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Immigration enforcement as ineffective as war on drugs, Prohibition

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Harry Peck Special To The Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Friday, June 4, 2010 12:00 am | Comments

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Recent events have brought our immigration policy into intense focus. I refer to the demise of the SBInet project and the approval of the enormous (over \$300 million) budget of the Border Patrol.

There are three goals of this policy, which is enforced primarily by the Border Patrol: Stop the flow of contraband, almost exclusively recreational drugs; prevent undocumented immigrants from crossing the Mexican border; and stop terrorists from entering the United States.

A "drug czar" symbolizes our "war against drugs." President Nixon appointed the first in 1974. Despite the money we've spent, in 36 years we have become, according to a United Nations study, the largest per-capita user of marijuana and cocaine in the world. Do we need any more evidence to conclude that this policy is an abject failure? How could we do worse? The Netherlands, for example, known for its lax policy on recreational drugs, has half our per-capita use.

We can look to history for another example. From 1920 to 1933 this country lived under what is now termed Prohibition. According to a study by the Cato Institute, under Prohibition, use of alcohol increased, crime increased and became organized, the courts and prison systems were stretched to the breaking point and corruption of public officials was rampant. Despite the enormous effort and money that flowed into its enforcement, Prohibition was, by any measure, a disaster and a failure.

I do not advocate use of recreational drugs. I am aware of the stories of families ruined by drug addiction. These examples, however, occurred while such drug use was illegal. Addiction to legal habits, such as alcohol and gambling, can be equally destructive. The evidence clearly indicates that prohibition and intense enforcement are not the answer to the problems created by recreational drug use. Treatment and rehabilitation are cheaper, more humane and far more effective.

Our immigration policy is similarly ineffective. Primarily justified by the assertion that these immigrants are a financial burden to our country, the policy ignores such "hard" evidence as a GAO study showing that approximately 75 percent of undocumented immigrants pay income tax. Even if they don't, they pay sales tax, gas tax, alcohol tax, phone tax and, if they rent, property tax. They get no tax refunds and they contribute to Social Security, according to its own budget, between \$7 billion and

\$8 billion annually, a significant factor in supporting that system.

Another major consideration is that almost all who try succeed in entering the country. According to a recent study by Wayne Cornelius of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California at San Diego, only about 25 percent of those who try are apprehended and, of those, 95 to 100 percent succeed in crossing later.

Finally, have our policies deterred terrorists? To date, not a single terrorist has ever been arrested at the border, much less charged, tried and convicted. It is far easier to forge a passport than cross the desert.

We need to look at the facts, not apocryphal or anecdotal stories supplied by anonymous sources or "studies" that are neither peer-reviewed, published, nor based upon accepted scientific principles.

Doing the same thing again and again and expecting a different result is the very definition of insanity. We need to stop the insanity.

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