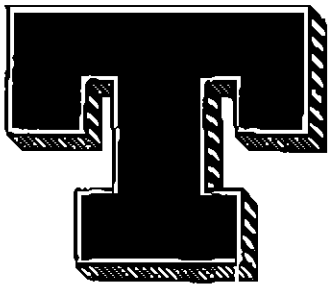


The War on Drugs: Our Next Vietnam

ROLLING
STONE
EDITORIAL



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. Pro-

hibition 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 antidrug 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 withdraw 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 in much the same way 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 legalize it out of existence can only lead us to grant governments the kind of power it should not have 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U.S. drug laws are outdated and need total revamping.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 result in a massive wave of new addicts. Legalization would eliminate inner-city violence associated with competitive drug dealing and allow billions of dollars to be rechanneled for treatment, antidrug education and economic assistance for job training, day care 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 1988, an estimated \$986 million in federal funds was used for anti-marijuana enforcement. That same year, 391,600 people were arrested for marijuana offenses, according to the FBI.

Attempts to control cocaine in the 1980s have likewise failed. In a textbook case of innovative marketing, cocaine — once considered a drug of the elite — trickled down to the poor in the form of crack, a cheap,

potent high and a profitable, easily transportable product for the young entrepreneur. Even though cocaine prices fell throughout the Eighties, consumption 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 intentioned as it might 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, this argument is simply irrelevant. Crack is absorbed by society at large, and its ready availability would not result in a meaningful increase in its use. In the areas where a large market exists, legalization would not increase availability in the least. The absurdity of this argument is apparent to anyone who has seen the street-side dealing in the twenty-four hour, open-air drug bazaars in the major urban centers.

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

In the ghettos, where the drug war is being waged, things are far more desperate. The residents of inner cities are faced with harsh realities. 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 awaiting trial.

Increasingly, the residents of our inner cities are losing hope. The disintegration of the family structure, the poor job outlook, inadequate education and government

abandonment have left these citizens with few alternatives. While middle-class white communities possess most of the things that the urban poor are lacking, white lawmakers have been slow to assist minorities in achieving a kind of social parity. And this abandonment is creating a permanent underclass of unemployable ghetto youths whose lives become hopelessly interwoven with drug crime and who in turn are becoming parents to another generation of seriously dysfunctional children.

The government's response to the plight of the poor has been far from ministerial. Bush and Bennett's national drug strategy calls for an increase in law-enforcement officers and a massive increase in prison space. Indeed, the 1990 drug-war budget of \$9.5 billion allows \$1.5 billion for prisons — a 100 percent increase — and \$876 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 of inner cities don't need more police officers 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-peace dividend on education, job assistance, child care and economic redevelopment.

Legalizing drugs would also eliminate the bloodshed associated with all levels of drug dealing and struggling. 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 illnesses resulting from the use of street drugs would be greatly reduced. Eliminating the black market in illegal drugs would dry up the estimated \$50 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 traffickers and barons, each successive wave of hysteria has only increased their profits and power. Legalization can take these away and dethrone the dealer in his neighborhood. Let's strip away the hypocrisy implicit 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 \$10 billion. With the military and the CIA wading 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 mature society.

— Jann S. Wenner
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