

End the War on Drugs

(Excerpt from [Where I'm Coming From](#))

By Michael E. Arth

Nixon was a mendacious hypocrite with at least two drug abuse problems (nicotine and alcohol) that were and still are tolerated, regulated, and taxed. His War on Drugs was a revival of Prohibition—without the cover of a constitutional amendment—including all the same problems that alcohol prohibition had caused from 1920 to 1933. The 18th Amendment forbade the sale of alcoholic beverages in the US and 21st Amendment repealed the same law only 13 years later. The “noble experiment,” driven by religious fervor, turned out to be horrifically ignoble because it spawned smuggling, mass murder, organized crime, police corruption, reduced tax collections, criminalization of vast swaths of the population, and increased incarceration—while also heightening the potency, danger, and lure of the forbidden substances. Some of the reasons why Nixon, and many others since, have pursued irrational and ineffective drug policies were further enumerated in 1994. In an interview with writer Dan Baum, Watergate co-conspirator, and Nixon’s counsel and assistant John Ehrlichman admitted:

We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or blacks, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.

To arrest and jail people for using psychedelics or cannabis is so misguided as to seem diabolical. Psychedelics are of low toxicity, non-addictive, and have been used therapeutically with great success to treat addiction and depression. They can also induce full-blown, crying-with-joy, mystical experiences and life-changing metanoia even in the most locked down, uptight person, which is considered by those experiencing it to be a good thing. So why is it illegal? As Timothy Leary used to say, “LSD is a psychedelic drug which occasionally causes psychotic behavior in people who have NOT taken it.” Marijuana, an immensely useful weed that thrives just about anywhere it is planted, has never killed anyone from overdose, but thousands have died indirectly as a result of its illegality. As former Fernandina Beach, Florida Chief of Police Jerry Cameron, and a member of LEEP (Law Enforcement Against Prohibition), told me, “To overdose on marijuana you’d have to have a bale of it dropped on you.” Its wide-ranging medical benefits are well-known and feared by Big Pharma. Various studies have shown that states with medical marijuana laws report vastly reduced opioid prescriptions and overdoses. Cameron also

said the cops always knew who was drinking and who was smoking pot. “The drunks would be speeding, swerving all over the road, and blowing through stop signs. Someone high on pot would be driving under the speed limit, have his hands at ten and two, and be stopping ten feet before the stop sign.”

Legalizing cannabis and psychedelics is a no-brainer. Even legalization of the addictive drugs, combined with health care, regulation, education, taxation, and lack of advertising, would greatly reduce the harm they doing now, and remove the criminal element from the equation. There are no compelling arguments for continuing drug prohibition, and decriminalization does not go far enough. As Chief Cameron explained in a filled-to-capacity auditorium at Stetson University in 2008:

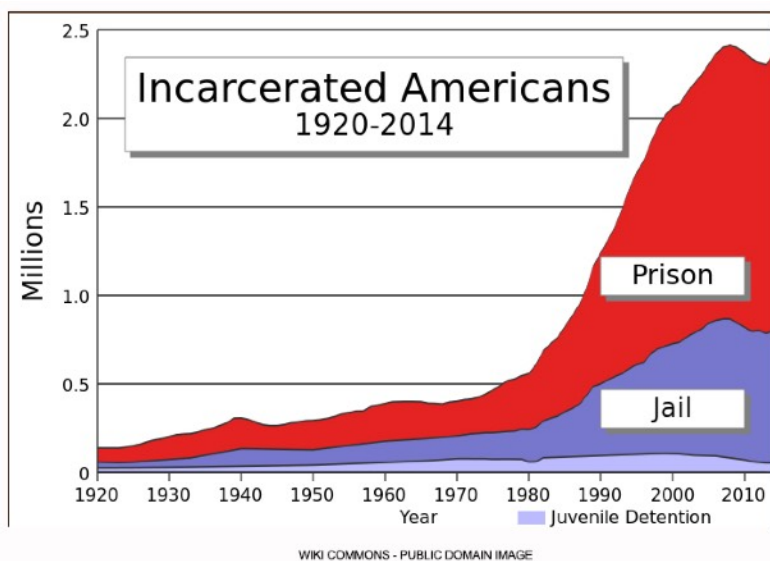
Let’s say I put some pure pharmaceutical heroin on the table and give you a nurse practitioner to inject it. We’ll dose you perfectly. You have no risk dying and I’ll give it to you for as long as you want it for free. How many want to come up and get started?...No hands.”

