

The 'Ask Nancy' Letters

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It all started harmlessly enough. I was sitting at my desk one evening last fall, contemplating the empty block of space that then constituted the op-ed page of the December issue (and final issue, it turns out) of Newservice's predecessor, **Drug Survival News**.

Somewhere along the line, I decided that what the space really cried out for was a bit of humor, since there was nothing much in the way of lightheartedness scheduled anywhere else in the magazine—largely due to the fact that, last fall, there was nothing much lighthearted anywhere in the country to report.

Ways and means of injecting levity into the proceedings sifted through my head, and after a while the formula that seemed most appealing was that of a "Dear Abby"-type column, featuring First Mom Nancy Reagan, and lampooning Nancy's latest bumbblings on behalf of drug abuse—or on behalf of her conservative cronies who wail against drug abuse, depending on how you look at these things.

What emerged was the column, "Ask Nancy." And in case you missed it first time around, it went like this:

Dear Nancy:

Please help me resolve a dilemma that's simply got me at the end of my tether! At a recent function, the entire executive committee of our local group, Parents Against Nearly Everything, turned out in full regalia to witness the signing of a proclamation by the governor praising us for the outstanding contributions made by citizen-preventors like ourselves and for how the stick-to-it-iveness of able volunteers working completely independent of government really reflects the same get-the-job-done philosophy that's made this country great. And then he announced that, because of our willingness to play 100% hardball on the drug issue (and mobilize support for candidates who

play 100% hardball), we've been designated a model prevention program and qualify for start-up program funding of \$225,000.

Well, my dear, I can't tell you how shocked and surprised we all were by this bolt from the blue! And then—wouldn't you know it—the meeting broke up because it was picketed by angry negroes who made the outrageous claim that your husband's budget cuts resulted in the closing of their methadone maintenance program (which was located in a terrible neighborhood to begin with).

Well! We all immediately piled into our

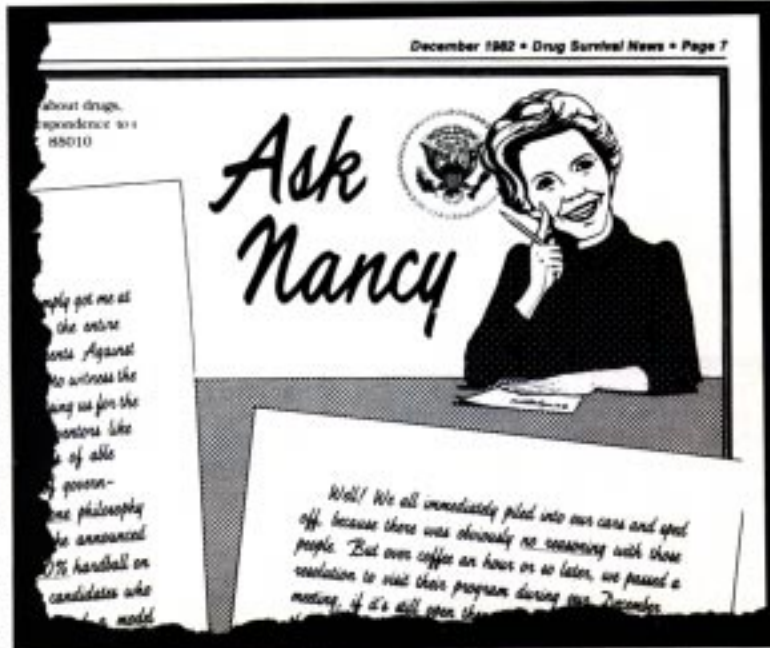
either. What do you wear to a program closing, anyway? It must come up quite a bit.

Just sign me "Bewildered"

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Dear "Bewildered"—

Wear whatever you feel most radiant in. Take my word for it, those people won't be looking at your clothes—they'll be looking at you! (And loving you in their own silent way for caring enough to visit them!) Swing out! Be yourself! Just don't wear any expensive jewelry—and leave that bag under the seat in the car!
Nancy



cars and sped off, because there was obviously no reasoning with those people. But over coffee an hour or so later, we passed a resolution to visit their program during our December meeting, if it's still open then. We think it's high time that parents begin the very necessary process of networking and information sharing with these unfortunates, and we can't think of a better time than a couple of months from now. We also thought we could take along some divinity and fudge since it's a well-known fact that those people like candy, and it will be close to the holidays.

Nancy, my question is this: Should I wear my teal blue organdy Bill Blass jumper with white pumps and a clasp handbag on our site visit, or something a little more subdued? I don't want to be ostentatious, but I certainly don't want to look feared

And that, I thought was that. Response from readers was overwhelmingly positive, and reports started filtering in from programs and state agencies around the country where the column was clipped and copied and hung on bulletin boards and chuckled over and remarked about. We were pleased that we'd been able to express what apparently was on so many people's minds, but that was the end of the matter—we thought. And then, along about the end of March, a slim gray envelope with the return address "The White House, Washington, D.C." came in the mail one morning.

This is what it said:

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

March 15, 1983

Dear Sir or Madam:

The "feature" entitled "Ask Nancy," which appeared in the December 1982 issue of Drug Survival News, has been called to my attention. This page included a

drawing of the First Lady; a reproduction of the Seal of the President of the United States; and purported letters to and from Mrs. Reagan, with the latter printed on a facsimile of White House stationery.

