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Book Review

by Paul Armentano

Bad Trip: How the War against Drugs Is Destroying America by Joel Miller
(Nashville: WorldNet Daily Books); 242 pages; \$24.99.

The self-proclaimed toughest cop in America, Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County, Arizona, brandishes a badge and a gun, and drives a custom-painted U.S. Army tank. “We are proud to have the ultimate weapon in the war on drugs in our arsenal,” Arpaio says of the self-propelled “howitzer,” which the sheriff proudly parades before local citizens to “educate our children of the dangers of drug abuse.” (The lesson apparently being, “If you use drugs, we will blow you up.”)

The troubling reality that local law enforcement now enjoys access to some of the same military weaponry as do America’s armed forces is just one of the insidious outgrowths of the drug war profiled in *Bad Trip: How the War against Drugs Is Destroying America*, by World Net Daily senior editor Joel Miller.

Miller writes,

By its intervention in the drug market, the State sets in motion an economic and political domino-collapse that exacerbates crime and corruption, gnaws away at privacy and property rights, endangers people’s well being, jails them, and sometimes takes their lives. In Martin Luther’s parlance, it’s a case of stepping on the dish while fetching the spoon, creating a big problem while trying to solve a small one.

The “big problem” Miller speaks of includes more than just the growing militarization of law enforcement, as exemplified by General — ahem — Sheriff Arpaio’s private “howie.” It’s the exponential growth of government power to seize control over Americans’ liberties, property, and even lives — all in the name of fighting the war on drugs. “Far from a simple attempt to rid the nation of crime and drugs, our policy against narcotics — like any public policy — comes with

strings attached,” the author writes. “And increasingly these strings are constricting around the necks of Americans’ lives and liberties.”

Readers of *Freedom Daily* are no doubt well aware of the numerous government abuses and intrusions carried out under the guise of America’s drug war, from the shredding of constitutional liberties to the rise of the police state to the explosion of America’s 2.1-million-person prison population. (Such striking models of modern democracy as Belarus and Turkmenistan jail fewer of their citizens per capita than the United States, Miller notes.) Nevertheless, Miller’s rapid-fire recitation of facts and anecdotes illustrative of the drug war’s ever rising collateral damage is still sobering. Seldom has an accounting of the war on drugs’ real-world costs been so meticulous and conveniently available all in one place.

Unfortunately, at a mere 242 pages (including footnotes), *Bad Trip* has little room to be much more than a tally of the drug war’s laundry list of casualties and abuses. Indeed, the sheer volume of ways “the war against drugs is destroying America” leaves Miller with few opportunities to probe many of the drug war’s negative repercussions with the depth they deserve. As a result, *Bad Trip* often reads like a Cliffs Notes guide to ending the war on drugs. Yes, readers are presented the whole story, but it’s an admittedly abridged version. (That said, for Miller to do otherwise would conceivably limit the book’s potential audience, many of whom are likely to be social conservatives who have rarely, if ever before, questioned the government’s drug-war agenda.)

Solving the drug-war crisis

So what is Miller’s solution to “pull ourselves out of this mess”? Simply put, “As prohibition is the root of all these problems, the fix lies in repeal.” In Miller’s opinion, this conclusion demands that America adopt some form of drug legalization that effectively removes government from the drug-control business, and instead relies on a system of cultural controls, primarily faith and family, to deter drug abuse. (The author is short on specifics, writing, “There is little space to deal in details, but a few broad strokes might help paint a useful picture.”)

“As a general rule, what the State does, society quits doing,” Miller asserts.

This is true for the poor (compare today’s stifling welfare to the boisterous pre–New Deal and Great Society charity industry), the elderly (think Social Security, which, pre–New Deal, somehow the elderly got along without, thanks to family-care structures), even substance abusers (who were, before prohibition, mainly dealt with by physicians, church, and family)... Seeing the resounding failure of the State’s tactics, it’s time we get back to cultural controls.

Of these, Miller sees the church and families — not federal criminal controls — as the social institutions most likely to discourage the misuse of drugs. “A more effective approach to

drug control and prohibition would be to allow [illicit] drugs legal status and simply encourage parents to do as parents are supposed to do — train a child up in the way that he should go,” he maintains. “In some cases this will involve religious reasons for abstention. In others, it will involve teaching regarding moderation. Still in others, it will involve a mixture of the two. This is what Europe has done with alcohol, and it works.”

Will such a system eventually eliminate all drug abuse and associated ills? Clearly not. But such a plan will halt the frightening and unmitigated expansion of state power under a prohibitionist regimen and restore many of the individual rights and liberties outlined by the Founding Fathers back to the citizenry.

“As long as we are addicted to the drug-war mentality, we’ll be powerless to stop the liberty-squelching growth of government,” Miller concludes.

What we have to remember is that not everything is under our control. If people are free in any meaningful sense of the word, that means they are at liberty to foul up their lives as much as make something grand of them. That’s a gamble we all take. That’s the risk of liberty. Nobody wants others to screw up their lives, but each must be free to do so for themselves.

This is the lesson that prohibition’s proponents have yet to learn, laments Miller, and the rest of the nation suffers for it.

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