

By Salim Muwakkil

A POORLY WRITTEN BOOK ON GENDER RELATIONS has taken the black community by storm, becoming one of the biggest underground bestsellers in African-American history. The book—*A Black Man's Guide to the Black Woman* by Shahrazad Ali—has struck such a responsive chord that, in some circles of influential blacks, its mere possession is considered a sign of hip, racial authenticity. According to most sources, the vanity press volume has sold nearly 100,000 copies since its 1989

GENDER RELATIONS

debut; the author claims to have sales surpassing 200,000.

Literary success of such dimensions is rare within the African-American community and normally would be celebrated by black writers and intellectuals. But that hasn't happened. Moreover, the fact that a black woman authored such a celebrated book should be gratifying to those struggling to topple a tradition that has excluded African-American women from the ranks of movement theorists. But, by and large, black feminists have denounced the book as misguided at best, and many have condemned it as a pernicious throwback to a late, unlamented era of patriarchal black nationalism.

Hoary stereotypes: Essentially, Ali's book argues that African-American men not only are victims of this society's racism but that they also have been systematically undermined by black women socialized into emasculating behavior. Those familiar with the gender policies of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam will easily hear the voice of the late patriarch resounding in this volume. And in a secular context, Ali's contentions echo hoary negative stereotypes about black women, but she has cleverly recast them in the jargon of the times. These days, the black movement is under the sway of an amorphous neo-black nationalism that incorporates those same pseudo-Islamic principles percolating through Ali's text.

"The success of Ali's book reveals the deep nature of the crisis in the African-American community," explains Bell Hooks, author of *Yearning: Race, Gender, Cultural Politics* and professor of English at Oberlin College. "We have many unresolved issues to deal with, including those concerning gender relations. The runaway success of this book indicates that many of us would rather take another detour to the fantasy land of idealized patriarchy than to actually grapple with the complexity of our situation."

Hooks, who refers to herself as a black woman advocating feminism rather than a black feminist, regards *A Black Man's Guide* as a symptom of the widespread sense of hopelessness that pervades black America. "Symptoms are everywhere; the popularity of [Nation of Islam leader Louis] Farrakhan, for example, is another one," Hooks contends. She believes that African-Americans are so reluctant to face the arduous tasks demanded of them that they are increasingly seeking distractions.

Hip-hop patriarchy: Hooks argues that even some of black America's most promising developments—like the emergence of rap music and the "hip-hop" culture it man-



Elijah Muhammad's voice rings through *A Black Man's Guide to the Black Woman*.

A Black Man's Guide misdirects the issues

ifests—are plagued with this problem. The dynamics of contemporary rap music are powered by a distinct dialectic; among those strains are two distinct models of black manhood. On the one hand there is the phallocentric, misogynous postures of groups such as 2 Live Crew and Ice Cube, whose favorite word for women begins with the letter "b," and then there is the patronizing patriarchy of neonationalist groups such as Public Enemy and X-Clan.

The explicit connection between hip-hop culture and gender relations was drawn by Michelle Wallace in an article that appeared in the July 29 edition of the *New York Times*. Wallace, whose 1978 book *Black Macho & the Myth of the Superwoman* examined the sexism in the black power movement, wrote that "what seems universal is how little male rappers respect sexual intimacy and how little regard they have for the humanity of the black woman." But Wallace's respect for the style's creative potential leavens her criticism. "I see the problem more in an educational context than anything else," she told *In These Times* in a recent interview.

"Black youth have been terribly deprived educationally, and we're reaping the results of that, both in the rap subculture and in the popularity of a book like *A Black Man's Guide*," she says. "I'd hazard a guess that Ali's book is much more popular among those African-Americans with less education than among those with more. In addition to being an ideological assault on me as a black woman, the book is very badly written and a real chore to read," she says.

Wallace has just completed a book bemoaning black women's declining cultural influence, and she finds the success of Ali's book particularly galling. "The absence of black feminist analysis of the rampant

sexism within black culture has left a vacuum that is being filled by the easy answers provided by Ali's mythic nationalism," she says. The controversy sparked by her 1978 book and other works of that era, such as Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, provoked an outpouring of activity designed to address the black community's intersexual problems. But that spasm of concern was short-lived and issues of gender relations once again disappeared from the movement's agenda.

