

A Modest Proposal Concerning the War on Drugs

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For decades, the United States has been embroiled in a much-maligned campaign, the “War on Drugs.” Encompassing harsh use and possession laws, youth education programs, and anti-smuggling regulations, the campaign has succeeded in imprisoning hundreds of thousands of criminals and capturing billions of dollars in contraband. It has also succeeded in spending billions of tax dollars on a war that has done little more than make the drug industry more profitable, more brutal, and more sophisticated than ever before; and has turned increasingly large segments of the public against the campaign against drugs.

Everybody knows this.

As a moral perfectionist, I feel no need to revisit the rationale for depriving US residents of substances that corrupt, deprave, injure, and kill them, and induce them to corrupt, deprave, injure, and kill others. The War on Drugs has a legitimate aim: preventing the American masses from harming both themselves and each other.

The campaign, however, has been poorly planned and poorly fought. Instead of attacking demand, Federal agents have fought the supply chain by raising penalties for dealers and traffickers, while giving users comparatively light sentences. A few programs are targeted at the demand side, but they range from draconian and ineffective (such as the infamous Rockefeller Laws of New York state) to simpering and ineffective (such as the laughable DARE “Drug Abuse Resistance Education” programs paraded before elementary-school students by suburban police officers.)

The drug problem in America is entirely a demand-side problem. It can be stopped, and can only be stopped, by eliminating the desire to take drugs. All effective criminal laws work upon this principle: it is not enough to merely restrain the public; one must also eradicate the desire to commit crime. Whether by harsh punishments which deter potential criminals, or by attaching social stigma to crime, or by removing the personal incentives for wrongdoing, the most successful anti-crime campaigns work by acting upon potential criminals. Crime is a demand-side problem with demand-side solutions.

To capitalize upon this disciplinary axiom, we can fold the latter two disincentives into a pronged approach.

- Phase out the DARE program. Phase in “PAY” – “Pure American Youth.” Instead of teaching students to “Just Say No,” teach them to cast the first stone. Organize anti-drug youth clubs, but emphasize “absolute purity” in addition to “zero tolerance.” Encourage bullying, teasing, and harassment of users, suspected users, or suspected children of users of drugs. Because many children are too naïve to recognize the telltale smell of marijuana, program officers should teach them a few simple heuristics: anyone who dresses oddly, smells strange, talks with an accent, or has a darker skin color is a suspect. Red flags go up if they have red-rimmed eyes or sniff often.
- In the coeducational tradition of saltpeter-spiked mashed potatoes, add a pinch of Antabuse and naltrexone (an opiate blocker) to each carton of milk distributed by the Federal School Lunch Program. As an bonus, the DEA can give a boost to sagging agriculture markets by pumping federal dollars into the “got milk?” campaign.

Why target children? Because they’re our most valuable resource – in marketing terms, at least. Children are the most impressionable Americans, buying every TV-hyped product they can and forcing their parents to buy the rest. All the drug war needs is a marketing strategy developed by somebody other than Nancy Reagan.

The masses of pot-experimenters serving lengthy sentences in Sing Sing are beyond help. We have to save Americans from themselves, before they become the cynical drug-abusers of today, casually financing Columbian warlords with their “recreational” habits. What we save in prison costs, we can recycle into advertising. It’s a win-win scenario.

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