

Column - US drug war makes an enemy of innocent citizens

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On the morning of May 5, 2011, 26-year-old Iraq War veteran Jose Guerena was sleeping after completing a 12-hour graveyard shift at a local mine. Around 9:30 he awoke to find suspicious men outside his home.

After telling his concerned wife and son to hide, Guerena grabbed his AR-15 assault rifle and prepared to face the trespassers. When the armed men broke down Guerena's door and saw him with the rifle, they let loose a hail storm of bullets, at least 22 of which struck and killed the ex-Marine.

Guerena had just become the latest victim of the United States' drug war. Those armed gunmen? They were policemen – a Pima County, Arizona SWAT team, to be specific. The team raided Guerena's home as part of a drug and home invasion probe, but no drugs or other evidence were found on the premises.

This particular drug raid was a "no-knock" raid, in which police storm a house quickly and without warning in order to prevent suspects from destroying evidence. The tactic seems better suited to the streets of Afghanistan than American suburbs, but police now conduct more than 70,000 no-knock raids across the United States each year. That's almost 200 raids a day.

As one might expect, Guerena's story is not unique. In January of last year, drug addict Todd Blair was shot and killed in a severely botched no-knock raid, after which police found only a small amount of marijuana and an empty meth vial in his home. At

<http://cato.org/raidmap>, the Cato Institute has documented hundreds of civilian and police deaths, wrongful home invasions and other disastrous instances of SWAT-style raids.

These atrocities would be bad enough if they were part of an otherwise successful strategy to combat drug use in the United States. The War on Drugs, however, has been a complete failure.

A prominent international panel – the Global Commission on Drug Policy – said as much last June. In their words, "Vast expenditures on criminalization and repressive measures directed at producers, traffickers and consumers of illegal drugs have clearly failed to effectively curtail supply or consumption."

Even so, the United States continues to sink \$51 billion annually into its militant efforts to combat illegal drug use. Thanks to these efforts the U.S. has, by far, the highest incarceration rate in the world. To fully conceptualize that fact, note that the U.S. imprisons over twice as many people per capita as Iran, and six times as many as China. What a shameful statistic for a supposed leader of free nations.

A massive portion of these incarcerations are drug related, as the number of individuals jailed for nonviolent drug offenses has increased twelvefold since 1980. Despite this roundup, the United States is still one of the heaviest marijuana and cocaine consuming countries in the world.

In response to these appalling developments, the Obama Administration has opted to stay the course. Tuesday, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, speaking in Mexico City, made it clear she has no interest in facing reality.

"I would not agree with the premise that the drug war is a failure. I would say, however, that it is a continuing effort to keep our peoples from becoming addicted to dangerous drugs," Napolitano said.

Additionally, President Obama's latest National Drug Control Budget, which makes only tiny changes to past funding, proves he intends to follow the same broken policies that have been in place for decades.

The War on Drugs and the increasing militarization of U.S. police forces are exhibits A and B in the case against unwieldy government power. Washington is literally waging a war against its own people in a foolish effort to save them from themselves.

To reverse this horrific trend, I have a modest proposal for the federal and state governments: decriminalize drugs – all drugs. Doing so will bring these substances out from the shadows of the black market and allow addicts to find help more easily.

It will undercut the violence of gangs and drug cartels because these will be able to call the police when disputes arise. In fact, many cartels will likely disappear as open market

competition reduces prices and eliminates the massive profits currently seen in drug trafficking.

Many people have understandable concerns over the societal effects of decriminalization, but history contradicts their fears. In 2001, for example, Portugal took massive steps to decriminalize all drugs, from pot to crack to heroin. Ten years later, are the streets overrun with crack heads and heroin addicts? Not at all.

In fact, the number of drug users stayed about the same, and the rates of addiction and drug crime actually decreased. The policy was so successful, the aforementioned Global Commission on Drug Policy cited it as a model for other countries to follow.

Governments have no right to tell individuals what substances they may or may not put in their bodies. Furthermore, they have repeatedly demonstrated a complete inability to do so.

It's time for a new approach to drug policy, and ending the War on Drugs must be the first step.