The Creation of Industry Front Groups: The Tobacco Industry and “Get Government Off Our Back”

We investigated how industries use front groups to combat public health measures by analyzing tobacco industry documents, contemporary media reports, journal articles, and press releases regarding “Get Government Off Our Back,” a coalition created by the tobacco industry.

RJ Reynolds created Get Government Off Our Back in 1994 to fight federal regulation of tobacco. By keeping its involvement secret, RJ Reynolds was able to draw public and legislative support and to avoid the tobacco industry reputation for misrepresenting evidence.

The tobacco industry is not unique in its creation of such groups. Research on organizational background and funding could identify other industry front groups. Those who seek to establish measures to protect public health should be prepared to counter the argument that government should not regulate private behavior.

THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY HAS a history of misrepresenting scientific evidence, attempting to directly influence government through the use of lobbying and campaign contributions and is responsible for more than 440,000 deaths annually in the United States. Over time, these factors have compromised the tobacco industry’s reputation with the general public and made political association with its interests a liability. The creation of a seemingly independent organization advanced the tobacco industry by presenting its antiregulation agenda as an expression of popular will, and allowed industry lobbyists access to policymakers who were otherwise unwilling to work with them. We describe the formation and activities of a tobacco industry front group that was created to fight proposed tobacco regulation by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) in 1994 and 1995.

The tobacco industry recruits potential allies from all ideological backgrounds. These include historically disenfranchised groups such as African Americans and gays and lesbians, as well as other industry associations, civil rights organizations, service providers such as homeless shelters, and strongly ideological groups, including libertarians. Frequently, these organizations are financially compensated in exchange for advocating on behalf of tobacco industry political goals. Tobacco companies have also created “smokers’ rights” front groups, such as the National Smokers Alliance, in the hope of generating political pressure on behalf of tobacco issues. Researchers and the media have been justifiably suspicious of such protobacco advocacy groups and have quickly exposed their tobacco industry financial support.

Unlike the goals of other front groups exposed by tobacco industry document research, the goals of the front group created by RJ Reynolds in 1994, Get Government Off Our Back (referred to in RJ Reynolds’s documents as “GGOOB”), were not overtly tobacco-related. Research in economics and political science has noted that political decisionmakers discount the activities of organizations that are obviously self-interested, such as “smokers’ rights” groups. The prevailing assumption is that these groups will protest whether or not their position reflects popular support, unlike more nonextremist groups.

Many firms have an incentive to deceive policymakers, especially about their sponsorship of lobbying activities, and creation of a front group that appears to be broad-based makes this possible. Organizations learn from each other, in part because they sometimes use the same legal or public relations firms to organize political activities, and RJ Reynolds’s success with GGOOB is consistent with the activities of other industries. Although there is limited research on the use of non–tobacco industry front groups, evidence suggests that pharmaceutical manufacturers, telecommunications firms, and credit unions have engaged in similar efforts.

The history of GGOOB provides insight for researchers and policymakers that may help forestall future misrepresentation by industry interest groups and limit the use of front groups through the identification of their creators.

METHODS

In conjunction with legal settlements between 46 state attorneys general and the major tobacco companies in the United States, more than 40 million pages of internal tobacco industry documents have been made publicly available. These documents are Web-accessible at the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library (http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu) and Tobacco Documents Online (http://tobaccodocuments.org), as well as from major US tobacco companies. Documents used for this paper were retrieved between September 2003 and December 2004, primarily from the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library and Tobacco Documents Online.

Internal corporate documents such as those provided by the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement make it possible to determine which “public interest” groups are front groups and which represent genuine public
sentiment. We used these documents to determine RJ Reynolds’s motivation for creating GGOOB and its goals for the organization’s activities. Using previously established techniques for systematically searching tobacco document archives,41 we began our online search with initial search terms such as organizational and individual names and references to the FDA and OSHA regulations proposed.

Searches were expanded with a “snowball” strategy, wherein contextual information from initial searches to identify additional search terms and relevant documents, including names of individuals and organizations, date ranges, places, and reference (Bates) numbers. More than 3000 internal tobacco industry documents that pertained to FDA and OSHA regulation, GGOOB, and the organizations that claimed to sponsor it (other than RJ Reynolds) were identified and screened for relevance. We also reviewed secondary data sources for corroborating information about funding and organizational activities including newspaper and journal articles, accessed using Lexis-Nexis, JSTOR, and Internet searches using Google.

