

THE TREBACH REPORT

"Addicts are the
scapegoat of our age."
--Reverend Terence E.
Tanner, London, 1979

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By

Arnold S. Trebach

Moral integrity is in the air of this presidential campaign. One way of measuring it is through the nature of appointees to high office. Of course, it is not always possible to read the tea leaves and make predictions as to what type of appointments a presidential candidate will make if elected. George the Second might surprise us all with truly compassionate conservatives or moderates, but the currently readable tea leaves suggest that many of his new appointees will be extremely conservative, much to the right of most Americans, and not necessarily compassionate.

The most prominent readable leaf is Dick Cheney. It is difficult to imagine a more extreme right wing choice for high national office at this point in history. As is now well known, when a congressman, the likeable and highly competent former Defense Secretary voted against the Equal Rights Amendment, Head Start, and the freeing of Nelson Mandela from prison, among other such enlightened choices. The example of Cheney has given many people nightmares as to who the next appointees might be, especially to the Supreme Court, if the Republican nominee is successful on November 7.

There is another potential nightmare hidden out there which has received very little attention. A hint of it was dropped during a CNN interview by Larry King on Nov. 26 when Mr. Bush volunteered that he supported "tough love." The very phrase, which inspires adulation in many quarters, brought up some old nightmares for me and perhaps for the country in the future. I first encountered TOUGHLOVE (often spelled just like that in capital letters) about twenty years ago when I saw it used as the core philosophy to justify many harsh measures against youthful drug users. Our young people were described by Toughlove patron saints Phyllis and David York as behaving "like clones stamped out in some satanic laboratory." Ergo parents had to unite and show steely determination in dealing with their children, even if it seemed to cause temporary harm to the kids

A horrifying example of where such an alien ideology might lead was an organization known as Straight, Inc., which created institutions where parents could place children suspected of drug use so that their errant behavior could be straightened out through prolonged mass therapy, which some psychologists have called brainwashing along the Chinese communist model. One of the cases of youth abuse that I studied extensively involved Fred Collins who was imprisoned in the

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original Straight institution in St. Petersburg, FL in June 1982, and later in his own luxurious home in Springfield, VA. The young man had experimented with marijuana and drank an occasional beer, and thus by Straight standards he was an addict headed for certain death. Underfed, constantly watched and threatened, in a few months he lost 25 pounds and almost became convinced that the Straight Toughlove ideology was correct and could save hordes of endangered youth. Then reality came crashing in and he contemplated suicide. After his escape, he sued Straight in a federal court, and recovered \$220,000 for false imprisonment.

Straight was eventually crushed by the weight of other successful lawsuits and state regulatory actions that condemned such actions as "spit therapy" in which counselors and other clients would gather around recalcitrant teenagers and spit on them to convince them of the error of their ways. By the early 90s the organization seemed to be dead.

However, the founders of Straight and their scary ideas on controlling kids are still very much in the picture. Mel and Betty Sembler of St. Petersburg, FL have formed what appears to be the successor to Straight -- the Drug-Free America Foundation, Inc. It is a Florida-based non-profit charitable organization that just came to my attention as the key sponsors of the "No on 36" conference in early October in California. That proposition on the California ballot on Nov. 7 would mandate treatment instead of prison for certain categories of nonviolent drug offenders, a seemingly sensible, moderate position that the Sembaliers somehow find offensive.

They never seemed to have found any of the proven Straight abuses of American kids offensive, however. While attending a major international conference in Melbourne in 1989, I heard the American ambassador to Australia brag that he and his wife had formed a drug treatment organization called Straight in Florida. The ambassador was of course Mel Sembler who had been appointed by President Reagan and was the featured after-dinner speaker. (I was sitting at a table composed mostly of foreign drug officials. When my wife and I reacted in quiet astonishment, they asked the cause of our outrage. As I started to explain in a whisper, they looked puzzled, but then a top Dutch drug policy official at the table offered his own explanation, "Oh yes, I know about the program, Hitler Jungen!").

Today, from the Republican National Committee web site and from Mr. Sembler's own resume on the Internet we learn a few other facts about him: 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 fund raiser: 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. "

Of course, neither major party has shown any unique rationality in dealing with the drug problem, and both Mr. Cheney and Mr. Sembler are in many ways decent folks. Nevertheless, they stand for many indecent ideas. The high status of Mr. Sembler in the Republican hierarchy combined with the appointment of Mr. Cheney provide dire harbingers of extremist appointments to come after November 7 if George W. Bush wins. This strong possibility should give comfort to no one including those Republicans who seek to restore moral integrity to the Presidency. There seems precious little moral integrity in opposing Head Start and promoting spit therapy for our kids.

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