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From the Trenches of the Drug War: A Street Cop's Perspective **by Howard J. Wooldridge**

The nine-year-old boy's eyes went as big as saucers, as my 40-caliber Glock came into view and paused for a split second on his chest. Being the fourth officer through the door of the townhouse meant the woman and her three kids were already in a state of shock. We spent 30 minutes looking for the marijuana mentioned in the search warrant, coming up empty. In retrospect, at least we had bothered to obtain a warrant.

As we left, no one bothered to apologize for our intrusion, the terror we created, or for any action on our part. Since we were the good guys, doing good work, what need was there to apologize? Looking back and realizing now what havoc I caused makes me ill. Incidents like this "spurred" me into riding my horse across North America to speed the end of the most destructive, dysfunctional, and immoral policy since slavery and Jim Crow.

I spent 18 years in law enforcement near Lansing, Michigan. The first three were in a cadet-type program, the next twelve (12) as a road officer, and the last three as a detective. Essentially I did everything in police work but shoot someone or be shot at. The war on drugs went from almost zero to a huge factor in my professional life as my career spanned 1974-1994.

When I first started, a mentor, Lt. Terry Meyer, summed it up best, "I don't give a damn what you do in your own home. But what you do in public becomes my business big time." And for the first 10 years or so we focused on public safety, not what an adult did in private.

The turning point came in about 1986, when we were educated on how to take property from citizens. I will never forget the two-hour seminar I attended at the Michigan State Police HQ in Lansing. A narcotics officer was almost gleeful, as he explained to the uniformed street cops how they too could become foot soldiers in winning the drug war. "No drugs need be found in the vehicle to seize it. All you need is either cash, drug paraphernalia, or drug documents. How much cash? Your local prosecutor will decide. When in doubt, seize the money and the vehicle. We can always give it back," he explained.

I was a mature 35 when they tried to enlist me in their money-making scheme. Without any conscious thought, I rejected what I learned. I continued my relentless pursuit of stopping

people using 3000 pound killing machines (i.e., cars and trucks) from killing innocent motorists in my township. Who cares if students from Michigan State have some pot in their glove box, as long as they were not driving stoned?

My early twenty-something colleagues however saw catching pot smokers as great sport, fun and rewarding. They were rewarded with atta-boys from the chief for pot busts and especially when they were able to seize a car. Mind you, despite what you see on TV, the average car seized was 10 years old and worth maybe 2,000 dollars. No matter, it all counted. I remember the first thing my chief bought with civil-asset-forfeiture money was a pager for all of us ... for the stated purpose so we could be quickly assembled if we needed to go on a drug raid. I looked at the thing with Alice in Wonderland in mind. What the bleep are we doing? Nonetheless, I carried it with me, like I carried my off-duty 38.

Being the ever-curious type, at the donut shop one night I asked my colleagues why they spent almost all their free time stopping and searching cars for a baggie. "It's a hoot. It is so easy to get them to agree to a search. Chief likes it. I feel good about it," they responded. What about the drunk drivers that actually hurt and kill people? I inquired. They shrugged their shoulders. Talk about a disconnect.

A few years later I became our department's first detective. As I began investigating the home burglaries and car thefts, I learned quickly the drug war was the cause of 80% of theft crimes. Crack was the drug du jour and addicts needed about 200 dollars per day and were stealing about \$2,000 to get the money. Addicts told me that some dealers would take the stolen goods in exchange for crack ... a barter system. I saw the pain and anguish as home owners described their precious heirlooms stolen, their sense of violation knowing that strangers had been in their "castle." As one homeowner described his grandfather's pocket watch, his wife began to cry and the man suddenly slammed his fist into the wall. It was at that moment that I became conscious of my opposition to drug policy. Why not let these damn idiots have the all the crack they want until they are dead? Leave the good people of Bath Township alone!

Two years after retiring and moving to Texas, I became a foot soldier in the movement to end drug prohibition. I expect to see it end in my lifetime but if not, I am confident that others will carry on the effort. I will work on this until modern Prohibition is in the history books or I draw my last breath. Little boys do not deserve to have weapons shoved in their faces.

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