

OPINION

# Big tobacco is coming for legal marijuana

It's no coincidence that in 2018 Altria, which owns the Marlboro brand, invested \$1.8 billion in a cannabis company and \$12.8 billion in JUUL, a nicotine vape product.

By **Shaleen Title and Andy Tan** Updated April 8, 2021, 3:00 a.m.



A person smokes a Juul Labs Inc. e-cigarette. GABBY JONES/PHOTOGRAPHER: GABBY JONES/BLOOMB

Big Tobacco has been planning for this moment for decades.

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A 1983 industry list titled [New Product Ideas](#), made public as part of a court settlement, reveals that tobacco companies even then were anticipating the opportunity to blend marijuana into cigarettes if the government legalized cannabis. Now tobacco behemoths are pouring billions of dollars into the new legal marijuana industry, seemingly determined to target marijuana consumers and patients as their next prey. We don't have to let them.

Announcing a comprehensive bill to legalize marijuana last week, Senate majority leader [Chuck Schumer said, "We don't want the big tobacco companies and the big liquor companies to swoop in and take over."](#) As public health activists — an inaugural Massachusetts state marijuana commissioner and a tobacco regulatory science and health disparities researcher — we agree. Tobacco companies are [convicted racketeers](#) who knowingly misled the public with false claims about their products for decades. Most of us can picture it: rich men in a boardroom examining a graph of profits from cigarettes, [a product that kills up to half its users](#), scheming new ways to chemically alter products to be more addictive and new populations to target.

These companies targeted the same communities targeted by the war on drugs with well-documented contempt and dehumanization. [One document](#) describing focus groups with young-adult Hispanic smokers said, "Due to substandard education, language problems at school, limited intellectual stimulation in their lives, and other environmental factors, YAHs generally do not conceptualize well." Another describes a marketing plan to target LGBTQ populations in San Francisco in the 1990s, internally referred to as "[subculture urban marketing](#)" — a.k.a. "Project SCUM."

Tobacco companies continue to target vulnerable people and profit off nicotine addiction. It's no coincidence that, in 2018, Altria, which owns the Marlboro brand, [invested \\$1.8 billion in a cannabis company](#) and [\\$12.8 billion in Juul](#), a nicotine vape product that has been popular with children and has fueled [a public health crisis in](#)

[teen vaping](#).

If no one has overdosed on marijuana, what's the worst that Big Tobacco could do? We need only look at the hundreds of chemicals that these companies added to cigarettes to design the most addictive product in history. They manipulated the chemical makeup of cigarettes for profit — adding ammonia to make the nicotine hit the brain faster, for example — and intentionally defrauded the public about the harms and safety of their tobacco products. "Advertising, commercialization, and profit motives are what keep me up at night," [Andrew Freedman](#), Colorado's former marijuana coordination director, who helped set up one of the country's first comprehensive marijuana regulatory systems, once said. "They start to learn how to get people more addicted and how to get people addicted at a younger age."

Freedman now serves as the executive director of an organization founded last month by Altria and other major players in industries that have a long record of actively — and effectively — fighting sensible public health regulations. As the [World Health Organization put it in 2000, tobacco companies have mastered the playbook](#) to resist government regulation by "using front groups" and "buying scientific and other expertise to create controversy."

States with legal cannabis have so far managed to resist Big Tobacco's playbook, implementing rigorous public health regulations for marijuana with sharply restrictive limitations on packaging and advertising that appeal to children. No one wants to see Joe Camel with a joint. Perhaps because of these restrictions, [preliminary evidence](#) shows that youth usage rates of marijuana have not increased in states that legalized marijuana and may even have decreased after legalization for adult use.

Several states, including California and Illinois, have also begun the process of examining marijuana legalization as an opportunity to repair some of the harm and devastation caused by the war on drugs. In Massachusetts, regulators also limit how large marijuana businesses can get by strictly enforcing regulations on how many stores or plants one

person can control, so no company can have an outsized influence on rulemaking and roll back the protections focused on public health.

Make no mistake: Tobacco companies want to erase these rules and write their own. Cannabis is a relatively benign substance in its natural form, but it is not risk-free and there is nothing inherent about cannabis that protects it from being combined with other substances to create products that kill people and target vulnerable populations. The tragic public health consequences of cigarettes were exacerbated through sustained profit-driven predatory marketing practices and deregulatory efforts. Instead of repeating that history, federal policy makers should work with tobacco control and state-level marijuana experts to prevent Big Tobacco 2.0. If we're not willing to take steps to prevent these familiar schemes, then we're not ready for legalization.

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