S-CHIPed

On April 1st, 43 million Americans will face the largest tax increase on a single product in the history of the United States. Can tobacco consumers take the financial hit?

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J. Glynn Loope, 45, a cigar-smoking lobbyist from Virginia, was appointed executive director of Cigar Rights of America (www.cigarrights.org) in January and immediately swung into action, looking something like the Dutch boy with his fingers in the holes of the dike. With cigar enthusiast’s rights to smoke being assaulted in no less than a dozen-and-a-half states when he came on board, there was no shortage of emergencies needing immediate attention.

With considerable experience in government relations, lobbying, and even setting up cigar-related organizations, Loope was eminently suited for the post. But since he was already running a consulting organization of his own, he wasn’t readily available. Several CRA board members prevailed upon him, and being the affable, cigar-smoking gentlemen with a love of freedom and the principals of individual rights that he is, Loope ultimately agreed to step up and develop the organization that the CRA founders envisioned.

Smokeshop sat down with Loope over a couple of fine cigars to discuss this important turning point in taking Cigar Rights of America to “the next level” and his plans for the organization.

SMOKESHOP: Glynn, as far as I know, you weren’t looking for a job when the CRA board approached you about the executive director position of the newly-formed, consumer-driven organization. What prompted you to accept the position?

LOOPE: I felt like this was the most unique opportunity to build a national organization from the ground up, for an industry that I believe in. Those moments don’t come around that often in life, so it needed to be seized. I had been running my own government relations and business development consulting firm for seven years, heading into my eighth when this first came up. Prior to that, I was involved in local, state, and federal projects and political work for a little over 20 years. This task will blend virtually every prior experience in one form or another.

SMOKESHOP: But you’ve also had some direct experience in protecting the rights of the cigar smoking community?

LOOPE: Like CRA getting off the ground and pulling the mechanics together, my first introduction to this type of work for the cigar industry came through our efforts in forming the Cigar Association of Virginia. This was a true case study in getting a group of profes-
sional tobacconists together, “making them political” for in some cases the first time in their lives, to fight against the heavy hand of government. It all began in 2006 when the first smoking ban legislation was introduced in Virginia. Our local cigar shop owners [Milan Tobacconists in Roanoke, Virginia] knew I was a lobbyist, and asked that I look into that and some OTP tax issues. The idea of the government not letting me have a cigar, in a place that welcomed me and that cigar, was entirely unacceptable.

**SMOKESHOP:** There are many such rights-oriented organizations—the NRA comes to mind as one that has been extremely successful. Are there any groups you are using as models in structuring the program for CRA?

**LOOPE:** There are numerous outstanding models for the CRA at the national level. We will be meeting with and emulating the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Federation of Independent Business, the National Association of Manufacturers, and we have already met with the National Rifle Association regarding use of some of their strategies. More important, however, are the national groups we need to be working with. In addition to those just noted, I would add the state and national restaurants association (with whom we’ve already met), American Gaming Association, and Licensed Beverage Councils, among others. They all need to be our allies in these political battles.

> During the debate on the Long Beach chamber floor, one of the councilpersons remarked that an unbelievable number of e-mails had been received opposing the ban on lounges.

**SMOKESHOP:** Our ability to enjoy a cigar has been impinged upon by municipal, county, state, and Federal legislation and regulation. How do you prioritize the efforts and, ultimately, the monies spent by CRA to fight the “good fight?”

**LOOPE:** For the last 60 days, we have been doing a lot of “priority setting.” There are smoking ban battles in at least 16 states as we speak. The priority is to have our presence felt in each of these, in one form or another. We’re calling legislators and like-minded organizations in each of these states, and informing our members on the status of each of these fights. Then there are the tax issues.

There are eight OTP tax battles brewing at the state level. We prioritize those according to level of severity and timing of the legislation. It all kind of gives “crises management” a new meaning. Frankly, though, it goes to the heart of how “Big Tobacco” approaches these moments. Their political machine is never off. It never shuts down; never takes a break. The cigar industry, in a political context, needs to be the same way.

**SMOKESHOP:** There is no argument that the industry and the cigar smoking community waited a long time before picking up the cudgel to do battle. How much more difficult has that made the task?

