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Chris Christie's war: Doctors, not lawyers, should be the ones dealing with drugs

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The War on Drugs has a lot in common with the War on Terror:

The presidents who started them had no idea how to finish them.

Our governor is an enthusiastic proponent of both. But if he has any idea how to win either I've yet to hear it.

That expansive program to fight drug abuse that he announced in his State of the State speech Tuesday amounted to a call for a vast new bureaucracy that would attempt to treat the symptoms of the problem but not the problem itself.

"It looks like addiction treatment is the last refuge of the scoundrel," said Stanton Peele when I called him to comment on the crusade Christie announced Tuesday.

Peele, who has both a Ph.D. in psychology and a law degree, is perhaps the leading debunker of the recovery industry in America. Before moving to Brooklyn recently, the 71-year-old spent most of his career in Morris County.

Back when the War on Drugs began, conservative critics like William F. Buckley and Milton Friedman warned that it would cause smugglers to switch to harder drugs - exactly as happened

That gave him a ringside seat to observe Christie's career, a career which is seemingly based on the idea that lawyers are the best people for any job that comes down the pike, from school construction to Hurricane Sandy relief.

Our governor was the star of "60 Minutes" on Sunday night. He appeared on the news show to discuss the borrowing crisis that afflicts New Jersey and many other states, and he proclaimed "The day of reckoning has arrived." On the day after the day of reckoning, however, the governor announced he will be increasing New Jersey's debt by...

In fact, Christie's administration bungled both of those. And Peele doesn't have high hopes for the latest lawyer-led effort to end drug dependency.

It sounds nice in theory to recommend, as the governor did during that 75-minute spiel last week, that drug users should be sent to treatment rather than to jail.

But Peele slices, dices and destroys that approach in a recent article titled "American Gulag: The Five Ways Hundreds of Thousands of People Are Coerced Into Rehab and AA."

"The myth is that 12-step programs and their associated treatment industry thrive simply because Americans love them," it begins. "In fact, both are substantially built on and maintained by force."

That force is applied by the legal system. The problem with that approach, said Peele, is that many of the rehab slots end up occupied by people who don't want to be there. That means a lot of people who really want treatment don't get it.

Another problem is that rehab doesn't always work as advertised. Christie admitted as much in his speech when he cited the examples of two drug users who died from overdoses despite being in and out of rehab.

The Republican governor sounded a lot like a Democrat as he proposed a slew of costly government programs to treat drug addiction; his approach amounts to an expansion of Obamacare

Peele stands with the "harm reduction" wing of the therapy establishment. These counselors believe we need to deal with drugs for the simple reason that we'll never get rid of them.

Arthur D. Little agreed. Arthur D. Little is the name of a management consulting firm founded by a chemist of that name.

In 1967, the firm issued a report on the drug menace of the day, which consisted mainly of some weak Mexican marijuana as well as heroin. A legal crackdown would make the problem worse, not better, the report said.

"If United States law-enforcement policies become so efficient as to prevent altogether the smuggling of heroin, the black market can readily convert to narcotic concentrates that are a thousand or even ten thousand times more potent, milligram for milligram," the firm reported.

That happened right on schedule. Christie mentioned the synthetic opioid fentanyl in his speech. But he failed to mention that the War on Drugs ended up turning a relatively small problem with natural drugs like marijuana and heroin into a major problem with synthetic drugs like meth, ecstasy and fentanyl.

He also proposed that the attorney general, i.e. a lawyer, look over the shoulder of every doctor in the state who prescribes pain-killers. Christie wants the AG to enforce an order that no doctor can prescribe more than five days' of painkillers at a time.

The Medical Society of New Jersey denounced "such intrusions into the practice of medicine, especially if they do not take into account individual patient circumstances, like medication tolerance or access to insurance, transportation or alternative treatments."

Or in other words, some poor, sick person who's in pain will have to make five extra trips to the pharmacy because some other person abuses the drug in question.

Then there's the question of marijuana. Christie wants the lawyers to hound the pot-smokers into treatment centers as well. Who's going to pay for all this?

Chris Christie had the right idea when he declared an end to the war on drugs; but he seems inclined to retain the nanny-state approach to the problem.

The rest of us, that's who. Christie proposes a mandate that every health insurance policy sold in New Jersey come with an entitlement to six months of drug treatment.

That puts him at odds with all the Republicans in Congress who are now busy dismantling Obamacare, said Michael Cannon, a health-policy expert at the free-market Cato Institute in Washington.

"Chris Christie doesn't think Barack Obama should be able to tell you which health benefits are essential," said Cannon. "He thinks Chris Christie should be able to tell you which health benefits are essential."

Exactly. He's a lawyer, after all, and lawyers know what's best for us.

Except when they don't.