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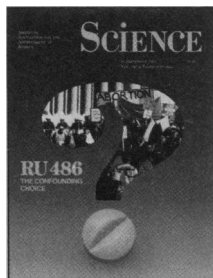
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COVER RU 486, a pill that counteracts the actions of the pregnancy hormone progesterone, can be used to terminate early pregnancies. It has been the subject of great controversy in the United States and in France (and Europe). See pages 1319 and 1351. [Photograph of RU 486 by Peter Krough. Photograph of a demonstration in front of the U.S. Supreme Court Building by Arthur Grace/Syigma]

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The War? Program? Experiment? on Drugs

After reading the headlines and editorial columns of newspapers on the President's new drug program, the average Martian visiting this planet would conclude that people are very indignant about the drug problem. No amount of money, no amount of discipline, no amount of sacrifice is too much to require for the successful waging of this war. On the platitudes, everyone is marching in step.

When it comes to the specifics, however, it is quite clear that no one is willing to give up a single prerogative, or even worse, a single preconception, in order to attack drugs. But because no one admits to such provincialism, it becomes necessary to create criticisms that will effectively compromise the program into nothingness and thereby save face. How is this done?

Easy. First of all, you announce that you are vigorously for the program, whatever it is, but that it does not go nearly far enough. Heroic person that you are, you are willing to sacrifice untold millions of other people's money to fight drugs. There is, of course, no intention of coupling the demand for money with increased taxes. When this is clarified it is necessary to come up with the proposal that all "discretionary" money in the budget be cut across the board and diverted to the new program. If increasing taxes is unlikely, then the notion that farmers, scientists, environmentalists, and lawyers would willingly cut their programs to contribute to a dubious war on drugs is even more unlikely.

The second way you undermine a program is to demand that certain massive and impossibly utopian ideals must be accomplished first. Drug use, you say, comes out of poverty, lack of education, and unhappy personalities, and these underlying ills must be addressed. Concentrate first on improving education and second on eliminating poverty. Finally, suggest a massive subsidy of psychiatry so that we can understand human nature. Improving education, eliminating poverty, and understanding human nature are certainly desirable goals. To imply, however, that they are preconditions to starting a drug program is a misdirection that helps none of them.

The drug program recently unveiled by the Executive Branch is far from perfect. It could use more money and it could use more boldness, but it is at least a useful experiment, and should be labeled as such. A program implies one knows the answer. An experiment suggests that this is one of several possible approaches. A program invites self-defeating compromise. An experiment should be designed to help the problem while at the same time producing data that are useful and convincing.

The program's emphasis on street crime is a direction that has been suggested by capable social scientists. It is a law and order approach and may be the last such attempt that has a chance of making a dent in the drug problem before the country reluctantly decides that prohibition for drugs is no more effective than it was for alcohol. If the country were mature enough for social experiments, we might institute tough laws for 5 years and then try legalization for another 5 years, collect the data on the two outcomes, and base a final policy on the results. Because that is politically impossible, then the best approach in the current climate seems to be to try punishment plus directed education as an experiment of the "get tough" category.

The proposed program has a certain amount of consistency, and it is a plan for which the Executive Branch, which must direct it, has enthusiasm. A minimal requirement would seem to be ongoing analysis of the program's degree of success, to decide whether to continue in the same direction or to seek new directions if the program is not succeeding. The appropriate time to expand the program would be when that feedback starts coming in. The program should contain an educational component on drug use and evaluate the problems of poverty, minorities, and civil rights in relation to drug use, but it should not be compromised by ancillary requirements relating to the general ambience of society.

The experiment will be acceptable only if accompanied by a scientific detachment that says, "The get-tough experiment is under way. If it fails, legalization is next." The country is faced today with a situation similar to prohibition. Those who read history know well how ineffective the law was in that case. But many say drugs are different from alcohol, so let's do the experiment and collect the data.—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.