

The Man Who Gave Us the Drug War

Dr. Hamilton Wright was famous for his discovery that beriberi is an infectious disease. It isn't. It's a vitamin deficiency but by the time his error was uncovered he had already married well. Very well in fact – to the daughter of Senator W.D. Washburn, head of the Republican Party.

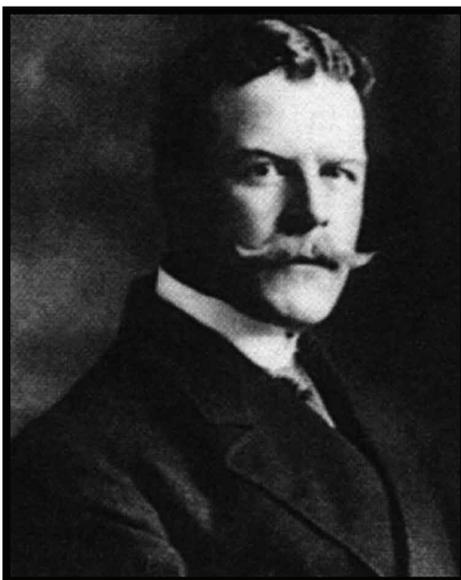
When Dr. Wright moved to Washington his new father-in-law got him a job as a delegate to the Chinese Opium Commission of 1909. This conference, aimed at helping the Chinese with their opium problem, was billed as an American good will gesture. The actual intent was to pull the rug out from under the British and open China's vast markets to US merchants.

But Dr. Wright, who always suspected he was destined for greatness, took the assignment seriously and by the time he returned from China he had persuaded himself that opium addiction was a global scourge. His mission would be to save the world from the evil of narcotics.

He faced daunting odds. The other key players—England, France, the Netherlands did not share Wright's horror of opium. A British study had recently concluded that opium addiction was no worse than alcoholism and maybe not as bad. But Wright's moral certainty finally carried the day on Capitol Hill. Badgering superiors and threatening foreign ambassadors, Wright managed to get the State Department to convene two follow-on conferences at Hague in spite of

resistance from almost every other nation involved.

In the end they all caved in and agreed to control cultivation, manufacture, and distribution of narcotics. Wright was able to achieve this stunning reversal through simple deception. At The Hague he said that the United States was demanding narcotics control, then back in Washington he squeezed Congress with fabricated demands from The Hague.



The U.S. legislation that Wright engineered finally made it through Congress in the winter of 1914 and at first glance the Harrison Narcotics Act appeared to be just a means of gathering information. It called on everybody in the drug trade to purchase a license and keep precise records. The bill passed in minutes. The New York Times didn't even mention it.

But Hamilton Wright had installed a land mine in the language, an extra clause that enabled federal agents to decree that all narcotics addicts should go cold turkey. Most addicts at the time were productive citizens with jobs, homes and a medical problem. Overnight they went from patients to criminals.

Today, as a direct result of using lawmen to supervise doctors we have 30 million Americans undertreated for chronic pain. And what did we get in return? After spending \$1 trillion over the last 90 years the rate of narcotics addiction in the US has increased 500 percent.

Common Sense for Drug Policy
www.CommonSenseDrugPolicy.org www.DrugWarFacts.org
www.ManagingChronicPain.org www.MedicalMJ.org
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info@cscp.org

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Photo credit: from the book *Drug War: Covert Money, Power & Policy* by Dan Russell