

Clarifying terms for drug war's end

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Words intended to mean one thing when leaving your mouth can mean something completely different upon entering the ear of another.

Saying what you mean in such a way that others will not misunderstand you is the great challenge in most any type of discussion, debate or negotiation. I wish I could remember who provided an illustration of this many years ago by pointing out that a fellow might intend to convey a romantic message meaning: "When I look at you time, time stands still." But if what the listener understands is, "Your face would stop a clock," there obviously was a major problem with word choice creating a definition gap between intention and understanding.

The word-choice topic came up in a dinner conversation Tuesday, when a California judge met with a handful of Texas people who share his interest in changing the nation's drug policy. Judge James Gray came to Houston to speak at a luncheon Thursday sponsored by the Drug Policy Forum of Texas. He is the author of a new book: *Why Our Drug Laws Have Failed and What We Can Do About it*.

Regulating isn't legalizing

Gray said he avoids choosing and using the word "legalize" in connection with drug-policy reforms. What he is working toward, he said, is regulation.

Gray first went public in 1992 as a critic of the nation's war on drugs because, he said, he had seen firsthand and up close how the drug laws have failed, how they waste tax dollars, increase crime and despair, and harm so many lives unnecessarily.

He said at that time that he predicted a major turnaround in drug policy - an end to the war on drugs - by the year 2000. He admits he was off on that guess, but based upon recent developments and the rapidly increasing support for policy change, he believes it could happen in another two or three years.

One of the folks at that Tuesday dinner said that when he used the word "legalize" when talking about drugs, he is proposing that they be treated like alcohol, which once also was illegal.

The problem with that, Gray explained, is that alcohol still is not legal in many instances. There are many places where buying it, selling it or consuming it are illegal for anyone. It is illegal for anyone underage to buy it or consume it. It is illegal to sell it without the licenses and permits. It is illegal to buy it without paying the taxes on it.

Many people hear "legalize" and they believe that to mean drugs would be readily available to everyone. Alcohol is readily available to everyone. Alcohol is regulated. And under potential policy changes favored by Gray and many others who want to see an end to the war, other drugs

also would be regulated.

He does not claim that regulating drugs would make them impossible for kids to get. After all, teen-agers can get booze today, just as the judge and others of us middle-age folks could get it when we were teens.

But kids have to go to some effort to obtain alcohol, due to the way it is regulated. Illegal drugs are easier to get, Gray said. Illegal drugs come looking for the kids, and there is a plentiful supply despite years of the best efforts of those fighting the costly but ineffective drug war.

Ill-defined words stall progress

So Gray said he is for changing laws so that the currently illegal drugs could be regulated.

In his book, he calls it a "major pitfall in the discussion of our current drug policy and alternative options" that terms are not carefully defined by those who use them.

"It is, regrettably, very common for one person not to know what another person is talking about, which naturally leads to a great deal of miscommunication and misunderstanding," he wrote. "If everyone would take care to define their terms, we would make a lot more progress."

He believes progress is inevitable.

"Our country will someday change to a materially different drug policy," he said, also predicting that "we will look back in astonishment that we allowed our former policy to persist for so long, much as we look back now at slavery."

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