Womanist challenge: Some black feminists purposely abandoned their strict focus on issues of gender oppression. "I realized that unless black womanists—and I prefer the term 'womanist' because of its nurturing, familial connotations and because I don't have to unload the baggage carried by the word 'feminist'—began to talk about issues in an economic and racial context, our discussions of 'patriarchy' and other structures of male domination had no real relationship to the black community," explains Delores Williams, assistant professor of theology at Drew University in New Jersey and a prominent womanist theorist. "And at the present time, one of the most important issues within the black community is the problem of disintegrating families," she contends. "It's a

Feminists condemn the book as a throwback to a late, unlamented era of patriarchal black nationalism.

problem with economic and racial as well as cultural roots, and if we don't figure out a way to deal with it all other problems will be rendered moot."

Williams believes that feminism, as it has developed in this country, has been a boon to white women and only marginally important for women of color. "Poor black women had an almost instinctual understanding that the ideological feminism being pushed during the early '70s had little relevance for them," she says. "Their oppression goes way beyond sexism and has complex interconnections to race and class. But we who called ourselves feminists never developed a rigorous analysis to address that special oppression. We have to go into the realities of poor black women—and the center of our movement should always be focused on impoverished black women—and come up with ideas and concepts that are meaningful to them before we can expect the black community to support our analyses."

Conspiracy of silence: Wallace connects the rejection of feminist theory to the black community's woeful lack of education. Awareness is a function of education, she insists. And she blames black intellectuals for failing to engage themselves thoroughly in the struggle to help lift the community's collective awareness. "We never fully faced the problem of what was wrong with the Islam-influenced cultural nationalism that seems to be making a comeback," Wallace says. "Black intellectuals never shouted those ideas down effectively, and now they are being recycled to plague us once again."

Wallace believes that black theorists have been intimidated into a "conspiracy of silence" by anti-intellectual elements of African-American culture. Feminist criticism and other forms of social analysis are considered by many blacks to be products of alien white culture and, she contends, this hostility has discouraged many theorists from pressing their points.

Ali's book is a current example of this problem, Wallace notes. Although educated blacks who read *A Black Man's Guide* can easily discern its sophistry and poorly argued propositions, the book's mass popularity dissuades them from pointing it out. "We are often cowered by charges that we're using white society's critical tools to judge black people's works. The fact that there's an element of truth in the charge should not prevent us from rigorous analysis."

Hooks and Wallace agree that there is a distressing portent of class conflict hinted in the mass popularity of Ali's book and misogynous styles of "gangster" rap. "A friend told me that more than 1,000 people turned out in Los Angeles for a book reception of Ali's book," Hooks recalls. "I don't think I've ever attracted that large a crowd in this country. That we would be so attracted to such a demeaning vision of black women, such a patriarchal fantasy, is something that is almost too depressing to contemplate."

But she adds, "We have developed no counterargument to contest Ali's comforting myths. So we just wind up angry and frustrated with those folks we see as vulnerable enough to fall for her foolishness." What's more, Hooks says, infighting among black feminists has made their message seem bankrupt. And since very few black feminist theorists are committed to the struggle of ideas, those neonationalist principles look good when compared to no principles at all. □

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Third World

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former hot spots. Although superpower cooperation resulted in independence for Namibia, the 1988 Southern Africa peace accord also extricated South Africa from military defeat in Angola, mandated the phased withdrawal of the Cuban troops that produced that defeat, forced the African National Congress to abandon its frontline bases in Angola—and left the CIA free to take South Africa's place in supporting UNITA, the Angolan "contras." Moscow's continued weapons shipments to Angola have not sufficed to prevent a string of recent UNITA advances that have left hundreds of thousands cut off from food deliveries.

