

If legalizing drugs is wrong,

does anyone have a better idea?

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY

Two months ago in this space I attempted to accost a dilemma, and very nearly got run over. To compress the analysis, it goes like this: (1) We aren't succeeding in keeping dope away from the American public. (2) We have, in attempting to keep it away from the public, created, and are now sustaining, a criminal class, plus encouraging criminal behavior on a vast scale. (3) Is there then a case for doing away with the crime

William F. Buckley Jr. is editor of National Review and a columnist.

by legalizing the stuff and simultaneously mounting a huge campaign against its consumption?

People who have had any experience in talking about drugs other than merely to condemn them will tell you that some people simply stop thinking when they read an attempt at reason. Many letters recounted to me the horrors of drug addiction — as though I had been arguing in favor of drug addiction. At a more subtle level, there is much sentiment out there that if the U.S. government legalized the consumption of hard drugs, it would inevitably appear as if the people of the United States sanctioned the consumption of hard drugs. There is of course no logic in that position: A society can sanction the sale of pistols without sanctioning their use to kill people. A drugstore that stocks sleeping

pills does not sanction their use for suicidal purposes. Still, there is the lingering impression that to license is to approve, and for that reason alone changes in the law would need to be made with fanfare whose message was unambiguous.

A lawyer wrote in with a novel suggestion, namely that Congress pass a law giving all Americans currently taking heroin or cocaine 90 days in which to register as users. They would then be supplied with the stuff, but only on their agreeing to sign up for rehabilitation courses. Anyone unregistered as a user and caught using the drugs after the 90-day limit would incur a special penalty of a very heavy kind. The idea is clear enough: Find out who the users are, give it to them at cost, for as long as it takes to break the habit. Warn others that experimentation will

bring draconian consequences.

An interesting variation, not to be dismissed. But it becomes clearer that mere denunciations of the drugs simply are not having the desired effect. Meanwhile, the figures roll in. Fifty percent, perhaps 60 percent, of all crime is drug-related. Ninety percent of illegal drugs reaching the country come in through organized crime. Businesses lose \$50 billion annually because of drug-related absenteeism and mistakes made at the plant. There are now 4 million frequent cocaine users, 10 million occasional users. The cost of both heroin and coke, three years after President Reagan's big anti-drug campaign was launched, are half what they were, which tells us that drugs are more ubiquitous than ever.

Here is a problem that the hardliners have a problem with. Take

Dr. Gabriel G. Nahas of Columbia University, author of several anti-marijuana studies, most recently, "Stay Off The Grass." Confront him with what we know about the drugs we do legally tolerate. Three hundred thousand people die every year because of tobacco. Fifty thousand (at least) because of alcohol and alcohol-related accidents. Yet there is certainly no sentiment to outlaw tobacco, let alone booze. Somehow our culture has decided to come to terms with the problem. Such pressure as there is is in the direction of advertising the noxious effects of smoking or overdrinking. Dr. Nahas will fend off questions relating to tobacco and alcohol by saying that proper epidemiological studies have yet to be done on the consumption of marijuana, so that there is as yet no way of telling exactly what is the strategic dam-

age done by its consumption. And then, of course, the ultimate psychological weapon: If the United States becomes a nation of drug users, this will sap our will, much as the will of China was sapped by the use of opium before the turn of the century, and that of Islam by the use of hashish. Stop, they tell us, before it is too late.

But then we pause to reflect. Stop it how? Mr. Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore can tell us how: All you need to do is execute everyone you catch selling the stuff, and maybe flog users, and presto, no further problem.

Meanwhile, we have lots and lots of crime, and lots and lots of drugs floating all over the place. I pray for a solution, and note gently that it is not a part of any solution to write me a letter to tell me how awful drugs are. ■