

THE SAGA OF MEL AND BETTY SEMBLER

Powerful American Drug Warriors
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As a proud American, I find Melvin Sembler, our ambassador to Italy, and his wife, Betty, to be profound embarrassments. It is important that their advice on the drug war and especially on drug treatment be ignored. Indeed, it might be best if Italians listened to what this powerful couple had to say about drugs - and then followed policies in precisely the opposite direction.

Every good country has important weak spots*, like every good person. One of the greatest weak spots in my good country is our addictive support of the war on drugs. One of the worst aspects of the American war on drugs is support for Toughlove approaches to drug-abuse treatment. Toughlove emphasizes harsh methods to deal with youth involved with drugs.

One of the worst organizations using harsh Toughlove measures for youth was Straight, Inc. This organization, which started in the Seventies, grew to over 20 chapters or related facilities around the United States. Essential features of Straight included, among others, the following: forcibly incarcerating suspected young drug users and abusers, usually at the request of exasperated parents; keeping the young people essentially isolated from the outside world for months or years; restricting contact with parents or other relatives, except in controlled circumstances; forcing these prisoners to sit in a large room for ten to twelve hours or more each day while listening to lectures or confessions of guilt by each other; using food as a weapon of control; providing only minimal amounts of food, with the result that many young prisoners lost significant amounts of weight; the denial of bathroom privileges at the whim of Toughlove staff, which meant that many of the young people were often sitting in their own waste; and the use of physical force to retrain those who objected to this brutal treatment or who tried to escape. Scores of young people carved on their bodies or tried to actually commit suicide, but none succeeded, to my knowledge, perhaps because they were constantly watched. Tragically, dozens of them succeeded in this self-destructive act after leaving.

Numerous civil lawsuits and criminal prosecutions have been brought against some Straight staff and related organizations all around the United States. There have been dozens, even hundreds, of stories in the print and electronic media about these horrible abuses by Straight. I wrote extensively about Straight and one of its prisoners, young Fred Collins, in one of my drug-policy books, *The Great Drug War*, published in 1987 by Macmillan. Collins had sued in federal court over the abuses he suffered and recovered \$220,000 in 1983. Other young victims have received even larger amounts in civil lawsuit victories, from Straight or related organizations.

For years I have worked to shut down Straight. I did so as an independent professor and writer and also as the founder and president of The Drug Policy Foundation, which at one point had 20,000 members in the US and other countries. So did many other people, many of whom, like Wes Fager, had been the parent of a Straight resident, or like Richard Bradbury, who had been a Straight inmate. All during my early work against Straight I was not aware of the names Mel and Betty Sembler. This was to change during a visit to Australia in November 1989, when I was an invited speaker at a major drug policy conference in Melbourne, which was put on by Australian

officials. One day during that conference, I was a speaker on a panel that was dealing with key issues of reform of drug laws before an audience composed largely of Australian experts but which also contained experts and officials from around the world. One of the other speakers was Dr. Donald Ian Macdonald, who had been the top drug advisor to President Ronald Reagan, in effect the American drug czar, but before that wonderfully autocratic term came into vogue.

When Dr. Macdonald took the podium, without warning he became enraged and launched a harsh personal attack on me because of my views advocating legalization of drugs, among other positions I had taken. He fairly shouted that he found it a shame that I was listed on the program as an American expert who had consulted with the U.S. Department of Justice, that I was a horrible representative of his country, and that he had been "ambushed" into appearing on the panel with me. I was stunned at his utter lack of basic civility and, I was later told, so was the audience. When I took the podium, I turned to him, seated just a few feet from me, and said words like these, as best I remember: Dr. Macdonald, I want to thank you for your outburst and for your attack on me. You sat at the right hand of the President of the United States and advised him on national and international drug policy. You have revealed to this international audience the harsh heart that beats at the core of the American drug war and you have done it in a way much better than I could have done. It is somewhat of a shame, however, that you chose to do so before this audience and before the American ambassador and his wife who are sitting there in one of the first rows.

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I had never met the American ambassador but it had been pointed out to me that he and his wife were there near the front of the audience. This turned out to be my first sight of Mel and Betty Sembler.

