

Effects of the War on Drugs

There is a war that has been going on for many years. It can never be won, yet the battle continues, both in the United States and globally. This war is the war on drugs. It started in the late 1800s when Chinese immigrants working in the United States introduced smoking opium to western culture. Alcohol prohibition was first attempted nationally in 1920, with the introduction of the 18th Amendment. The 18th Amendment was repealed only thirteen years later, in 1933.

Marijuana, which is in much wider use than opium *sup* its derivatives in modern society, is the focus of the modern drug war. Marijuana prohibition at the federal level began with the Marijuana Tax Stamp Act of 1937 (The History of Drug Laws). Today, the war on drugs continues, despite being ineffective in decreasing drug use. The two agencies largely responsible for fighting the war on drugs are the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), which was created in 1973, and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), currently led by "Drug Czar" John Walters'. The war on drugs is high on the agenda of the conservative Bush administration, and is being fought with more fervor than ever before. Conservative and religious movements continue to support the drug war with the naive belief that one day drugs will disappear from the face of the earth.

So what is the big deal? Why shouldn't the government try to reduce drug abuse? At least they have good intentions, some might argue. The big deal is that there are numerous negative effects of the war on drugs, which hurt citizens everyday. These include wasted tax dollars, an increase in violent crime, misinformation about drugs, overcrowding of prisons, and the ruining of good peoples' lives, among other things. There is only one potentially positive effect, reducing drug abuse, and it will never even be realized if the war on drugs continues in its current form.

The war on drugs is an extremely costly war. Just in the first two months of 2004, the government has already spent over 4.6 billion dollars on the drug war. In 2003 the federal government spent 19.179 billion dollars on the drug war, with state and local governments also spending a total of over 20 billion dollars (War on Drugs Clock). That is over 40 billion dollars, spent in just one year, to fight drug abuse. For comparison, the war in Iraq cost approximately 100 billion dollars (Cost of War), and fighting drug abuse. doesn't require any 50,000 dollar-a-pop smart missiles. In 2003, the ONDCP spent 150 ' million dollars on anti-marijuana ads, which attempted to convince kids that if they smoked marijuana they were supporting terrorism, or they might shoot their best friend or run over a girl on a bike. The government even aired one of these ads during the Super Bowl, which is the most expensive time of the year to buy commercial slots. These ads were received by the general public as laughable. The problem is that the same people laughing at the commercial were the people paying for it: taxpaying citizens. A study commissioned by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), which is part of the U.S.;¹ Department of Health and Human Services, and conducted by the University of Pennsylvania Annenberg School of Communications and Westat research firm, reports that in regards to the anti-drug advertising campaign from September 1999 to June 2003,

' The term "Drug Czar" is not meant to imply a negative connotation. Walters even uses the term on his official website.

"there is little evidence of direct favorable [advertising] campaign effects on youth. "(Anti-Marijuana Ads Failed, Independent Evaluation Reports). In January of 2000 the White House General Accounting Office released report GAO-03-172R Youth Illicit Drug Use Prevention: DARE Long-Term Evaluations and Federal Efforts to Identify Effective Programs. DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) is the most common drug abuse education program in the country and costs approximately 215 million dollars a year. According to the report, "All of the evaluations suggested that DARE had no statistically significant long-term effect on preventing youth illicit drug use."(Erowid Prohibition Vault: 2003 GAO Report on Youth Illicit Drug Use Prevention). All of this money adds up, and yet reports show that we are getting nothing in return.

The war on drugs is not only ineffective, it may actually be making things worse. All the techniques the government uses, while failing in their intended goal, expose children to drugs and teach them that they are "taboo" and "forbidden." When kids hear this, many are actually compelled to try drugs, rather than turn them down. It is their way of rebelling against a system of rules, which is a natural human tendency. In the Netherlands, where marijuana use is tolerated, the society has successfully achieved a separation of "soft-drugs" and "hard-drugs". In 2001, the lifetime prevalence of marijuana use (ages 12+) was 36.9% for the USA, and only 17% for the Netherlands (Factbook: The Netherlands and the United States). Despite this fact, John Walters has criticized the Netherlands' liberal drug policy as "a fundamentally irrational health policy and social policy," (Dutch Ecstasy).

The war on drugs also contributes to crime and violence by creating a profitable black market. In 2003, 84% of the marijuana plants seized in California belonged to multi-million dollar Mexican drug cartels, and 79% of these grow operations were located on state owned land, such as public forests and recreation areas. These areas are sometimes booby-trapped with things such as barbed wire and bear traps, potentially injuring innocent state employees or citizens (2003 Campaign Against Marijuana Planting Program Has Record-breaking Season). Our valuable police officers suffer from the war on drugs as well. In 2003, "14 police officers, or slightly more than one per month, were killed enforcing drug prohibition last year." In response. Jack Cole, director of Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (LEAP) said "These police deaths are totally unnecessary. If we ended drug prohibition, none of these officers would have had to die. We're killing our police. All we have to do is legalize drugs and that would not be happening. Can't we learn from Alcohol Prohibition? We had the highest murder rate in our history and cops were dying right and left." (Drug War Kills More Than a Cop a Month).

While the war on drugs does not reduce drug abuse, it does produce plenty of convictions and incarcerations, needlessly overcrowding our jails with non-violent drug offenders. According to the US Department of Justice "Prisoners sentenced for drug offenses constituted the largest group of Federal inmates (55%) in 2001, down from 60% in 1995. On September 30, 2001, the date of the latest available data in the Federal Justice Statistics Program, Federal prisons held 78,501 sentenced drug offenders, compared to 52,782 in 1995" (Drug War Facts: Prisons). If non-violent drug abusers were given medical treatment instead of jail time, our prison system would have more than twice as much available capacity to house serious criminals. Instead hundreds of new prisons are built across the country, and each becomes more crowded than the last.

The war on drugs is also racially unfair, sending a disproportionate amount of minorities to prison each year. "Of the 246,100 state prison inmates serving time for drug offenses in 2001, 139,700 (56.7%) were black, 47,000 (19%) were Hispanic, and 57,300 (23.2%) were white." Black people however, are not the most prevalent users of drugs; according to the federal Household Survey 72% of all drug users are white (Factbook: Race, Prison, and the Drug Laws). There is clearly an unfair bias in the judicial system towards minorities, who often do not have adequate legal counsel to keep them out of prison.

The war on drugs is a problem, not a solution. Every year that it fails in its goals to reduce drug abuse, it makes things worse by actually increasing drug use, crime, needless loss of life and incarceration. Billions of taxpayers' dollars are essentially wasted every year, because conservative politicians have an axe to grind. If the U.S. government really wants to help, it needs to stop the current war on drugs. It needs to reevaluate its tactics, focusing on education and rehabilitation, instead of misinformation and incarceration. Maybe, if this ever happens, we will actually see a decline in drug abuse.