



Newscity

The War on the War on Drugs

Ex-Gov. Gary Johnson talks policy reform

International Drug Policy Reform Conference brought together scientists, police chiefs and law enforcement officers, think tank policy-makers, human rights activists and government officials. Three days of workshops pointed toward one idea: The “war on drugs” is a failure.

This is the second time Albuquerque hosted the biennial International Drug Policy Reform Conference. Reformers met here in 2001, two years after **Gov. Gary Johnson called for an end to the nation’s drug prohibition**. Johnson, a Republican, was at the time the highest-ranking elected official in the country to call for an end to the war on drugs.

Under the Johnson administration, the state Legislature passed the **Harm Reduction Act of 1997**. This made New Mexico a national model for comprehensive programs that include needle exchange and overdose prevention, along with other compassionate health-based services. In 2007 the state started the most progressive medical marijuana program in the country. Local Drug Policy Alliance organizers said these factors frame Albuquerque as an ideal location for the conference.



An iPhone clip of Gary Johnson’s speech at the 2009 International Drug Policy Reform Conference.

Ethan Nadelmann, executive director of the national **Drug Policy Alliance**, opened the conference with a **high-energy speech**. “The wind is at our back,” Nadelmann said. “We believe that if the war on drugs will end in the U.S., the global drug prohibition regime will lose its driving force and collapse like dominoes.”

Former Gov. Gary Johnson was a featured speaker at the closing plenary. He received a standing ovation before he even said a word. He is an outspoken proponent for a drug policy that keeps users out of the criminal justice system and calls for abuse to be handled through medical and social avenues.

The *Alibi* talked with Johnson while walking through a conference crowd filled with people of all nationalities and political persuasions. Every few steps, attendees stopped him to shake his hand, to share their stories about how his advocacy affected their

efforts—and to encourage him to **run for president in 2012**. He was mum on whether he is considering a run at the White House, but he’s been contacted by the Libertarian Party.

If he were president, what would be the first thing he’d do about national drug policy? “Legalize marijuana,” he said. “90 percent of the drug problems are prohibition-related, not user-related. Bottom line is that marijuana is a lot safer than alcohol.”

Reform could go a long way toward ending the violence and devastation tied to the war on drugs, he said, while freeing up scant resources to use for better purposes. “It makes no sense to spend the kind of money we spend as a society locking up people for using drugs and using the criminal justice system to address the problem.”

He also contended marijuana legalization won’t have a negative impact on young people or lead them down the path to other drugs. “It is a **gateway drug** like milk is a gateway drug to alcohol,” he said. “Once you legalize and regulate it, you do away with the huge gateway aspect. Street dealers have all kinds of other harder drugs in their bags to offer.” Pot and any other drugs, including alcohol, will never be legal for kids, Johnson added. Studies show more than half of the high school graduating class of 2009 said **they had tried illegal drugs**, he pointed out. “In fact, fewer kids will do drugs if they are legal and regulated.”

Johnson **does not promote drug use**. He’s said that he’s smoked pot, done cocaine and drank alcohol in the past but sees drugs as a hindrance to personal accomplishment. He is an avid skier and a triathlete who has **climbed Mount Everest**.

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Ethan Nadelmann , executive director of the national Drug Policy Alliance

New Mexico's Medical Cannabis Program is a great step, he said, but the Legislature has not done enough to keep things moving forward. There was a note of impatience in his voice; he's been saying the same things about drug reform for more than a decade, banging his drum for sensible laws internationally.

Presenters for the educational sessions came from across the nation and around the world. Other countries with expert representation included Canada, the United Kingdom, Cambodia, Thailand, Switzerland, Australia, Hungary, Poland, Argentina, Mexico, Santa Lucia, Greece, Indonesia, Netherlands, Brazil, France, Denmark, Scotland, South Africa and Portugal.

Some of these countries are still struggling with harsh drug laws and draconian criminal justice systems. Still, there are bright spots. In 2001, Portugal became the first European country to **decriminalize personal possession** of drugs, including marijuana, cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine. Jail time was replaced with therapy. According to a **study done by the Cato Institute**, the changes are considered a success and have made it possible for the Portuguese government to better deal with its drug problem.

Johnson travels the world talking drug policy reform. He's seen a real shift internationally from punitive attitudes to science-based perspectives. "It is happening," he said. "The scales are tipping." Prohibition-focused drug policies are the largest civil rights issue not only in the U.S. but around the planet, he said. "There is not a bigger issue when at least 50 percent of law enforcement, courts and jail space is taken up with drug-related issues," Johnson said. About 1.8 million people are arrested nationally each year for nonviolent drug offenses, he added. "That is like the entire state of New Mexico. Doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results—that is the definition of insanity."

Some of the highlights of the breakout sessions included:



- The use of psychedelics as therapeutic tools to treat addictions
- Medical marijuana issues
- Innovative heroin-assisted treatments and the benefits of providing safe injection locations
- How the LGBT community can join forces with the drug reform movement to fight the health and social impacts of drug criminalization
- Treatment options—what works and what doesn't



- Border issues and the devastation the war on drugs wreaks on Mexico
- Economic implications of drug policy reform
- Worldwide strategies for reform
- Teen and student issues
- Harm reduction
- Law enforcement officers against prohibition

Tweets, comments and photos from the International Drug Policy Reform Conference **in**