We drew from approximately 200 documents, dated from 1993 to 1997, to prepare this article. Many of the initial documents we found were copies of contemporaneous public information such as press releases and advertising for the organization; these were frequently duplicative or irrelevant to our analysis. Our interpretative data analysis was iterative and involved review of the documents to identify recurring themes and organizational strategies and to establish a timeline until the process yielded no new information.

We relied on expectations about organizational lobbying behavior to guide the analysis.26–35

RESULTS
Organizational Creation and Development
The inspiration for GGOOB appears to have been drawn from a print advertisement run by RJ Reynolds shortly after the OSHA and FDA announcements that proposed new regulations on tobacco (Table 1). We included obvious tobacco industry references and buttermilk.42,43 Ultimately, this advertisement claimed that smoking restrictions were a smokescreen by a government determined to control individual behavior by banning cigarettes, followed by “liquor and fast food and buttermilk.”42,43 In October 1994, the public relations firm Mongoven, Biscoe and Duchin proposed the creation of an ad hoc coalition to “Get Government Off Our Back.”25 The firm has developed initiatives for RJ Reynolds that advocate protobacco goals through outside organizations26; among other projects, the firm organized veterans organizations to oppose the workplace smoking regulation proposed by OSHA.25,26 GGOOB was intended to have popular support as well as backing from outside organizations.25,26 As a result, it relied on existing groups recruited by RJ Reynolds52 as well as on voluntary efforts from the general population. Thus, GGOOB was created to combat increasing numbers of proposed federal and state regulations on the use and sale of tobacco products.

Although the creation and development of GGOOB was funded by RJ Reynolds through Mongoven, Biscoe and Duchin, the company itself was not identified as a sponsor in the public communications or press coverage that we found.53–55 The first identified press release for the organization appeared in October 1994 and noted that a number of North Carolina groups had decided to join the GGOOB coalition (Table 2). These included obvious tobacco industry affiliates such as the Tobacco Growers Information Committee.
“I’m one of America’s 45 million smokers.
I’m not a moaner or a whiner.
But I’m getting fed up.
I’d like to get the government off my back.”

If you’re a smoker you’ll know exactly what I’m talking about. If you’re a non-smoker you may think the current attempts to ban smoking in America have nothing to do with you. But if you give me two minutes I’ll tell you why I think it’s important, that you know what’s going on and how it’s going to affect you.

I chose to smoke. It’s my decision. As an adult it’s my right. This doesn’t mean that I believe there’s the right to blow smoke in your face. I think smoking and no-smoking sections in restaurants and public places are a good way of keeping everybody happy.

But when it comes to smoking in other places, in my own home, in my car or truck, and with my friends, that’s a different story. That’s my right.

You’ve probably heard about the proposed workplace ban. They want smoking to be banned anywhere where two or more people work in a one-week period. This means that smoking will be illegal in almost every workplace in the country unless an incredibly expensive, specially ventilated room is provided. And who can afford that?

You may also have heard about the proposed 80% tax increase on cigarettes that Congressmen are taking alone. That’s discrimination against smoking, nothing less. And it will affect non-smokers too when the bootleggers start to get involved.

There is no question in my mind that the government is seeking an all-out prohibition on cigarettes. And once vested interests achieve that goal they’ll be free to pursue other targets. They’ll go for liquor and fast food and butter milk and who knows what else. There’s a line of dominoes now.

We can work these issues out without the government telling us how to do it. If we let it become law then we’ve got a serious problem. Because then people are no longer allowed to work it out themselves. We have to talk.

This opinion is brought to you in the interest of an informed debate by the RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company. We believe that the solution to most smoking issues can be found in accommodation, in finding ways in which smokers and non-smokers can co-exist peacefully. And we encourage dialogue and discussion that will help solve the issues without government intervention. For further information please call 1-800-355-6443.

Together, we can work it out.

Source: RJ Reynolds.

name Citizens for Congressional Reform.20 These groups also received support from other industries.20,60–66

Throughout the creation and development of GGOOB, the decision of RJ Reynolds and Mongoven, Biscoe and Duchin to create the lobbying coalition was never mentioned by the coalition, and we were unable to find any mention of this in the popular press. Instead, organizers claimed the group was created to protect small business, because larger firms “often welcome new regulations because they know the regulations will help consolidate their market share and wipe out small business competitors.”113 The GGOOB literature and Web site posed the question, “How did Get Government Off Our Back get started?” The answer provided was, “Because of the growing number of cases of government waste and abuse nationwide, civic groups and other organizations have already been forming all over the country to respond to the problem. So the strength of this movement is, and will remain, at the grass-roots level. It’s only because the problem is becoming so prevalent that it is pushing its way into the national spotlight.”114

GGOOB claimed that government should leave individuals and businesses to make their own accommodation, a position that drew extensive public support. Its apparent focus on a broad ideological issue deflected attention from its underlying tobacco industry agenda.

