

Drug prohibition violates logic -- and civil rights

BY THOMAS RAVENEL
Saturday, February 5, 2011

Drug prohibition violates logic -- and civil rights

No matter how bad you might think illegal drugs are, drug prohibition (the War on Drugs) makes it infinitely worse. We must, again, repeal prohibition, not for drug users but for all Americans who are forced to endure the violence, street crime, erosion of civil liberties, corruption and social and economic decay caused by prohibition.

Drug abuse is a medical, health care and spiritual problem, not a problem to be solved within a criminal justice model. What historical precedent is there to recommend our current prohibitionist policy? Isn't history abundantly clear about such foolishness?

During the 1800s, drugs were legal and could be bought in grocery stores and pharmacies. The temperance movement was started to stop what was considered a menace to society - - alcohol, not drugs. Americans learned in the 1920s that prohibition was far worse than alcohol as it created crime, corruption, drive-by shootings and organized crime. Isn't it time we relearn that lesson and end the madness?

Related story

[Thomas Ravenel: Legalize drugs](#)

Before alcohol prohibition passed, its sponsors predicted jails would empty. Yet after passage, crime exploded and prisons overflowed. Before passage, the homicide rate was declining, and after, it exploded. During prohibition, alcohol use went up, not down, especially among teens.

We know, not from intuition but from history, that when we end drug prohibition, crime, murder, inner city decay, corruption, and waste of lives and national treasure will all dramatically decline as it all mercifully did after the repeal of alcohol prohibition.

Prohibition creates the black market and is thus responsible for all the problems related to the black market, like high drug profits to dealers, drug gangs funded by those profits, shootouts over turf, addicts who steal to pay for expensive black-market drugs, children selling drugs because they are subject to lower penalties than their adult comrades, police corruption, the creation of a criminal subculture in the inner city, and the jailing and criminalization of large numbers of young minority males.

Ask yourself, what was the original goal of prohibiting drugs. Was it to reduce use, protect the kids or reduce crime? By every metric, it has failed spectacularly. Prohibition doesn't protect our youth. Three national surveys reveal it's far easier for teenagers to buy illegal drugs than alcohol. Liquor stores check IDs, drug dealers don't. Recently, when drugs were decriminalized in Portugal, teen drug use went down.

Also, when the government bans one substance, many just substitute with drugs that are far worse. In the 1600s, China banned cigarettes and people switched to opium. In 1914, the Harrison Act banned cocaine, opium and morphine so many switched to heroin. Now, for example, in substitution of safer, plant-based drugs, users manufacture deadlier drugs like crystal meth with ingredients bought at Walgreens.

Drugs don't cause crime, the illicit nature of drugs does. How often do Anheuser Busch and Jack Daniel Distilleries have shootouts with innocent children being killed in the crossfire? Of course it never happens, because these companies deal in legal commerce and resolve conflicts through the courts, not through shootouts.

Did anyone argue in 1914 that we must ban cocaine because addicts were causing a crime wave by stealing money to buy cocaine for \$100 a gram? No, because cocaine was legal and cheap. When heroin was legalized in Switzerland, use did not go up but property crime went down 60 percent. It so happens that countries with the most prohibitive anti-drug laws happen to have the most drug use. In Holland, where marijuana is legal, 22.6 percent of the population has used it, but in America 41 percent have used marijuana.

Prohibition is a violation of our civil rights. The Ninth Amendment states that by enumerating some rights the government in no way limits other rights that are too many to enumerate. This is recognition of our unalienable rights, which pre-exist governments.

Prohibition has transformed the land of the free into the land of lock everybody up. America incarcerates at five times the world rate. Are we five times more evil than the rest of the world?

One might ascribe these disgraceful figures to differences in culture and safety. Think again. Canada is similar to us culturally, and yet we incarcerate eight times the rate it does, and it is rated the eighth safest country on earth. America is 83rd. Has all that incarcerating helped? America is No. 1 in illegal drug use!

President Lincoln said, "The best way to get a bad law repealed is to enforce it strictly."

If drug prohibition were strictly enforced, 85 percent of the population over 47, including three presidents, would do prison time. But that kind of enforcement would lead to repeal. So what is done to keep the gravy train rolling? Target the poor and the voiceless, mostly young minorities. America incarcerates blacks at a rate five times that of South Africa during apartheid!

Yearly in America, 435,000 people die from cigarettes, 85,000 from alcohol, 365,000 from obesity and poor dieting, 75,000 from prescription drugs and 34,000 from automobile wrecks, 2,300 from cocaine and zero from marijuana. About 11,000 die from all illegal drugs combined, with many of these deaths the result of a lack of quality control in the black market.

For every user who dies from the intrinsic effects of cocaine, 20 die from heroin, 37 from alcohol and 162 from cigarettes, according to researcher James Ostrowski in a study prepared for the Cato Institute. Thus, we're incarcerating people three and four times longer than murderers for selling consenting adults a drug that's 162 times less deadly than cigarettes!

In the past, our inability to tolerate different religions led to eternal religious wars. The correct solution to those wars was to decree "freedom of religion." Can a similar lesson be drawn from our current experiment with intolerance to personal freedom?

Drug prohibition is our government's most destructive policy since slavery. Prohibition doesn't make us drug-free, just unfree.

Thomas Ravenel was elected state treasurer as a Republican in 2006. He resigned in 2007 while facing drug charges. He pleaded guilty to conspiracy with intent to distribute cocaine and was sentenced to 10 months in federal prison. He is now working as a commercial real estate developer.