

# Surgeon general ignites drug legalization debate

by Kathleen Klenetsky

Already the subject of controversy for her views on abortion and sex education, U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders has now managed to incite a national debate about drug legalization, thanks to her allegedly off-the-cuff remarks on the subject to reporters at the National Press Club on Dec. 7.

In response to a reporter's question, Elders stated that she thought that legalizing drugs would "markedly" reduce the U.S. crime rate. Claiming that "60% of our violent crimes committed are associated with alcohol or drug use," she asserted: "I do feel that we would markedly reduce our crime rate if drugs were legalized. But I don't know all the ramifications of this. I do feel that we need to do some studies. And some of the countries that have legalized drugs and made it legal, they certainly have shown that there has been a reduction in their crime rate and there has been no increase in their drug use rate."

Elders's Pearl Harbor Day bombshell triggered an immediate uproar. Through various of its officials, from FBI head Louis Freeh through chief Clinton drug policy adviser Lee Brown, the Clinton administration attempted to disassociate itself from Elders's remarks. White House spokeswoman Dee Dee Myers told reporters, "Basically, it's [drug legalization] not going to happen."

## No reprimand from the White House

President Clinton himself responded to his surgeon general's comments by denouncing legalization, and saying that he believes that if drugs were legalized, his brother Roger (a recovering cocaine addict) would be dead. But Clinton steadfastly refused to entertain the possibility that Elders should be reprimanded. And he rejected out-of-hand the demand, made by Sen. Don Nickles (R-Okla.), that Elders should resign on the grounds that it's "outrageous for the nation's top health official to talk about legalizing drugs."

Although the Clinton administration moved swiftly to distance itself from Elders's position, the surgeon general had already provided new ammunition to the dope lobby just at the time it had suffered a blow with the death of Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar. As the Dec. 8 *New York Times* put it: "Dr. Elders's comments are almost certain to revive a perennial debate about the most effective way to handle the nation's drug problems."

And so they have.

Not only have Elders's statements triggered a flurry of editorials and other media commentaries—many of them favorable; they have also been seized upon by the advocates of drug legalization to press their cause.

Immediately following her National Press Club appearance, the pro-legalization Criminal Justice Policy Foundation issued a press release stating that it "agrees that a study of regulating, licensing, and taxing the commerce in now-illegal drugs is urgently needed."

In the nation's capital, Washington, D.C. Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly, following a meeting at the White House with Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno on crime-fighting, said that she agreed with Elders's suggestion that the question of drug legalization should be studied.

Every imaginable stripe of drug-legalizer has crawled out of the woodwork to go on television or take to the opinion pages of the major newspapers to participate in a media-orchestrated debate on the virtues of legalization. On the night of Elders's remarks, ABC News used them to justify a lengthy segment on illegal drugs, which boosted the notion purveyed by Elders, but disputed by most criminal justice experts, that decriminalization of drugs reduces robberies, thefts, and other crimes. The next day, the major network morning news shows featured such proponents of legalization as Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke and Judge Robert Sweet of New York wholeheartedly endorsing Elders's call for a "study" of drug legalization.

Nearly every major news outlet has given big play to the issue. The Dec. 20 issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, former home to White House adviser David Gergen, ran an editorial by co-editor Michael Ruby which, while pointing up the dangers of decriminalizing drugs, nevertheless endorsed Elders's call for a "study" of the issue. "Bill Clinton should listen to part of what his surgeon general has to say. It's unlikely that a fair-minded study could make a convincing case for legalization, but new research might well turn up some useful information."

The Dec. 14 *New York Times* turned over its opinion page to the "pros and cons" of legalization, with former Assistant U.S. Attorney Sidney Zion taking the "pro" side, and citing recent British experiments with "medicalizing" drug use, i.e., having doctors hand out drugs to addicts, as a model for U.S. drug policy.

These are just a few of the examples of how the media are using Elders's comments to promote legalization.

## EIR saw it coming

In its July 30, 1993 issue, *EIR* published a feature story which warned that the drug lobby saw in the Clinton administration an opportunity for "de-demonizing" drugs, in the words of longtime legalization advocate Prof. Ethan Nadelman, as opposed to outright legalization. Elders's comments appear to have given the process of "de-demonization" a big boost.