

# The Dallas Morning News

Texas' Leading Newspaper

Dallas, Texas, Wednesday, March 29, 2006

[DallasNews.com](http://DallasNews.com)

50¢

# Funny side of tobacco debate

**MOVIES:** Film tackles issues  
of smoking and lobbying

By **CHRIS VOGNAR**

Staff Critic

Big Tobacco's last starring role on the big screen came in 1999's *The Insider*. It wasn't a particularly flattering portrayal.

Whistle-blower Jeffrey Wigand, played by Russell Crowe, dodged death threats and

---

**'Thank You for Smoking'**  
review, Friday in  
GuideLive Movies

---

smear campaigns as he spoke out against the cover-up of nicotine addiction. The movie was played for thrills.

*Thank You for Smoking*, however, is played for laughs. Opening Friday, the carcinogenic satire, based on Christopher Buckley's 1994 novel, dares to find humor in a subject that raises the hackles of smokers and non-smokers alike.



Boston Globe

**Jason Reitman brings humor to the smoking debate.**

See  
**'SMOKING'**  
Page 2G

# 'Smoking'

Continued from Page 1G

"For some reason, tobacco really makes people mad," said writer and director Jason Reitman in Dallas recently. "It's not like other issues of vice. I don't know exactly why, but I can feel it, and I think that's why the book works so well."

This sense of outrage from both sides of the cigarette aisle — "Your secondhand smoke is killing me!" "What, can't I light up anywhere these days?" — is a target of *Smoking's* satiric barbs. The hero, or antihero, depending on your point of view, is tobacco lobbyist Nick Naylor. Played by the perfectly smug Aaron Eckhart, Nick is a master at the fine art of spin. If you say the sky is blue, he can convince you it's orange in a matter of seconds.

Nick plies his trade for the Institute for Tobacco Studies, a fictional lobbying juggernaut paid by Big

Tobacco to spread the good word on cigarettes. The institute's goals include increasing tobacco's glamour factor by raising the profile of cigarettes in the movies. The movie industry is represented by Rob Lowe as a slithery superagent.

Mr. Reitman says such efforts wouldn't work in this day and age of tobacco-lawsuit fallout and image control. The 1998 master settlement agreement against Big Tobacco made cigarette advertising and product placement a far riskier business than ever before.

"At this point, Big Tobacco is too smart for that," says the filmmaker. "They're so self-aware, and they know how most people feel about them. They're trying to turn themselves into a big American company that makes all sorts of products, from soda to snack food to cigarettes. That's their motto right now. It would be too easy for them to be vilified for trying to infiltrate Hollywood."

But raising tobacco's profile was common Hollywood practice in the

'80s and '90s.

Back in 1983, *Superman II* was a virtual Marlboro advertisement; kidnappers even threw Clark Kent into a van adorned with a picture of the Marlboro Man. Cigarettes could even be used for gallows humor: Recall the hacking coroner in *Chinatown*, complaining about his darned cough. And there was Eddie Murphy, brandishing his pack of Lucky Strikes in *Beverly Hills Cop*.

"There used to be a number of agencies going around paying for placement," says Kori Titus, program manager for the Hackademy Awards, which calls attention to what it deems inappropriate cigarette smoking in the movies. "There was a real big push to get Hollywood addicted to tobacco. They would make sure an actor's favorite brand would show up in his mailbox. And there were efforts to work with scriptwriters to get cigarettes in scripts."

But *Thank You for Smoking* isn't just about smokes and the movies. It's also a cynical but oddly sympathetic take on the much-maligned world of lobbyists.

Nick is the Big Kahuna in the film's lobbying world, the guy who teaches his young son that any point can be argued, and any argument can be won. But he has company. He dines regularly with a gun lobbyist (David Koechner) and an alcohol lobbyist (Maria Bello).

They call themselves the Merchants of Death.

"Lobbyists love the book," says Mr. Reitman. "They're not embarrassed. They think it's the greatest thing ever. It treats them fairly, and

my movie treats them fairly. I had liquor lobbyists come up to me after a screening in D.C. and tell me how much they enjoyed the movie."

The lobbying business has been scorned far and wide in the wake of the Jack Abramoff influence-peddling scandal.

"Lobbyists generally get a very harsh rap in the media," says Caren Z. Turner, a Washington lobbyist. "I represent a client as an attorney would represent a client in a courtroom. You're an advocate for that

position, and you have an obligation to advocate to the best of your ability. Is that spin?"

To Mr. Reitman, it is. And he has no problem with it.

"The thing with spin is that you know you're being spun, and it's harmless," he says.

Cigarette smoke may be getting thinner, at least in public opinion. But smokescreens will never be out of fashion.

E-mail cvognar@dallasnews.com