**Organizational Activities**

By 1995, GGOOB had generated enough media attention that it began to organize events designed to draw popular support. The organization designated March 1995 as “Regulatory Revolt Month” and organized anti-regulation rallies in 12 states.115 With the development of these rallies and other recruitment efforts, lobbyists for RJ Reynolds were able to contact state legislators without their necessarily realizing that they were speaking to tobacco industry representatives. In Florida, Senator Mario Diaz-Balart was recruited by RJ Reynolds to speak to the state GGOOB rally, but there was “no mention of tobacco” in the discussion.116 Letters were sent to legislators in other states requesting that they attend the GGOOB rallies and support the goal of reduced regulation, again without mentioning tobacco issues.17,18

Contemporary media reports claimed that in response to these solicitations and rallies, several state legislators signed the GGOOB resolution that suggested a moratorium on all new government regulation.119–122

The GGOOB resolution dovetailed with the goals of the newly Republican-led US House of Representatives and its Contract With America, and in 1995 the House passed a bill that froze new federal regulations, and demanded that in the future no “unnecessary” federal regulations be allowed. This text matched the GGOOB resolution nearly verbatim,123–126 although we found no evidence that indicated whether this was deliberate. The antiregulatory provisions of the Contract With America were written by lobbyists from regulated industries.28

In April 1995, Mongoven, Biscoe and Duchin wrote a follow-up memo about GGOOB to RJ Reynolds executives. In it, they noted that their objective was “to mobilize national and state-level resources to oppose

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*Organization in which the tobacco industry was a member.
Organization funded by the tobacco industry.20,60–111
Organization spun off from a group funded by the tobacco industry.20,60–111
regulations and legislation that is in opposition to RJ Reynolds’s interests . . . . Most important at this time is to expand on and use more effectively the elements that are already in place, specifically GGOOB.” They noted plans to organize, train, and guide “Action Corps” and “Truth Squads” media tours on the state and local levels through GGOOB, and to continue to recruit outside organizations to oppose regulations through the coalition. Although GGOOB advocated reduced regulation of all business, it chose to focus on regulations that restricted smoking indoors, unsurprising given the organizational and financial support provided by RJ Reynolds.

By this time, GGOOB itself had become well known enough that some organizations and individuals sought out membership in the coalition without being solicited. The GGOOB rallies drew substantial press attention at the national and state levels. Throughout late 1994 and 1995, internal RJ Reynolds documents from the company’s external relations group listed developing GGOOB groups and encouraged them to communicate “grass roots” anti-regulatory positions to government as a continuing priority. These documents make it clear that RJ Reynolds viewed GGOOB as a more politically palatable example of excessive regulation rather than its own lobbyists, who were running amok.”

As the threat of wide-reaching FDA and OSHA regulation receded, RJ Reynolds reduced its commitment to GGOOB. By the beginning of 1996, RJ Reynolds’s external relations documents no longer referred to the organization, aside from mentioning that an industry ally was running for the Nevada legislature on the strength of its past GGOOB affiliation. It is not clear from the available documents, however, whether there was any formal decision made to disband the coalition. RJ Reynolds may have decided that to continue to use the organization, and to have its history and funding exposed, was a political risk. In addition, the company may have wished to reduce its financial commitment to outside advocacy organizations, given that some of these groups (such as Citizens for a Sound Economy) received substantial contributions. The relatively short time period during which GGOOB existed meant that there was little investigation that might have identified its character. Although an academic paper published in 2002 about the actions of Mongoven, Bisceo and Duchin noted that GGOOB was an industry front group, we found no other mention of the tobacco industry connection to the organization. GGOOB was clearly a pure industry front group throughout its history: RJ Reynolds and a public relations firm were entirely responsible for its creation, organization, activities, and maintenance. And although some individuals appear to have volunteered to join the group, many of the organizations involved were financially compensated for their participation.

Overall, RJ Reynolds’s decision to create GGOOB appears to have been an unqualified success. The organization drew popular support from the public and from legislators, gathered extensive press attention for tobacco industry political positions, and assisted in derailing proposed regulations of workplace smoking and tobacco sales. Evidence from previous case studies of public relations efforts that used coalitions suggests that these accomplishments were partially or wholly contingent on the fact that some participants and the media did not realize the organization was an industry front group.

