

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

June 26th, 1951

Description: In this segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question on whether or not peddling dope should be punishable by death.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Walter Philipp, Ben Grauer

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And now we come to our question for today. It's from Mrs. Elizabeth Smith of Woodside, New York who is very concerned with the present dope scandal. She says that she saw an item in the paper which says that the Union County, New Jersey American Legion has urged enactment of federal legislation making dope peddling punishable by death. She asks Mrs. Roosevelt, "Do you think such a law should be enacted?"

[ER:] No. I don't think you should make dope pedaling pun-punishable by death. Um I think you should perhaps tighten up on the laws so as to make uh it really um pretty disagreeable if you are caught peddling dope, and probably more so if you are ever caught peddling it to young people um. But, um I-I perhaps am a bad person to ask because I have never felt uh really very happy about the death penalty anyway. It doesn't seem to me that it's up to us to take away other people's lives. On the other hand I realize that to be imprisoned for life is um perhaps a worse punishment than uh to be electrocuted. But somehow it-it doesn't seem quite right and certainly for dope pedaling, where there is a chance of rehabilitation-- and in the person, it would seem to me a perfectly dreadful thing to start putting a death penalty on that particular uh offense. (1:47)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Isn't it true that in quite a number of cases, particularly on the juvenile sale of uh dope uh that actually the peddler, the person who sells it to the children, is another child.

[ER:] Very often, but of course it should go back to um [ER coughs] the person from whom that child got it. And that person would naturally be the responsible person. But I don't think even then a death penalty eh should be exacted, because there is still hope of rehabilitating someone uh who has uh perhaps lacked a-a realization of the seriousness of what he was doing.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I think [ER coughs] one of the points that is-- disturbed me tremendously in this whole matter of uh the dope scandals that have gone on in New York and other parts of the country, has been the fact that I wondered how these children were getting the money to buy dope uh because uh it seems to me-- [ER: Dope is expensive!] it's so expensive; it seems to me it would be clear out of the pocketbook range of most children!

[ER:] Well I imagine we would find that there goes with dope uh buying, with the habit of uh of-of craving that comes with dope, uh a deterioration and everything else. And I imagine that you would find that practically every child stole [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] in order to buy um uh dope. Because I know that a drug addict--I once knew, quite well, uh a drug addict in a woman's prison. Um I knew about her and I've known her since and she uh got out. And she told me um how it really feels and how uh you will do almost anything when you have the craving. How you will hide it when you enter a house so that nobody will know and so that you will be able to find it--um how it will be safe. And um I think that that goes for a child probably eh in even greater extent because they have a weaker make up and um uh it deteriorates the whole character. They lie, they must lie. And undoubtedly they steal.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mhm. Do you feel that uh there would be any advantage in uh strengthening the laws by increasing the penalties uh-- the mandatory penalties for dope selling, uh not necessarily to the extent of the death penalty, but uh at least insofar as uh the number of years that a person would mandatorily have to go to prison for.

[ER:] I think I would tighten up in more ways than that. I think I would tighten up the um the sources of supply. I think I would try very hard to see that these sources were purely medical and uh that you would have to watch the coming into this country and the immediate um distribution, do you see, to what--where they went. And then you would have to watch that they never got away into other [Elliott Roosevelt: Well--] channels. (5:30)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That raises a very interesting point because I just saw a statement concerning the United States Customs Service.

[ER:] Yes, that they don't examine the ships. I saw that too this morning.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Uh that statement [ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap] was made--

[ER:] More than one in four.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That statement was made by the head of the US Customs Service in a plea uh that his appropriation had been so drastically cut that they couldn't possibly examine the ships that there the mandatory cuts in the Customs Service had cut down so much on our examination of incoming traffic into this country. To look for such items as dope on incoming planes, uh boats and-and trains across the border from uh Canada and Mexico that the entire thing has become almost a farce.

[ER:] Well, that you see -- I think that is an illustration of how badly we plan in our government. It would be far cheaper um to have enough Customs Service very skilled personnel to check on the incoming supply and on where it goes, than it is to have money spent uh to catch these children and uh examine them and put them into jail. I mean the money, the money is badly distributed on these things. And then in addition to that, I don't know how other people felt, but it seemed to me a dreadful thing that we had been so careless that it wasn't until this scandal came up that we cleared the ordinary lots around about of Marijuana we-we- uh weeds. Now that just is criminal, because certainly it takes uh a little time and some labor to clear those lots, but Heavens, isn't it much more worth it than almost anything else that personnel could do to make it impossible for the kids to just go out and pick Marijuana weed? It's just um really quite horrible I think. And it is something which we ought to watch because people grow it in their gardens.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's true.

[ER:] And everybody should be told "This is a dangerous weed." I-I was interested the other day in having the -- I think it was the 4-H club, or the Girl Scouts -- uh have got out a little pamphlet that they had-- not a pamphlet, a leaf-- that they were distributing in the country, telling about poisonous weeds and the effects of different things. I was simply horrified at the number of things which are really poisonous which most of us don't know anything about. And I haven't had time yet to learn them all. And it's not-- I've always gone gaily ahead and thought that if I knew poison ivy and Sumac uh I-I had about all I really needed to know, but my goodness why there's a whole collection of things which if a child were to get one berry of, they would die! [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm, mhm.] And uh this is the first time I've ever seen an organization that deals with children hand them out a leaf which definitely tells them what are the poisons in their country environment [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] and what happens. Now um I think that uh that should be intensified and that um rural people who deal with um uh rural safety, for instance the

state policemen or uh um the Sherriff or so forth, uh should be on the lookout to eliminate all things like Marijuana weed wherever he sees it. And nobody should be allowed to plant Marijuana we-weed. They do! [Elliott Roosevelt: Uh-huh.] And --

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well now, I'd like to-- going back again to this question of Marijuana and dope in general. Uh It is recognized that there is a rather fabulous uh syndicate of underworld characters that is supposedly headed by Mr. Luciano [Charles "Lucky" Luciano] who was thrown out of this country a number of years ago and now resides in Italy. Uh might it not be a good idea through the UN to have a rounding up of all those suspected of being in the international dope uh trading field, and have them tried uh by the individual countries and-and incarcerated and taken out of the-of the general flow of trade? (10:25)

[ER:] If they are active, I think it should be done. I think this is an international question, and of course we do have a whole lot of-of conventions on narcotics, uh which includes opium and all those things. Some of which are lived up to very well by different nations, and others are not lived up to. And um I think what we should do is to um -- and that is an international question, you see, and it has-- or it-- it already is--there is a group [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm. Mhm.] studying it in the UN. I think it just should be uh emphasized that this has to be carried out.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes. Well I think that that answers this question of this lady. In the first place you're against the death penalty in connection with dealing with this. And you feel that it-- that we should go back to the source--the source of supply and to stop its getting into this country. And I hope that that is an adequate answer, and now I see that our announcer has a few words and then we're going on to our interview today. (11:41)

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