

THURSDAY, OCT 14, 2010 10:15 ET

# The Wars on Drugs and Terror: mirror images

BY GLENN GREENWALD

GLENN  
GREENWALD

On November 2, Californians will vote on Proposition 19, a referendum which (roughly speaking) would legalize marijuana. I have **an Op-Ed in *Politico* today** (a phrase I never expected to write) on the resounding success of drug decriminalization in Portugal and how that empirical data should affect the California debate. That Op-Ed is based on the **comprehensive report I wrote** for the Cato Institute after conducting research in Portugal in late 2008, documenting how decriminalization has single-handedly enabled that country to manage, control and even reduce the problems associated with drug usage far more effectively than other nations (i.e., other EU states and the U.S.) which continue to criminalize drugs.

I'm convinced that drug prohibition, and especially the "War on Drugs" which enables it, is going to be one of those policies which, decades from now, future generations will be completely unable to understand how we could have tolerated. So irrational and empirically false are the justifications for drug prohibition, and so costly is the War waged in its name, that it is difficult to imagine a more counter-productive policy than this (that's why public opinion is **inexorably realizing this** despite decades of Drug War propaganda and the absence of any real advocacy for decriminalization on the part of national political leaders). In that regard, and in virtually every other, the War on Drugs is a mirror image of the War on Terror: sustained with the same deceitful propaganda, driven by many of the same motives, prosecuted with similar templates, and destructive in many of the same ways.

The similarities are obvious. Both wars rely upon cartoon depictions of Scary Villains (The Drug Kingpin, Mexican Cartels, the Terrorist Mastermind) to keep the population in a state of heightened fear and thus blind them to rational discourse. But both wars are not only complete failures in eradicating those villains, but they both do more to empower those very villains than any other single cause -- the War on Drugs by **ensuring that cartels' profits from the illegal drug trade remain sky-high**, and the War on Terror by **ensuring more and more support and recruits for anti-American extremists**. And both, separately and together, endlessly erode basic American liberties by convincing a frightened public that they can Stay Safe only if they cede more and more power to the state. Many of the civil liberties erosions from the War on Terror have their genesis in the War on Drugs.

The most important commonality between these two wars is that they continue -- and will continue -- for reasons having nothing to do with their stated justifications. Both wars ensure an unlimited stream of massive amounts of money into the private war-making industries which fuel them. By itself, the increasingly privatized American prison industry -- fed a **constant stream of human beings put in cages as a result of drug prohibition laws** -- is **obscenely profitable**. Add to these powerful profit centers the political fear that officials have of being perceived as abandoning any war before it is "won," and these two intrinsically unwinnable wars -- unwinnable by design -- seem destined to endure forever, or at least until some sort of major financial collapse simply permits them no longer.

It's the perfect deceit. These wars, in an endless loop, sustain and strengthen the very menaces which, in turn, justify their continuous escalation. These wars manufacture the very dangers they are ostensibly designed to combat. Meanwhile, the industries which fight them become richer and richer. The political officials those industries own become more and more powerful. Brutal drug cartels monopolize an unimaginably profitable, no-competition industry, while Terrorists are continuously supplied the perfect rationale for persuading huge numbers of otherwise unsympathetic people to join them or support them. Everyone wins -- except for ordinary citizens, who become poorer and poorer, more and more imprisoned, meeker and meeker, and less and less free.

-- Glenn Greenwald