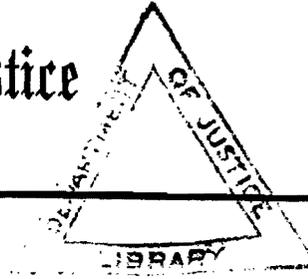




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ADDRESS

BY

ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY, GENERAL CHAIRMAN

WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON NARCOTIC AND DRUG ABUSE

DEPARTMENT OF STATE AUDITORIUM

WASHINGTON, D. C.

SEPTEMBER 28, 1962

Ladies and Gentlemen:

For a day and a half, this Conference has been analyzing the problems of Narcotic and Drug Abuse. This afternoon, in the panel on legislation, the Conference will consider various courses for action in the future.

Before we do so, however, I think this is a particularly appropriate time to stop for a moment and recognize an outstanding example of the distinguished work that already has been done. I speak of Dr. Harris Isbell, for 17 years the director of the National Institute of Mental Health's Addiction Research Center at Lexington, Kentucky.

Dr. Isbell has been described by his Public Health Service colleagues as the "foremost world authority on the biology of narcotic addiction." He has done considerable and important research while at the same time serving as an outstanding administrator.

It is a great pleasure for me to present to Dr. Isbell the Meritorious Service Award of the Public Health Service Commissioned Corps.

The accompanying citation reads:

"In recognition of his outstanding accomplishments in the field of drug addiction research. Throughout his seventeen years as Director of the Addiction Research Center of the National Institute of Mental Health, he has provided very effective scientific, intellectual, and moral leadership. Under his leadership, the Center has gained world-wide recognition, not only for its work in the field of drug addiction, but also as a center for research in experimental psychiatry.

"In both of these areas, Dr. Isbell has distinguished himself not only as an extraordinarily able director and coordinator of multi-disciplinary research, but also as an outstanding investigator in his own right whose work in clinical pharmacology has exerted far-reaching influences on medical practice."

Dr. Isbell, please accept this medal, together with our warmest congratulations.

We are a proud and powerful nation. There is no affliction to which we surrender. We have conquered our environment by conquering our ignorance. Sewage systems protect us from cholera and typhoid. Vaccinations guard us against other diseases. And public and private institutions, working with wide public awareness and financial support, continue to wage an unremitting campaign against cancer, heart disease, and other afflictions which we have not yet been able to defeat.

Such efforts are not limited to natural afflictions. Increasingly, we are devoting the same kind of urgent effort to socially spawned problems. The extent and effect of traffic safety campaigns, for example, is well-known. And our efforts are constantly improving in such areas as mental illness and juvenile delinquency.

Yet our approach to the great social problem of narcotics and drug abuse, reflects none of the same dedication, confidence, or progress. Not only do we not have a comprehensive program; we do not have sufficient reliable information on which to base a program.

To say this about a nation which won two world wars or which sends men into orbit sounds like lunacy or lethargy. We must soon prove otherwise and, as I said yesterday, this Conference is a historic beginning.

We have somehow assumed that the narcotics problem is so intensely dangerous and vicious that the solution is principally punitive. This field reaches across many disciplines--psychology, sociology, economics and medicine, as well as criminology and yet we have persisted in letting almost the entire burden fall on the Federal Bureau of Narcotics.

We are all aware and all grateful to the Bureau of Narcotics for the remarkably effective work it has done, for so long, under Mr. H. J. Anslinger and now under his very able successor, Mr. Henry Giordano. Illicit narcotics traffic has been reduced greatly and many racketeers who prey on the needs of addicts have been sent to prison. But law enforcement is only one aspect. The root of the problem remains.

Thoreau said, "There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root."

Our difficulty is that despite dedicated and sincere efforts, we have not been striking at the root. We spend too much time debating how to do so, without knowing where the root is, and without knowing whether we are using a hoe where a bulldozer is needed.

