



What if bad public policy were judged as harshly as failing football coaches?

By Ken Braun
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Barring the sort of improbable upset that happens at least once every other weekend and makes college football the greatest spectator sport ever crafted by talking apes, the Michigan Wolverines will lose to Michigan State this afternoon. If so, then embattled Michigan head coach Brady Hoke may soon be seeking new employment.

College football coaches are a costly investment and failure is often swiftly punished. Imagine if costly public policy failure was judged with the same ruthless critical eye.

We're still winless in the War on Drugs, yet firing the coach - changing the policy - hasn't happened for 40-plus years. The perils of addiction - the only problem that should be addressed - are still more than with us. The criminal element with the profit motive to make the problem worse is predictably stronger.

We have jacked up our prison population from 300,000 to 2.3 million since 1973. The "Land of the Free" cages a larger percentage of its people than every nation on the planet, yet still has inner city neighborhoods fought over by murderous drug gangs.

Even our foreign affairs are a mess as a result. The violence on our southern border is drug fueled and the terrorists we fight in Afghanistan are often funded with heroin profits

There are always other policy options to try, just as there's always another coach to hire.

Alcoholism and smoking addiction are treated without resorting to prohibition, police and prisons. Legalization allows profits from these dangerous drugs to be taxed and often directed at curing the addictions rather than used to create and enrich violent criminals with an incentive to make bigger problems.

Drug abuse of any kind is a health concern rather than a criminal concern. We needed and still need a coach - a policy - that wins games against addiction, rather than chemicals and addicts.

Similarly, this week the Cato Institute released "[The War on Poverty Turns 50: Are We Winning Yet?](#)," an analysis of a \$19 *trillion* policy failure. When he declared the War on Poverty in a 1964 speech at the University of Michigan, President Lyndon Johnson said the goal was not just

to “relieve the symptoms of poverty,
but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it.”

Inflation-adjusted spending per American against poverty has increased 320 percent since 1966, the first year of LBJ’s anti-poverty programs. While Cato demonstrates some of that spending took the edge off the worst effects of grinding poverty, the enormous spending increases on top of that were not needed for that modest objective.

The overall goal of “curing” poverty has been a failure. The official poverty rate had been declining prior to 1966, when it reached 14.3 percent, but by 2012 it had hit 15.0 percent. Poverty is winning, even though the war is costing Americans vastly more and thus - perversely - leaving us poorer.

No football coach who turned in measurably worse results for steeply rising costs would last forty or fifty years. He wouldn’t last five. But suggest firing failed policies and trying something else and you’ll be accused of promoting drug use, being soft on crime, lacking compassion for the poor and the like. Bad policy is judged on good intentions, rather than results, and thus the most socially acceptable response to failure is to give the well-meaning “coach” a raise.

Of course, this comparison is dreadfully unfair. Football coaches are paid to accomplish comparatively inconsequential objectives. They lose a few games for a few years, while bad public policy loses trillions of dollars and tens of millions of people for generations.