

# A Duty to Censor

**U.N. officials want to crack down on drug war protesters.**

By Phillip O. Coffin

In a TV ad that aired worldwide in May, a cleaning woman walks down the hall of the United Nations headquarters in New York. As she approaches the globe in the front of the General Assembly's meeting room, the narrator talks about the organization's 20th Special Session: "On June the 8th, leaders from 185 countries will gather in this room for three days to talk about drugs."

The cleaning woman, beginning with her rag on Thailand, spritzes the globe and "wipes it free of drugs." Her rag becomes a squadron of helicopters spraying fields with herbicide. We see images of high-tech radar equipment, drug-sniffing dogs, and flaming drug laboratories, offset by two classroom shots representing anti-drug

education. The narrator concludes: "Three days...this room...and a world of good. A drug-free world...we can do it."

The U.N.'s anti-drug apparatus—which includes the Drug Control Program, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB)—seeks to wipe the world free of dissent as well as drugs. The INCB's 1997 report calls for criminalizing opposition to the war on drugs. The nations of the world have not followed through on that recommendation yet, but the spirit behind it has helped prevent a genuine international debate about drug policy.

Based on the 1988 U.N. Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, the INCB

claims that all nations are obliged to enact laws that prohibit inciting or inducing people "by any means" to "use narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances illicitly." According to the INCB's report, offenders include anyone who "shows illicit use in a favourable light" or who advocates "a change in the drug law."

The report criticizes "reputable medical journals" for "favouring the 'medical' use of cannabis," since "such information... tends to generate an overall climate of acceptance that is favourable to" illegal drug use. It also attacks the marketing of nonpsychoactive hemp products, such as clothing and foodstuffs, for "contributing to the overall promotion of illicit drugs."

The INCB even suggests that political campaigns based on calls for drug policy reform may be prohibited under international treaties: "Election campaigns have been conducted with candidates standing for parliament on a drug legalization platform. Some of the candidates for the European Parliament stood on such a platform and were successful. Thus, they were able to use their access and influence to win others over to their cause. Some campaigns, such as the successful campaigns for the 'medical' use of cannabis in Arizona and California in the United States of America, have sought to change the law...."

"The Board notes with regret that despite the fact that... Governments of States that are parties to the 1988 Convention are required to make the incitement or inducement to take drugs a criminal offence, either this has not been done or the law has not been enforced. Prominent people have issued some very public calls to take drugs and have not been prosecuted."

The new director of the U.N. Drug Control Program, Pino Arlacchi, has followed up on the 1997 report by attacking European Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs Emma Bonino, an advocate of drug policy reform. In a March letter to Jacques Santer, president of the European Commission, Arlacchi questioned Bonino's status: "I wish to raise the critical issue of the compatibility of Ms. Bonino's behaviour with the role and functions of



**Stop the World, I Want to Get High:** As this still from a United Nations TV commercial underscores, the U.N.'s anti-drug apparatus seeks to wipe the world clean of dissent as well as drugs. U.N. officials have attacked advocacy of medical marijuana and suggested that political campaigns to reform drug policies may be prohibited under the 1988 U.N. Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances.

COURTESY PHILLIP O. COFFIN

a top official of the European Commission," he wrote. "Her main objective seems to be to ridicule the efforts undertaken" by the Drug Control Program. In response, Santer wrote to U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, arguing that it is perfectly appropriate for a European commissioner to consider "fundamental questions about the principles, objectives and modalities of the war on drugs."

**K**enneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, noted that the Drug Control Program's position on dissenters has sweeping implications. "Many people...do not share the views about drugs reflected in the U.N. drug conventions and the antinarcotics efforts of many member states," he said in an April letter to the members of the INCB. "Would the [INCB] have member states criminalize advocacy of medical marijuana or of the decriminalization of possession of small amounts of marijuana? Would it have states impose criminal sanctions on people who write books about the sacred truths they have allegedly received from ingesting hallucinogens? Does it really support carting musicians off to jail if their songs are deemed to glamorize drugs?" For anyone who values freedom of expression, the INCB's blithe advocacy of worldwide censorship is pretty scary.

But a more immediate threat is the suppression of politically incorrect views within the U.N. itself. The World Health Organization removed a section from a recent report on marijuana concluding that the drug's hazards pale beside those of tobacco and alcohol. WHO said the section was dropped because "the reliability and public health significance of such comparisons are doubtful." The lead researcher, Robin Room of Canada's Addiction Research Foundation, disagreed. "In my view," he wrote in *The (Toronto) Globe and Mail*, "enough is known for such comparisons to be useful." The real concern seemed to be the potential reaction from U.N. drug control officials. One source familiar with the controversy says the view at the Drug Control Program is that "anyone who wants to make comparisons [between marijuana and licit drugs] is a legalizer."

Another case of WHO censorship involved research on coca. In 1994, after two

years of research in 19 countries, a group of well-respected investigators concluded that coca leaf chewing is not addictive. They also found that most cocaine users consume very little of the drug and experience few serious problems. The results were summarized in a March 1995 press release. In May 1995, according to official WHO records, the organization's U.S. representative, Neil Boyer, "took the view that the study on cocaine...indicates that [WHO's] programme on substance abuse was headed in the wrong direction" and that "if WHO activities relating to drugs failed to reinforce proven drug control approaches, funds for the relevant programmes should be curtailed." The full results of the study were never released.

