

# Sarasota Herald-Tribune

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Elven Grubbs, Publisher

News

Editorial

William F. McIlwain, Executive Editor

Waldo Proffitt Jr., Editor

Diane H. McFarlin, Managing Editor

Robert G. Watt, Editorial Page Editor



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## Editorials

### An Immoderate Proposal

A special commission to advise the President of the United States on Organized Crime has made a remarkable suggestion. What it amounts to is: Fight the drug traffickers by testing the population for drug use.

Now it's indisputable that the illegal drug trade is an organized crime, magnificently profitable for those who import or manufacture and distribute narcotics and other substances whose sale and use is either prohibited or controlled by law.

It is also undeniable that the best efforts made by federal, state and local law enforcement agencies have not seriously impeded this activity.

It's also true that government's heaviest anti-drug guns have been directed against the smugglers and sellers of these substances rather than against those who buy and use them.

So, since government hasn't been able to stop the biggies in the business of the victimizers, if you will - and since it is illegal to possess and use the stuff as well as to sell it, the presidential commission now proposes to focus on smelling out and punishing the victims of this organized crime.

To meet the obvious objection that this would mean unjustified and unlawful searches, an unconstitutional infringement on personal liberties, the commission proposes to start with federal employees. Presumably it would be ruled a condition of their employment that they submit to such testing - anyone who objects being free to quit.

Then the commission would make employee drug-testing a condition for anyone doing business with the federal government.

Next, we suppose, using the U.S. mails could be categorized as doing business with the government, and presto - universal drug tests.

This immoderate proposal by the presidential commission is really a confession that we cannot effectively enforce our drug laws against the criminals who profit from them. That being so, does anyone seriously think that they would be put out of their vicious business by wholesale testing of working

Americans in hopes of turning up some of their customers?

Before we consider trying to enforce our drug laws by such futile and totalitarian means, we should reconsider those laws.

First, who is actually helped and who is hindered by the laws against marijuana, cocaine, and heroin?

Everyone in the illegal drug trade - from Latin American and Mideastern and Southeast Asian suppliers to the pusher around the corner - profits hugely because it is the anti-drug laws that make it possible to get very big dollars for stuff that costs pennies to produce.

And obviously, anti-drug laws are not keeping the customers from buying. Uncounted numbers of users are addicted, dependent, and in too many cases willing to do whatever degrading or criminal thing may be necessary to support an expensive and destructive habit.

It would be a radical change, of course, to decriminalize the use of these drugs. It would be an admission that the law hasn't been able to stop people from using them, just as the 18th Amendment wasn't effective in prohibiting people from drinking alcohol.

After sad experience with that noble experiment, it was repealed.

We do not equate the two, drugs and alcoholic beverages. We know that the abuse of alcohol wrecks the lives and the health of far too many of our citizens. We cannot know what effect decriminalization of narcotics would have on American society.

But the country faces a serious crisis when a presidential commission recommends widespread involuntary blood testing or urinalysis to try to combat the illegal drug business which, it says, accounts for 40 percent of all the organized criminal activity in the country.

Perhaps it's time to weigh an alternative - letting those who choose to destroy themselves with drugs do so without having to commit crimes to get the money with which to enrich the drug traffickers.

It wouldn't solve the drug-abuse problem, but it would stop a lot of burglary and street crime. And it would kill the dirty business for organized crime.