

Drugs Continued from Page 6

Shultz. Liberals supporting legalization include syndicated columnists Mike Royko and Anthony Lewis.

The only political party supporting legalization is the Libertarian Party, which along with Oregon Marijuana Initiative, has worked to decriminalize marijuana use in the state. Libertarians base their position on the idea that using drugs is a "victimless crime."

"In a free country, people have the right to do things that are bad for them," said Toni Nathan, national media director for the Libertarian Party. "I think using drugs is wrong, but it's not morally wrong. It's wrong because it's stupid."

**Hypocrisy and alcohol**

Although Nathan admits using drugs is not a victimless crime when users become violent or steal to support their habit, she said it's hypocritical to allow the consumption of alcohol and prohibit the use of other drugs.

The most recent Bureau of Justice statistics show that 13 percent of violent crimes in the United States are committed by people under the influence of drugs, while alcohol is a factor in 20 percent.

Coffin thinks both of those numbers are unacceptable. He said the number of violent crimes committed by users might overshadow the problem with alcohol if drugs were legalized.

"I fail to see the logic in the

argument that because we already allow one type of drug in our society ... that we must also now introduce these other drugs," Coffin said.

Coffin speculates that if alcohol and tobacco did not have a long history of use in America, society might regard them as unacceptable as cocaine.

A key feature of the legalization argument is that money currently being used for law enforcement could be spent on education and treatment programs.

"One of the lowest priorities in the drug war from what I understand is for the individual who wants to seek treatment," said Michael Connelly, a drug counselor with the Lane County Mental Health Division. "The people who are addicted really get the short end of the stick. In the long run, it would pay to put more money into treatment."

Yet Connelly said there is no room in his head for the legalization argument. "It's not a legal issue," he said. "All I can deal with is what's in front of my face."

Bates and Weeks agree that trying to enforce the nation's drug laws has backfired spectacularly and that the future doesn't look brighter. They contend that the "war on drugs" is a failure. "I don't think you could find anybody who could look you right in the eye and tell you it has any chance of working," Weeks

said.

Local law enforcement officials say if Oregon continues to march down the path of decriminalizing drug offenses, making headway will be difficult. State sentencing guidelines call for a maximum 60-day prison term for manufacturing drugs.

"I would say that the state legislative body has passed a set of guidelines that indicates to me drugs dealers are not going to be going to jail," said Sergeant Rick Siel, director of the Eugene Police Department's narcotics division.

Coffin challenges the notion that decriminalizing drug laws would lower the crime rate. According to a report released in March by the U.S. District Attorney's Portland office, the rate of bank robberies, burglaries and homicides in Oregon has increased in recent years.

"If the proponents of drug legalization are correct, we should see an improvement in the crime rate around here," he said.

"You're going to have a drug problem whether it's legal or illegal," Bates said. He thinks the legalization argument is gaining strength, and that people will continue to debate the question of how to deal with the problems of drugs as long as we have drugs, which he says will be for a long time.

"You can't put a fence around the United States of America," he said.

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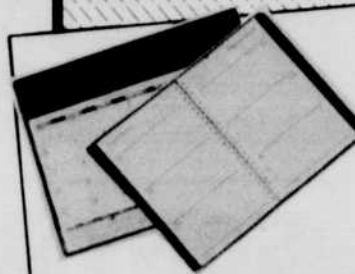
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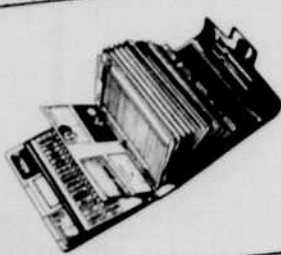
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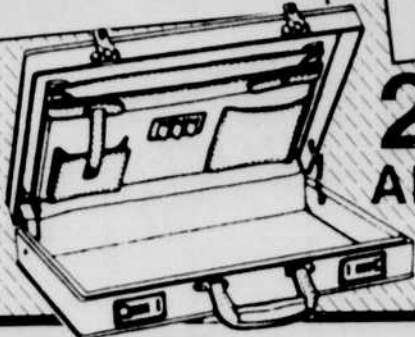
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