

What Would Happen If Freedom Manufacturing Did What the Military Did?

By Veterans Institutional Exposure Initiative

Freedom Manufacturing is a global powerhouse — one of the largest employers in the world. With over a half million workers in more than 40 countries, it builds everything from aerospace components to armored vehicles. Its culture is steeped in tradition, discipline, and pride in service.

But imagine if this proud company had, for decades, encouraged its employees to smoke — even made it part of the job.

A Culture of Loyalty — and Addiction

From the 1950s through the early 2000s, Freedom Manufacturing didn't just allow smoking; it institutionalized it. Cigarettes were included in employee morale packs. Factory stores sold tobacco products tax-free. Supervisors handed out cigarettes during long shifts to "boost morale."

Promotional posters depicted executives lighting up beside workers on the line. "Strong Work. Strong Smoke," read one campaign. Smoking wasn't viewed as a health hazard — it was seen as a symbol of endurance, unity, and patriotism.

Even young apprentices, some still teenagers, were given complimentary packs to "help them fit in." The company's tobacco suppliers called the partnership a model of "employee engagement."

The Warnings That Went Unheeded

By the late 1980s, Freedom Manufacturing's own medical and safety officers began to sound the alarm. Internal health reports showed alarming rates of lung disease and heart failure among long-term employees.

One memo, dated June 14, 1988, warned: "We are knowingly providing a harmful substance to our workforce. If this were any other chemical, regulatory agencies would intervene immediately."

Rather than act, company leadership doubled down, calling smoking "a matter of personal choice." The internal smoking lounge at corporate headquarters was remodeled and expanded in 1990.

A Generation of Damage

By the 2020s, thousands of Freedom Manufacturing retirees suffered from emphysema, COPD, and other smoking-related illnesses. Many had started smoking only because it was promoted — and discounted — at work.

Widows and families began asking the same question: If this had been asbestos or lead, would the company still be blameless?

Eventually, the lawsuits came. Plaintiffs alleged that Freedom Manufacturing knowingly fostered addiction, sold harmful products on company property, and created a workplace culture that normalized substance use despite decades of evidence.

The legal case — Anderson et al. v. Freedom Manufacturing — became a national spectacle. Attorneys compared the company's actions to distributing toxins without warning. One summed it up simply: "They called it tradition. We call it negligence."

The jury agreed, awarding billions in damages to former employees and their families.

The Real Question

If a corporation like Freedom Manufacturing did this — if it sold tobacco tax-free to its employees, encouraged use on the job, and ignored health warnings for generations — would it be held accountable?

The answer is clear: yes. It would be sued. It would lose.

Now ask the harder question: When the same practices were carried out within a government institution — one that shaped culture, policy, and even national identity — why was there no accountability, no restitution, and no justice for those who served?

Would Freedom Manufacturing be sued? Absolutely.

Would it lose? Without a doubt.

So why should the rules be different for the U.S. Military?