

Opioid Emergency Demands FDR-Style Measures Now

By Nancy Spannaus

Aug. 8, 2017—"With approximately 142 Americans dying [from overdoses of either prescription opioids or street opioids] every day, America is enduring a death toll equal to September 11th every three weeks." With that statement, President Trump's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis in its late July interim report recommended that the President declare a state of national emergency to deal with the crisis. Such a declaration would permit Congress to break through the red tape to provide immediate new funds, personnel, and rule changes that would improve access to treatment, and hopefully reduce the availability of the opioid drugs.



The use of deadly opioids is now a national emergency. (dreamstime)

The recommendation is apt, and long overdue. Overdoses related to the use of opioids have been growing exponentially since the mid- to late 1990s, and have now reached epidemic proportions. No socio-economic stratum, age group, or area of the country has been spared. Yet no significant national campaign has been waged to defeat this scourge, which is

literally killing off the future of the United States.

But what kind of campaign can possibly deal with a problem of this scope? In truth, only a total reorientation of American society and economy can possibly stem the problem. It has been the utter collapse of the commitment to the American System, most recently expressed by Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy, that set the stage for this crisis. Vast portions of the population have seen their hopes for the future go up in smoke, and either live for the moment, or sink into despair. This sets them up for the addictions, and other "diseases of despair" which are now rampaging through the nation.

When FDR took over the Presidency, he concentrated on rebuilding the hope for the future, along with specific measures of the American System which put the General Welfare back at the center of national policy-making. And it's only by the restoration of that American System approach that we can hope to fight our way back to a healthy society and population. What we need are FDR-style measures across the board—from cleaning up the financial system with Glass-Steagall and appropriate law enforcement, to providing vastly expanded health infrastructure and health care, and launching great infrastructure projects that restore the sense of working for a national mission.

In his Inaugural Address, when he forthrightly put forward the devastation which our "stricken nation" was experiencing, President Roosevelt invoked the image of a mobilization as in war, as required to put the nation back on track. His war was against the economic royalists of Wall Street, and the mentality that submitted to it as inevitable. In effect, the war against the opioid scourge we need to is against the same enemy.

FDR did not have to invoke an emergency, because Congress and the American people recognized the wisdom of his proposals to

restore and discipline the banking system, initiate great projects like the TVA, and put the unemployed to work rebuilding local infrastructure. FDR rebuilt the nation both materially and in spirit—and nothing less will create the conditions for actually defeating the opioid crisis today.

A Public Health Emergency

The interim report begins with the shocking statistics: that drug overdoses now kill more people than gun homicides and car crashes combined; that nearly two-thirds of drug overdoses were linked to opioids like Percocet, OxyContin, heroin, and fentanyl; that the number of opioid overdoses in America have quadrupled since 1999, with more than half a million deaths due to overdoses between 1999 and 2015; and that the millions of citizens with drug addiction problems (called “substance use disorder”) have inadequate or no access to treatment.



A memorial to deaths by opioid overdoses in Vancouver. (dreamstime)

The Commission outlines the following measures to deal with the problem, which would be facilitated by the declaration of National Emergency, most likely under the Public Health Service Act of 1944, which was crafted at that time to deal with the scourge of tuberculosis. Under the Act, the Secretary of Health and Human Services can declare an emergency for 90 days, which can be extended.

- Rapidly increase treatment capacity, within existing facilities
- Mandate prescriber education, as the Commission believes the overwhelming percentage of overprescribing is due to lack of education.
- Create a federal incentive to enhance access to Medication-Assisted Treatment, and promote research for new options
- Provide model legislation on the use of naloxone, a life-saving drug that rapidly reverses opioid overdose
- Prioritize funding and manpower for law enforcement against fentanyl, a synthetic opioid many time more powerful than heroin, at the borders and elsewhere
- Federal funding for better interstate tracking of prescription drugs
- Adjust patient privacy laws
- Enforce provisions for equity in mental health and addiction treatment, with treatment of physical health.

Although these measures are clearly only ameliorative and small-scale, the emergency should be declared, now. People are dying for lack of the necessary drugs; even when they want treatment, many have no place to go. The nation can't afford to wait until the Commission's final report is issued in October. But at the same time, the causes of the problem must be immediately addressed.

