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Legalizing and Taxing the Drugs

The mailbag continues heavy since I wrote that circumstances argue the legalization of drugs combined with massive public education. Rep. Charles Rangel of New York entered my last column into the *Congressional Record*, introducing it with a few paragraphs about the extent to which he opposes drugs; and then passed along the package with a covering letter urging me to rethink my conclusion in the matter. He writes: "My Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control has held many hearings on the subject of drug abuse and ways to control it. I assure you, our findings clearly show that legalization is not the solution you seek..." But neither in his letter nor in his speech on the floor does Congressman Rangel tell us what his committee has accomplished.

I don't know when the first of Mr. Rangel's meetings was held, but I wager with confidence that between then and now, a) drug consumption has increased, b) drug-related crime has increased, and c) the price of drugs has come down. When the price of illegal drugs comes down, the market is telling you something as plainspoken as the oscillations in the price of an airplane ticket: competition is setting the price. When there is a reduction in the price of street drugs, this means that our massive efforts to keep drugs out of the country are failing. When, a few years ago, we had all that telegenic chemical destruction of the marijuana crop in Mexico, the marijuana crop in Colombia promptly increased, *pari passu*. It's like wage and price controls.

Not all my correspondents are in Congress. One sits in Sing Sing, and he writes with that declarative vig-

William F. Buckley Jr.

think it over

or that cuts through much obfuscation.

I quote him exactly: "You are 100 percent correct and the people who wrote to you saying that you are wrong about legalizing drugs have no conception of what is going on in this country because of drugs."

"- 85 percent of the New York prison population is black or Hispanic.

"- 75 percent of the entire population in New York prisons and probably the whole country, are in because of drugs or drug-related.

"- The local junkie must steal every day of the week, in order to keep up his or her habit, they must steal \$1,000 a day or more, in order to get \$100 or \$150.

"- Every junkie helps young people to start using junk, or pills, or mary-jane, or something to get them started, and the business escalates with new customers every day.

"- Marijuana is no different than alcohol. Excessive use will drive you crazy or kill you.

"- Cocaine is not addictive, rich man's toy.

"- All pills are dangerous.

"- Heroin is a killer and addictive.

"- The price and profit of dope is so high that honest people go into the business, who would never commit a crime; they take the place of those who get caught.

"- They say it takes \$100,000 to build one cell.

"- They say it takes \$40,000 to house one inmate (for one year).

"- If you legalize all the drugs, the prisons would be almost empty, crime would be reduced by 75 percent. Marijuana would be sold and taxed by the government, it would produce millions of dollars, to be used constructively.

"- As you know all this, supply and demand would kill the drug trade."

One needn't accept all the asseverations of the anonymous prisoner. But the ring of truth is there. The largest psychological obstacle remains the public notion that to legalize drugs is to pronounce benediction on them.

This isn't an entirely benighted idea. About a generation ago, Inland Revenue collectors in London decided the time had come to tax the whores, and so estimates were made out of their income, and tax bills were sent out. These included forms, and under "profession," the disconsolate girls would put down such things as "hostess," or "companion," or "nurse." One girl wrote down carefully, "prostitute." A few weeks later her check was returned. His Majesty's government was not going to participate in the wages of sin.

Something of that attitude carries over into the notion of a tax on drugs. But the paradox is as easily penetrated as the proposition that because we permit the publication of *Hustler* magazine, we approve of reading that vile journal - which, by the way, we unblushingly tax. We are overdue for hard thought on this pained and divisive subject.

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