

Harry J. Anslinger

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Harry Jacob Anslinger (May 20, 1892 – November 14, 1975) held office as the assistant prohibition commissioner in the Bureau of Prohibition, before being appointed as the first commissioner of the U.S. Treasury Department's Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) on August 12, 1930.^[1]

Anslinger held office an unprecedented 32 years in his role as commissioner until 1962. He then held office two years as US Representative to the United Nations Narcotics Commission. The responsibilities once held by Anslinger are now largely under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy. He died at the age of 83 of heart failure in Altoona, Pennsylvania.

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Early life, marriage

Anslinger's father, Robert J. Anslinger, was born in Bern, Switzerland and had worked in that country as a barber. His mother, Rosa Christiana Fladt, was born in Baden, Germany. The family emigrated to the United States in 1881. Robert Anslinger worked in New York for two years, then moved to Altoona, Pennsylvania. In 1892, the same year his son Harry was born, Anslinger went to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad.

Harry Jacob Anslinger

1st Commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics

In office

August 12, 1930 – May 1962

President Herbert Hoover
Franklin D. Roosevelt
Harry S. Truman
Dwight D. Eisenhower
John F. Kennedy

Succeeded by Henry Giordano

Personal details

Born Harry Jacob Anslinger
May 20, 1892
Altoona, Pennsylvania

Died November 14, 1975 (aged 83)
Altoona, Pennsylvania

Spouse(s) Martha Kind Denniston

Anslinger later claimed that he had witnessed a scene that affected his life. When he was 12, he heard the screams of a morphine addict that were silenced only by a boy returning from a pharmacist to supply the addict with more morphine. Anslinger was appalled that the drug was so powerful and that children had ready access to such drugs.

Anslinger enrolled at Altoona Business College at the age of 17. He also went to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad. In 1913, he was granted a furlough so he could enroll at Pennsylvania State College, where he studied in a two-year associate degree program in business and engineering.

In 1917 Anslinger married Martha Kind Denniston (Sept 1886 – Oct 10, 1961), niece of Andrew W. Mellon. In 1930, at age 38, he was appointed as the first commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. There is no government document or legitimate source of information which verifies the fact Anslinger married Martha Denniston. The most reputable source comes from the American National Biography online which published that he was married in 1923, not 1917, and the article also states he brought Denniston's kid from a previous marriage under his care.

Rise to prominence

Anslinger gained notoriety early in his career. At the age of 23 (in 1915), while working as an investigator for the Pennsylvania Railroad,^[2] he performed a detailed investigation that found the claim of a widower in a railroad accident to be fraudulent. He saved the company \$50,000 and was promoted to captain of railroad police.

From 1917 to 1928, Anslinger worked for various military and police organizations. His duties took him all over the world, from Germany to Venezuela to Japan. His focus was on stopping international drug trafficking, and he is widely credited with shaping not only America's domestic and international drug policies, but for having influence on drug policies of other nations, particularly those that had not debated the issues internally.

By 1929, Anslinger returned from his international tour to work as an assistant commissioner in the United States Bureau of Prohibition. Around this time, corruption and scandal gripped prohibition and narcotics agencies. The ensuing shake-ups and re-organizations set the stage for Anslinger, perceived as an honest and incorruptible figure, to advance not only in rank but to great political stature.

In 1930, Anslinger was appointed to the newly created Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) as its first commissioner.^[3] The FBN, like the Bureau of Prohibition,^[3] was under the U.S. Treasury Department. At that time, the trade of alcohol and drugs was considered a loss of revenue because, as illegal substances, they could not be taxed. Anslinger was appointed by Secretary of the Treasury Andrew W. Mellon, and given a budget of \$100,000.

The campaign against marijuana 1930–1937

Restrictions for cannabis as a drug, often called *Indian Hemp* in documents before the 1940s, started in local laws in New York already in 1860 and was followed by local laws in many other states and by state laws in the 1910s and 1920s.^[4] The federal Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 regulated labeling of patent medicines with Cannabis India (*Indian Hemp*). In 1925 United States supported regulation of *Indian hemp*, Cannabis for use as a drug, in the International Opium Convention.^[5] Recommendations from the International Opium Convention inspired the work with the Uniform State Narcotic Act between 1925 and 1932. Anslinger hadn't become an active person in this process until about 1930.^{[6][7]}

Anslinger received, as head of The Federal Bureau of Narcotics, an increase of reports about smoking of marijuana in 1936 that continued to spread at an accelerated pace in 1937. Before, smoking of marijuana had been relatively slight and confined to the Southwest, particularly along the Mexican border. The bureau launched two important steps. First, the Bureau prepared a legislative plan to seek from Congress a new law that would place marijuana and its distribution directly under federal control. Second, Anslinger ran a campaign against marijuana on radio and at major forums.^{[8][9]}

