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Drugs not the issue; illicit trade is

Legalization can restore trust in government and society.

By: Erich Prince - January 06, 2013

In 1991, Milton Friedman appeared on the television series *America's Drug Forum*: "I see America with half the number of prisons, half the number of prisoners, 10,000 fewer homicides a year, inner cities in which there's a chance for these poor people to live without being afraid for their lives . . . the same thing happened under Prohibition of alcohol as is happening now."

Friedman, a Nobel laureate in economics, then challenged government's infringement on individual liberty: "If [the drug user] is caught, he goes to jail. Now, is that moral? Is that proper? I think it's absolutely disgraceful that our government should be in the position of converting people who are not harming others into criminals. . . . That's the issue to me."

Governments exist to protect the governed, not to establish morality. John Locke, the forefather of our Declaration of Independence, affirmed that we must arrive at self-awareness, and thus purpose, through experience. Government must not interfere with the quest of the individual to substantiate the value of his existence unless his actions directly endanger others. How, then, can the United States seek to control what its citizens do with their own bodies?

Not only does the "war on drugs" violate the nation's commitment to personal liberty; it is also alarmingly ineffective, as Prohibition was.

The 18th Amendment failed to deter the consumption of alcohol, and gave rise to organized crime. Carroll Woody's often-cited retrospective, *The Growth of the Federal Government, 1915-1932*, illustrated the consequences: Violent crime increased by 13 percent, the federal prison population grew by 366 percent, and total spending on the prison system increased by 1,000 percent. Alcohol consumption at the end of the "noble experiment" was higher than when it began.

Similarly, since President Richard M. Nixon first declared the "war on drugs" in 1971, the inefficiency and enormous cost of enforcing drug laws have been widely criticized. Historian Richard Davenport-Hines notes in his book *The Pursuit of Oblivion* that "10-15 percent of illicit heroin . . . is intercepted," but "at least 75 percent of illicit drug shipments would have to be intercepted before the traffickers' profits were hurt."

It is time to recognize that the war on drugs is impossible to win. People will use drugs regardless of their legality. When a government attempts to enforce an unenforceable law, the people lose trust in the integrity of law.

Worse, economically, the United States is protecting the drug cartels, as prohibition restricts the supply of drugs without lessening the demand. What could be fair, legal competition is replaced by corrupt drug cartels that capitalize on a protected black market. Dealers, in turn, coerce children, especially in economically challenged neighborhoods, to use drugs. By encouraging dependence, dealers ensure a consistent income stream while giving rise to the next generation of addicts and perpetuating the cycle of faltering education, crime, and a lack of social progress. This underground nature of the drug trade promotes violence. If a disagreement arises, a dealer's only recourse is force, as he lacks the security of a judicial system.

Legalization would remove the incentive to sell drugs and also provide a taxable, quality, regulated market. Jeffrey Miron, a senior lecturer in the Harvard University economics department and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, estimates an annual tax revenue of \$46.7 billion.

Portugal, which fully decriminalized the use of drugs in 2001, has witnessed a significant reduction in consumption. It replaced incarceration with therapy. Rather than imprison people with drug problems, the government recommends, but does not mandate, treatment. According to a 2009 story in Time magazine, Portugal had the lowest lifetime use of marijuana in the European Union, at 10 percent. (The rate in the United States is 39.8 percent.) The use of any drug by teens fell from 14.1 percent to 10.6. New cases of HIV in drug users decreased by 17 percent.

By cooperatively treating addiction as a health problem, legalization helps restore trust between the government and the people. Users are encouraged to recover and become functioning members of society rather than clogging the prison system.

The use of drugs is not a threat to public safety. However, the illicit trade resulting from prohibition is the cause of much violence and social distress. Prohibition has been tried, and it has failed to solve America's drug problem.