

Tobacco Executives Testify Before Health Subcommittee

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Description

In the battle of their lives, Big Tobacco executives deny they've misled customers and defend the habit of smoking during this 1997 hearing.

Keywords

House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, Henry Waxman, Chairman, Tobacco, Nicotine, Addiction, RJR Nabisco, RJ Reynolds, Surgeon General, Smoking, Cigarettes, Ron Wyden, James Johnston, Joseph Taddeo, Andrew Tisch, Lorillard Tobacco, Edward Horrigan, Liggett Group, Thomas Sandefur, Brown and Williamson, Donald Johnston, American Tobacco

Transcript

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TOM BROKAW, anchor:

They're in the fight of their lives, and so the nation's tobacco makers came out swinging on Capitol Hill today, defending the honor of smoking against very heavy skepticism. NBC's Robert Hager:

ROBERT HAGER, reporting:

It was a bitter confrontation. Finally under oath, chief executives, top men of the nation's seven biggest tobacco companies, facing a subcommittee chaired by one the industry's fiercest critics, Congressman Henry Waxman, who's accused them of manipulating nicotine content to keep smokers hooked. 'Not so,' said Philip Morris' William Campbell.

Mr. WILLIAM CAMPBELL: We do not spike our cigarettes.

HAGER: And R.J. Reynolds' James Johnston.

Mr. JAMES JOHNSTON (RJR Tobacco Company): We do not spike our products with nicotine.

HAGER: But what about the Surgeon General's estimate of more than 400,000 deaths a year from smoking? Reynolds' Johnston quizzed by Waxman.

Representative HENRY WAXMAN: Do you agree with this estimate? If you don't agree with the number, then give us your number. How many smokers die each year from smoking cigarettes?

Mr. JOHNSTON: I--I--I will explain.

Rep. WAXMAN: No, I want your answer. We have a limited time.

Mr. JOHNSTON: I do not know how many.

HAGER: By now, the patience of the tobacco men was wearing thin.

Mr. JOHNSTON: If any member of this subcommittee truly believes that cigarettes are too dangerous to be sold, then stand up, vote for prohibition, and be prepared for the consequences.

HAGER: But now the committee moved the bottom line--addiction.

Unidentified Man: Yes or no, do you believe nicotine is not addictive?

Mr. JOSEPH TADDEO (United States Tobacco): I don't believe that nicotine or our products are addictive.

Mr. ANDREW TISCH (Lorillard Tobacco): I believe nicotine is not addictive.

Mr. EDWARD HARRIGAN (Liggett Group): I believe that nicotine is not addictive.

Mr. THOMAS SANDEFUR (Brown And Williamson): I believe that nicotine is not addictive.

Mr. DONALD JOHNSTON (American Tobacco): And I, too, believe that nicotine is not addictive.

HAGER: No more addictive, the executives said, than the caffeine in coffee or the sugar in sweets, even Twinkies. Waxman disagreed.

Rep. WAXMAN: The difference between cigarettes and Twinkies and the other products you mentioned is death.

HAGER: To emphasize this, the chairman had posted a big sign saying every 80 seconds another American smoker dies. The tobacco men could only sit there and take it. Robert Hager, NBC News, Washington.

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