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The Lies of the Drug War **by Paul Armentano**

Lies, Damned Lies, and Drug War Statistics by Matthew B. Robinson and Renee G. Scherlen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); 268 pages; \$27.95.

One war appears to be going well for the United States and its allies these days: the drug war.

That was the lead in dozens of U.S. newspapers in response to a June 2007 United Nations report claiming that U.S. drug policy has led to a substantial decline in illicit drug use. Chances are the author of the story hadn't read a copy of *Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics: A Critical Analysis of Claims Made by the Office of National Drug Control Policy*.

He ought to.

Written by a pair of Appalachian State associate professors — Matthew Robinson and Renee Scherlen — *Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics* seeks to provide an objective, “fair assessment of America’s drug war” since the passage of the 1988 federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act. (The law, passed by Congress at the height of the 1980s drug-war Zeitgeist, created the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy — known colloquially as the “drug czar’s” office — and pronounced, “It is the declared policy of the United States Government to create a Drug-Free America by 1995.”)

Their assessment is nothing short of scathing.

Since the ONDCP’s founding in 1989, “trends in drug use, drug treatment, deaths attributed to drug use, emergency-room mentions of drug use, drug availability, drug purity, and drug prices are inconsistent with the goals of [the federal government],” the authors assert. “Yet, during this same time period, funding for the drug war grew tremendously and costs of the drug war expanded as well.”

Of course, such a critical appraisal of U.S. drug policy is hardly unique. What sets Robinson and Scherlen’s evaluation apart is their methodology. *Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics* consists primarily of the authors’ evaluation of the federal anti-drug agency’s annual National

Drug Control Strategies. These reports, issued by the ONDCP at the beginning of each year, outline the agency's policy objectives ("Stop [illicit drug] use before it starts; heal America's drug users; [and] disrupt the [illicit drug] market.") and, in theory, provide statistical "proof" to Congress and the public of the drug war's ongoing success.

Under close scrutiny, however, it is troublingly apparent that (a) the agency is failing to achieve its stated goals, and (b) the drug czar's office is manipulating and falsifying statistics in its public reports in order to claim successes that are not warranted.

Robinson and Scherlen affirm that there is "overwhelming evidence" that the ONDCP is "consistently making false and dishonest claims" regarding the drug war's perceived progress, and the authors cite more than 80 instances of the agency's relying on "inappropriate and dishonest uses of statistics to prove its case."

Examples of the agency's duplicity include:

- Manipulating its budgeting techniques to exclude law enforcement and correctional costs attributable to the drug war in order to give "the appearance of increasing the proportion of funding for treatment in the drug war budget."
- Creating the impression of declines in illicit drug use by beginning its trend analysis in 1979 (the peak year of self-reported illicit drug use in the United States). By doing so, the agency attempts to "show visually that drug use is down when it has actually not decreased during [the ONDCP's] existence." (Authors further note that although the agency consistently claims credit for alleged declines in drug use, the ONDCP fails to accept any responsibility for increases in drug use among the general population.)
- Claiming that the black-market prices for illicit drugs are holding steady as a result of U.S. drug policies, when, "in fact, they are generally declining."
- Alleging that most U.S. drug arrests and incarcerations are for trafficking offenses, when, in fact, approximately 80 percent of all drug arrests are for possession offenses.
- Abandoning previously stated goals without comment, and replacing them with new (and in recent years, far fewer) goals. Though the ONDCP "generally does not ... admit failure in meeting [its] goals ... it [does] use its failure to call for stepped-up efforts in the drug war," the authors note.

Of the available critiques of U.S. drug policy, Robinson and Scherlen's work proves to be one of the most thorough and irrefutable, as it relies solely on the ONDCP's own rhetoric and data sources to debunk the agency's various claims. In the authors' final analysis, they determine that the agency consistently and overwhelmingly fails to act in a fair, honest, or transparent manner — as required by law.

Instead, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy predominantly operates "as a generator and defender of a given ideology in the drug war," Robinson and Scherlen conclude.

This ideology asserts that illicit drugs are always bad, never acceptable, supply-driven, and must be fought through an ongoing war. This ideology asserts that fighting a “war” on drugs is the only way to reduce drug use and achieve related goals.

In theory, one would expect that policies that do not achieve their objectives (such as the drug war) would be discontinued.... Our assessment reveals that the ONDCP has not achieved its goals in the years since its creation. Thus, a rational response to this situation would be to terminate the ONDCP. This would save tax money, alleviate government inefficiency, and reduce the size of government. If accompanied by a reassessment of U.S. policy toward drugs, it might even result in better outcomes with regard to drug use and abuse in the United States.

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