is all because of you--Philip Morris. So, bless you, for helping me and the other non-smokers to see the light of your cigarette as a humanitarian beacon, guiding our heads out of our butts, so we can start putting your cigarettes in our mouths and the mouths of our little ones and creating the only butts that matter--those from the Philip Morris brand. You have shown us the true sacrifice of giving and those non-smokers who still refuse to give from the heart and lungs, can just kiss our as...ashtray. We couldn't have done it, without you being the leader of the pack! In fact, the next time I adopt another poor black kid into our giving...smoking family, I'm going to change his name to Marlboro--that's how much your humanitarianism has inspired me!!" As I wipe the tears from my eyes, due in part to the "fake" emotion and the irritation from being in a room full of smoke--the camera goes to black, as well as the Philip Morris profit margin and unfortunately, also the lungs of "humanitarian" smokers. Commercial aside, maybe, on second thought, I'll just confine my humanitarianism to giving to the appropriate charitable organizations. I think in the long run, it'll probably be more cost effective to write a check--than to lose a lung...or my life.