

No Friends of Bill Wilson

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On May 3, the Washington Post's David Von Drehle wrote a Style Section profile of Susan Cheever, biographer of Alcoholics Anonymous founder Bill Wilson. In the article, we learn that as Wilson was dying of emphysema, he--the man who has inspired millions to kick the bottle--asked his caretakers for three shots of whiskey. Over his last days, he asked three more times for a drink. He was never given one.

Cheever says she was "shocked and horrified" that Wilson would want whiskey on his deathbed, and confesses that her "blood ran cold" when she read of his request in the nurses' logs of the last days of his life. Though she doesn't say so explicitly, the implication is that Cheever--and I would imagine a good percentage of people who read Drehle's article--took relief in the fact that the man who founded Alcoholics Anonymous remained clean and sober to the very end.

I don't know why Bill Wilson was denied those three shots of whiskey. Perhaps alcohol would have reacted poorly with the medication he was on. Perhaps it was against the policy of the hospital or medical center where he was staying. Whatever the case, I'm not at all shocked or horrified that Bill Wilson asked for whiskey as he was dying. But I am saddened that a dying man was denied one of the few things that may have given him some comfort. And I find it even sadder that anyone would be relieved to hear he was denied that final drink.

There are a couple of ways of looking at drug addiction. One way calls for rehabilitation when a person's craving for a substance begins to take a toll on his health, his job, his mood, and/or on those around him. That is, drug or alcohol use only becomes a problem when, well, when it actually becomes a problem.

The other way looks at overcoming drug and alcohol addiction as an end unto itself. There are no "functional" or "recreational" users. Drug and alcohol use ought to be fought at every turn. Overcoming the craving for a drink, or the urge for a hit, is always a victory, even if rehabilitation wreaks greater costs on the user and on society than continued use.

It's this second approach to drug and alcohol use that causes us to put a higher priority on preserving the purity of Bill Wilson's legacy than on granting a dying man the small comfort of a shot of whiskey. It's also the kind of zero-tolerance, win-at-all-costs thinking that motivates our 30-year **war on drugs**.

Last month, Jacob Sullum wrote an article for Reason magazine's website about Richard Paey, a 45-year-old father of three in constant, chronic pain from a car accident, back surgery, and multiple sclerosis. Unable to find a doctor after moving to Florida, Paey covertly obtained the painkillers he needed for relief. Because the painkillers contained oxycodone (the drug war's latest fashionable target), and because Paey obtained more than 28 grams of the drug (about 60 pills), he was arrested last March for drug trafficking. Paey was tried and convicted. Though both prosecutors and jury conceded that Paey wasn't a dealer, their hands were tied by uncompromising drug-war policy. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison.

In September 2002, federal agents raided a Santa Cruz, California, hospice where many of the terminally ill patients smoke marijuana cigarettes to alleviate their pain. Agents pointed their guns at the head of Suzanne Pfeil, an elderly post-polio patient, and demanded that she get up from her bed. She couldn't. She's crippled. They settled on handcuffing her to the bed for over an hour, while they raided the hospice's medicine cabinets and files for evidence of medicinal marijuana use. DEA Administrator Asa Hutchinson insisted the agents were only doing their job: enforcing federal controlled-substance laws.

The same mindset that finds a symbolic victory over alcoholism more important than a deathbed drink for a sick man can see fit to justify a 25-year prison term for an oxycodone-using MS sufferer and handcuffing an elderly post-polio marijuana user to her bed at the point of a gun.

It's the mindset that says victory over drug addiction is an end unto itself, regardless of method, costs, or consequences. It's a mindset that fails to consider, for example, that no kid stops or starts smoking marijuana because federal agents do or don't raid convalescent centers in California; that no one's decision to lubricate life's monotony with Oxycontin is based on whether Florida prosecutors decide to pursue distribution charges against an MS patient.

Likewise, the millions of people who have benefited from Bill Wilson's Alcoholics Anonymous program aren't going to go back on the bottle upon learning that Wilson asked for booze in his final days. And it's tough to see how that would be any different if he'd actually gotten his "last call."

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