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Ending the Drug War Would End the Violence **by Sheldon Richman**

The news media are rife with stories about Mexican drug cartels operating throughout the United States and drug-related violence threatening U.S. cities near the border. Americans are becoming reluctant to cross into Mexican towns for fear of getting caught in the crossfire.

Do we need another reason to end the abominable war on “drugs” (a war on people, actually)?

You read that right. The drug trade is violent because the U.S. government persists in trying to eradicate the manufacture, sale, and consumption of certain substances. If there were no drug war, there would be no drug violence. Those who doubt this should ask themselves why violent cartels aren’t fighting over the tobacco and liquor trades.

In America we play a dangerous game. We pretend that if the government outlaws a product — such as heroin or cocaine or marijuana — it vanishes. But we know it’s not true. The product simply goes into the black market, where anyone who wants it can get it. They still can’t keep drugs out of prisons!

The key question is, who provides it? When a product is banned, respectable people tend to stay out of the trade. That leaves it to those who have few scruples — including scruples about the use of violence. Indeed, the black market rewards such people. If a party reneges on a contract for heroin, the other has to take matters into his own hands because he can’t sue. Cutthroats prosper.

So we shouldn’t be surprised when violence erupts between drug gangs and harms innocent people. While each perpetrator of mayhem is responsible for his actions, we must also condemn the entity that created the environment in which violence pays.

That entity is government. As long as it enforces the ban on drugs, there will be violence within the drug trade. And there will be more than that: police brutality, particularly in minority communities; erosion of civil liberties; corruption of the legal system; prisons full of nonviolent drug consumers; development of more-potent substances; and the enticement of youth — the lure of forbidden fruit.

Those are only the domestic effects. By trying to suppress the growing of coca and poppy in foreign countries, the U.S. government makes enemies for America, creates constituencies for terrorist and guerilla movements, and helps to finance their operations.

Nothing good comes from prohibition. Yet the evils of prohibition are blamed on drug consumers and guns!

So why is there a “war on drugs”? It provides a nice living for demagogic politicians, DEA thugs, and all kinds of “drug-abuse experts” who gladly accept taxpayer money for services no one would pay for willingly. There are big bucks in prohibition, compliments of the taxpayers. The only people less eager for an end to it are the cartel bosses, whose profits would evaporate overnight.

Americans have been systematically propagandized by the aforementioned people into believing that chaos would rule if drugs were legal. How absurd. Most who abstain from forbidden drugs today wouldn't start using them if they became legal tomorrow. Besides, as former drug czar Bill Bennett acknowledges, most consumers of illegal substances are self-responsible. We aren't aware of them because they support their families, hold decent jobs, and pay their bills. Contrary to the anti-drug government-industrial complex, the danger is not in the drug; it's in people and how they choose to use drugs. A drug habit is a choice. True, some people harm themselves with illegal drugs, but other people harm themselves with things that are perfectly legal, such as the drug we call alcohol. To the extent people get hurt because black-market drugs are impure, again the blame belongs largely with government. An open market would offer consumer protection.

In a free society adults would be free to ingest what they want. Drug consumers would be responsible for their actions, but as long as they were peaceful the law would leave them alone.

The drug war should end simply because it is unfit for a free society. Perhaps the latest violence will finally prompt people to think about this outrage.

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