**LOOPE:** It’s a real challenge. This moment in political history crept up on the industry. We need a national infrastructure—now. It’s coming, though, and I believe we can make up for lost time. There are ample models in the distilled spirits industry and associated analogies that allow me to believe, with confidence, that we can turn a new political page for the cigar business.

**SMOKESHOP:** When the CRA I was first organized, I hypothesized that if five percent of the supposed seven million American cigar smokers could be tapped as dues-paying members, the CRA could have over $10 million per annum from dues with which to function. Has CRA created a political action committee (PAC), which would appear to be the most effective way to use that kind of money?

**LOOPE:** Well, that would be an amazing achievement, and it needs to remain the goal. Yes, the CRA has incorporated a PAC, but we are in the legal process of moving that to Virginia. We really need to be heading down a duel path: 1) Create structure and stability for CRA as an organization, and we’re clearly on that track; and 2) Capitalize the PAC so that we can begin influencing elections at all levels. There are some legal and organizational matters to work through, but this too will happen. And we can change some elections.

**SMOKESHOP:** Could you, perhaps, give us a step-by-step outline of what you CRA is going to be doing on behalf of the cigar smoker?

**LOOPE:** That’s a question for another day! We have a program, a structure, but I want to fine-tune it before I lay it out as the Holy Grail.

**SMOKESHOP:** Have you had conversations with legislators—or seen simply seen any “omens”—that make you confident that while CRA may not be able to reverse the trend, you
will be able to slow the anti-cigar tsunami?

LOOPE: Just the examples we have seen so far this year allow me to believe we can “slow the anti-cigar tsunami.” The very fact that a Colorado legislator introduced a bill to expand their cigar bar definition and expand smoking in gaming areas; that a Nebraska legislator introduced a bill amending their Indoor Clean Air Act that would allow previously banned cigar bars to now exist; that an Ohio legislator introduced a measure to loosen up their state smoking ban because of enforcement concerns; that a local government in Kentucky is having the same discussion; that the City of Long Beach, Calif. (one of the birthplaces of smoking bans) voted 6-2 to allow for indoor cigar lounge smoking—all within the last 60 days, bodes well. Have faith. Extremism can work in our favor.

SMOKESHOP: A person can smoke three cigars in an evening and get into their car and not hurt a living soul. Yet, if they have three alcoholic drinks and do the same, they could well kill someone.

Why hasn’t the liquor industry been beset by the “anti-enjoyment” forces?

LOOPE: They’re next. But, the liquor industry has been there before—the Volstead Act [better known as “Prohibition”]—and has a very well oiled lobbying machine.

SMOKESHOP: Are you getting the response from consumer that you expected?

LOOPE: It’s coming. It’s a marketing and awareness need right now. I believe, however, that through more sophisticated and aggressive internet overtures, personal involvement in these local, state, and federal issues, that the consumer will, in short order, recognize the virtue of joining CRA.

SMOKESHOP: Tobacconists could be seen as the lynch-pin in raising awareness of the organization and getting their clientele to become members. Are tobacconists being effective enough in this regard?

LOOPE: That, beyond any doubt, is next on the agenda for CRA. We are about to roll out a series of tobacconist benefits for joining CRA in a new category of membership. They will be the cornerstone of our success. We want them to be the conduit to the cigar patrons of this country, and we believe you and the industry will be very pleased with what’s about to come in that regard. Really, they have not been asked formally. There have been some overtures, discussions, and awareness building with the tobacconist community, but within the month, it’s going to be a different ball game.

SMOKESHOP: What will CRA be doing to help them be more effective?

LOOPE: We will be providing them some tools and strategies that will allow them to be of great assistance.

SMOKESHOP: Where are we going, Glynn?

LOOPE: Up. We are on the threshold of creating the first cigar consumer based organization in history for this country, and this industry. That’s exciting. Then, we’re going to the bar for a cigar.

There it is! Not only does Loope have a plan, he is optimistic and he is running the only organization ever to speak for cigar smokers and our rights. CRA deserves the support of everyone who wants to be free to enjoy a fine cigar.