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Let the Guy Smoke

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Obama Is Probably Fibbing About Giving Up Cigarettes. That's Okay.

By Michael Kinsley
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It is still okay to discriminate against one group of Americans. This discrimination is not only legal, it is encouraged. You see members of this oppressed minority huddled outside in rain and snow, forbidden to seek refuge. No one feels sorry for them. And yet we may have just elected one of these pariahs as president.

Smoking is a disgusting habit that can kill you and those around you. [Barack Obama](#) claims to have quit, but the evidence is ambiguous. And the media's lack of interest in this question supports the charge that Obama is enjoying a honeymoon with the press. Compare the attention given to [John McCain](#)'s melanoma -- a health problem more likely than smoking to kill him in the next four years, but also a problem beyond his control. Smoking, by contrast, is behavior. It sets a deplorable example for young people, millions of whom Obama has inspired into active citizenship.

Obama has never denied that he was a smoker for much of his adult life. He said as early as February 2007 that he had promised his wife he would quit in order to run for president. He also admitted as recently as this June -- when his presidential campaign was about three-quarters over -- that he hadn't done so. In May the Obama campaign released a carefully worded letter from his doctor, who wrote that Obama's "own history included intermittent cigarette smoking. He has quit this practice on several occasions and is currently using Nicorette gum with success." Obama has declined to amplify.

The instructions on Nicorette say to stop smoking before starting with the gum and to stop using the gum after 12 weeks. We know, because he has said as much, that Obama was still smoking the month after his doctor said he was using the gum. And even if he smoked his last cigarette on May 28, the day before his doctor said he was on gum therapy, the 12 weeks would have elapsed Aug. 20. Wouldn't you think that some reporter since then would have asked Obama whether the gum had worked? Yet no one seems to have asked.

According to Nicorette's Web site, the gum "can more than double your chances of quitting versus just willpower alone." Those chances are less than one in 20. Double that is one in 10. Obama is a man of impressive determination and self-discipline, as we are learning. But it would be astonishing if he managed to beat these odds during the past high-stress summer.

Now, I have been enjoying Obama euphoria as much as anyone. Without it, the prospect would be depressing indeed. But where is the skepticism? If Obama actually has accomplished the miracle of giving up cigarettes at the apogee of a presidential race, he should be happy to let us know this and add to his superman image. And if he hasn't? Well, if he is straight with us about it, we should forgive him. So he's not a superman. Neither are we. In a democracy, that is a good thing for ruler and ruled to know they have in common. Furthermore, as presidential vices go, this one is not near the top. As for

being a role model for youths, Obama's good habits outweigh this single bad one. He's great on hydration, apparently.

Obama is 47. A recent [Journal of the National Cancer Institute](#) study determined that 49 out of 1,000 American male former smokers age 45 (close enough) will die of all causes over the next decade, compared with 91 out of 1,000 who are still smoking. If he is still smoking, Obama is doubling his chance of an early death. Of course, he increases that risk by becoming president as well. But we allow candidates to take that second risk. Whether he takes the first one is his business, too.

Another question is what effect a president desperate for a cigarette and trying to quit might have on your life expectancy and mine. Obama's steely calm is now one of our country's major assets. If he needs an occasional cigarette to preserve it, let's hand him an ashtray, offer him a light and look the other way.

Michael Kinsley, a columnist for Time magazine, is an occasional contributor to The Post.

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