



## **Putting an end to war on drugs would solve a lot of problems**

**Mary Boland**

**Post Independent**

**Glenwood Springs, CO Colorado**

*Thursday, January 26, 2012*

“Prohibition is an attempted cure that makes matters worse for both the addict and the rest of us.”

– Milton Friedman

Now the right-wing Cato Institute has just added its voice to the many from all parts of the political spectrum calling for an end to the Drug War.

The Cato Institute is a respected think tank that owes its name to Cato's Letters, a series of 18th Century English essays attacking excessive government power. The institute is always on the side of individual liberty and very limited government.

I usually do not fully agree with them. But their articles are well researched, presented clearly and calmly and with respect for those who think otherwise. So I check out their website fairly regularly. And sometimes I agree with them 100 percent, as in the case of the drug war.

In the words of Cato senior fellow Doug Bandow: “Banning drugs raises their price, creates enormous profits for criminal entrepreneurs, thrusts even casual users into an illegal marketplace, encourages heavy users to commit property crimes to acquire higher-priced drugs, leaves violence the only means for dealers to resolve disputes, forces government to spend lavishly on enforcement, corrupts public officials and institutions, and undermines a free society.”

Bandow also points out that because drug offenses generally involve no complaining witness, enforcement virtually requires measures that disregard our civil liberties – measures such as informants, surveillance, wiretaps and raids. In the U.S. there are more than 100 SWAT-type raids every day, in which

innocent people are routinely harmed.

Most disastrous, in my opinion, is the militarized enforcement relentlessly pushed on other countries by Washington. This has corrupted and destabilized entire nations. The worst cases are in Latin America. Think of Colombia. And now, right on our own doorstep, Mexico is virtually falling apart because of the violence of the narcotraficantes.

The damage caused by the Drug War has driven a lot of our illegal immigration from Latin America. I personally know of undocumented families from Mexico who came here and are staying here because they fear the violence at home and believe it has ruined any chance for the reform and progress that would allow their children to build a life there.

Bandow presents research indicating that legalizing drugs would save more than \$41 billion per year in government enforcement expenditure, and could yield an even higher figure in tax revenue.

And he reviews the fact that the drug war is turning us into a prison state, with much higher rates of incarceration than other western industrialized nations. In 2009, 1.7 million people were arrested for drug crimes, 80 percent for possession, almost 50 percent for marijuana. By contrast, only 590,000 were arrested for violent crimes.

Unfortunately the privatization of prison construction and maintenance has produced a lobby of those who profit from high incarceration rates.

Also unfortunately, it is much easier for the police to practice enforcement among the poor than among those more able to hide their usage and afford high-powered lawyers to beat charges. Thus arrests and imprisonment disproportionately affect the poor, including African-Americans.

Finally and, most importantly, it is beyond obvious by now that drug prohibition simply doesn't work. It doesn't work any better than alcohol prohibition did. In fact, studies show that drug usage is highest in the countries with the strictest enforcement regimes.

On the other hand, consider the case of Portugal, which decriminalized use of all drugs a decade ago. They did so in the belief that it would be the most effective way of reducing addiction and its accompanying harms because it would encourage users to seek treatment and free up funds with which to provide treatment.

As Bandow states: "None of the parade of horrors that decriminalization opponents typically invoke has come to pass." More people are in treatment as users don't fear coming forward. Drug-related HIV infections and mortality are

down. And drug use in Portugal remains low compared to the rest of Europe.

I firmly believe that drug abuse is the product of despair. Thus the most effective measure against drug abuse is the creation of a nation where every child can look forward to a productive and meaningful career in a just, caring and productive society, and where those who stumble can easily get help.

“What Do We Really Want?” appears on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month. Mary Boland is a retired teacher and journalist, a proud grandmother, and a longtime resident of Carbondale. Follow her on twitter@grannyboland.