

By imposing a smoking ban, WSU yields to mob rule

Michael Costello/Lewiston Tribune

"When the republic is at its most corrupt, the laws are most numerous." - Tacitus

"If you have ten thousand regulations you destroy all respect for the law." - Winston Churchill

For at least 2,000 years, great minds have appreciated the corrosive effect of excessive regulation.

Early morning on this most recent Halloween, the Pullman Police Department encountered a screaming woman who was running from a bare-chested man cracking a bullwhip behind her. According to the Pullman police, alcohol was involved.

The incident reminded me of a police blotter story from 30 years ago, describing a bare-chested man making his way down Main Street swinging a Samurai sword. Alcohol was involved in that one, too.

Alcohol has been involved in a number of fatal and near-fatal accidents in the area. Fourteen years ago, an inebriated Frederick Russell killed three young people on the Moscow-Pullman Highway.

A common theme nearly every year is that we have accidents in residence halls or frat houses in which a drunken student suffers severe injuries after a fall downstairs or off a balcony.

What we never hear or read about is a story that concludes with a notation that nicotine was involved. In fact, on the Washington State University campus, we have had more innocent people injured as a result of coffee consumption than tobacco. In 2009, motorist Dan Noble suddenly accelerated while driving on Stadium Way, before striking and severely injuring two pedestrians. He blamed the accident on "caffeine psychosis" as a consequence of drinking too much coffee.

In spite of the fact that nicotine ranks far behind alcohol and even coffee for causing bodily harm to anyone but the user on the WSU campus, this past week the WSU Board of Regents voted to banish all forms of tobacco. You may not smoke cigarettes on the campus, on the sidewalks or even on the golf course. In fact, you can't even chew tobacco or place a dip of snuff under your lip while on the hallowed ground. If you must smoke, then you are required to do so in your car with the windows rolled up.

And because they contain nicotine, you can't even use those electronic vapor devices on university grounds. Those vapor devices will probably save more lives by liberating people from cigarettes than any other intervention available today. But WSU just banned their use.

In banning all manifestations of tobacco, WSU joins approximately 1,100 other colleges and universities that have already instituted similar bans.

This has nothing to do with the imaginary perils of second-hand smoke. This is pure cultural bigotry and petty moral exhibitionism. Anyone who finds himself briefly downwind of a smoker will suffer no harm. Studies that claim to find deleterious effects from second-hand smoke only do so in the most extreme circumstances, such as children growing up in the homes of heavy smokers.

And if we're going to tell individuals what they can't do for their own good, we should ban bacon and hot dogs.

WSU's smokers are already required to go outside and stand at least 25 feet from any entrance to smoke. That provides more than enough protection to anyone fearful of cigarette smoke. But the bigots don't even want to see anyone else smoking.

Jansen VanderMeulen, WSU's student regent, explained the regents' reasoning for imposing the ban: "Despite some objections, students, faculty and staff, when given the opportunity to give feedback, all expressed overwhelming support for this policy."

In other words, we have mob rule. What the regents have failed to comprehend is that sometimes you have to tell people that they can't always get what they want. Would the regents ban Hawaiian shirts or pink hair if a survey revealed majority disapproval?

Winston Churchill found 10,000 regulations oppressive. The current Code of Federal Regulation contains 175,000 pages of regulations. And government at every level adds its own regulations.

We should thank smokers. Smokers pay more than their fair share of taxes and consume less in pensions and Social Security.

I often draw on quotes from history's greatest thinkers. I admire their talent for squeezing so much wisdom into so few words. As William Shakespeare noted: "Brevity is the soul of wit." And perhaps Shakespeare's admonition is why I sometimes recommend the most unlikely of philosophers, the late entertainer Jimmy Durante, who once asked, "Why can't everybody just leave everybody else the hell alone?"

Costello is a research technician at Washington State University. His email address is kozmocostello@hotmail.com.