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Much-Deserved Praise for Ron Paul on Ending the Drug War

By Daniel J. Mitchell

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While I'm usually a pessimist about public policy, there are a handful of issues where I think there's positive momentum. [School choice is one example](#) and another is putting an end to the [misguided war on drugs](#).

I'm somewhat optimistic on the drug war because more and more people, including conservatives, are realizing that government intervention isn't working and is actually making things worse.

For example, here are some excerpts from a [Mona Charen column](#), in which she praises Ron Paul for his leadership position on the issue.

Friedman was for legalization of all drugs, not just marijuana. It's a position embraced by only one candidate for president, Ron Paul. ...Paul deserves full credit for endorsing drug legalization. Friedman would approve. Governments in the United States, federal and state, spend an estimated \$41.3 billion annually to prevent people from ingesting substances we deem harmful, though many unsafe ingestibles — you know the list — remain legal. Half of all federal prisoners are serving sentences for drug offenses, along with 20 percent of state prisoners. In 2009, there were 1.7 million drug arrests in the U.S. Half of those were for marijuana. As David Boaz and Timothy Lynch of the Cato Institute noted, "Addicts commit crimes to pay for a habit that would be easily affordable if it were legal. Police sources have estimated that as much as half the property crime in some major cities is committed by drug users." Drug money, such as booze money during Prohibition, has corrupted countless police, Drug Enforcement Administration agents, border patrol agents, prosecutors and judges. Drug crime has blighted many neighborhoods. America's appetite for drugs has encouraged lawlessness and violence in many neighboring countries, most recently in Mexico, where its drug violence is spilling north. Because illegal drugs are unregulated, their purity is unknowable — accounting for thousands of overdose deaths and injuries. Since we maintain drug prohibition to protect people from their own foolish decisions, those overdose deaths must weigh in the balance, too. Drug prohibition, Milton Friedman pointed out, keeps the price of drugs artificially inflated and amounts to a favor by the government to the drug lords. ...Harvard economics professor Jeffrey Miron estimates that if drugs were legal and taxed, the U.S. and state treasuries would

receive \$46.7 billion in added revenue, while saving \$41.3 billion in expenditures.

My only disagreement with Charen's column is that [Gary Johnson also wants to end the War on Drugs](#), so he should share some of the praise with Ron Paul.

And I suppose I should say that I don't want the government to collect an additional \$46.7 billion of revenue, but that's a separate fiscal policy issue.

Ms. Charen continues with some very sensible cost-benefit analysis of legalization.

What is the downside to legalization? Friedman acknowledged the possibility that legalization might result in some increase in drug addiction. There was, after all, an uptick in alcoholism after Prohibition was repealed. But not all victims are created equal. The child, Friedman notes, who is killed in a drive-by shoot-out between drug gangs is a total victim. The adult who decides to take drugs is not. Let's stipulate that some unknown number of Americans will become addicts after legalization, who otherwise would not have. We must ask whether the terrible price we are now paying — in police costs, international drug control efforts, border security, foregone tax revenue, overdose deaths, corruption and violence — is worth it.

This utilitarian argument is important. Libertarians traditionally rely on the moral argument that people should be free from government coercion so long as they're not hindering the rights of others, and I certainly agree with that sentiment. But we could probably make more progress on this issue by also explaining that the costs of the drug war far outweigh any benefits.

And I suspect it also would help if we explained that legalization does not necessarily mean approval.

Ending the war on drugs does not mean endorsing drug use, any more than ending prohibition meant one had to be in favor of alcohol consumption.

Heck, [you can be like me](#) and be personally opposed to drug use and favor legalization. You can also favor private-sector sanctions against drug use and favor legalization.

When all is said and done, there are lots of reasons to favor legalization. Prohibition didn't work in the 1920s and it isn't working today. Too bad Ron Paul and Gary Johnson are the only candidates on the right side of this issue.

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