

NATIONAL REVIEW

Do We Really Need a Drug Czar?

Michael Tanner

October 25, 2017

The office spends billions, to no avail. Maybe Congress should abolish it.

Last week, Representative Tom Marino withdrew from consideration as drug czar, after reports emerged suggesting that he had played a role in legislation making it easier to import Fentanyl, the painkiller that has become a driving force behind America's opioid crisis. Most will chalk this up to another case of poor vetting by the Trump administration and move on to speculation about the next nominee. But maybe we should be asking another question:

Why do we need a drug czar in the first place?

Well, we will undoubtedly be told, the country is facing an opioid epidemic. We have to do something. But even setting aside the fact that we already have an “opioid czar” — President Trump appointed New Jersey governor Chris Christie to that position in March — the idea of a drug czar is symptomatic of Washington's belief that every problem must have a government solution. Moreover, that solution must be undertaken by the federal government, not the states, and should involve as much bureaucracy and spending as possible. The drug czar oversees some \$31.4 billion in federal anti-drug programs. The fancy title is an extra bonus.

The appointment of any “czar” — the drug czar, the bioethics czar, the auto-industry-recovery czar — is meant to show how serious the government takes one societal problem or another. Such symbolism would be costly in the best of cases. But ever since its creation in 1988, the drug czar's office — officially the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) — has been the source of both scandal and bad policy.

In 2005, the GAO found that the drug czar's office had violated laws against domestic government propaganda by distributing pre-packaged “news” stories without disclosing their origin. Nor was this the first time that the office found itself in hot water for its propaganda efforts. For instance, the FCC has ruled that the ONDCP was violating agency rules by failing to disclose that it was paying television networks to embed anti-drug messages in their programming.

The ONDCP also appears to have frequently skirted campaign-finance laws, using taxpayer money to campaign against ballot initiatives that would legalize marijuana. However, despite frequent complaints, the Federal Elections Commission has so far held that the office does not have to disclose how much it has spent trying to influence elections.

The drug czar also directly administers \$380 million in federal grant programs, with little oversight or accountability. These are programs that even the White House Office of Management and Budget has called duplicative and wasteful. Maybe it is time to take a step back and realize that Washington is not the font of all wisdom.

But most concerning is the fact that the head of the ONDCP continues to act as the top general in the failed and counterproductive War on Drugs. Ignoring all available evidence to the contrary, the office continues to cling to the idea that it's best to treat drug use as a criminal problem rather than a public-health issue.

Aside from the way such thinking can damage both lives and communities — and contribute to racial disparities in the criminal-justice system — the continued reliance on law enforcement to solve our drug problems is often counterproductive. For example, studies show that opioid use goes down when a state legalizes marijuana. Yet the Office of National Drug Control Policy remains the tip of the spear in the campaign against marijuana decriminalization.

Maybe, just maybe, it is time to take a step back and realize that Washington is not the font of all wisdom — and that not every problem in America requires its own federal office, bureaucracy, or czar.

Michael Tanner is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the author of [Going for Broke: Deficits, Debt, and the Entitlement Crisis](#). You can follow him on his blog, [TannerOnPolicy.com](#).