Some of his critics ^[10] allege that Anslinger and the campaign against marijuana had a hidden agenda. DuPont petrochemical interests and William Randolph Hearst together created the highly sensational anti-marijuana campaign to eliminate hemp as an industrial competitor. Indeed, Anslinger did not himself consider marijuana a serious threat to American society until in the fourth year of his tenure (1934), at which point an anti-marijuana campaign, aimed at alarming the public, became his primary focus as part of the government's broader push to outlaw all recreational drugs.^[11] Members of the League of Nations had already implemented restrictions for marijuana in the beginning of the 1930s and restrictions started in many states in the U.S years before Anslinger was appointed. Both president Franklin D. Roosevelt and his attorney general publicly supported this development in 1935.^{[11][12]}

By using the mass media as his forum (receiving much support from William Randolph Hearst), Anslinger propelled the anti-marijuana sentiment from the state level to a national movement. Writing for *The American Magazine*, the best examples were contained in his "Gore File", a collection of quotes from police reports, by later opponents described as police-blotter-type narratives of heinous cases, most with no substantiation, linking graphically depicted offenses with the drug. Anslinger sometimes used the very brief and concise language in many police reports when he wrote about drug crimes:

"An entire family was murdered by a youthful addict in Florida. When officers arrived at the home, they found the youth staggering about in a human slaughterhouse. With an axe he had killed his father, mother, two brothers, and a sister. He seemed to be in a daze... He had no recollection of having committed the multiple crime. The officers knew him ordinarily as a sane, rather quiet young man; now he was pitifully crazed. They sought the reason. The boy said that he had been in the habit of smoking something which youthful friends called "muggles," a childish name for marijuana."^[13]

Anslinger has been accused ^[10] of being responsible for racial themes in articles against marijuana in the 1930s.

"By the tons it is coming into this country — the deadly, dreadful poison that racks and tears not only the body, but the very heart and soul of every human being who once becomes a slave to it in any of its cruel and devastating forms.... Marihuana is a short cut to the insane asylum. Smoke marihuana cigarettes for a month and what was once your brain will be nothing but a storehouse of horrid specters. Hasheesh makes a murderer who kills for the love of killing out of the mildest mannered man who ever laughed at the idea that any habit could ever get him...."^[14]

"Colored students at the Univ. of Minn. partying with (white) female students, smoking [marijuana] and getting their sympathy with stories of racial persecution. Result: pregnancy"^{[15][16]}

"Two Negroes took a girl fourteen years old and kept her for two days under the influence of hemp. Upon

recovery she was found to be suffering from syphilis."^{[16][17]}

"The first Federal law-enforcement administrator to recognize the signs of a national criminal syndication and sound the alarm was Harry J. Anslinger, Commissioner of the Bureau of Narcotics in the Treasury" (Ronald Reagan 1986)^[18]

When Anslinger was interviewed in 1954 about drug abuse (see below), he did not mention anything about race or sex. In his book *The Protectors* (1964) Anslinger has a chapter called "Jazz and Junk Don't Mix" about the black jazz musicians Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker, who both died after years of heroin and alcohol abuse:

"Jazz entertainers are neither fish nor fowl. They do not get the million-dollar protection Hollywood and Broadway can afford for their stars who have become addicted – and there are many more than will ever be revealed. Perhaps this is because jazz, once considered a decadent kind of music, has only token respectability. Jazz grew up next door to crime, so to speak. Clubs of dubious reputation were, for a long time, the only places where it could be heard. But the times bring changes, and as Billy Holiday was a victim of time and change, so too was Charlie Parker, a man whose music, like Billie's, is still widely imitated. Most musicians credit Parker among others as spearheading what is called modern jazz." (p. 157)

Anslinger hoped to orchestrate a nationwide dragnet of jazz musicians and kept a file called 'Marijuana and Musicians'.^[19]

The La Guardia Committee

The La Guardia Committee, promoted in 1939 by New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, was the first in depth study into the effects of smoking marijuana. It systematically contradicted claims made by the U.S. Treasury Department that smoking marijuana results in insanity, and determined that *the practice of smoking marihuana does not lead to addiction in the medical sense of the word.*^[20] Released in 1944, the report infuriated Anslinger who was campaigning against marijuana and he condemned it as unscientific.^[21]

Later years

Later in his career, Anslinger was scrutinized for insubordination by refusing to desist from an attempt to halt the ABA/AMA Joint Report on Narcotic Addiction, a publication edited by the sociology Professor Alfred R. Lindesmith of Indiana University. Lindesmith wrote, among other works, *Opiate Addiction* (1947), *The Addict and the Law* (1965), and a number of articles condemning the criminalization of addiction. Nearly everything Lindesmith did was critical of the War on Drugs, specifically condemning Anslinger's role. The AMA/ABA controversy is sometimes credited with ending Anslinger's position of commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics.

