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Axing the Drug-Terrorism Ad Campaign **by Paul Armentano**

“Where do terrorists get their money? If you buy drugs, some of it might come from you.” Or so claimed a year-long series of U.S. taxpayer-funded public service announcements (PSAs) alleging that recreational drug use sponsors international terrorism. Nevertheless, despite the Bush administration’s having spent tens of millions of dollars on the much-ballyhooed ad campaign, it’s painfully apparent that the American public isn’t buying their message.

So apparent, in fact, that the White House quietly decided in April to pull the plug on the controversial campaign theme, effective this summer. Their decision came less than six months after an internal evaluation of the ads — which began pushing the specific drugs-fund-terror agenda shortly after September 11, 2001 — determined that they had failed to discourage viewers from trying marijuana or other drugs, and in some cases had fostered so-called “pro-drug” beliefs among teens.

Talk about a blowback.

For drug czar John Walters, the White House’s decision to drop the controversial ads has to be particularly embarrassing. Walters inherited the \$195-million-per-year program, dubbed the “National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign,” after assuming office in late 2001. (Congress initially funded the program with a five-year \$1.2 billion appropriation in 1998.) Almost immediately, he lobbied to shift the content of the campaign’s PSAs from drug-abuse-associated health risks to the administration’s questionable claim that recreational drug use aids terrorism.

At Congressional hearings last summer, Walters promised that his abrupt change in direction would yield positive results among target audiences within six months. “I can show you ... by this fall that if I make the changes I want, you’ll see the results you want,” Walters said, adding that he’d “live by the results,” whatever they might be.

The results could not have been worse. According to an evaluation of the ads completed last November by the firm Westat Inc. and the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, there were “no statistically significant ... improvements in beliefs and attitudes about marijuana use between 2000 and the first half of 2002” attributable to the multi-million-

dollar ad campaign. The review was the fifth semiannual evaluation of the campaign since its inception and the first since the introduction of Walters's much-hyped drugs-and-terror ads. In addition, reviewers noted that those teens who were more exposed to the campaign tended to "move more markedly in a 'pro-drug' direction as they aged than those who were exposed to less."

The November evaluation proved not only to be the death knell for the drug czar's pet project, but also for Westat and Annenberg's tumultuous relationship with the White House. As part of the Bush administration's decision to deep-six the drugs-and-terror ads, the feds also announced that they would cease funding the \$8 million biannual evaluations, which had consistently been critical of the "National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign." Testifying before Congress last June, Robert Hornick of the Annenberg School of Communication called the negative results among the worst in the history of large-scale public communication campaigns.

Nevertheless, despite the PSA's abysmal performance, the White House continues to back its overall anti-drug media campaign and is asking Congress to re-fund the program with a new five-year appropriation, which includes a \$90 million funding boost. Congress would be wise to scrap the program altogether.

Audiences rejected the White House's drugs-and-terror premise because they saw it for precisely what it was: government propaganda. It's likely that any future federal ad campaign will just be more of the same and elicit a similar negative reaction from the public.

While a small portion of black-market profits may theoretically fund certain terrorist groups around the globe, this fact is not the result of drugs per se, but the result of federal drug policies that keep them illegal — thus inflating their prices and relegating their production and trade exclusively to criminal entrepreneurs. Therefore, to break any supposed link between illicit drugs and terrorism, the solution is simply to legalize the drugs, thereby putting an end to the black-market effects of their criminalization.

Moreover, there exists no evidence that sales from the illicit cultivation and use of marijuana — far and away Americans' illegal drug of choice — have ever been used to fund international terror campaigns. Much of the pot consumed by Americans is grown domestically, and that which is imported comes primarily from Mexico, Jamaica, and Canada — none of which are known hotbeds for international terror organizations.

Of course, none of these facts matters to George Bush and his cronies, who seem content to simply exchange one lie about drugs — marijuana in particular — for another. Rather than proceed down this failed course, the U.S. government ought to use its latest drug-war failure as an opportunity to reassess and end its overall "do drugs; do time" mentality and recognize that drug abuse is a health issue that is best addressed by the private sector and not the criminal justice system. That's a message the public just might buy.

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