The War on Drugs: Our Next Vietnam

The war on drugs has been lost. Despite decades of interdiction and enforcement efforts that have cost billions of dollars, there are more drugs and more blood on the streets than ever before. Our courts and prisons are crowded beyond capacity, corruption is rampant at home, and governments abroad are under siege.

With all the hysteria and hypocrisy surrounding the issue of drugs, we have ignored the clear lessons of history. Prohibition financed the rise of organized crime and failed miserably as effective legal and social policy. Likewise, the war on drugs has created new, highly financed criminal conspiracies—and yet another moral crusade has failed miserably as effective law or social policy.

The latest round of an old drug hysteria has created a climate akin to the anti-Communist witch hunts of the McCarthy era. Judge Douglas Ginsburg, a conservative legal scholar from Harvard University, was forced to resign from consideration for the Supreme Court after admitting he had smoked marijuana. The constitutional guarantee against unreasonable search and seizure is being routinely breached by judges across the country who uphold questionable searches.

Those courts, says University of Indiana law professor Craig Bradley, "are influenced by the drug scare and use the same reasoning courts were influenced by the Red scare." And Bush's drug czar, William Bennett, has encouraged school children who turn in friends and family suspected of taking drugs.

A society cannot long afford to have its laws widely and openly broken. The urge to use some form of mind-altering substance is deeply ingrained in human nature. Attempting to legislate is cutting off the vine can only lead to a greater government the kind of power is not necessary in a free society.

U.S. drug laws are outdated and need total revamping. The arguments against legalization are tired and invalid. Legalization does not imply governmental approval of drug use; it would not increase availability or use in a massive wave of new addicts. Legalization would diminish social pressures and give rise to competitive drug dealing and allow billions of dollars to be rechanneled for treatment, drug education and economic assistance for job training, drug abuse and better schools.

Despite Richard Nixon's attempts to eradicate marijuana production and consumption in this country, some 60 million Americans have smoked pot, and 21 million now smoke it regularly. Eleven states have decriminalized personal use, and not a single death has been attributed to a marijuana overdose. Yet as late as 1985, an estimated $286 million in federal funds was used for anti-marijuana enforcement. That same year, 39,000 people were arrested for marijuana offenses, according to the PBI.

Attempts to control cocaine in the 1980s have likewise failed. In a recent case of innovative marketing, cocaine—once considered a drug of the elite—was smoked by young people in the form of crack, a cheap, potent high and profitable, easily transportable product for the young entrepreneur. Even though cocaine prices have fallen through the floor, the number of users has increased so greatly that crack profits made the drug barons of Latin America among the richest men in the history of the world.

The war on drugs, as well intended as it may be, has now become the problem. Allowing this underground market to continue, according to federal judge Robert Sweet, "creates an economic incentive for drug sellers to increase the use of drugs. Eliminate the crime premium, and the price would fall. Cut out the illegal traffickers, and the spiral of crime would end.

The primary argument against legalization is that if drugs were suddenly legalized, the result would be a significant increase in new addicts. With crack, that argument is simply irrelevant. Crack is abundant, cheap, and easily available,

The number of addicts is estimated to be in the millions, and the number of deaths attributable to drug use is in the tens of thousands. In the area where a large market exists, legalization would not lead to an increase in use. The few addicts who remain are a small, but significant, minority of the population. The argument that legalization would lead to an increase in drug use is a spurious one.

If the legalization of drugs results in a slight increase in the number of addicts, let us accept the consequences. Most middle-class Americans have access to a social safety net that includes family, employers and social services, as well as health insurance, education and treatment facilities.

In the ghettos, where the drug war is being waged, the result is far more devastating. The women, children and elderly are facing a hard reality. Real wages for poor black men dropped fifty percent during the 1970s. Approximately one-third of black men from poor areas are arrested on drug charges by the age of thirty. Nearly one in four black males between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine is in prison, on probation or parole, or serving time.

Increasingly, the residents of our inner cities are losing hope. The disintegration of the family structure, the power of media, inadequate education and government abandoners have left these citizens with few alternatives. While middle-class white communities possess most of the things that the urban poor are lacking, what lawmakers have been slow to assist minorities in all aspects of social policy. And this abandonment is creating a permanent underclass of unemployable ghettos whose lives become hopelessly intertwined with drug crime and who in turn are becoming parents to another generation of generational dysfunction.

The government's response to the plague of the poor has been far from meaningful. Bush and Bennett's national drug strategy calls for an increase in law enforcement efforts and a massive increase in prison space. Indeed, the 1990 drug-war budget of $95.5 billion will result in a 100 percent increase—and $837 million for the military's involvement.

It is time for the government to offer more than punitive assistance to this segment of society. The residents to whom it is turn to help them obey the law or prison space to house them when they fail to do so. They need opportunity and equality. Spend the billions that will result from a drug-penniless, diversity on education, job assistance, child care and economic redevelopment.

Legalizing drugs would also eliminate the black market and deal a critical blow to drug dealers and drug stores. Federal judges would find some 15,000 fewer cases a year on their dockets—which is a small fraction of the burden that would be lifted from state and local courts.

And since nearly fifty percent of all federal prisoners are now serving time for drug-related offenses, the national prison crisis would be forestalled. In addition, the risk of death by overdose, hepatitis, AIDS and other diseases resulting from the use of street drugs would be greatly reduced. Eliminating the black market in illegal drugs would dry up the estimated $30 to $60 billion a year in profits for organized crime.

In seventy-five years of trying, the government has failed to control drugs through prohibition. For the producers and the users, each successive action has only increased their profits and power. Legalization can take these away and dehumanize the dealers in our neighborhood. It's a step away from hypocrisy unshared in laws that are only enforced against the poor and minorities.

At the beginning of the Reagan administration, the United States spent $1 billion to enforce laws against all drugs. Next year, Bush's drug war will cost over $30 billion. With the military and the CIA adding into an escalating, hopeless war, perhaps the history lesson can begin.

Like Vietnam, this is a quagmire. We are in a war that is tearing apart the fabric of our country. There is no light at the end of the tunnel. And it is time to admit: We are wrong. And perhaps we can behave as a kinder, gentler and more humane society.

Jann S. Wenner
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