**DISCUSSION**

RJ Reynolds’s development of GGOOB suggests that industries may successfully block legislation and regulation with the development of allied organizations that are not obviously connected to their issues. During the 2-year period that GGOOB was active, there was very little discussion of how a new and previously unknown organization managed to fund multiple rallies and events, widely publicize them (in at least 1 case with an airplane flying overhead that trailed the coalition’s logo), and make its agenda a top priority for a range of existing national advocacy groups. Asking these questions might have revealed RJ Reynolds’s involvement in generating GGOOB from little more than a substantial lobbying budget and an advertisement that drew popular attention. Even a review of the organization’s early press releases, which specifically referenced support from tobacco growers and distributors, could have identified the tobacco industry connection. However, neither the advocacy groups that supported regulation nor the media appear to have investigated the coalition contemporaneously.

The history of GGOOB suggests that policymakers, advocates, and the media should be cautious in accepting the claims of groups that purport to reflect popular dissatisfaction, whether or not they appear to have an industry connection. Existing research on public relations notes that media investigation of organizational sponsors has frequently limited the effectiveness of front groups, and notes that to require industries to disclose all of their political activity would also limit the value of front groups to industry. To date, however, there are no rules requiring such disclosure, and media attention to the sponsorship of groups that are not obviously self-interested has been sporadic. The limited attention to organizational sponsorship is surprising given that nearly 90% of advocacy groups, when surveyed, admit that they are primarily dependent on outside patronage for their funding.
Advocates for public health in particular should also consider ideological arguments that have the potential to draw substantial public support against new measures to protect public health. The claim that government should leave individuals and businesses to make their own accommodations drew extensive public support, and if this argument is accepted, makes scientific evidence that supports measures to protect public health appear less important. In at least some cases, public and legislative support for this position appears to have developed without these supporters realizing that they were being solicited by the tobacco industry. Research on the use of ideological arguments in policymaking suggests that industries rely on such claims to maintain a profitable status quo. Public health advocates who seek new regulation or legislation should be prepared to address these kinds of ideological claims directly. The success of GGOOB relied largely on the appeal of the ideological position that dealing with tobacco issues should not be the province of government but the business of business. This research has certain limitations. The history of GGOOB is a single case study, which gives the history of 1 organization at a time when the industry that created it faced immense political threat. The tobacco industry in particular has an incentive to create front groups because it has historically been viewed as untrustworthy. In addition, the reliance on internal industry documents and press reports, rather than on contemporaneous interviews with policymakers, raises questions about the true influence of the organization in affecting the outcome of the FDA and OSHA regulatory battles. However, the substantial organizational and financial commitment made by RJ Reynolds suggests that the coalition did provide some value to the tobacco industry.

The successful development of industry front groups such as GGOOB has implications beyond tobacco regulation. Similar public health issues arise in debates about food policy and obesity, pharmaceutical regulation, limitations on the production of oil and gas, and attempts to control pollutants. Organizations learn from each other and research on lobbying suggests that other industries (such as the pharmaceutical industry) that face new restrictions have developed similar kinds of front groups to advocate on their behalf. However, unlike the tobacco industry, few of these other industries have been required to release the kinds of internal documents that would make the creation of such groups evident to outside observers. Lacking this kind of information, policymakers and advocates should research newly formed coalitions, as well as extrapolate from evidence provided by descriptions of tobacco industry activity obtained by looking through the “keyhole” of internal industry documents.

About the Authors
Dorie E. Apollonio and Lisa A. Bero are with the Department of Clinical Pharmacy, University of California, San Francisco. Dorie E. Apollonio is also with the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of California, San Francisco. Requests for reprints should be sent to Dr Lisa A. Bero, Department of Clinical Pharmacy, University of California San Francisco, 3333 California St, Suite 420, San Francisco, CA 94114 (e-mail: berol@pharmacy.ucsf.edu). This essay was accepted April 1, 2006.

Contributors
D.E. Apollonio originated the study, conducted the analysis, and led the writing of the article. L.A. Bero supervised the study and edited the article.

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Human Participation Protection
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About the Authors
Dorie E. Apollonio and Lisa A. Bero are with the Department of Clinical Pharmacy, University of California, San Francisco. Dorie E. Apollonio is also with the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of California, San Francisco. Requests for reprints should be sent to Dr Lisa A. Bero, Department of Clinical Pharmacy, University of California San Francisco, 3333 California St, Suite 420, San Francisco, CA 94114 (e-mail: berol@pharmacy.ucsf.edu). This essay was accepted April 1, 2006.


Chairman, Ways & Means Committee.