As you are well aware, none of the foregoing was authorized or approved in any fashion, and we must insist that these improper uses of the name and likeness of the First Lady, the Presidential Seal and White House stationery cease forthwith. Specifically, Mrs. Reagan has not authorized you to use her name or likeness, or otherwise to suggest that she is associated with this so-called "column." The Presidential Seal may be used only when permission is granted for authorized purposes, and its unauthorized use may be subject to criminal penalties. White House stationery is for the use of the President and persons within the White House Office, and may not be used by others for non-official purposes.

Your views on the First Lady's efforts to assist in the fight against drug abuse, and the tastelessness with which you present those opinions, are your own affair. But you may not use the name or likeness of the First Lady, the Presidential Seal or official White House stationery; nor may you otherwise falsely suggest or imply, in any manner, that the President, the First Lady or anyone in the White House is in any way associated with your publication or any of its features.

Very truly yours,

Fred F. Fielding
Counsel to the President

be tied up defining the concept and refining the format of **Newservice**, and it didn't seem especially wise or profitable to pursue a long-distance debate with the Chief Inquisitor of the Reagan administration, Fred Fielding.

And that's where the entire matter would likely have stayed until one afternoon when I mentioned the episode on the phone to **High Times** "Almighty God Editor" Dean Latimer, and Dean acted righteously indignant and exploded: "Those

while big-bucks **High Times** magazine hadn't, his reaction started me thinking. And the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that something important was at stake here—namely, our First Amendment protections of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. So, I took up my pen (reluctant patriot that I am) and dashed off the following:

May 31, 1983

Mr. Fred Fielding
Counsel to the President
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. Fielding:

Thank you for informing me of your views concerning the satirical column, "Ask Nancy," which appeared in the December, 1982 issue of **Drug Survival News**. Although I question the accuracy and validity of certain of the points you raised in your letter (especially those concerning the possible illegality of our use of caricatures of the first lady and facsimiles of White House stationery and the presidential seal in the column), I really do not care to pursue a lengthy discussion of the merits (or lack of same) of your argument. I'm sure we both have more pressing matters to attend to at the moment and, since we have no intention of running "Ask Nancy" on a regular basis in the future (largely a result of reader disinterest in reports, satirical or otherwise, of the comings and goings of the first lady), the issue becomes moot.

What I would like to do at this time is point out what my intentions were in writing and publishing the column. I believe it is imperative that I set the record straight at this point since, from the tone of your letter, I'm not sure you understood that the column was intended as a satire and was not intended to represent a bona

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Fred F. Fielding
Counsel to the President

The Editor
Drug Survival News
POST OFFICE BOX 3115
Phoenix, Arizona 85010

Harumph (as Major Hoople used to say in the funny papers)...I guess he told me.

Well, I sat on that for a while, not really intending to respond one way or the other, just content to let the whole thing die—particularly so since every spare moment seemed to

bastards! They can't do that to you! They've never done it to me!"

And although Latimer's display was in no small part due to the fact that he was just plain jealous that little **Drug Survival News** had succeeded in attracting the official ire of the Reagan Administration

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vide advice column by Mrs. Reagan.

The main goal I sought to achieve in running the column was to contrast the Reagan administration's official policy of budget cuts and fiscal derring-do in the drug abuse field with the unofficial hand-wringing that Mrs. Reagan routinely and publicly performs on the "drug problem." It strikes me as more than a little incongruous that a president as unequivocally and unalterably opposed to drug abuse as Mr. Reagan claims to be has done so little to strike at the real causes of chemical dependency in America: high unemployment and plummeting expectations, complicated by the administration's benign indifference to the legitimate needs of millions of our least fortunate citizens. And rather than doing what can and should be done to rehabilitate the hundreds of thousands of addicts and abusers who guarantee the perpetuation of the drug problem in this country, the administration instead treats us to round after round of budget cuts and program slashes and to the unlikely spectacle of the first lady of the United States mumbling inanities about a complex social problem about which she demonstrates precious little understanding.

Further, I find it peculiar (as do many of our readers who have responded to the column) that, although we have had a serious drug problem in this country since at least the mid 1960s, Mrs. Reagan has only seemed to become aware of it since it has become politically advantageous for the administration to court the conservative leadership of the national anti-drug parents movement.

We're not questioning Mrs. Reagan's motives, but we do think it's time that someone somewhere stood up and said: "What new clothes? The president (or the first lady) isn't wearing new clothes. He (or she) is naked."

That's our position and that's what "Ask Nancy" was all about. We happen to believe—and believe strongly—that if the president were really concerned about drug and alcohol abuse in America, he'd do something about the real causes of the problem: the poverty and racism and lack of real opportunity that truly impoverish the spirit—and rob millions of Americans of a fair chance for a decent life.

Again, Mr. Fielding, thank you for your comments. We very much appreciate knowing the column touched a nerve at the White House.

Sincerely,
James D. Parker
Editor

I haven't received a response to that yet, and I don't really expect to, but I'm betting if I do, that Ron or Fred or Nancy will completely miss the point again and try to intimidate me with the fact that Ron's president and (so far) the rest of us aren't.

In the meantime, I'd like to make clear that my objections to Nancy's occasional forays into the forbidden

zone of drug abuse are not merely a matter of personalities. I personally like Nancy very much, particularly when she does what she truly does best: spend money lavishly and accept "loans" of high-couture designer fashion creations. No, I want it known that we support her and invite her to drop by our foundation in January, 1985 when she and her husband retire to California. We'll still be in the drug abuse prevention business then.

Will she?

