

N.Y. Harsh Drug Law

by ROBERT E. SEGAL

Now that the state of New York, under vigorous prodding by Governor Rockefeller has put into operation its new anti-drug law, we seem to have opened a new chapter on the drug scene.

Apparently the harshest of all drug laws yet enacted, the New York measure provides mandatory life sentence for sellers of narcotic drugs. Millions who favor the law, including friends and relatives of innocent bystanders

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assaulted or even killed by addicts, heap enthusiastic praise on Mr. Rockefeller. A smaller group, but perhaps just as vocal, cry out that society's real need anent the drug problem, is to rehabilitate drug addicts, not jail them for life or even years.

The current drug scene runs a long gamut of drama. When we talk of the problem today, we no longer concentrate on the flower children of Haight-Ashbury. This doesn't mean that young people have all kicked the habit. Pills are still popped, and marijuana and hashish continue in vogue on many campuses; but in the 1970s, preoccupation with drugs is not nearly as marked as it was in the 1960s.

One widely-publicized figure of days not long gone--Abbi Hoffman--has been in the Tombs recently, unable to post large bail after his indictment on charges of selling cocaine to police undercover men. And oldtimers in poughkeepsie now recall that G. Gordon Liddy, convicted pacesetter of the Watergate burglars, liked to sniff out drug users when he was assistant district attorney in the Vassar area.

But these are side issues. Two new considerations stand out: (1) President Nixon is authority for the recent statement that the nation has turned the corner on drug addiction; (2) Armed with the power to appoint up to 100 new judges to make the New York anti-drug law effective, Governor Rockefeller may either prove to the country that harsh, harsher, and harshest sentences are the answer or else play into the hands of those who continue to argue that education, treatment for addiction, and rehabilitation must not be abandoned in favor of such a stern crackdown.

When he declared that the federal government has turned the corner in its war on drugs, President Nixon pointedly included education on the dangers of drug use.

The law Governor Rockefeller asked for and got provides for one to 15 years imprisonment for the sale of marijuana. A person convicted of selling LSD may end up in prison for life; anyone convicted of the unlawful sale of narcotics to boys or girls under 21 can have a 25-year sentence imposed on him. Some who know the drug picture most intimately contend that the New York law is cruel and vengeful. Charles Kenyetta, who served as bodyguard for Malcolm X, offers a sharper appraisal: unless the New York bill is repealed or at least modified, the measure will, he says, become New York's No. 1 cop killer. He adds: "When the police clamp down with an arrest that could lead to a life sentence, the dealer with money is going to hold court right there in the street. If he runs up on a cop who will not take graft, he's probably found one who will take lead instead.

So it is that the drug problem--scarcely visible in America before World War II but a matter of unending concern to thousands of parents of college students in the late 1960s--

--is now on a win-or-bust course in New York. And the whole nation is watching. We watch to see whether Governor Rockefeller will triumph in his gamble, and we watch with hope strong in our hearts that midnight raids by over-eager narcotics agents on people innocently living next door to suspects will cease.

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