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Conservatives and the War on Drugs

by Jacob G. Hornberger

Conservatives never cease to fascinate me, given their professed devotion to “freedom, free enterprise, and limited government” and their ardent support of policies that violate that principle. One of the most prominent examples is the drug war. In fact, if you’re ever wondering whether a person is a conservative or a libertarian, a good litmus-test question is, How do you feel about the war on drugs? The conservative will respond, “Even though I believe in freedom, free enterprise, and limited government, we’ve got to continue waging the war on drugs.” The libertarian will respond, “End it. It is an immoral and destructive violation of the principles of freedom, free enterprise, and limited government.”

The most recent example of conservative drug-war nonsense is an article entitled “[Winning the Drug War](#),” by Jonathan V. Last in the current issue of *The Weekly Standard*, one of the premier conservative publications in the country. In his article, Last cites statistics showing that drug usage among certain groups of Americans has diminished and that supplies of certain drugs have decreased. He says that all this is evidence that the war on drugs is finally succeeding and that we just need to keep waging it for some indeterminate time into the future, when presumably U.S. officials will finally be able to declare “victory.”

Of course, we’ve heard this type of “positive” drug-war nonsense for the past several decades, at least since Richard Nixon declared war on drugs back in the 1970s. What conservatives never tell us is how final “victory” will ultimately be measured. Like all other drug warriors for the past several decades, Last doesn’t say, “The statistics are so good that the drug war has now been won and therefore we can now end it,” but rather, “Victory is right around the corner. The statistics are getting better. Let’s keep going.”

Last failed to mention what is happening to the people of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, where drug lords compete violently to export illegal drugs into the United States to reap the financial benefits of exorbitant black-market prices and profits that the drug war has produced. Recently drug gangs [fired high-powered weapons](#) and a grenade into the newsroom of *La Manana*, killing Jaime Orozco Tey, a 40-year-old father of three. Several other journalists have been killed in

retaliation for their stories on the drug war, and newspapers are now self-censoring in fear of the drug lords. There are also political killings in Nuevo Laredo arising out of the drug war, including [the city's mayor](#) after he had served the grand total of nine hours in office. According to the *New York Times*, “In Nuevo Laredo, the federal police say average citizens live in terror of drug dealers. Drug-related killings have become commonplace.” The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists says that the U.S.-Mexico border region is now one of the world’s most dangerous places for reporters.

Not surprisingly, Last did not mention these statistics in his “We’re winning the drug war” article.

During Prohibition, there were undoubtedly people such as Last claiming, “Booze consumption is down. We’re winning the war on booze. Al Capone is in jail. We’ve got to keep on waging the war on booze until we can declare final victory.”

Fortunately, Americans living at that time finally saw through such nonsense, especially given the massive Prohibition-related violent crime that the war on booze had spawned. They were right to finally legalize the manufacture and sale of alcohol and treat alcohol consumption as a social issue, not a criminal-justice problem.

Both conservatives and liberals have waged their war on drugs for decades, and they have reaped nothing but drug gangs, drug lords, robberies, thefts, muggings, murders, dirty needles, overcrowded prisons, decimated families, record drug busts, government corruption, infringements on civil liberties, violations of financial privacy, massive federal spending, and, of course, ever-glowing statistics reflecting drug-war “progress.”

Americans would be wise to reject, once and for all, the war on drugs, and cast drug prohibition, like booze prohibition, into the ashcan of history.

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