

# THE BLADE

## Renewing the war on drugs would be a disaster

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President Donald Trump's much-ballyhooed appearance at the United Nations predictably stirred up more discussion of waning U.S. influence around the globe and the president's controversial tactics. But largely lost in the coverage was news of Mr. Trump's plan to renew the war on drugs.

According to the U.S. State Department, 130 countries signed Mr. Trump's "Global Call to Action on the World Drug Problem," a non-negotiable action plan meant to combat drug use and trafficking. The plan is regarded by experts as a return to the punitive policies of the infamous "war on drugs," concocted by President Richard Nixon and expanded by President Ronald Reagan.

A number of countries with draconian drug laws support the Trump administration's proposal, including the Philippines, home to a drug war that has resulted in more than 12,000 extrajudicial executions.

Historically, international drug policy has been decided through a process of negotiation and discussion. But controversy has surrounded the creation of the new policy reflected in the agreement because the Trump administration made it clear the plan is non-negotiable, an unusual approach alienating a number of U.S. allies.

John Walsh, director for drug policy and the Andes at the Washington Office on Latin America, told The Intercept that the delegations from other nations, including those that have signed the agreement, "found it entirely offensive that one country would take it upon itself with a few others, pronounce a text as non-negotiable and then pressure countries to sign up because they said so.

"The U.S. is trying to lead us backwards now to the failed policies that led us here," Mr. Walsh said.

Mr. Walsh is correct. The United States' war on drugs has been abysmal. It has been ineffective, costly, and unfair, instituting and elevating systemic injustices that endure to this day.

Since President Nixon announced the war on drugs in 1971, the incarceration rate in the U.S. has quintupled. More than 2.2 million people are currently in U.S. prisons and jails, an increase of more than 500 percent since 1971, according to the Sentencing Project

When President Reagan amped up the war on drugs in the 1980s, it exacerbated the incarceration problem. Thanks to a series of punitive laws, including new mandatory minimum sentences for a variety of drugs, hundreds of thousands of Americans, including a disproportionate number of

poor people and minorities, have found themselves behind bars. In 1980, slightly more than 40,000 people were incarcerated for drug offenses. By 2010, that number was over 450,000.

These policies have also led to the militarization of the nation's police forces. Everyone from the liberal American Civil Liberties Union to the libertarian Cato Institute agrees that the war on drugs is to blame for the use of military tactics and equipment in police departments throughout the U.S. Issues currently plaguing U.S. police departments, namely the use of excessive force and aggressive tactics, can be traced to the militarization of the police and the war on drugs.

On the international front, Latin American countries have been ravaged by bloodshed due in part to ineffective U.S. drug policy. Because the policies of the war on drugs eschew treatment, the drug problem in the U.S. has ballooned. Nearly 25 million Americans have become illegal drug users, according to estimates from the National Institute on Drug Abuse. This has created a violent economy south of our border, as drug cartels battle with one another for control of the profitable U.S. drug market. As a result, millions of people have fled the region, often coming to the U.S. illegally to avoid the violence.

The Trump administration's proposal to renew the call for war on drugs flies in the face of all the U.S. should have learned as a result of the failure of the past three decades.

Simply put, punitive drug policies do not work. Instead, they make worse inequalities that drive more people to use drugs, lower the standard of living in the U.S., and fuel murderous cartels abroad. And ignoring what has been learned about drug use and addiction through biomedical research makes many of our drug laws less than fully informed and less than wholly logical.

Since the 1980s, hundreds of studies, including repeated analysis by the RAND Corporation, have found that treatment would better serve those afflicted by drugs and would save the U.S. government hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars, in the process. The American public has embraced this idea as well. A recent ABC News poll found that 69 percent of Americans prefer drug treatment over incarceration.

But Mr. Trump's call to action, which comes at time when the opioid crisis has become the defining drug issue of the early 21st century, perpetuates the obviously flawed elements of the war on drugs and ignores potentially constructive approaches to the problem. U.S. policymakers would be wise to learn from the mistakes of the past, in the process crafting a more thoughtful drug policy centered around treatment and education, not punishment, incarceration and violence.

Until that time, the cycles of violence, inequality and injustice that have emanated from the war on drugs will continue and wreak even more havoc here and in many other countries.