Only in Afghanistan and Cuba has the Soviet Union resisted U.S. pressure for such lopsided settlements. Moscow has slashed its military presence in Southeast Asia, abandoned the former U.S. naval base at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam and recently told Ethiopia that its military agreement will not be renewed. Soviet policy toward Latin America has veered away from support for liberation movements and focused on expanding political and economic links with the large South American nations.

While the Reagan and Bush administrations undoubtedly deserve much of the credit for the Sandinistas' electoral defeat, these administrations had Soviet support for the Nicaraguan "peace process." In El Salvador, the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front has responded to the changed world order with an increased emphasis on negotiations with the Salvadoran government.

On the one hand, Moscow's policy change

freed liberation movements and leftist governments from the Soviet ideological orbit. But that independence may be largely illusory. Developing countries are acutely aware that they have no shot at Western funds if they stray from the West's prescribed course. The hasty abandonment of socialist economic policies by Mozambique, Ethiopia and Benin, among others, and the efforts of Nigeria and Ghana to sell off state enterprises and open themselves to foreign investment have gained nods of approval from Washington but pitifully little else.

Yet, as the only political player of consequence in the international aid game, the U.S. is under no pressure to advocate changes in the harsh austerity measures imposed by the IMF as a condition of new lending. Even though many Western nations have written off their loans to the poorest debtor nations, the pound of flesh demanded by the IMF and the sharp fall in prices for African export commodities—a disaster in which Washington has also played a leading role—have eroded much of the economic progress Africa has made in the post-colonial era.

The world's bankers have lost no time enrolling their new Eastern vassals in Western political objectives. The IMF already has Hungary and Poland at its feet scrambling to meet cutthroat repayment schedules, with the other Eastern Europeans queuing up for the same treatment. East European diplomats in Phnom Penh report that IMF arm-twisting prompted their near-total cutback in aid to Cambodia. The Warsaw Pact countries bankrolled Cambodia to the tune of 80 percent of its budget. As of 1991, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe's relationship with Cambodia will be almost entirely com-

mercial, based on pay-as-you-go exchange. Vietnam escaped more easily, with a 20 percent cut—or \$500 million—a year from the Soviet Union.

The World Bank cropped up behind Hungary's recent move to recover its outstanding claims from Third World debtors. Budapest's trade minister conceded the bank's argument that an indebted Hungary cannot afford to have bad debts itself. Developing countries owe Hungary \$630 million, and it is doubtful that Sudan, South Yemen, Mozambique and Nicaragua will meet their obligations. Such loans will be liquidated only for countries considered potential Hungarian export markets or those opening plants with Hungarian cooperation.

Cuba has now become Washington's ersatz evil empire—and the pressure being brought to bear on it is in a category all its own. President George Bush's precondition that to qualify for credit the USSR must alter its \$4 billion a year aid relationship with Cuba was the crassest bullying yet of the Soviet leader. While Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov has insisted that Moscow will not abandon Cuba, the terms of the Soviet aid package are certain to be revised in the near future.

Moreover, the Eastern Europeans are already clearing out of Cuba. Poland is closing its school, and most of the 477 Bulgarians and 30 Hungarians will be home by year's end. Guest-worker and student exchanges with Eastern Europe have been terminated only slightly ahead of Castro's order to return. The Central Europeans and Bulgaria made their allegiance plain in March, backing a U.S.-drafted human-rights resolution against Cuba at the United Nations.

The explosion of nationalism across Europe has propelled the continent in a new direction. In the East, the former bondsmen are eager to play lord. The petty egoistic logic of their new psychologies justifies the redirection of oppressor violence into an attempted rectification of their own national tragedies. Among the freshly "liberated" populations, North-South cooperation smacks of the old communist regimes' wooden solidarity efforts—a rhetoric that was seldom matched by deeds and nurtured a latent racism that now has room for expression.

The bloc partners' cultural and travel restrictions fostered a narrow-minded xenophobia that makes anti-Third World policies immensely popular. At home, the resentment and racial hatred is vented on the 275,000 foreign workers imported for second-class jobs and never assimilated into domestic cultural life.

