

Freedom Manufacturing: The Cover-Up

By Veterans Institutional Exposure Initiative (VIEI)

When Freedom Manufacturing was finally forced to open its archives, investigators discovered something startling: the company had known about the dangers of tobacco for decades — and had actively concealed it.

A Crisis of Knowledge

By 1972, Freedom's medical division had compiled a report titled "Respiratory Decline in Long-Term Workers." The document warned that employees exposed to high nicotine levels were showing early lung scarring, chronic cough, and reduced oxygen absorption.

The conclusion read simply: "Prolonged tobacco use presents measurable risk to workforce health and productivity."

Instead of issuing a warning, Freedom's board voted to classify the report as "proprietary and confidential." Executives feared it could "damage morale and recruitment" — and more importantly, attract regulators.

Shaping the Narrative

Internal marketing teams were ordered to double down on positive imagery. Company newsletters ran stories featuring older employees who "smoked for 40 years and never missed a day." Smoking lounges were modernized and photographed for corporate brochures.

A 1984 internal memo from the public affairs office revealed the strategy: "We must link smoking with professionalism and endurance — make it appear integral to the Freedom identity."

Meanwhile, company doctors were quietly directed to "avoid associating respiratory decline with tobacco consumption in any written report."

Silencing the Whistleblowers

A handful of employees tried to sound the alarm. One safety inspector, Thomas Reilly, sent a letter to the Department of Labor in 1992 describing "institutional encouragement of smoking" and the "systemic denial of its effects."

Within months, Reilly was transferred to a remote plant in Alaska and later resigned. His case never made it to court — until decades later, when it resurfaced during the class-action

proceedings.

Echoes of a Larger Pattern

Freedom Manufacturing's behavior mirrors that of powerful institutions throughout history — organizations that valued tradition and image over truth. By the time reforms arrived, the damage was already done.

The company's public apology, issued only after losing its lawsuit, read: "We acknowledge that some past practices may have contributed to negative health outcomes."

The understatement was staggering.

The Real Parallel

If a company like Freedom Manufacturing could knowingly suppress medical data, manipulate perception, and endanger its employees — and still face justice — then how should a government institution be treated for doing the same?

Veterans didn't have the option to walk away. They couldn't "resign from exposure." They served in environments where tobacco was cheap, accessible, and normalized by command authority.

Freedom Manufacturing's cover-up ended in accountability.
The military's has not.

It's time to ask why.

Next in the Series: Freedom Manufacturing — The Reckoning