

Kurtz, E. (1999). Here's to Spuds. In *The Collected Ernie Kurtz*, Wheeling, West Virginia: The Bishop of Books, pp. 229-230.

During my brief tenure as Director of Research and Education at Guest House, our Development Director, Michael Goddard, asked if I could write a piece that might be carried in local newspapers to educate about alcoholism. One piece of alcohol advertising had been irritating me since my days at the University of Georgia, so I decided to have a try at taking on one of beer advertising's perennial fad inventions. Given the heaviness of the previous piece, I hope this serves as a more fitting conclusion to this collection of writings that I have so much enjoyed producing.

Here's to "Spuds"!

Prominent voices have recently complained of the Spuds McKenzie character used promotionally by a leading manufacturer of magic chemicals. Spuds, a supposedly lovable pit bull terrier, is presented as "a party animal." Advertisements portray him surrounded by buxom, bubbling sex objects. Those who protest the advertisements claim that they are designed to seduce young people, presumably especially males, into imbibing the sponsor's beverage.

Such fears are foolish. Young people are not dumb: they understand and will learn from the education afforded by the Spuds character. As a student of our culture's attitudes toward mind-altering chemical use, I respectfully suggest that it would be difficult to devise a more accurate depiction of the results of consuming the pushed product. Three obvious points stand out.

First, despite denials, Spuds McKenzie is at the very least made up as a pit bull terrier. The breed's reputation for erratic behavior and especially for unpredictable violence hardly requires comment. Yet so great is the honesty of the sponsor – or so great its confidence in the stupidity of its audience – that this trait is underlined by choosing as

"Spuds" a patch-eyed specimen who looks as though he has lost a recent fight.

Second, in the advertisements, Spuds is clearly doped up to the point of being doped out. Sitting dazed dumb at parties seems a weird idea of being "a party animal." Can Spuds speak? Can Spuds dance? Can Spuds even blink his eyes? Apparently not – the surest evidence that, unlike some other advertising models, Spuds has indeed partaken of the sponsor's wares.

Third, there is the matter of Spuds McKenzie's companions. Although portrayed as vacuous air heads – an intriguing commentary on the sponsor's attitude toward women – these playful lasses are undeniably physically attractive. Yet Spuds remains oblivious to them and to their charms. I can imagine few hells worse than being surrounded by available sexuality and yet unable to enjoy the opportunity or even to notice it. Of course, as Shakespeare recognized, that is one inevitable outcome of partaking of Spuds' sponsor's product.

And so I disagree with those who find the Spuds McKenzie commercials misleading and dishonest. Rarely has any advertisement so accurately flaunted the consequences flowing from the use of the pushed product. If Americans, young or old, wish to sit dazed out of their minds at parties, unable to function socially or sexually, then they should know that consuming the products of the sponsor who brings them Spuds will effect that outcome.

The people who work in alcohol treatment should be grateful for Spuds. They often decry the stereotype of the skid-row alcoholic. The modern alcoholic is far better imaged by Spuds McKenzie – dazed mindless and sexless, scorned even while being fawned over.

Thank you, Anheuser-Busch, for an unprecedented example of truth in advertising.

[1988]