

Motion Picture Chief Defends Smoking in Films

Washington should not legislate smoking on the silver screen, says the man who manages motion picture interests.

“I don’t believe that whatever the director does ought to incite the intervention of the government in any form,” Jack Valenti, CEO of the [Motion Picture Association of America](#), told the Senate Commerce Committee last Tuesday, according to an Associated Press [article](#).

Washington lit Hollywood up on this issue because of recent studies showing that teens who watch films featuring smokers are more likely to become smokers themselves.

Several options surfaced during Valenti’s meeting with the committee: running public service announcements before films, cutting back on smoking in films altogether, or including smoking in the content descriptors accompanying ratings.

As for the latter, Valenti disagreed with further amending the ratings system, which he devised in 1968. In 1990, the MPAA began attaching content descriptors to the rating. For example, 2003 Oscar winner “Chicago” was rated PG-13 for “sexual content and dialogue, violence and thematic elements.” Before the change, the movie would simply have been rated PG-13.

“Chicago,” however, has been fingered by anti-smoking activist groups as a film that romanticizes smoking. Such groups would like the MPAA to indicate when a film does just that.

Valenti said the MPAA’s descriptive comments address issues that parents have shown the most concern about—and smoking was not one of them. He also added that if smoking descriptors are included, then other activists will want their pet

issues included as well.

“I want to make sure this rating system does not get cluttered up with a bunch of other people who have equally passionate views that want to be included,” Valenti told the committee, according to AP. “I’ve lived this for 38 years and I understand it very well.”

At least one senator wasn’t convinced.

“Why is it OK to modify [films] for nudity, for language, but it’s not OK to modify it for tobacco—the number one preventable health problem we have in this country?” asked Republican Sen. John Ensign of Nevada during the hearing, according to a BBC news [article](#).

As for the notion of running PSAs prior to films, Valenti said that option would be handled by theater owners, not studios. The BBC reported that Valenti personally favored this approach.

But when it comes to cutting back on smoking on film, Valenti refused to interfere with a storyteller’s creative freedom.

“I’ve got to tell you I believe it is his right to tell the story as he chooses to tell it,” he said, according to AP.

Valenti, 82, will retire this year after 38 years as head of the MPAA. He earned a bachelor’s degree from the University of Houston and an M.B.A. from Harvard. He flew 51 combat missions in World War II and, while working for then Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, was in the motorcade for President John F. Kennedy when Kennedy was shot.

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