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Adam Bates: Violence is inherent in prohibition, not the drug trade

Adam Bates

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Correcting Attorney General Jeff Sessions' misstatements about U.S. drug policy is beating a dead horse at this point. The problem is that this particular horse keeps standing back up and killing innocent people.

Mr. Sessions again demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of drug violence, claiming in a recent Washington Post op-ed that massive violence is simply an "inherent" part of the drug market that can only be answered with more violence and harsher penalties from the government.

Mr. Sessions often attempts to bolster this conception by explaining that drug traffickers cannot rely on courts to settle disputes and resort to violence instead.

The word inherent means "by nature" or "intrinsic." In other words, Sessions is saying that there can never be a peaceful market for these drugs, and that extreme violence is inextricably written into the DNA of drug distribution.

But there's nothing inherent about that. Drug market participants can't go to court for one simple reason: because lawmakers and enforcers like Jeff Sessions have made it illegal for them to do so. The absence of a mechanism for peaceful dispute resolution isn't intrinsic in drug trafficking, it's a direct consequence of U.S. drug policy.

Violence isn't any more inherent to the distribution of marijuana or cocaine than it was to the distribution of alcohol in the 1920s. A resident of Chicago in 1929 could be forgiven for wondering whether all the violence on the front page of the Chicago Tribune represented something inherently dangerous in alcohol distribution, but we now know that it didn't. Prohibition-era alcohol distribution was violent because it was illegal, not the other way around.

Today, the executives of Anheuser-Busch might laugh at the suggestion that alcohol distributors can't settle disputes without resort to gunfire massacres. So might the members of America's pharmaceutical industry, who manage to distribute billions of dollars in legal drugs without cutting anyone's throat.

Unfortunately, Sessions' logic seems to be seeping into other areas of the administration as well. President Trump, who once avored the legalization of all drugs, recently tweeted that drug violence in Mexico is a reason to further separate our two countries rather than acknowledging the immense role that U.S. drug policy has in stimulating Mexican violence.

Drug prohibition, not a porous border or anything inherent in Mexican society, is what has turned the Mexican drug war into an actual war.

And that story isn't just happening abroad.

When police officer Jeronimo Yanez fired seven rounds into a car full of compliant civilians, killing Philando Castile and prompting a 4-year-old girl to beg for her mother's life, it was the smell of marijuana, Mr. Yanez later said, that convinced him he was dealing with dangerous people.

Anyone who would be under the influence of marijuana in close proximity to a child, Mr. Yanez reasoned, is capable of anything and therefore to be regarded as a threat.

Would Mr. Yanez have had the same deadly response to someone smoking a cigarette? Or drinking alcohol? We can't know that, but we do know that the prohibition-driven violence of the U.S. drug trade stigmatizes peaceful drug-users and teaches police officers to regard them as dangerous criminals even when they demonstrate no threatening behavior.

That phenomenon isn't inherent either. It is the direct consequence of conscious decisions by U.S. lawmakers to criminalize a massive chunk of the global drug market and to replace peaceful legal means of dispute resolution with gunfights and murders.

Americans cannot afford to accept the Sessions argument that these acts of violence are just what happens when people do drugs. The government shrugging its collective shoulders in the face of such violence and chalking it up as "inherent" isn't just incorrect, it's a refusal by the nation's highest lawmakers and enforcement officials to accept responsibility for the direct and deadly consequences of their actions.

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