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Ending America's Domestic Quagmire

by Paul Armentano

A growing number of political pundits are questioning America's military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and some are beginning to draw parallels to lawmakers' much longer domestic war effort: the so-called war on drugs. The comparison is apropos.

For nearly 100 years, starting with the passage of America's first federal anti-drug law in 1914, lawmakers have relied on the mantra "Do drugs, do time." As in the Middle East, the human and fiscal consequences of this inflexible policy have been steadily mounting.

America now spends nearly \$50 billion dollars per year targeting, prosecuting, and incarcerating illicit-drug users. As a result, the population of illicit-drug offenders now behind bars is greater than the entire U.S. prison population in 1980. Since the mid 1990s, drug offenders have accounted for nearly 50 percent of the total federal prison population growth and some 40 percent of all state prison population growth. For marijuana alone, law enforcement currently spends between \$7 billion and \$10 billion dollars annually targeting users — primarily low-level offenders — and taxpayers spend more than \$1 billion annually to incarcerate them.

Despite these unprecedented punitive efforts, illicit drugs remain cheaper and more plentiful than ever. (Who ever heard of crack, ice, Ecstasy, GHB, or Special K 30 years ago?) Among children, the percentage using illicit drugs is little different than it was in 1975, when the government first began monitoring teen drug use (though, comparatively, adolescents' use of cigarettes has fallen dramatically during this time). Illicit-drug use among adults has also remained virtually unchanged; however, far more users are overdosing and dying from substance abuse than ever before.

Americans are also dying in greater numbers a result of drug-war enforcement. For example, members of Georgia's narcotics task force shot and killed 92-year-old Kathryn Johnston in November 2006 during a no-knock drug raid of her home. Two officers in the raid eventually pled guilty to manslaughter and admitted that they planted drugs in Ms. Johnston's house as a cover story for their actions.

A similar fate befell 44-year-old housewife Cheryl Noel of Baltimore, who was shot and killed by police in 2005 during a 5 o'clock a.m. "flash-bang" raid of her home. Noel's husband and 19-year-old son were later charged with possession of marijuana and drug paraphernalia.

Nevertheless, despite the drug war's growing expense and civilian casualties, lawmakers continue to offer few, if any, strategies other than to stay the course. Such a mindset is epitomized by the outgoing House Drug Policy Subcommittee chairman, Mark Souder (R-Ind.), who authored federal legislation to withhold financial aid from convicted drug offenders, recently pushed for the use of mycoherbicides as biological agents to kill drug crops overseas, and continues to publicly lambaste drug czar John Walters for employing an oversoft (in Souder's opinion) drug-war battle-plan. The families of Kathryn Johnston and Cheryl Noel would most likely beg to differ.

However, in contrast to politicians who call for a review of the U.S. military's Middle East policies, few lawmakers are demanding a timetable to bring about a cease-fire to the war on drugs — or are even calling for a reduction in the number of "troops" (i.e., narcotics detectives, DEA agents, et cetera) serving on the front lines. They ought to. If American lawmakers want to take a serious look at the United States's war strategies, let them begin by reassessing — and ending — their failed war here at home.

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