

Winning the war on drugs

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“Winning the War on Drugs?” Is that you, Dr. Steve? Isn’t that “War” just a construct designed to achieve political and economic aims, while oppressing with it one particular sector of the population? How can it be “won?” This column considers that conundrum in almost telegraphic form. I have written at length on it in the academic literature. Interested readers are welcome to get in touch with me for references. The “War on Drugs” has never been such a thing. From its inauguration by Richard Nixon it has always been a War on Drug Users, for the most part minority drug users at that, although some non-minorities have occasionally been caught up in its tentacles. The so-called War on Drugs was begun shortly after the invention of the race-based “Southern Strategy” that has controlled the fortunes of the GOP and unfortunately the country for most of the time since Nixon installed it.

The correctly labeled “War on Drug Users” has primarily been a racist enterprise too. It has been aimed at the users of one minor class of the Recreational Mood Altering Drugs (RMADs), those that are currently “illicit” (as alcohol was nationally between 1920 and 1933 and cigarettes were in 15 states at various times during the 19th century. Although the ratios have declined a bit in the last few years, for most of its duration under the War on Drug Users, while approximately 75% of those in prison for drug-related offenses are non-white approximately 75% of illicit-drug users are white. Further, the War on Drug Users has been race-based in terms of the neighborhoods in which it has been waged. There was one major previous true War on Drugs, Prohibition. It was for the most part actually aimed at the drug, ethyl alcohol, not at the users.

The commonly used RMADs are alcohol, nicotine in tobacco, the non-prescription use of prescription drugs, and the illicit, primarily marijuana, heroin, cocaine, and fairly recently, methamphetamine. In terms of negative outcomes of RMAD use, for example, tobacco kills about 430,000 people per year, alcohol between 60,000 and 100,000, depending upon how one counts, and the illicit kill about 20,000, half that number as a result of drug-trade violence that would not exist absent the War on Drug Users and some of the other half due to forced unsterile use of the drugs. Tobacco and alcohol are not only the major drug killers but they are the “starter drugs,” most often in childhood, for almost every problem-user of them in adult life and almost every user of the illicit, regardless of age.

Logic has not ended the War on Drug Users. Neither has the mainstream drug policy reform movement which views RMAD use as the same false duality the Drug Warriors do. Logic did not end Prohibition either. Over-riding policy concerns did: rampant crime on the one hand and a major need for new tax revenues to deal with the Depression on the other. Major funding for the final Repeal campaign of the early 1930s came from a John D. Rockefeller-lead group of financiers who wanted to prevent any increases in income tax levels that an incoming Democratic Administration might enact.

In dealing with the War on Drug Users the stars would seem to be aligned, that is if the unitary-RMAD understanding of reality were to be adopted. There is a major series of problems that could be addressed by ending the War on Drug Users. Legalizing the currently illicit would create a major new source of tax revenues. Doing so would significantly reduce the prison population resulting in major reductions in Federal, state and local spending on incarceration. Doing so would significantly unclog the courts, especially at the Federal level where they are so over-burdened with drug cases that the waits for trials on much more important matters, especially in the civil realm, can become interminable. Obviously, there would be a significant reduction in the demands on the law enforcement sector of government, which could either save money or enable the diversion of resources to other important areas, such as financial fraud, that do not always receive the attention they deserve.

The Taliban would be largely defunded. That the heroin trade is a major source of their funding is the subject a new book that is currently featured on BuzzFlash.com: *Seeds of Terror: How Heroin Is Bankrolling the Taliban and al Qaeda*. As well, of course, the true Drug Wars that are killing thousands of Latin Americans, especially in Mexico and Colombia, would be brought to a sudden, well-deserved end. Finally, the recognition of the unitary nature of RMAD use would enable for the first time a comprehensive public health program to deal with all of the negative aspects of that use, especially among children for whom it is the major licit drugs which are the stepping stones both to later habitual, damaging use of them, and, currently, to the use of the illicit.

As to the practical matter of how to implement the legalization of the illicit, it has been said that the tobacco companies have been prepared for marijuana legalization, up to and including the registration of trade names. Heroin and cocaine could be sold by Federal or state-operated stores, similar to the “package stores” that dispense certain alcoholic beverages in such states as Vermont. As for the synthetic RMADs, and the non-prescription use of the prescription drugs (the latter of which has been a much more serious problem than the use of heroin and cocaine combined), a variety of approaches could be explored. This all would have be combined with a major public-health based anti- and safe-RMAD use program, combining tax policy, controls on advertising, packaging, and marketing, and effective education programs for both adults and children. The result would be a much healthier nation. Since finding sources of new government revenues in the face of ever-increasing deficits have become such a major concern and since certain major foreign policy aims could be achieved so easily, now is the time to end the War on Drug Users, once and for all.

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