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Opinion

Black history has taught us that Big Tobacco is not an ally

By Phillip Gardiner

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Phillip Gardiner is co-chair of the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council. This Black History Month, I have a simple message for nonprofit organizations in the United States: If you have accepted money from the tobacco industry, send it back. For hundreds of years, from enslaved people working on tobacco plantations to today's menthol smokers, Black people have died for the tobacco industry's profit. Today, the makers of Marlboro, Camel and Newport are using cash donations to [polish their images](#) and influence policy while [approximately 45,000 Black Americans](#) die of smoking-related illness every year.

It struck a chord when [the Kennedy Center was criticized](#) in The Post for accepting donations from cigarette giants Altria and Philip Morris International. I and many others cannot reconcile any organization saying that it works to support Black communities while simultaneously taking substantial donations from an industry that [predatorily targets](#) the same people.

Subsequently, I was horrified to learn the [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) takes donations from Marlboro-maker Altria. As co-chair of the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council, I wrote to the museum's leadership to reject tobacco money. [Vital Strategies](#), a global public health organization that helped with this essay, had approached the Kennedy Center with a similar message before [Rebecca Perl's piece](#) ran in The Post and received no response. I did hear from the museum, nearly two months after contacting it. Officials said they appreciated my concern, but it doesn't appear the museum has any intention to change its existing practices. I don't think that's good enough.

Standing tall on our capital's National Mall alongside the Washington Monument, the museum says its purpose is to "tell the American story through the lens of African American history and culture." Tobacco's shameful chapter in that story is [forever connected to the slave trade](#) and tobacco plantations, where forced labor formed part of the foundations of the United States — and what is now a global tobacco industry.

Vestiges of that exploitation continue to this day, principally through the predatory marketing of menthol cigarettes and flavored little cigars in the Black community. There are [more advertisements, more promotions](#) in Black communities, where menthol cigarettes are cheaper.

Menthol is an anesthetic that masks the harsh taste of tobacco and allows for deeper inhalation of [greater amounts of nicotine and tar](#). Studies show that menthol cigarettes are [more addictive](#) and, unsurprisingly, users find it [harder to quit](#) than non-menthol cigarette users. These products fuel a cycle of addiction to harmful products that hurt the pocketbooks in Black communities and fuels death, health problems and medical costs.

In 1953, 5 percent of African Americans smoked menthol cigarettes. Today, [85 percent of Black adults and 94 percent of Black youths](#) who smoke use menthol products. Between [1980 and 2018](#), menthol cigarettes were responsible for 1.5 million new smokers, 157,000 smoking-related premature deaths and 1.5 million life-years lost among African Americans, representing a staggering 41 percent of premature deaths and half of the total in life-years lost in America. In other words, menthol takes a much greater toll on African Americans. Black Americans [die disproportionately](#) of heart attacks, lung cancer, strokes and other tobacco-related diseases. Menthol cigarettes are a leading vector for death and disease in Black communities, worsening health and economic inequities. Responsibility lies with the tobacco companies. It's time they stopped producing menthol cigarettes and treating the health of Black communities as expendable. Congress should also act to pass the [proposed ban](#) on menthol tobacco products without further delay. The Food and Drug Administration estimates that a national menthol ban could save up to 6,000 Black lives each year. Prioritizing profit over Black lives, the industry is [lobbying](#) against the legislation.

Tobacco donations to institutions such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture are part of the playbook, giving cigarette companies a sheen of respectability that allows them to access the halls of power and helping them maintain the profitable status quo. Altria, a donor to the museum, [owns Philip Morris USA](#), the largest tobacco company in the United States, with nearly half of the cigarette retail market, including [26 percent](#) of the menthol market. In accepting Altria's money rather than holding its donor and the industry to account, the National Museum of African American History and Culture is complicit in the industry's ongoing exploitation of Black people. Maybe cultural institutions will not break from tobacco companies unless they are forced to do so. Some countries ban tobacco sponsorships so cigarette makers can't promote themselves under the guise of [corporate social responsibility](#).

Lacking such legislation in the United States, we are reliant on the integrity of the institutions involved or the type of public outrage that led to Sackler donations [being rejected](#) when the family's company, Purdue Pharma, was exposed as a key driver of the opioid epidemic. I'm disappointed but not surprised that we haven't heard the same volume of voices demanding that the National Museum of African American History and Culture reject cigarette company donations, since many African American organizations [take the money](#). The preservation and honoring of African American history

shouldn't be an economic and cultural opportunity for corporations whose activities perpetuate inequity and harm for Black Americans.

So, if the National Museum of African American History and Culture or any other cultural or charitable institution would like to demonstrate their support for Black Americans this Black History Month, return the money received from the tobacco industry.