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## It's Time To End the War on Drugs

"It's time to end the war Nixon began and move toward a more humane and sensible approach to dealing with this problem. It's time to legalize narcotics."

By **Steven Goldman** | April 26, 2022



Last summer, the war in Afghanistan came to an inglorious end after 20 brutal years. It cost the United States over \$2 trillion and resulted in the loss of over 6,000 American lives. But Afghanistan has not been our country's longest war, or in many ways its costliest. That dubious distinction belongs to the War on Drugs,

which Richard Nixon announced almost 51 years ago when he pledged to use the full force of the federal government to wage a “war” against illegal narcotics. While this massive, decades-long effort to eradicate illegal narcotics within our borders has resulted in no measurable success, the strategy remains largely intact. The time has come to change our approach to narcotics. For a second time in our country's history, prohibition has failed. But the good news is that there are strong reasons to believe that legalization would be a more successful strategy.

The war on drugs is based on the premise that ingesting narcotics is unhealthy for the individual and dangerous for society. Narcotics cause people to experience altered mental states, which people enjoy for a variety of reasons. Their abuse, however, can result in some steep costs, including crime and death. Of course, the same can be said of alcohol, which is both legal and widely consumed. Why do we draw such an arbitrary line between alcohol and drugs? Does the alcohol industry simply have a better lobby? And when did we collectively decide that the government could tell us which mental states we are allowed to experience and which are forbidden? Is that really any different from being told what we can and cannot think?

But hypocrisy and paternalism are only a small part of the story. By criminalizing narcotics, we have focused massive law enforcement resources in poor communities where drugs like heroin and fentanyl are commonly found. The vast majority of law-abiding people who reside in these communities live in constant fear of the dual menace of criminals and the police who pursue them. They are the ones who bear the brunt of our endless war on drugs, which for them often feels like living in a literal war zone. By contrast, law enforcement largely turns a blind eye toward drug use in wealthier communities, where drugs like cocaine and oxycodone, which are also illegal, can be found in abundance. Residents of these tonier communities purchase and consume their “designer” drugs with relative impunity, largely unconcerned about the police, whose energies are focused elsewhere. There has long been a troubling inequality in the enforcement of our drug laws.

Ironically, no group has benefited more from our war against drugs than law enforcement. Police departments around the country regularly use sting operations, called buy and busts, to arrest as many people as they can process. For them it's like shooting fish in a barrel. Most of the people arrested in these buy and busts are drug users or low-level dealers who often sell drugs just to support their own habit. Another common target are couriers, who are paid marginal sums to transport drugs from one place to another. The people higher up the narcotics food chain are rarely arrested, and those in the highest echelons often reside outside the U.S. and are thus largely beyond our reach. The padded arrest statistics are used to justify funding requests. Law enforcement agencies regularly argue, without proof, that increased narcotics arrests translate into increased safety. This argument has kept police departments around the country awash in dollars for decades. The annual budget of the NYPD, for example, is about \$11 billion, more than the entire GDP of Congo.

One irrefutable consequence of our mania for arresting people for using and selling drugs has been a spike in incarcerations. According to World Population Review, our country has the shameful distinction of incarcerating more of its citizens, in both absolute terms and as a percentage of the population, than any other country. We are the incarceration capital of the world.

It is true that the illegal drug trade has resulted in huge numbers of deaths. This has become a particularly urgent problem as fentanyl has surged into the market. Because fentanyl is synthetic and cheap to produce, it is frequently sold to unsuspecting buyers in place of more expensive drugs like heroin and oxycodone. According to the CDC, fentanyl is up to 50 times as potent as heroin. The inevitable result is an epidemic of overdose deaths. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, over 56,000 overdose deaths from synthetic opioids, mostly fentanyl, occurred in 2020. Yet the loss of life is as avoidable as it is staggering.

Currently, drug users are at the mercy of the often-unscrupulous drug dealers who serve them. Were we to legalize narcotics and subject them to standard quality controls, drug users would know exactly what they are getting and in what quantity. The problem of the bait and switch would largely end.

But fewer deaths would be just the beginning. By legalizing narcotics, state and federal government would save literally billions of dollars. This would be achieved, in part, by cutting back on law enforcement personnel that are no longer needed to enforce narcotics laws. Judicial resources—lawyers, court officers, judges, etc.—would also be dramatically reduced. And consider the savings from not having to incarcerate a large portion of our population. Finally, the foreign drug cartels and domestic drug syndicates that thrive on the illegal drug trade and wield enormous power, would be starved in the same way that the mob suffered when prohibition ended and its moonshine revenue dried up. Legalizing narcotics would radically reduce the cost, in lives and dollars, foisted upon our society by its pointless war on drugs.

One common argument against the legalization of narcotics is the notion that it would turn us into a country of drug addicts. This is nothing more than scaremongering. If easy availability were sufficient to create widespread abuse, it would have already happened, since narcotics are—and have long been—readily available. In the same way that legalizing alcohol did not turn us into a nation of alcoholics, legalizing narcotics will not turn us into a nation of drug addicts. But the converse is also true. Prohibiting drugs has not—and cannot—prevent people from using them. People who want narcotics will always find a way to get them. Making narcotics illegal simply transfers the production and sale of them to illegal drug syndicates, thereby creating the web of problems outlined above.

The war on drugs has, in reality, been a war against our fellow citizens who use drugs. It's time to recognize the mistake for what it was. It's time to end the war Nixon began and move toward a more humane and sensible approach to dealing with this problem. It's time to legalize narcotics.

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