

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Editorial: Drug war is unwinnable

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Defenders of the war on drugs say it's a matter of simple morality that the United States continue a full range of anti-drug efforts; it's an expression of opposition to drug use. Drug war defenders fear that use of now-illicit drugs would skyrocket were these drugs declared legal. But, a growing number of people are questioning this view as they assess the more than 30,000 drug war-related deaths in Mexico since 2006, an erosion of liberties as government drug enforcement powers increase, and an approach that too often favors incarceration over treatment.

Now, this group of questioners, which has included our Editorial Board over the years, includes some important new voices. On June 2, the Global Commission on Drug Policy released a 24-page report concluding that the "global war on drugs has failed, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world."

The commission's 19 members included some heavy-hitters, including former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, former Federal Reserve Board Chairman Paul Volcker, former President of Mexico Ernesto Zedillo, former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Anan, entrepreneur Richard Branson and well-known authors Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes.

The report found, "Political leaders and public figures should have the courage to articulate publicly what many of them acknowledge privately: that the evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that repressive strategies will not solve the drug problem, and that the war on drugs has not, and cannot, be won."

The report drew a sharp riposte from the Obama administration. "Drug addiction is a disease that can be successfully prevented and treated," said Office of National Drug Control Policy spokesman Rafael Lemaitre said. "Making drugs more available – as this report suggests – will make it harder to keep our communities healthy and safe."

The opposite is true. "There's no history of that," Jeffrey A. Miron told us; he's a senior lecturer in the economics department at Harvard University and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

He pointed out that when cocaine was legal, before 1915, people were aware that cocaine was harmful, so use was limited. Recently, tobacco use has declined sharply after its harmful health effects were publicized.

The benefits of decriminalization, Mr. Miron said, would include reduced crime and government corruption, and an "improvement in the lives of drug users. They could get the drugs in a safe way," in a clean form from a pharmacy, instead possibly contaminated drugs from violent pushers.

Decriminalization also would mean abatement of the deadly drug wars the U.S. government has pushed on other countries, especially Colombia, Mexico and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, there is at least one good example of what happens when a government backs off a drug war. After decriminalization in Portugal in 2001, by 2006, "rates of lifetime use of any illegal drug among seventh through ninth graders fell from 14.1 percent to 10.6 percent; drug use in older teens also declined. Lifetime heroin use among 16-to-18-year-olds fell from 2.5 percent to 1.8 percent," reported Time magazine.

We're reminded of our late colleague, Senior Editorial Writer Alan Bock. He spent more than 40 years working

for drug decriminalization, specifically, for marijuana to be available for medical purposes in California. Medical marijuana was legalized in California (by the state; not yet the federal government) with Proposition 215 in 2006.

And last year, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed into law a reduction in the penalty for using small amounts of marijuana to \$100, effectively making it like a traffic ticket. So, there's hope for more progress on de-escalating the drug war.

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