The response to that project was reminiscent of an incident that occurred nearly half a century ago. In 1950, when he found out that the Navy was investigating the use of coca to prevent muscular fatigue, Harry Anslinger, director of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, wrote to the principal researcher. "The fact that a domestic scientific project was in progress in the United States, involving the study of the effect of chewing of coca leaves on fatigue, would have a most unfortunate effect on our efforts to achieve international agreement on limitation of production of the leaves," Anslinger said in a letter uncovered by historian Paul Gootenberg. "I therefore must strongly urge that that part of the project involving the use of coca leaves be abandoned." It was.

U.S. officials continue to lead the international fight against deviation from the official line on drugs. According to staff members at the U.N. Drug Control Program, the INCB's U.S. representative, Herbert Okun, has played a vital role in developing the U.N.'s censorship standards. That role is not surprising, given the attitude of U.S. drug warriors toward American dissenters.

In December 1996, a month after California and Arizona voters legalized the medical use of marijuana, Attorney General Janet Reno, drug czar Barry McCaffrey, and Drug Enforcement Administration Director Thomas Constantine announced that the federal government would punish any doctor who recommended marijuana to a patient. A group of California physicians challenged the

policy as a violation of the First Amendment, and they won a temporary injunction from a federal judge. A year later, when television character Murphy Brown smoked marijuana to relieve the nausea brought on by cancer chemotherapy, Constantine promised to investigate "if any laws were broken."

By trying to silence skeptical voices, drug warriors further weaken their authority and credibility. Perhaps sensing that such an approach is counterproductive, the conservative Finnish delegation to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs rejected the conclusions of the INCB's 1997 report. "Finland represents a very restrictive drug policy line," it said. "We consider, however, that it would be unfair to label all those who are of a different opinion as being in favour of drugs. If we feel that we are the losers in the debate with the free press, it is best to check our own arguments." ♦

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# Retirement Plans

**Genuine Social Security reforms appear surprisingly likely.**

By Michael W. Lynch

In 1992, presidential candidate Bill Clinton, needing to shed the liberal baggage that then accompanied Democrats on national campaigns, promised to “end welfare as we know it” if elected. In 1996, after President Clinton twice vetoed bills that would have done so, Dick Morris whispered in his ear, and the president signed a bill that ended Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

Cut to January 1998. The president’s Lewinsky period begins. Facing a hostile press and Congress, President Clinton needed to come up with a zinger or two for his State of the Union address. With his favorite subject—children—temporarily off the table, Clinton shifted his attention to the other end of the age spectrum. Pre-empting Republican dreams of tax cuts, the president promised to use “every penny of any [budget] surplus” to “save Social Security.”

Whether Clinton meant it at the time isn’t important. Political leaders often set forces in motion they cannot control. And just as Clinton’s pre-presidential promise eased the way for welfare reform, his State of the Union speech may mark the beginning of the end for the unsustainable Ponzi scheme known as Social Security.

It is far from a sure thing, but the political planets are in alignment for real reform in 1999: Congressional Republicans have long wanted to reform the system; polls show the public understands something must change for Social Security to remain intact; the budget surplus is accumulating to cover some of the short-term costs that any reform will generate; and high-profile Democrats such as Sens. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (N.Y.) and

John Breaux (La.) are joining Republicans in offering serious reform plans.

One reason action is likely is that Washington’s policy makers—and many Americans—already know what’s wrong with the system: It’s a raw deal on the verge of long-term insolvency. They also know what needs to be done to fix it: Transform the system from an intergenerational transfer program to one that is based on invested wealth.

**S**ocial Security, as currently structured, faces the twin problems of insolvency and poor rate of return. According to the latest Social Security Trustees report, by 2013 Social Security will begin to pay out more each year than it collects in taxes. At that point, the system’s obligations will put pressure on the general budget, as the cash-flow shortfall will have to be made up by some combination of spending cuts, tax increases, or debt finance.

Even as its solvency slips away, Social Security promises to provide Americans currently compelled to contribute to it an extremely poor rate of return. Calculations by the Heritage Foundation show that an average two-income family with 30-year-

old parents can expect a dismal 1.2 percent return from the 10.7 percent of its income devoted to Social Security’s retirement benefit.

Here’s the rub: Under the current pay-as-it-goes structure, the problems of solvency and rate of return cannot be simultaneously addressed. Everyone knows how to increase the system’s solvency: Implement a politically unpalatable combination of increased taxes and reduced benefits. But to do this would make Social Security an even rawer deal for those toiling to pay its taxes. Doing the reverse—reducing taxes and raising benefits—would increase the rate of return. But the system’s solvency would slip away.

The only way out of this bind is to make the system’s assets work harder. And the only way to make the system’s assets work harder is for it to actually accumulate assets. As Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Texas) quipped at a Heritage Foundation luncheon, “You cannot set up a wealth-based system without wealth.” There are many ways for the Social Security system to begin to rely on wealth, some better than others, some downright dangerous, and all requiring legislative change.

There are three general approaches to fund the system with real assets. One is to maintain the structure of the current system but have its administrators supplement the investment in government bonds with private securities. This is the preference of old-guard liberals such as Henry Aaron of the Brookings Institution. Writes Aaron: “If Congress wants to assure Social Security beneficiaries the same high returns on Social Security reserves that private securities yield, it need only instruct the managers of the trust funds to invest Security reserves in passively managed index funds containing private stocks and bonds.”

The perils of this approach are obvious. The risks of letting the federal government own a chunk of corporate America outweigh any return on the

