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The Bureau of Narcotics

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NOTE: The original 1,000+ page manuscript for *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* had to be cut by more than half before its first publication in 1998. This is an edited excerpt that was deleted from the original manuscript.

If there was a driving force in the evolution of American anti-drug policy following the Harrison Tax Act, it was undoubtedly the Treasury Department and its Bureau of Narcotics. If there was a seminal figure in this evolution, it was undoubtedly Harry Anslinger. The Bureau of Narcotics was created in 1930, when drug enforcement was separated from the Treasury Department's Prohibition Unit.

The Bureau's appointed commissioner, Harry Anslinger, was a bundle of contradictions. On the surface, he looked like the stereotype of a federal law enforcement administrator: bald, square-jawed, beefy, intense, intimidating, tough-talking. He came to the Bureau after working as a railroad and arson investigator, and as a highly successful administrator in the Treasury Department. Known for his honesty and his work ethic, he led federal drug enforcement efforts for the next 32 years. His name became synonymous with drug prohibition. But there was another, more private, Anslinger—sensitive, sophisticated, highly intelligent, fluent in

several languages, and a masterful politician. Anslinger retired in 1962, having been the most visible champion of American anti-drug efforts. He left before the drug epidemic of the 1960s, believing that illicit drug use was on the verge of extinction (Woods, 1931). He died in 1975 of heart failure. In perhaps one of the ultimate ironies in the history of narcotics in America, Anslinger, an adamant opponent of narcotic maintenance, was in the period before his death maintained on morphine to blunt the pain of his angina (Jonnes, 1996).

Anslinger believed drug addiction was contagious. He honestly believed that the way to eliminate America's drug problem was to eliminate drug availability, and at the same time isolate and cure the existing pool of addicts. Both achievements proved impossible. In spite of—some would say because of—Anslinger's campaigns to intensify the criminalization of addiction (the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937, the Boggs Act of 1951, the Narcotics Control Act of 1956), increased opportunities for market expansion turned the illicit drug culture into

an ever-growing, many-headed monster (Kinder and Walker, 1986). Although treatment facilities fulfilled Anslinger's goal of temporary quarantine for addicts, they failed to cure the majority of the addicts they treated. Most addicts returned to their all-encompassing relationship with the illicit drug culture.

When he realized that this portion of his solution was not being realized, Anslinger's attitude toward addicts changed. His position became clear: drug users were "criminals first and addicts afterwards" and should be treated as such (Kinder and Walker, 1986, p. 919). For more than 30 years, this view drove the penalties for possession of illegal drugs higher and higher.

References

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