As you know, this Conference was not called to provide a forum for certain theories nor to reach what might at best be arbitrary solutions. This conference is designed--as the preceding panels have demonstrated--to help us recognize what we know about the problem and, perhaps more important, how much we don't know. Our major aim is to re-emphasize that we do, indeed, need answers and to determine how we can best find them, on a rational and national basis.

As you go into this final panel session on legislation, I hope that we can direct attention to future pooling of experience, experiment and excitement--with the thoughts and facts gathered at this Conference as a firm foundation.

In the words of your excellent ad hoc panel report, "Difficult as is the prevention of drug abuse and the cure of addicts, the members of the Panel are reasonably optimistic that the problem is not insoluble, and that in certain programs, real, if limited success is being achieved"

"Above all else, sound information must form the basis of future legislation -- legislation which is broadly directed toward the general problem of compulsive drug abuse, so that it will be both appropriate to the situation at hand and flexible to meet new and changing manifestations of this unresolved disorder."

I hope, however, that we can point the way to more than information. I hope we can also chart directions for action. You have, so far, considered the most difficult and challenging problems in the area of narcotics and drug abuse. The legislation panel provides the forum for ideas about how best to put various approaches to these problems into action.

For example, one particularly promising approach you have analyzed here is civil commitment--giving an addict treatment rather than just a prison term, with an intensive period of institutional care followed by closely supervised parole and aftercare. Throughout the period of prospective rehabilitation, criminal charges are kept pending.

There is no federal program for civil commitment at present, but the Administration supports extensive experimentation with the principle.

As Governor Brown reported yesterday, for example, the program underway in California has, so far, resulted in a remarkably low rate of relapse. Not nearly enough time has passed to warrant optimism about the long-term success of these projects and none of us can now say they are the answer. But they might very well indicate the right direction, and they warrant extensive experimental steps in that direction.

I think we all agree totally that narcotics racketeers deserve the severest prosecution and sentencing. Under the present mandatory sentencing law they have received it and it has been effective.

Because of this law and other enforcement efforts, the Bureau of Narcotics and other agencies have been able to curtail sharply the flow of narcotics both into and within the country. As the President noted yesterday, addicts could get 100 percent, or pure heroin 35 years ago, while today, the drug is so scarce that addicts obtain only 3 to 5 percent heroin.

While the criminal should be given a prison sentence, I think we also agree, however, that the addict should be given treatment. The mandatory sentencing law applies equally to racketeers and to others, who may be peddlers only to support the cost of their own addiction. As a result, rigid application of the law has produced some notable and dramatic sentencing disparities.

Development of the principle of civil commitment might well help us find a way to plane down some of these rough edges on the otherwise effective mandatory sentencing procedure.

The legislative views you express today on such questions as these will have great importance. My hope that you can help us chart directions for action is not rhetorical.

The narcotic and drug abuse problem is not just a law enforcement problem or a medical problem. It is not just a New York problem or a California problem. It is a national problem and a mutual responsibility.

The Administration has drafted positive programs for other domestic problems, ranging from agriculture to unemployment. It is the Administration's intention to develop a narcotics program -- and to present the start of this program to the next Congress.

The President is in the process of appointing a council, as a follow-up to this Conference, to be responsible for the development of this legislative program. This council, to include several expert and distinguished individuals, will work at the White House level and will exemplify cooperation among the relevant federal agencies.

We are extremely hopeful that we also can rely on the cooperation and support of the state, local and private agencies, organizations and individuals participating in this conference. With the findings of our meetings here as a foundation, we hope to translate cooperation into information, information into legislation, legislation into action and action into success.

It is our hope, as I know it is yours, that we can defeat the problem of narcotics and drug abuse; that we can, in time, relegate the anguish and the terrible price of this affliction to the medical histories, along with the Black Death, yellow fever, and other one-time scourges of mankind.

This is a task that calls forth our best as experts, as Americans, and as human beings. We have made a good beginning. Let us now work to a speedy end.