

# Learning lessons, ignoring lessons, and running away from them

The Portugal experiment in drug policy has been a critical and important laboratory demonstrating two huge points in the drug policy debate:

1. tough enforcement (with all its destruction) isn't somehow magically preventing an even larger drug problem than we have today (this is the completely unsupported argument that prohibitionists use to oppose trying anything other than strict prohibition)
2. smarter approaches to drug policy can actually work to reduce harm, save lives, save money, and more.

The story was broken in a huge way by Glenn Greenwald, in his outstanding white paper for the Cato Institute: [Drug Decriminalization in Portugal: Lessons for Creating Fair and Successful Drug Policies](#) (downloadable for free) in April, 2009. The report, while given a lot of play on the internet, was fairly thoroughly ignored in most of the mainstream media.

This week that changed, with a large piece by Barry Hatton and Martha Mendoza with the Associated Press: [Portugal's drug policy pays off; US eyes lessons](#). It's a pretty good piece, with accompanying video, about the Portugal experiment, plus other innovative approaches around the world, including the Switzerland heroin maintenance program, the harm maintenance programs in Canada, and drug courts in the U.S. Inexcusably, however (yet typically for mainstream media), they fail to even mention Greenwald's white paper.

Regardless, it's good to see this getting some good coverage.

One of the things the piece mentioned was that Drug Czar Kerlikowske went to Portugal in September to see it for himself. They also mentioned that Kerlikowske was publicly trying to distance himself from the "drug war" language.

Well, this was just a little too close to an endorsement of something other than prohibition for the czar, so we quickly found [this correction](#) from the AP in the Washington Post:

In a Dec. 26 story, The Associated Press reported that the United States is studying drug reforms in Portugal, and that White House drug czar Gil Kerlikowske visited Portugal to learn about its experience with decriminalizing drugs. The story should have made clear that Kerlikowske does not think Portugal's approach is right for the United States.

Running away from good lessons. We don't even dare *talk* about it unless someone gets the idea that something other than strict prohibition can be a possibility.

It's also interesting that if we point out an outright provable lie that the drug czar has gotten the press to print, there's [no interest](#) in printing a correction, but let the Drug Czar think that something in an article might lead people to believe that he'd be open-minded and a correction is posted within hours.

[Thanks, Tom]

