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## “War on Drugs” hit by world leaders

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Albert Einstein, offering perhaps the most succinct definition ever of “insanity,” said it was performing the very same task repeatedly, yet expecting a different result each time. The modern world’s most famous physicist could easily have been describing the government’s five-decade old “war on drugs.”

In the past half century, one administration after another has spent billions trying to rid the country of those who choose to ingest non-government sanctioned substances. Far from achieving any measure of ultimate success, the result of this so-called “war” has been a net increase in illicit drug users, a massive increase in police powers, a huge increase in America’s prison population, and a depressing decrease in civil liberties.

Now, a breath of fresh air has wafted into the debate over whether it makes sense for governments to continue to engage in this costly conflict. A report issued by the Global Commission on Drug Policy, a panel composed of prominent world leaders, including former Secretary of State George Schultz and former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, has concluded that the “global war on drugs has failed, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world.”

Unfortunately, and sadly, Washington’s response to this impressive report is likely to be to ignore it, and keep right on marching to the same tune. In so doing, the federal government ignores another key and irrefutable conclusion of the Commission’s report: that the ongoing war on drugs has caused the “growth of a ‘huge criminal black market,’ financed by the risk-escalated profits of supplying international demand for illicit drugs.”

In addition to recommending treatment rather than incarceration for non-violent drug addicts, the commission’s solution is decriminalization of drugs. Despite reservations that most politicians in the United States harbor about decriminalization, the policy has a track record of demonstrable success.

For example, when Portugal decriminalized drugs a decade ago, there were dire warnings that drug usage would increase dramatically and the country would become a destination for tourists seeking to get high. A 2009 white paper, authored by Glenn Greenwald for the Cato Institute, found such predictions have not materialized.

Through his extensive research, Greenwald also found that “drug-related pathologies — such as sexually transmitted diseases and deaths due to drug usage — have decreased dramatically”; and in so doing, decriminalization actually opened the door to better treatment options. Portugal still fines people for possession, and applies no criminal penalties; although drug trafficking remains a crime.

The conclusions reached by the Global Commission are hardly new. In 1996, the *National Review*, founded by conservative icon William F. Buckley, Jr., declared the “War on Drugs is lost.” The magazine’s advocacy of drug legalization was based on pragmatic considerations. The *Review* also understood that the war was “diverting intelligent energy away from how to deal with the problem of addiction, that it is wasting our resources, and that it is encouraging civil, judicial, and penal procedures associated with police states.” Political leaders predictably ignored what the *National Review* knew.

Outside the United States, political leaders understand it is our country, with its seeming insatiable appetite for illicit drugs, which must lead the way toward reform. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, Mexican President Felipe Calderon, who says he is open to dialogue despite having stepped up his country’s own bloody war against brutal drug cartels, understands it would be “absurd” to consider legalization in Mexico as long as narcotics remain illegal north of the border, “where the massive demand determines the prices and profitability of the drug trade.”

The rest of the world may be waiting for the United States to at least acknowledge this latest credible conclusion that the billions we spend trying to change human nature, will achieve no more success than in the past decades. Unfortunately, it probably waits in vain.

by Bob Barr — The Barr Code

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