

It's Time to Give up the War on Drugs

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The Bush Administration appears determined to continue the war on drugs that has been actively pursued by all U.S. governments since the Nixon Administration. I believe this is a serious mistake because that approach has failed badly. Legalizing marijuana, and even some hard drugs, may be a more effective alternative.

Defenders of the war on drugs often throw in an economic argument: It has been successful because it curtails use by raising street prices. It does this because suppliers have to be compensated for the risk of imprisonment and other punishments. It may be true that high prices have reduced the demand for drugs, but the fact remains that most illegal drugs remain popular and available, regardless of price. More important, any reduction in the number of addicts and other users has come with an enormous price tag. The U.S. alone spends almost \$40 billion annually fighting the drug war, and other countries also spend big sums.

The war is fought by seizing and destroying drugs and by apprehending and imprisoning suppliers. Large numbers of Americans were jailed on drug convictions during the 1980s and '90s, so that they now account for more than 30% of all inmates. A depressing fact is that the U.S. imprisons a larger fraction of its population for drug-related offenses than European nations do for all crimes.

The high prices due to the war have provided huge profits for cartels and others who evade detection and punishment. Estimates place the world market value of illegal drugs at several hundred billions of dollars--in the same league as the markets for cigarettes and alcohol.

STREET WAR. To protect their profits, criminals battle police and bribe officials all over the world. Some cartels have become more powerful than the governments that oppose them. The economy of Colombia, the world's biggest exporter of cocaine and a major producer of heroin, has been wrecked by the conflict between drug cartels and government efforts, financed by the U.S., to eradicate production of cocaine and heroin. These efforts have had only modest success.

Competing American gangs intimidate and assault, and sometimes murder, anyone who opposes them as they fight over the large illicit profits from drugs. This has helped devastate many inner-city neighborhoods because poor blacks and Hispanics in these neighborhoods are the main foot soldiers in drug supply networks. They earn what may appear to be pathetically little, given the risks they take, but their earnings often are higher than what they could get in legal jobs. And there is also a small chance that they will make a big score.

Legalizing drugs is far from a panacea for all the distress caused by drugs, but it will eliminate most of the profit and corruption from the drug trade. Ending Prohibition

almost immediately cleaned up the liquor industry. To be sure, legalization will increase drug use by, among other things, lowering street prices, but that can be partially offset through sizable excise taxes on producers. In many nations, retail prices of cigarettes, alcohol, and gasoline are several hundred percent higher than their wholesale prices because of large ``sin" taxes on them. The revenue collected from large taxes on drugs could be used to treat addicts and educate youngsters about the harmful effects of many drugs.

Although some drug production would go underground to avoid high taxes, experience with liquor, gasoline, and cigarettes shows that most producers would operate legally. They would want to use the courts in order to settle contract disputes, to raise funds on financial markets, and to avoid the penalties associated with criminal production. In addition, many consumers would prefer legal suppliers of drugs because they provide better control over quality and safety, considerations that are even more important for drugs than for cigarettes and gasoline.

Although legalization would make drugs cheaper and more readily available, sales to minors could be discouraged by harsh punishments and by restricting legal sales to designated shops. The present system has not been effective in discouraging drug experimentation by the young in part because suppliers are subject to punishments whether they sell to adults or children.

And anyone who drives or works while impaired by drugs should be subject to severe punishments because they are a menace to others. A good example to follow is the tough approach that some nations take toward drunk drivers: They lose their licenses, pay fines, and frequently receive stiff jail sentences.

Since legalizing drugs is a venture into the unknown, it may be wise to proceed in steps. But sooner or later, the human and other costs directly due to the continuing wars on drugs will force a new approach. So far, no one has devised a better alternative than legalization of drugs combined with a high ``sin" tax on users, safeguards against sales to children, and severe punishments to anyone who drives or works while impaired by drugs.