

## **Prohibition, black markets and coerced morality**

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The war on drugs is immoral — insidiously immoral — and filled with self-righteous hypocrisy.

I want to unambiguously state my thesis and invite the curious or undecided into a reasoned dialogue about the merits of prohibition.

For those already convinced of the rightness of the status quo and who are perhaps offended that we could even question its perpetuation, now is the time to stop reading and avoid the discomfort. In the following two-part article, I lay out the proposition that, though well-intended, the prohibition monster we have created is more harmful, by orders of magnitude, than a legal system of regulated, taxed, open-market intoxicant sales, similar to the current system of tobacco and alcohol sales.

The war on drugs has largely been a creature of political opportunism and calculation, cheered on by successive politicians wanting to appear more “tough on crime” than their predecessors. As willing allies, we the public buy into the immutable script that if given enough money, more incarcerations of American youth, walled off and locked down borders against foreign invaders and expanded, more sophisticated prisons, success is just around the bend.

And it is forever thus.

After all, we continue to see the nightly news footage, happily provided by the Drug Enforcement Agency, of the stacks of confiscated drugs and cash, arrested and tattooed street thugs, families and neighborhoods destroyed, all as proof that we need to be tougher still, for our own good. As we, the public, acquiesce to the drug warrior creed, lost in our bravado is the fact that war comes at a great cost, and this drug war has been very dear indeed: displaced populations, disrupted economies, cartel terrorism, excessive violence, curtailment of civil liberties, demonizing of enemies and wanton hypocrisy.

Henry Anslinger, the first “drug Czar” commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (1930-1962), is quoted as saying, “Reefer makes darkies think they are as good as white men.” All the while Anslinger was supplying Senator Joe McCarthy with his heroin addiction (“Chasing the Scream,” Johann Hari, 2015, pg. 298).

Former drug Czar and moral crusader Bill Bennett, while wagging his finger of scorn at drug use in the U.S., was remorseless in defending his own million-dollar gambling habit (The New York Times, Katharine Q. Seelye, May 3, 2003). During a recent debate on drug legalization, Asa Hutchinson, past administrator of the DEA, hypocritically admitted that if his daughter was caught with cocaine that he would not call the police to have her arrested, but would want to know who sold it to her (Intelligence Squared Debates, Nov. 14, 2012).

How many U.S. Presidents or vice presidents, members of the House and Senate are known to have used intoxicants/narcotics, yet to a man, all have called for more punitive law enforcement against what they describe as “youthful indiscretions?” The smell of pretense and duplicity ascends to the high heavens.

Our current drug prohibition regime is based on three premises: 1) the criminalization of a broad array of intoxicants, less dangerous than alcohol and tobacco; 2) the presumption that coerced abstinence is the only acceptable relationship to these narcotics; and 3) the idea that drug addiction is best treated by arrest and incarceration rather than medical treatment.

It is a fact that narcotics, intoxicants and other mood-altering drugs of all kinds, including the most widely used — caffeine (“The Worlds Most Popular Drug”, Psychology Today, May 27, 2010) — provide great benefit and pleasure and with misuse, great harm and pain. It is a fact that education and persuasion, rather than force and coercion, are most effective for the good.

Prohibition as a means of coerced morality has created a global black market that seethes with demonstrable but ignored evils. The public confuses the actual pleasure/harm caused by intoxicant use with the massive social, economic market distortions caused by government-imposed prohibition.

Note the following short list. 1) Children/adolescents have greater access to illegal drugs because, unlike your local convenience/grocery store, drug dealers don't check for ID; 2) Black-markets provide no legal arbitration for dispute and resort to violence. Budweiser and Coors are not killing each other in the streets for market share; 3) When you drive throughout southeastern Idaho looking at the green, orderly fields of beer barley that your neighbor is growing — “Barley is one of the biggest crops in southeastern Idaho.” (Standard Journal, “Economic Driver,” July 18, 2015) — contrast this to the hidden and dangerous illegal “marijuana grows” that dot our national forests and the Mexican Sierra Madre Mountains; 4) Harvard economist Jeffery Miron estimates that ending prohibition would save roughly \$41 billion per year (“The Budgetary Impact of Ending Drug Prohibition,” The Cato Institute, 2010); 5) Activist/commentator Richard Cowen coined the term “iron law of prohibition,” which states that when law enforcement becomes more intense, drug potency increases. As Cowen said, “the harder the enforcement, the harder the drug”; 6) Since 2006, when former Mexican President Felipe Calderon disrupted prior established drug corridors, 164,000 people have been killed, outpacing civilian deaths in both Afghanistan and Iraq from 2006 to the present (“The Staggering Death Toll of Mexico's Drug War,” July 27, 2015 “Frontline” story by Jason Breslow).

The tally is even worse than we feared. Stay tuned for part two.

