

Heroin Hotline

A Big Flop SFChronicle



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THE heroin hotline, which President Nixon personally inaugurated with huge fanfare on April 7, has turned out to be a total flop.

It was supposed to be used by informers to tip off federal authorities where to find smuggled heroin. Yet it has helped agents to uncover only a few pinches of dangerous drugs.

As late as July 24, the President assured a gullible public that the fight against drugs had advanced from the 10-yard line to the 50-yard line. "We have the ball now!" cried football fan Nixon. "Let's go!"

The cheerleading was echoed by Myles Ambrose, the hotline honcho, who said that "effective information" had been developed from some 5000 hotline calls.

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A SECRET report by the General Accounting Office, however, disputes these claims. Through June 30, declares the report, the heroin hotline recorded 28,341 calls. But all except 4363 were totally worthless nut calls, obscene calls and harassing calls.

These 4363 calls led to the seizure of a grand total of three grams of marijuana in Los Angeles, two revolvers "and small quantities of miscellaneous dangerous drugs in New York City" and "3300 dosage units of LSD" in San Francisco.

Up to June 30, in other words, the heroin hotline didn't produce a single sniff of heroin. The marijuana seizures were so inconsequential that they had to be mea-

sured in grams instead of pounds or kilograms, which narcotics agents usually use to describe their confiscated booty. Except for the LSD, almost any high school principal could turn up more drugs in a single locker sweep.

All told, the hotline netted seven small-fry suspects between the grand opening and June 30. Yet the hotline system had offices in 23 major cities and tied up narcotics agents who were taken away from more vital work.

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REPRESENTATIVE Lester Wolff, (Dem-N.Y.), who ordered the GAO report, confirmed to my associate Les Whitten that he had received the secret study. Wolff refused, however, to divulge the final totals. His staff is still studying them, he said, but his preliminary assessment indicates little improvement in the hotline after June 30.

In short, the heroin hotline was a public relations contraption that produced more hot air than heroin. Indeed, even as the President praised it, the hotline was being quietly dismantled. Its long distance lines were reduced from 41 in April to five by the end of June. And the 27 narcotics people, who were borrowed by the hotline system, were cut back to a mere seven.

FOOTNOTE: So fouled up was the hotline operation, according to the GAO report, that even those calls described by Ambrose as "effective" were often never assigned to be checked out.