

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Obama Behind the Curve on Drug War

Ted Galen Carpenter

May 4, 2012

Leaders at the recently concluded Central American summit joined a growing trend of major figures who have grown disenchanted with the war on drugs. Other defectors in just the past two years include [two former](#) presidents of Mexico, the former presidents of [Honduras](#) and [Brazil](#) and [televangelist Pat Robertson](#). Former president Vicente Fox has not only denounced the war on drugs, he has repudiated the entire concept of drug prohibition, noting that its principal effect has been to enrich the most violence-prone criminal elements—[the vicious drug cartels](#) that have brought so much misery to his country.

The Central American leaders hoped to see a signal from Washington that U.S. officials were also willing to rethink the strategy Richard Nixon proclaimed more than four decades ago of waging a “war” against illicit drugs. But the Obama administration’s response was disappointingly sterile. The president [bluntly stated](#) that legalization of drugs was not an option. In making that statement, the man who pledged in the 2008 campaign that his administration would be one characterized by “hope and change” decided to perpetuate a policy that has not only failed to achieve its principal goals but also has caused an array of horrific societal side effects—both in other countries and in the United States.

The saddest aspect is that Obama’s stubborn commitment to the drug war occurs at a time when global sentiment is shifting against the futile and perverse strategy of prohibition. Moreover, the Obama administration itself showed signs of flexibility during the president’s initial months in office. The administration’s low-key, largely noncommittal response to Mexico’s modest domestic drug-reform legislation in 2009 stood in marked contrast not only to the Bush administration’s vehement opposition to a similar proposal in 2006 but also to Washington’s long-standing posture of hostility and intimidation toward any government that dared flirt with policy reform.

There were also early indications that the president and his advisers wanted to move away from the “war” model and instead deal with drug use as primarily a public-health issue. At least rhetorically, the administration stressed the importance of education and treatment programs while reducing the entrenched emphasis on arresting and imprisoning drug-law violators. The Obama Justice Department also [instructed](#) federal prosecutors in jurisdictions where medical marijuana laws were in effect not to trample on those statutes by authorizing raids on or prosecutions of marijuana clinics unless there were especially flagrant violations of federal law.

Unfortunately, those early signs of a more tolerant approach have virtually disappeared. By 2011, Washington was authorizing more and more raids on medical-marijuana dispensaries in California and other states, displaying an arrogant indifference to the wishes of the voters in those states. Increasingly, the Obama administration’s drug policies [have come to resemble](#) the hard-line policies of its predecessors.

That regression is especially puzzling and unfortunate because public attitudes in the United States (as well as other countries) seem to be shifting in a more liberal direction regarding drug issues. Several states began to pass medical-marijuana initiatives in the 1990s and the early years of twenty-first century, and by 2009, thirteen states had gone even further and decriminalized the personal possession of that drug. In 2010, California voters narrowly rejected an even more far-reaching measure that would have legalized, taxed and regulated marijuana.

[An October 2011 Gallup Poll](#) confirmed there was growing support for legalizing marijuana. Some 50 percent of respondents favored legalization, while only 46 percent opposed it. As recently as 2006, only 36 percent endorsed legalization, with 60 percent opposed. And Gallup surveys taken in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s consistently showed opposition between 66 and 84 percent, with prolegalization sentiment languishing in the low to mid-20s.

A deeper analysis of the 2011 Gallup survey provided even more encouragement for advocates of legalization. Opposition was strongest among respondents over the age of sixty-five. Conversely, support for legalization was strongest among respondents eighteen to twenty-nine (a whopping 62 percent.) Given the realities of mortality tables, the portion of the population supportive of the drug war is certain to diminish, even if that trend might be offset somewhat by the tendency of people to become more socially conservative as they age. It was also significant that solid majorities of both Democrats and Independents (57 percent in both cases) embraced legalization of marijuana. In other words, support for the war on drugs as it applies to marijuana is now heavily concentrated among elderly Republicans.

All of this suggests that Americans are at least wavering in their support for drug prohibition. True, far lower percentages of people in the United States as well as other countries are more reluctant to endorse the legalization of harder drugs. But the trend in opinion regarding marijuana should put the option of legalization on the table. And it

certainly should lead to a badly needed national and international discussion about the wisdom of Washington's current drug policy.

Unfortunately, at precisely the time that creative leadership by the president of the United States could prove extraordinarily important and helpful, President Obama has shown no willingness to provide such leadership on the drug issue. History is likely to judge his timidity or poor judgment harshly—as it should.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs, including *Bad Neighbor Policy: Washington's Futile War on Drugs in Latin America* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.) His latest book, *The Fire Next Door: Mexico's Drug Violence and the Danger to America*, will be published in October 2012 by the Cato Institute.*