



## War on Drugs

by John D. Whitaker

If you were looking for proof that the war on drugs is going badly you need only look south. Last month Mexico decriminalized possession of small amounts of heroin, cocaine, LSD, and marijuana. It is hard to believe, but it is no longer against the law in Mexico to be in possession of 50 milligrams of heroin. So much for the trillion dollars we have spent on the war on drugs since war was declared by President Nixon in 1980. High School kids can now wander across the Mexican border and buy up to 4 joints of marijuana without violating the law.

Of course we do have something to show for all the money we have spent. The number of people in prison in the United States for drug offenses rose from 41,000 in 1980 to 500,000 today. Federal, state and local governments spend 44.1 billion dollars annually enforcing drug prohibition. Presently, we spend 7 times more money on drug interdiction policing and imprisonment than on treatment, yet according to former Seattle police Chief Norm Stamper, drugs are now more available, at lower prices, and higher levels of potency than ever before. We are funding violent drug cartels and international criminals in places like Mexico and Afghanistan who use the money we give them to destabilize governments, murder innocent people, repress women and generally fund obstacles to America's legitimate foreign policy objectives. Prohibition also enables our local criminals to keep the price of drugs high so that they can make huge sums of money while at the same time terrorizing entire neighborhoods in our large cities.

California has been flirting with the idea of legalizing marijuana outright so that the taxes it would produce could be used to help with the fiscal crisis that state is now facing. Medical marijuana is now legal under California state law with a prescription although it remains a violation of federal law. Recently, U.S. Attorney General



Eric Holder said that the federal authorities will no longer raid medical marijuana stores in California. A Zogby poll done in April of this year indicated that 52% of the American public now favors legalizing marijuana so that it can be taxed and regulated. Opponents of decriminalization argue that liberalizing the drug laws will lead to an increase in use and addiction, but so far that has not occurred in California. Another recent Zogby poll found that 99% of the people surveyed said that if hard drugs like heroin and cocaine were legal they would not try them. So one could

argue that we are spending 44 billion dollars a year to keep 1% of the population from taking the drugs that are readily available anywhere and that they were likely to take anyway.

Now that it has finally dawned on congress that we just don't have money to throw away on programs that don't work, it seems that it is time to rethink how this country is going to move forward on the war on drugs. Wyoming considers possession of small amounts of marijuana to be a misdemeanor unless the person has been convicted of possession at least two prior times. A third time possession of even a small amount of marijuana is a felony punishable by up to 5 years in the penitentiary and or a fine of up to five thousand dollars. In addition, there is the loss of civil rights associated with a felony conviction. A felony conviction can have a devastating affect on a young persons future and felony level violations should be reserved only for very serious misconduct. I am not saying that addiction isn't a very serious problem, but I am saying that we should begin to talk about the way we deal with it. Harsh criminal sanctions do not seem to be working.

At least we don't need to worry about it for a while. Spring break is still at least 6 months away, but Cancun is going to have a little different vibe this year. When the prodigal son asks to go to Mexico for spring break you can always suggest Disney Land. Oh wait, that won't work, Disney Land is in California.

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