Anslinger was surprised to be re-appointed by President John F. Kennedy in February 1961. The new President had a tendency to invigorate the government with more youthful civil servants and by 1962 Anslinger was 70 years old, the mandatory age for retirement in his position. In addition, during the previous year he had witnessed his wife Martha's slow and agonizing death due to heart failure and lost some of his drive and ambition. He submitted his resignation to President Kennedy on his 70th birthday, May 20, 1962. Since Kennedy did not have a successor,

Anslinger stayed in his \$18,500 a year (\$125,535 in 2007 dollars) position until later that year. He was succeeded by Henry Giordano. Following that, he was the United States Representative to the United Nations Narcotics Commission for two years after which he retired.

By 1973, Anslinger was completely blind, had a debilitatingly enlarged prostate gland, and suffered from angina.

On November 14, 1975, at 1 pm, Anslinger died of heart failure at the former Mercy Hospital (now known as Bon Secours Hospital Campus of the Altoona Regional Health System) in Altoona, Pennsylvania.^{[1][22]} He was 83.

He was survived by his son Joseph Leet Anslinger and a sister. According to John McWilliams' 1990 book *The Protectors*, Anslinger's daughter-in-law Bea at that time still lived in Anslinger's home in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania.

Anslinger is buried in Hollidaysburg Presbyterian Cemetery, Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania, Plot: Sec. C, Lot 320.^[23]

In the media

- In 1973 he was played by actor Edmond O'Brien in the film *Lucky Luciano* by Francesco Rosi, with Gian Maria Volonté.

Career timeline, recognition

- 1913–1915 : Student, Pennsylvania State University, State College PA
- 1917–1918 : Member, Efficiency Board, Ordinance Division, War Department
- 1918–1921 : Attached to American Legation, The Hague
- 1921–1923 : Vice-Consul, Hamburg, Germany
- 1923–1925 : Consul, La Guaira, Venezuela
- 1926 : Consul, Venezuela
- 1926 : Delegate of US to Conference on Suppression of Smuggling, London
- 1926–1929 : Chief Division of Foreign Control, US Treasury Department
- 1927 : Delegate of US to Conference on Suppression of Smuggling, Paris
- 1928 : International Congress against Alcoholism, Antwerp, Belgium
- 1928 : Conference to Revise Treaty with US, Ottawa, Canada
- 1929–1930 : Assistant Commissioner of Prohibition
- 1930 : LL.B., Washington College of Law
- ? : LL.D., University of Maryland
- 1930–1962 : Commissioner of Federal Bureau of Narcotics
- 1931 : Conference of Limitation of Manufacture of Narcotic Drugs
- 1932–34, 1936–39 : Co-Observers of US at League of Nations Opium Advisory Commission
- 1936 : US delegation International Conference for Suppression of Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs, League of

Nations, Geneva

- 1952 : US representative commission on Narcotic Drugs of UN Recipient Pennsylvania Ambassador, Proctor Gold Medal Awards
- 1958 : One of ten outstanding career men, Federal Government, National Civil Service League
- 1959 : Alumni Recognition Award, American University
- 1959 : Distinguished Alumnus award, Pennsylvania State University
- 1962–1963 : US Representative to United Nations Narcotics Commission
- 1964: Retired
- 1975: Died

- Alexander Hamilton Medal
- Remington Medal
- Presidential Citation
- Member, Commission Drug Addiction NRC
- Honorable Member, Terre Haute Academy of Medicine
- Associate Member, International Police Chief Association
- Member, Advisory Committee, International Cooperation Common Law, American Bar Association
- Life Member, Pennsylvania and Blair County Pharm. Association
- Diplomatic and Consular Officers Reg. (board of governors)
- Sigma Nu Phi

See also

- LaGuardia Commission
- Havana Conference
- Legal history of marijuana in the United States
- Legal issues of cannabis
- L. G. Nutt
- Prohibition (drugs)



Wikiquote has quotations related to: ***Harry J. Anslinger***

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External links

- Harry J. Anslinger, Commissioner of the US Bureau of Narcotics, "Marijuana: assassin of Youth" (<http://www.cannabis.net/assassin-of-youth.html>), *The American Magazine*, July 1937
- Statement by Harry J. Anslinger, Commissioner of the US Bureau of Narcotics, to the Senate Ways and Means Committee, 1937 (<http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/hemp/taxact/anslng1.htm>)

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