

Legalization, No -- Policy Overhaul, Yes

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Calls by Orange County judge for a critical study of drug laws gain influential support

Bit by bit, adding a legislator here and a policeman there, Orange County Superior Court Judge James P. Gray is building a coalition to support his proposal for a thorough review of the nation's drug laws. He is proving to be a catalyst for a needed debate on an important subject.

Gray first caused a stir by advocating drug legalization, a position The Times opposes. However, his less controversial call for examination of existing laws merits study.

Consider state Sen. Marian Bergeson (R-Newport Beach), who appeared with Gray at a Santa Ana press conference last month. Bergeson, an adamant foe of drug legalization, lamented that "drug use is ravaging our families" yet she said also that a study of the problem is needed "if we are to make a difference." It's hard to quarrel with that.

It has been nearly two years since Gray proclaimed himself fed up with the dreary parade of drug cases through his court and said he backed legalization of marijuana, cocaine and heroin as a way of dealing with the tide of drugs in America. He was condemned by a host of law enforcement officials, and there even were calls for him to be disciplined.

The judge survived, and now he urges "a program of regulated distribution" of drugs. That's a bad idea, but Gray is right to keep up the effort to make the public aware of inadequacies in present drug enforcement approaches. Several days before the Santa Ana press conference, U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders suggested that drug legalization be studied. Clinton Administration officials quickly disowned her comments, but examining and reforming anti-drug policies indeed make sense. For one thing, we clearly need better treatment programs.

At the press conference, Gray was supported by a Detroit councilwoman, a clergyman, an L.A. County sheriff's lieutenant and an Orange County supervisor. Among those advocating drug legalization or decriminalization are conservatives and liberals. They deserve to be heard, and proposals for a study of anti-drug policies deserve consideration.

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