Clean Up the Banking System: Clearing Out the Criminals

The restoration of FDR's Glass-Steagall separation between commercial and investment banking, and an associated tightening up of bank regulation, are absolutely key to attacking two of the central causes of the opioid epidemic: 1) the use of the banking system for laundering illegal drug

money; and 2) the collapse of the productive economy and infrastructure of the United States.

First, it should be noted that the over-prescription of opioid painkillers (which itself has a sordid [history](#)) has a direct relationship to bringing in illegal drugs—the heroin and fentanyl that the [cartels](#) are now virtually giving away in some cities in order to create a market for their deadly product.



Citibank got off with a paltry fine after admitting that its Banamex subsidiary had laundered drug money.
(dreamstime)

As early as 2003, the Drug Enforcement Administration was raising the alarm about the over-prescription of narcotics by doctors who were inadequately trained in pain management. Yet, as in the case of “high” finance—international banking institutions such as HSBC and Citibank which have been documented to launder drug money worldwide—no serious prosecutions were carried out to stop the practice.

On the political side, the offending bankers and drug companies are joined by the outright drug legalizers, led by the notorious George Soros, who has done his best to buy up the Democratic Party on behalf of this policy. Among his supporters was the previous President of the United States, Barack Obama, whose policies permitted the spread of drug

legalization in the states contrary to Federal law, in addition to refusing to prosecute the drug bankers who had been exposed anew by the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, among others.

This aspect of the problem demands criminal prosecutions; those who push and profit from these deadly drugs have blood on their hands. That prosecution would be greatly facilitated by breaking up the huge bank holding companies (comprising both investment and commercial banks) which the elimination of key Glass-Steagall provisions permitted.

Obviously, such a cleanup of a financial system which supports the illicit narcotic trade, also requires a reversal of the increasingly prevailing tolerance of the use of mind-altering drugs. The first step is a recognition that preserving the minds of the American population is an indispensable part of defending the General Welfare. This American System approach is at bottom a moral approach, which depends upon valuing the creative powers of every individual as a core part of ensuring the prosperity of the nation today, and in the future.

Does anyone doubt that this drug epidemic (legal and illegal) is destroying the minds and productive potential of our nation? CNN recently interviewed the owner of a machine shop in Warren, Ohio about the impact of the opioid crisis on her business. She reported that four out of every ten otherwise qualified applicants for welding, machinist, and crane-operating jobs had to be turned away due to their failing drug tests. Surely this instance is not unique.

Cleaning Up the Banking System: Creating a Real Economy

The second indispensable function of Glass-Steagall in attacking the opioid crisis is the fact that it's the first step in creating an actually functioning economy. And without creating a growing economy again, which provides a future for all its citizens, we cannot eliminate the despair which is

driving Americans *en masse* into basically committing suicide by turning to mind- and body-destroying drugs.



FDR's CCC program provided a way for youth to find a productive purpose, as well as giving them a job.

After Glass-Steagall's re-imposition cuts off the speculative parasites, the Congress must then create new sources of low-interest, long-term credit through an infrastructure bank or some other facility created on Hamiltonian principles, to begin the rebuilding. That rebuilding must be a mobilization, oriented toward reaching a new level of productivity through nuclear fusion power and space exploration, while providing the essential power, transport, water, health, and education infrastructure to achieve it. This mobilization will immediately improve people's lives and their hope for the future.

Not since President Kennedy and his announcement of the challenge of going to the Moon has the United States population had its eyes set on achieving a great mission. Nor was the Moon Mission Kennedy's only program to energize our people: the Peace Corps, Food for Peace, the Alliance for Progress, and a broad array of lesser known projects for building water and power infrastructure were all components of an overall effort to inspire the nation.

During his short presidency, JFK was following the principles of the American System. He, like FDR, knew that every section of the nation needed to have access to credit to improve its water, power, and transport infrastructure, while the nation as a whole focused on future-oriented, science-driver projects. No part of the country could be left behind, as we see in many decimated rural areas of the United States today.

Given the current programs of the Trump administration and Republican Congress—not to mention the insane Democratic Party focus on overthrowing the President by pushing confrontation with the Russians—this perspective may indeed seem unreachable. But from an historical perspective, the task is no more daunting than that which faced Alexander Hamilton and George Washington, or Henry Carey and Abraham Lincoln. From them we can take the necessary inspiration—because, like them, we as a nation cannot afford to fail.