At the same time, the widening North-South gap has Europe's prosperous half petrified that mass exodus will swamp their lands with the world's have-nots. In West Germany and Austria, new walls have been erected, drastically curtailing refugee and asylum provisions, the very laws that enabled their German brethren to gain exit through Prague's and Budapest's embassies last year. West German solidarity groups report flagging interest and contributions during recent fundraisers. Yet, with Eastern Europe fast in retreat, the Western left may well now find itself the Third World's most important ally. □

Paul Hockenos is *In These Times'* correspondent in Eastern Europe. Jane Hunter is editor of *Israeli Foreign Affairs*.

NO BODY BAGS FOR OIL

U.S. TROOPS ARE NOT THERE TO PROMOTE PEACE

When Iraq invaded Iran, the U.S. stood by. Later we actually gave Iraq help.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait, the U.S. rushed in as the world's policeman, overriding all attempts to find a peaceful solution.

Far from promoting peace, U.S. actions are escalating steadily towards war.

THEY ARE THERE FOR THE OIL

And yet, the U.S. blockade has stopped the flow of oil from two of the world's biggest producers, Iraq and Kuwait.

But the flow of oil was never threatened. Iraq needs to sell it, not hoard it.

We risk trading body bags — and hostages — for oil.

KISS THE PEACE DIVIDEND GOOD-BYE

The Cold War is over and with it the justification for the \$300 billion a year military budget.

Before troops went to the Middle East, we were looking forward to a Peace Dividend. The military was not. George Bush was not. They have found a way to replace the Cold War.

We will spend \$1.8 billion just through September, and already they are telling us the troops will be there for a long time. During war we would spend \$1 billion a day!

The U.S. is playing world leader — and we are paying for it.

SPEAK OUT NOW — REMEMBER VIETNAM

The American people weren't asked if they wanted this war. Just as we weren't asked if we wanted Vietnam.

George Bush and the Pentagon learned a lesson from Vietnam — act quickly and ask for approval later.

We learned a lesson, too — we must speak out now, before it is too late.

That is why OUT NOW is launching a national petition campaign. Copies will be forwarded to Congress and the President.

OUT NOW — BRING OUR TROOPS HOME

I am opposed to a war for oil.

I am also opposed to the commitment of U.S. troops to the Middle East without public debate.

I call upon Congress and the President to pull out U.S. forces and to seek a peaceful solution through the United Nations and the Arab League.

signature

name (print)

address

zip

phone

☐ send me extra copies of the petition so I can circulate them

☐ I am enclosing a contribution of \$20 \$50
 \$100 to help OUT NOW pay for future ads.

Contributions should be made payable to OUT NOW and mailed with your petition to: OUT NOW, PO Box 1194, Salinas, CA 93902.

By Paul Bass

Group smokes out tobacco investment

A NEW, NOVEL WAR ON THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY has exploded in the Northeast, targeting the investment policies of institutions that claim to benefit humanity.

Leading this innovative campaign against cigarette manufacturers is a Boston-based group called the Tobacco Divestment Project (TDP). Since its formation in May, TDP has claimed remarkable victories and has sparked tobacco divestment actions throughout Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York and Rhode Island, with new offensives forming in Texas and California.

TDP's strategy is simple: pressure universities, insurers, charities, hospitals and local governments to sell off stocks in companies that make, market and sell cigarettes. The argument is also simple: such bodies claim helping people as their main mission, and supporting companies which spend \$3.28 billion in domestic marketing dollars every year to hook 3,000 new teenagers a day to a deadly drug, says TDP, only increases the number of people in need of such help. Nor should universities profit, TDP argues, from the exploitation of youth, minorities and Third World nations (the U.S. exports over 112 billion cigarettes annually) by companies whose continual denial of the harm of smoking offends the very principles of higher education.

Not surprisingly, tobacco companies continue to claim they market a legitimate, legal product and deny that they target teens or minorities in their ads. In addition, many institutions reject TDP's argument that such social concerns should affect their decisions on how to invest their money.

