



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

End the Other War, Too **by Sheldon Richman**

The war in Iraq goes on, but we shouldn't let it overshadow the war at home — one that frequently takes the lives of people who don't deserve to die. It's known as the war on drugs, but it's really a war on people who themselves are not making war against anyone. Too often individuals minding their own business are killed by government officers. In the name of decency, this war must end.

On November 21 of last year, an 88-year-old Atlanta woman who lived alone was shot dead by police raiding her home on the basis, they say, of an informant's claim that he had bought crack cocaine from a man named Sam at that location. However, the informant, Alex White, says the police told him after the shooting to lie about the drug buy to protect the officers. Speaking to a television reporter, White said he was never at the house and that he could have told police the old woman lived there alone. He also said the police have used his services many times to obtain drug information. He added that he was once suspended from the police anti-drug program because he allegedly bought marijuana for himself but was reinstated.

Kathryn Johnston, whom the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said was "described by neighbors as feeble and afraid to open her door after dark," was killed as police, executing a no-knock warrant, forcibly entered her home. Johnston fired on the men with a rusty pistol she kept for protection in her rough neighborhood, wounding three police officers. Returning the fire, the police killed her. The injuries to the police were not life-threatening.

The police story has changed several times, raising credibility questions. For example, the police first said a narcotics cop, not an informant, bought the drugs. And they said they found narcotics in Johnston's home but later changed that to a small amount of marijuana, which is not classified as a narcotic. The FBI is investigating, and the police have been placed on paid leave.

The Atlanta police are following the script long-established in such cases. They obtained a no-knock warrant on the basis of a supposedly trusted informant's statement and refused to release his name because he was important to their anti-drug efforts. Then when his identity became known and he undermined the police story, they cut him loose. "He's now a liability,"

writes Radley Balko, who watches such cases closely at [The Agitator](#) blog. “Because of that, in no more than a week this ‘reliable’ police informant is now ‘a former drug dealer.’... One week ago, his word was gold. It alone was enough to secure a no-knock warrant on an old woman’s home, with no corroborating investigation.”

As Balko points out, the informant White may be lying, but so may the police. Who has the greater incentive to lie? “So far, the police haven’t given us much reason to take them at their word,” Balko writes.

They flat-out lied about an undercover officer making the initial buy. This is purely speculative, but I can’t see what incentive Mr. White would have to be lying now. If anything, the incentive would have been there for him to play along, and do what the cops told him to do. That way, he’d continue to get paid. No one would out him as an informant. And he wouldn’t have every cop in Atlanta cursing his name. So why would he risk all of that and still come forward?

Corruption and resulting tragedies in the drug war are becoming old news. As Balko documents in the Cato Institute White Paper “Overkill: The Rise of Paramilitary Police Raids in America,”

Over the last 25 years, America has seen a disturbing militarization of its civilian law enforcement, along with a dramatic and unsettling rise in the use of paramilitary police units (most commonly called Special Weapons and Tactics, or SWAT) for routine police work. The most common use of SWAT teams today is to serve narcotics warrants, usually with forced, unannounced entry into the home.

These increasingly frequent raids, 40,000 per year by one estimate, are needlessly subjecting nonviolent drug offenders, bystanders, and wrongly targeted civilians to the terror of having their homes invaded while they’re sleeping, usually by teams of heavily armed paramilitary units dressed not as police officers but as soldiers. These raids bring unnecessary violence and provocation to nonviolent drug offenders, many of whom were guilty of only misdemeanors. The raids terrorize innocents when police mistakenly target the wrong residence. And they have resulted in dozens of needless deaths and injuries, not only of drug offenders, but also of police officers, children, bystanders, and innocent suspects.

Victimless crimes

The fact is that without the war on drugs, atrocities such as the killing of Kathryn Johnston wouldn’t be happening. It is the very nature of victimless crimes that motivates the police to use unscrupulous tactics. Unlike real crimes, victimless “crimes,” such as illegal drug transactions,

produce no complaining witness. No one has an interest in reporting the illegal activity to the police. After all, the buyer and seller willingly participate in the transaction.

Thus the only way the police can detect the activity is to set it up themselves or encourage informants to participate and then rat out their associates. An informant is unlikely to be a virtuous, law-abiding citizen but rather someone with a record of run-ins with the law.

This is true of Alex White in Atlanta. Obviously the opportunity and temptation for corruption is immense in such law enforcement. Informants with pending charges against them who want to gain favor with the police have an incentive to entrap others or provide false information. You only have to read the newspapers to find details of corrupt law enforcement in connection with drug prohibition.

The danger of no-knock raids is obvious. Police say they are necessary because drug evidence is easily destroyed. But why should a person believe that the men bursting into his home late at night are police officers who mean him no harm? What happened to the doctrines of self-defense and “a man’s home is his castle”?

No reform will ever fix these flaws. Prohibiting the manufacture, sale, and use of drugs doesn’t make them disappear. It simply grants a de facto monopoly to black-market operatives, who will usually be unscrupulous and proficient in the use of violence. They have to be, considering they can’t call the police when there’s trouble or take disagreements to court. In turn the police will crack down, feeling justified in using tactics that even they realize cross the line of propriety and endanger innocents.

Of course the other form of corruption rampant in drug-law enforcement is bribery. The black market for drugs is so lucrative (despite their being cheap to produce) that there is plenty of cash to spread around to buy protection. Police officers, federal drug agents, judges, customs officials, and military men have all been known to succumb to the temptation.

Yet this is not the end of the bad consequences that come from drug prohibition. On the international stage, prohibition makes enemies for the United States and imperils innocent Americans. Every time a U.S. administration imposes on a foreign government to destroy the coca or opium crops of poor farmers, new enemies emerge. While interventionist U.S. foreign policy creates the terrorists who wish us ill, the drug war provides money for their operations. U.S. officials acknowledge this.

Thus, prohibition is all cost and no benefit. It mocks claims that America is a free society.

Free adults have the right to ingest whatever they want. It’s no business of the government. But if it makes such peaceful private activity its business, law enforcement will inevitably turn to measures that jeopardize the lives of people who have harmed no one else. Let’s end this other war now.

*Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation, author of **Tethered Citizens: Time to Repeal the Welfare State**, and editor of [The Freeman](#) magazine.*

This article was originally published in the February 2007 edition of *Freedom Daily*.