Seeing no takers, he asked rhetorically, “If the absence of the law and the ability to even get it for free doesn’t affect your decision not to use it, and the existence of the law and it being hard to get doesn’t deter the drug dealer, then what is the purpose of the law?” He looked around for a few seconds and continued, “The effect of the law is only to create an environment where the black market can thrive. I put this guy in jail and he comes out. What’s he going to do? There was only one thing he knew how to do when I put him in, and he’s learned how to do it better while he was in there.” In the 1970s, I was heartened to find agreement on the futility of prohibition with my father, whose idol, William F. Buckley, had also come out for legalization. Other than drug war profiteers, authoritarians, and the religious people who often see drug usage as evil and deserving of punishment, legalization is an issue that unites disparate thinkers across the political spectrum.

Ironically, I inadvertently ended up waging my own private war on drugs that came about in a roundabout way. In 1999, as a result of my interest in architecture and urban design, I founded a more ecological and pedestrian-oriented version of [New Urbanism](#) called [New Pedestrianism](#). The desire to build a new town based on these principles led me to searching across the country for a project. In 2001, I began rebuilding a crime-ridden, drug-infested slum neighborhood in downtown DeLand, Florida. With two dozen, private loans at 20% interest in the first year, I bought thirty-three homes and businesses in an area formerly known as “Cracktown,” “Dead-Land,” and “The End,” and rechristened it “The Garden District.” Other people bought into the neighborhood and we quickly turned the slum into a charming, walkable community.

In 2001, my daughter Sophie was born in a renovated, former crack house, and subsequently grew up in the Garden District. By the time she was in fifth grade, our neighborhood was so safe she could ride her bicycle to school. More recently, I acquired land that had been cleared of homes long before my arrival, and designed Craftsman-style homes that will face a car-free pedestrian lane and linear park. Today I still live in the mixed income, mixed-race, mixed-use neighborhood on a quiet, tree-lined cul-de-sac, along with my partner, Shasta Solis, and her two children. As for the drug dealers and their associates, they either moved to another neighborhood, or they moved into jail, but not before my workers and I had some frightening encounters with a local drug gang. Filmmaker Blake Wiers and I made a feature-length film, [New Urban Cowboy: Toward a New Pedestrianism](#), which documents these struggles.

Kicking out the drug dealers and rebuilding Cracktown demonstrated to me that a little bit of enlightened public policy could have prevented decades of misery. If not for the [War on Drugs](#), abetted by the decline of public transportation and the rise of automobile-facilitated flight to the suburbs, drug slums all over our country would never have come into existence. In 2011, the FBI estimated there were 1.4 million gang members in some 33,000 gangs in the United States. Gang members are the primary distributors of illegal drugs on the street, and they are responsible for



Since the War on Drugs began in 1971, the US incarceration rate has grown 700%, falling disproportionately on minorities and women. The rate of increase has even surpassed the Prohibition era. The US has only 4% of the world's population, but 22% of its prisoners.

nearly half of all violent crime. The US has also spread the drug-war-related misery throughout Latin America, with Mexico being its biggest victim. Gang formation, the destruction of the inner cities, and a 700% increase in the incarceration rate since 1971, are all largely attributable to drug prohibition, which gives immense wealth and power to drug cartels and the violent, male-dominated, gangster culture. Meanwhile, the established patriarchy keeps claiming that by increasing the violence and repression, they can “win” the drug war. President Trump’s latest iteration of failed law enforcement solutions is to call for executions

of drug dealers. His inspiration is the macho Philippine strongman, Rodrigo Duterte, who Trump called up to congratulate on how he was doing an “unbelievable job on the drug problem.” If there is anything we have learned from prohibition is that it causes far more harm than was ever caused by the prohibited substances. It is time to finally end the boondoggle and replace it with regulation, taxation, treatment, and the banning of all advertising for psychoactive substances, including alcohol and tobacco.