As it happened, the keynote speaker at the magnificent dinner that night in our five-star hotel was none other than The Honorable Melvin Sembler. When he started speaking, he was most gracious and said that he was glad that we were all present, that he welcomed both "Dr. Macdonald and Mr. Trebach" to the event because he was interested in the views of everyone on this important subject. Then he said something that shocked my wife, Marj Rosner, and I to practically levitate out of our chairs. He said words like: as it happens I know a little bit about drug policy and treatment because many years ago, along with eight other people in St. Petersburg, Florida, I started an organization called Straight, Inc. that has helped a lot of kids with their drug abuse problems. He then went on to explain how the treatment program worked, making it sound wonderful. As he was talking in these glowing terms, Marj and I whispered to each other that we could not believe our ears. Here before an international audience of officials and experts, the leading American official in Australia was claiming that one of the worst treatment programs in America was one of the best - and at no time mentioned any of the many successful lawsuits against the program.

As we continued to whisper in hushed, shocked voices, the other people at the table, mainly foreign officials, politely asked what in the world had so upset us. We whispered brief replies to their puzzled inquiries. Then a top Dutch drug policy official said, "Oh yes, I know about the program - Hitler Jungen!"

During the next few days, I appeared on Australian radio and television, including their Today Show, warning the people of the country not to follow the destructive advice of the Semblers on drug policy and treatment, in the same manner as I am now warning the people of Italy. Happily, for the most part Australian drug policy is moving in a healthier direction.

Over the years since that traumatic incident in Melbourne, I am happy to report that the original organization called Straight, Inc. was forced to close under the deluge of lawsuits and critical news stories. That is about all of the good news in that regard. I discovered that Dr. Macdonald had been the research director of Straight before he entered the Reagan White House. A number of other treatment facilities have sprung into existence, modeled after Straight and continuing its

destructive practices. Mel and Betty Sembler continue to be major American drug policy leaders, gathering support from leading medical doctors, like Dr. Macdonald, and politicians, including those in the Bush family. They have formed a number of new drug policy organizations, especially the Drug-Free America Foundation, Inc. that seems to be a direct descendant of Straight, Inc.

The Semblers hold important political positions in the Republican power structure dealing with a whole range of issues beyond drug policy, although that remains a particular interest of this drug-warrior duo. The website of the Republican National Committee - the RNC, the leading group of that dominant party - and Mr. Sembler's own resume on the Internet reveal some more significant facts: the very successful developer of more than 50 shopping centers, service on the National Finance and Steering Committee for the George Bush for President campaign in 1988, the Finance Co-Chairman for President Bush's Inaugural in 1989, and a member of the board of the Holocaust Museum. Of perhaps the greatest significance now, Mr. Sembler is the top Republican fundraiser: Finance Chairman of the RNC. The RNC web site also states proudly, "In 1976, Sembler and his wife Betty founded STRAIGHT, an adolescent drug rehabilitation program. During its 17 years of existence, STRAIGHT graduated more than 12,000 kids nationwide from its remarkably successful program." Thus, the Semblers combine vast economic power (which has been known to buy ambassadorships) within the dominant Republican Party along with their vast ideological commitment to some of the worst dogma ever created in the history of America - my America, which, forgive me to those who do not see this noble land with my eyes, I view as the great hope of the world. Even worse, they seek to export this repressive dogma to other countries, to Italy and to the world.

To those who oppose their programs that abuse children in the name of saving them from drugs, Betty Sembler has been known to reply that they have nothing to hide and that those who criticize them are trying to legalize drugs. This is a delusion and is misleading - because the issues must be considered separately. First, in my opinion, the need for civilized and humane treatment programs is present no matter what the overall legal structure. Alcohol is almost everywhere legal and yet there exists the same need for good treatment programs as there does in the case of heroin, which is almost everywhere illegal. Second, even if all drugs were made legal, a position I strongly support, the need for humane treatment programs would continue. In other words, my work on a worldwide stage for the legalization of drugs does not mean I support the use of drugs nor does it mean that I am absolved of the responsibility to work for effective treatment methods.

The Semblers do not understand these realities. Like so many drug warriors in America and in Italy, they vehemently oppose legalization and they also approve of harsh, uncivilized methods to treat drug users and abusers. They do not seem to understand that cruelty and utter irrationality lie at the heart of both drug prohibition laws and also repressive drug treatment methods.

Moreover, neither of them works in real life.

Arnold S. Trebach, J.D., Ph.D., has a long history in drug policy and treatment and has a worldwide reputation in that regard. He has written a number of groundbreaking books and articles. He is the founder and past president of The Drug Policy Foundation, one of the leading reform groups in the United States. In recent years, he has worked with the survivors of Straight and related destructive treatment facilities to seek redress for victims and to shut down the new similar programs that have been developed. He has been a member of the Transnational Radical Party and is in the process of rejoining it. His email is arnold@trebach.com and his website is www.trebach.com. Wesley Fager's important website is www.thestraights.com.

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