Startling is how many people have sided with TDP in just three months. Harvard University's board of trustees announced in May that it had divested its approximately \$58 million in tobacco-stained stocks. City University of New York followed suit by deciding to sell its \$3.5 million in tobacco-related stocks. Columbia University also has divested, and Pittsburgh's city council did the same. A New York City councilman has introduced legislation to divest \$330 million in pension funds from such corporations as Philip Morris (whose cigarette brands include Marlboro and Virginia Slims) and Loews (Newport, Kent).

Similar campaigns have targeted Yale's medical school and hospital in New Haven, Conn., Rice University in Houston, University of Wisconsin at Madison and Brown University in Providence, R.I. After endorsing TDP's drive in July, Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis is currently exploring the quickest route to divesting approximately \$31 million in state government employees' retirement funds. TDP has since targeted another \$100 million-plus in the retirement funds of New York, Texas and California. TDP is also working with divestment campaigns in the state legislatures of Wisconsin, Oregon and Pennsylvania.

"This may be the greatest revolution of the 20th century," says Patrick Reynolds, a tobacco-heir-turned national anti-tobacco crusader. "The sea change in Americans' attitudes toward smoking in just the past five years has indeed changed people's lives."

A new kind of revolution: The transformation began with then-Surgeon Gen. C. Everett Koop's 1986 finding that cigarettes can kill non-smokers via secondhand smoke. After Koop left office, Health and Human Services Sec. Louis Sullivan, picked up the

passionate anti-tobacco-company campaign. Sullivan was instrumental in R.J.R. Nabisco's withdrawal in January of its plan to market a new cigarette, Uptown, directly to blacks. A similar plan to market Dakota cigarettes to working-class women was withdrawn the following month.

Armed with new scientific evidence about the adverse effects of tobacco, legislators nationwide subsequently banned smoking from elevators, restaurants and airplanes. (One federal legislator is even looking at banning smoking altogether from airports.) Most large offices have also become smoke-free. After a Harlem minister named Calvin Butts began leading groups of whitewashers to cover billboards suggesting healthy, happy lives for black smokers, several billboard companies replaced their Newport messages with religious paeans.

Smokers who years ago confidently trumpeted their rights to light up anywhere now find themselves pariahs, hovering in smokers' lounges, criticized for a socially unacceptable habit. TV producers have begun putting cigarettes in the mouths of villains instead of heroes. When William Bennett was appointed President Bush's "drug czar," he had to drop his fierce cigarette habit to gain credibility. "Doonesbury" cartoonist Garry Trudeau didn't let him get away with switching to nicotine chewing gum without questioning whether Washington's "war on drugs" ignores the most widely used lethal addictive substance in the U.S.

Tobacco companies, too, have found themselves on the defensive. Smoking has been declining two percent a year in the U.S. Although well over 3,000 people (most of them teens) pick up the habit each day, says

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TDP, the manufacturers daily lose about 5,000 U.S. customers to smoking-related disease and death or to anti-smoking campaigns.

