



Guest columnist

A new drug czar, a new opportunity

If President Obama appoints Seattle Police Chief Gil Kerlikowske as the nation's new drug czar, guest columnist Kevin A. Sabet says he'll have an opportunity to make a significant mark on drug policy and enforcement. A former senior adviser to drug czars in the Clinton and Bush administration, Sabet offers the chief some advice.

By **Kevin A. Sabet**
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PRESIDENT Obama is expected to name Seattle Police Chief Gil Kerlikowske as the next director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. The Cabinet post is more widely known as the drug czar — an informal title coined more than 25 years ago by then-Sen. Joe Biden.



Kevin A. Sabet, a former senior adviser to drug czars in the Clinton and Bush Administrations.

The idea is this: One bureaucrat, appointed by the president, should oversee the various departments and agencies responsible for reducing the illegal demand and supply of drugs in the United States.

The drug policy world has been abuzz about President Obama's pick. The likely choice of Kerlikowske is an interesting one, given his instrumental role with the establishment of the successful Community-Oriented Police Services program (COPS) in the Clinton administration.

Surely, it is fun to speculate about specific actions Kerlikowske might take when he is confirmed. It is what pundits and interest groups do best. But two questions should be considered first: What qualities should our next drug czar possess? And what will he have to do in order to be effective? Here are some ideas:

- *Have street cred.* Despite his grand title, the drug czar is anything but an autocrat. He must be able to get key members of Congress on the phone, satisfy various constituencies and transmit the president's ideas in a way that reassures everyone. That means the incoming director must be able to get meetings with Cabinet secretaries (who would prefer to send deputies) and congressional leaders (who often have their own drug-policy agendas) in order to actually coordinate drug policy in the first place. An effective czar should be able to bring all the key players to the table and communicate a coherent message to rally behind.

- *Do the job tasked to him by law.* It's a novel idea, isn't it? It may sound obvious, but no director has effectively utilized all of the tools at his disposal to improve the nation's drug efforts. In a world of high emotions, big egos, congressional subcommittees, and small but vocal interest groups, the director has been able to command only modest authority over drug-control spending and projects, despite statutory provisions to the contrary.

The director is mandated by law to coordinate the U.S. illicit drug strategy across a distressingly large number of agencies, each with its own interests and political motivations. That makes the political game delicate. Most directors have chosen the diplomatic path, rarely getting in the way of budget chiefs or Cabinet heads. But the job description formally calls for him to "certify" the scattered budgets that drive the government's drug policy. The czar has almost always performed these certifications passively, acquiescing to the bigger wigs in the Cabinet. The next drug czar must not be afraid to flex his muscle.

- *Embrace innovative ideas that have been shown to work.* Drug policy is rarely a bone of contention among Democrats and Republicans. Everyone believes in prevention, law enforcement and treatment. And legalization remains (rightfully) the stuff of dreams (nightmares, really, when you take into account the heavy social costs that would result from a free, commercial market for illegal drugs). But this administration's mantra is change, and the drug czar should not be afraid to seek out unfamiliar ideas that have yielded real results at the state and local level.

One of them is the aptly titled "Project: HOPE." Pioneered in Hawaii, the program performs regular, randomized drug testing in the criminally active population and implements reliable, swift (but short) sanctions for positive screens. It reduced positive drug tests among methamphetamine users there by 80 percent and, to keen observers of crime policy, it has become a model for how to deal with all kinds of probationers.

Kerlikowske will have a choice: to continue below the radar, signing off on old programs and submitting to others' agendas, or to transform the agency, blazing a new, bold path. Let's hope he chooses the latter.

Kevin A. Sabet is a former senior adviser to drug czars in the Clinton and Bush administrations.

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