



## **History as Farce: A Review of "Traffic"**

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By John J. McCarthy, MD

**Nothing has changed since Afghanistan except that drugs are far more available. All we need do is change the names of the country where the drugs are coming from.**

MOVIES ABOUT ILLEGAL DRUGS are usually based on distortions that either confuse addiction with criminality or glamorize the war on the drug trade. "Traffic" does neither.

It presents a somewhat superficial but accurate picture of addiction as an attempt to manage emotional pain. And it shines a bright spotlight on enforcement efforts to control the flow of drugs.

The plot was taken directly (with credit) from a British miniseries from the 1980s, depicting the futility of the British and Interpol attempt to stop the flow of heroin from Afghanistan, as seen through the eyes of Scotland Yard's top drug cop whose daughter is a heroin addict. The plot weaves together the themes of the tragic futility of interdiction efforts with the human tragedy of addiction.

The continued relevance of this series to today suggests that history is repeating itself. Nothing has changed since Afghanistan except that drugs are far more available. All we need do is change the names of the country where the drugs are coming from.

"Traffic" focuses on drug trade through Mexico, as seen through the eyes of a new U.S. "drug czar." He takes office with the usual "tough-on-drugs" agenda.

Meanwhile, his teenage daughter is progressing from drug abuse to addiction. He tries to deny this family tragedy while he focuses on a high profile prosecution of a Mexican-American businessman/drug dealer in San Diego.

The movie switches between Washington, San Diego and Mexico. U.S. drug police are trying to figure out who's in charge of the Mexican drug trade, but they don't have a clue about the ever-changing power dynamics among the Mexican cartels. So the drug czar winds up at a high level meeting in Mexico promising U.S. aid to the people who are actually running the drugs.

On the way home from this "successful" meeting, the czar meets with all his staff and tries to charge up his troops by asking them to "think outside the box." He then looks around at the experts on his staff and asks: "Is there anyone here from treatment?" The camera then pans a dozen blank faces. On this note of dumb silence the scene ends.

Back home in Washington the czar's daughter is spiraling downward. He had caught her doing drugs but his reaction is anger and threats which merely worsen the situation. His wife tries to break through his denial by confronting him about their own drug use in college, pleading for some understanding and support for their child.

It is only when his daughter disappears into the ghetto in search of drugs that his denial

falls apart and he becomes real. His character change is movingly reflected in a brief scene where he and his wife attend a recovery meeting at which he says that he's there only "to listen".

We have had the recent good fortune of a drug czar who actually sought advice from medical leaders with treatment expertise, to bring some science to an office known more for "blank faces" than for any interest in treatment. While not perfect, Barry McCaffery was especially courageous in trying to reverse the tragic mismanagement of heroin addiction in this country and to bring "evidence-based" treatment standards into public policy.

Our good fortune seems at an end with a new administration that immediately began to reverse the tentative progress made at the federal level. President Clinton signed legislation last fall that would make the medication, buprenorphine, available for physicians to use in the management of opiate addiction.

For the first time since the Harrison Narcotic Act, physicians in their offices would have a medication to treat the hundreds of thousands of opiate addicts unable to get treatment in the over-regulated, limited clinic system. The Bush administration, apparently bowing to drug enforcement opposition to expanding medical care of heroin addicts, immediately blocked implementation of this bill, obstructing expansion of the only proven effective treatment for heroin addiction.

In the place of medical care for addicts, the President has come up with something he dubs "faith-based drug treatment." Beyond being an attempt to kick back federal money to Christian fundamentalist supporters, this initiative pushes the premise that addiction is not a medical and behavioral health problem, but a sin that requires religion to forgive it.

Mr. Bush seems unaware of the AA/NA self-help system that has addressed the spiritual component of recovery, without the divisiveness that specific religious dogmas can engender, and without attaching the destructive connotations of "sin" to the illness of addiction.

In reality this "pseudo-treatment" proposal has as much chance of longevity as a faith-based public health policy. It appears, to be a cover for a return to an escalated drug war. Witness the president's new "czar," John Walters. He was head of drug interdiction in his father's administration, i.e., one of the "blank faces" depicted in the movie *No friend of treatment*, he began his tenure by attacking General McCaffery for his emphasis on treatment approaches. He also opposes recent efforts to rescind the racist cocaine laws and the cruel and unjust mandatory minimum sentences, left from the failed prison policies of Mr. Bush's father.

There is a saying that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce. George Bush's drug war in the late 1980's was tragic. The massive law enforcement mobilization to stop drug use failed. All it accomplished was the incarceration of millions of parents whose children suffered the psychological trauma of losing parents to our prisons.

Our communities are now dealing with the results of this devastation as these parent-loss children mature into predictably dysfunctional adolescence.

George W's faith-based foolishness, his obstruction of a medically informed approach to heroin addiction, and his choice of a leader who wants to continue his father's failed policies suggests that history is returning as farce.

"Traffic" was released at a propitious moment: at the passage of Proposition 36. This voter mandate signals an end to Federal dictatorship on drug policy.

The important policy issues are now being worked on in individual states, in a democratic process, through the initiative process. Polls of voters in Florida, Michigan and Ohio show an 80 percent support for a Proposition 36-type approach to drug problems.

The public, at least, has moved beyond the federal irrelevancy depicted in "Traffic," into an era of experimentation and innovation.

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