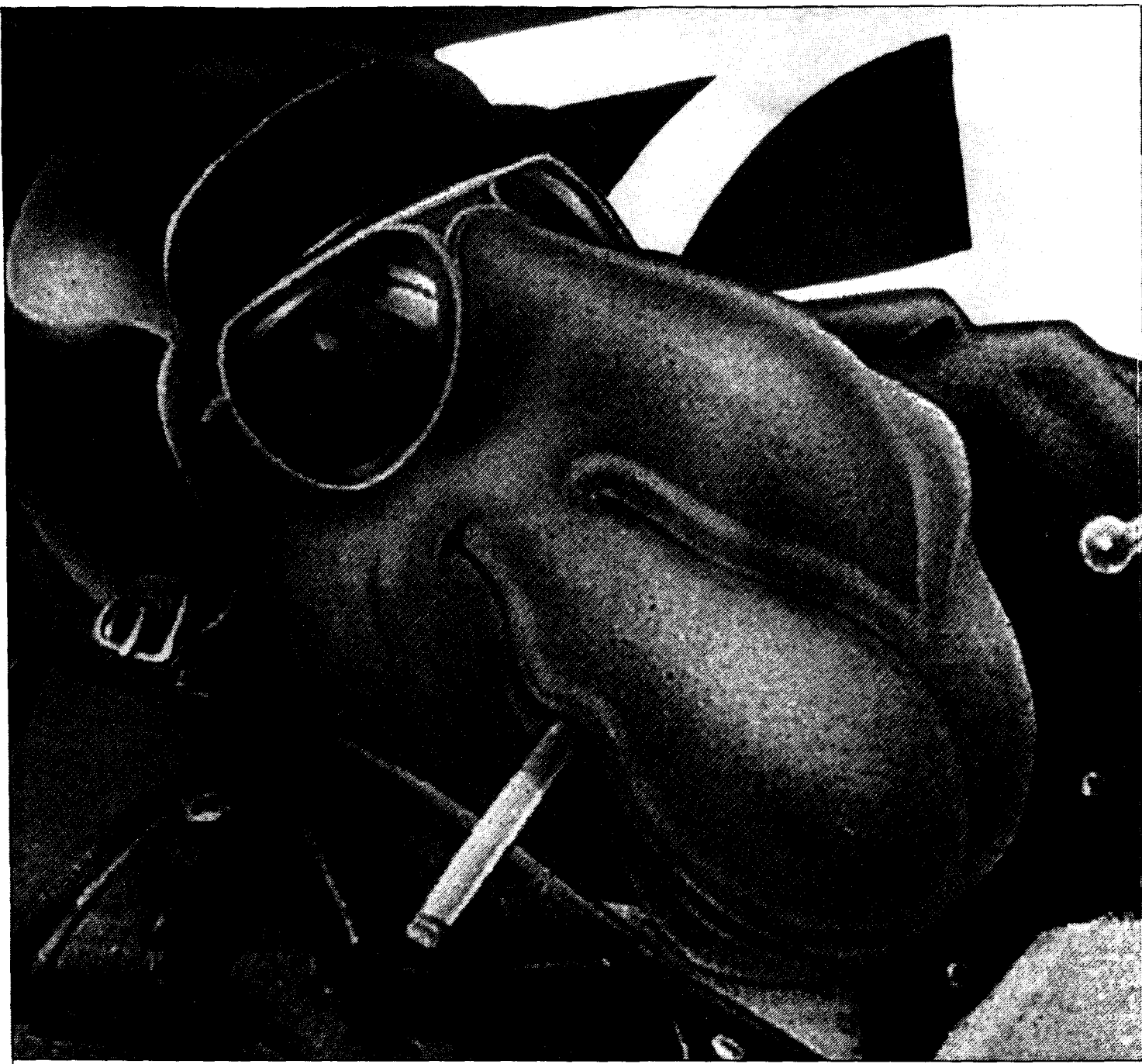
The strategy is simple: pressure universities, insurers, charities, hospitals and local governments to sell off stocks in companies that make, market and sell cigarettes.

While the companies have succeeded in finding new customers abroad—where smoking has reportedly increased 73 percent since 1968—those efforts have raised widespread criticism at home. Marketing efforts geared toward teens (such as R.J.R. Reynold's cigarette-puffing, womanizing cartoon "Smooth character"), minorities and working-class women also have been chastised. Rather than quashing stories about such complaints, newspapers and magazines, where cigarette companies advertise widely, now report them. Some critics question how a government officially pursuing a war on drugs can subsidize the tobacco industry and whether placing anti-drug billboards alongside Marlboro or Virginia Slims billboards promotes a mixed message.

Tobacco companies, however, continue to earn high profits and exert considerable influence. Lobbyists recently convinced the Bush administration to threaten economic sanctions to Asian countries reluctant to opening their markets to more cigarette imports. But tobacco-company bashing too has become a growth industry. Hence the rise of the TDP, which has successfully united frustrated health professionals active in anti-smoking campaigns in several states.

"We decided to attack the companies financially," says TDP Executive Director Brad Krevor. Destroying the stock of Philip Morris won't happen, he adds. But "we will damage it, and we will destroy the conspiratorial si-

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TDP chastises marketing efforts geared toward minorities and teens, such as R.J. Reynolds' cigarette-puffing "Smooth Character" cartoon.