



Jeff Sessions, Drugs and the Late Lamented GOP

Sheila Kennedy

May 19, 2017

Jeff Sessions is a poster boy for the contemporary GOP—a perfect example of its takeover by racists, misogynists and anti-intellectuals, and its retreat from (and misapplication of) its philosophical roots.

Nowhere is the intellectual and moral corruption Sessions represents clearer than in his enthusiasm for re-instituting the War on Drugs—a counterproductive effort that even the rank and file of the GOP has largely abandoned.

Whether Sessions' determination to go after marijuana, as well as harder drugs, is a result of his inability or unwillingness to understand the research, or is prompted by investments in the private prison industry, as has been speculated, is beside the point. In either case, Sessions is an example of the division—the abyss—between thoughtful adherents of principled conservatism and the ideologues who appeal to a far less thoughtful Republican base.

Nothing makes those contemporary Republican divisions clearer than a recent issue of *Policy Analysis*, a publication of the Cato Institute. Whether one agrees with its positions or not, Cato is indisputably home to legitimate scholars who make principled and consistent arguments for a libertarian point of view that used to be widely accepted—albeit never dominant—within the GOP.

Unlike today's Republicans, Cato does not confine its application of libertarianism to economic issues and the boardroom while cheerfully endorsing theocratic control of personal behaviors.

The Institute's current research adds to the great weight of evidence against Session-like drug policy, as the introduction makes clear:

Proponents of drug prohibition claim that such policies reduce drug-related crime, decrease drug-related disease and overdose, and are an effective means of disrupting and dismantling organized criminal enterprises.

We analyze the theoretical underpinnings of these claims, using tools and insights from economics, and explore the economics of prohibition and the veracity of proponent claims by analyzing data on overdose deaths, crime, and cartels. Moreover, we offer additional insights through an analysis of U.S. international drug policy utilizing data from U.S. drug policy in Afghanistan. While others have examined the effect of prohibition on domestic outcomes, few have asked how these programs impact foreign policy outcomes.

We conclude that prohibition is not only ineffective, but counterproductive, at achieving the goals of policymakers both domestically and abroad. Given the insights from economics and the available data, we find that the domestic War on Drugs has contributed to an increase in drug overdoses and fostered and sustained the creation of powerful drug cartels. Internationally, we find that prohibition not only fails in its own right, but also actively undermines the goals of the Global War on Terror.

Right now, all eyes are on the harm being done to our nation by the embarrassing buffoon in the Oval Office and his cabinet of theocrats and incompetents. That harm is real. But an even greater and more long-term harm comes from the collapse of a once-respectable political party capable of articulating a serious, intellectually challenging conservative philosophy.

Much as partisans like to believe it, no political party has all the answers to the dilemmas of modern society. Without the advantage of *adult* conversation and debate, without the ability to consider and evaluate contending good-faith approaches to our common problems, America can't move forward.

As long as the GOP remains dominated by clones of Jeff Sessions — in thrall to a rigid ideology, bound to partisan litmus tests, and convinced that genuine consideration of probative evidence is tantamount to betrayal— we all lose.