R.J. Reynold's 'cleaner' cigarettes: A breakthrough or a smoke screen?

By Simson L. Garfinkel

Banning cigarette smoking has been quite the rage lately. Both my undergraduate *alma mater*—MIT—and Columbia decided last spring to tell smokers they couldn't indulge their habit in campus buildings. But for all the legislation, the fact is that these new rules are nearly impossible to force on unwilling members of our community.

Imagine how much simpler life would be for smokers and nonsmokers alike if cigarettes were smokeless. Smokers could indulge themselves without fear of reprisals—and without bothering the rest of us.

Fortunately, we don't have to imagine any more. Last month, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. announced a new kind of cigarette, one that uses a charcoal heat source to generate hot gases. The user sucks these gases through a wad of tobacco, a "flavor capsule," and a filter—and finally into his (and increasingly her) lungs. Reynolds plans to start marketing this new contraption in 1988. We should be suspicious of the cigarette maker's newest defense against the anti-smoking lobby.

Since charcoal burns more cleanly than tobacco, the new cigarette is supposed to generate less smoke than today's cigarettes. And since the paper casing doesn't burn, there's

no need for ashtrays. The new cigarette even solves the fire hazard of today's smokes by extinguishing itself when the user is finished.

Reynolds is gambling that "Operation Black Hole's" technological fix can overcome the resolve and growing legislative power of the anti-smoking movement. Perhaps the company's efforts would be better spent finding a new use for its tobacco plantations.

The company has been very careful to avoid saying that its new cigarette is "safe." (It isn't.) Instead, Reynolds claims that the product is "cleaner," but the impression conveyed is the same. And the claim of "cleaner" smoking may have the unintended effect of landing RJR in court, either for fraudulent advertising (in the case of the new cigarette), gross negligence (for not developing the new cigarette sooner), or both.

Excitement over the new cigarette is probably misplaced. Smokers, like most other drug addicts, are notoriously loathe

See Smoke, p.5

Simson Garfinkel, a 1987 graduate of MIT, is a first-year student at the Journalism School.

Smoke
continued from page three

to substitute one form of addiction for another until forced to. Reynolds is already admitting that the new cigarette will probably cost more than existing brands, so few smokers are likely to switch. Nor is the new cigarette likely to deal a death blow to the anti-smoking campaign, for smoke is not the real issue.

You've heard all the reasons for the public smoking bans: cigarette smoke is irritating and unhealthy to nonsmokers, lighted cigarettes are dangerous (as I can attest, having seen a child burned in the face by a careless smoker), and nonsmokers have a right not to be exposed to these sorts of risks. The party line follows that we also have a duty to protect smokers' children from growing up in smoke-filled homes.

The hidden motive is the belief that smoking is unhealthy for the smoker and highly addictive to casual users (including children). Thus, we as a society have a responsibility to protect our citizens from the influence of tobacco. The same rationale is used successfully to ban other drugs, such as marijuana and cocaine.

Personally, I have a third motive for opposing smoking: aesthetics. Smokers have terrible breath, their mouths taste funny, and they have a tendency to litter. Almost anywhere you

travel in the United States today, you can find cigarette butts strewn about on the pavement or ground out on floors in office buildings.

Although Reynolds' new cigarette may produce less smoke, it seems unlikely that it will be completely free of the noxious and cancer-causing fumes of today's cigarettes. Otherwise, why would smokers bother with it? Although the problem of passive smoking may be reduced by the new cigarette, it is by no mean eliminated.

And as an answer to the health hazards caused by smokers, RJR's smokeless smokes are likely to exacerbate the public's fear of smoking, not ease it. The problem is the proposed "flavor capsule": nobody outside RJR knows what's in it, and RJR isn't talking. And it doesn't have to. Tobacco is specifically exempted from control by the Food and Drug Administration and from the Consumer Product Safety Agency.

So RJR could put a deadly poison inside the flavor capsule, tell people that the poison enhances taste, and legally sell it. Indeed, this is exactly what the company has been doing with its conventional cigarettes all along, resulting today in 350,000 deaths a year.

One of the greatest dangers of the new cigarette is the advertising campaign likely to accompany its introduction. The idea of a "cleaner" cigarette may attract some children who otherwise wouldn't have taken up smoking. And it may convince some smokers who had considered quitting to switch to the new smokeless smokes.

With national cigarette consumption falling every year since 1981, both of these trends could help shore up profits at the world's largest marketer of cancer sticks. We should recognize R.J.Reynolds' new cigarette for what it is: a smoke screen.