



A Real Debate About Drug Policy

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Photo: Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

"The global war on drugs has failed, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world."

That is the opening sentence of a report issued last week by the Global Commission on Drug Policy. Both of us have signed on to this report. Why?

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We believe that drug addiction is harmful to individuals, impairs health and has adverse societal effects. So we want an effective program to deal with this problem.

The question is: What is the best way to go about it? For 40 years now, our nation's approach has been to criminalize the entire process of producing, transporting, selling and using drugs, with the exception of tobacco and alcohol. Our judgment, shared by other members of the commission, is that this approach has not worked, just as our national experiment with the prohibition of alcohol failed. Drugs are still readily available, and crime rates remain high. But drug use in the U.S. is no lower than, and sometimes surpasses, drug use in countries with very different approaches to the problem.

At the same time, the costs of the drug war have become astronomical. Inmates arrested for consuming drugs and for possessing small quantities of them now crowd our prisons, where too often they learn how to become real criminals. The dollar costs are huge, but they pale in comparison to the lives being lost in our neighborhoods and throughout the world. The number of drug-related casualties in Mexico is on the same order as the number of U.S. lives lost in the Vietnam and Korean wars.

Throughout our hemisphere, governance and economic development have suffered because of drugs. It is no accident that the initiative for this global commission came from former presidents of Latin American nations. These countries, sometimes with American support, have made strong efforts to reduce drug supplies. But they have increasingly concluded that drug policies in the U.S. are making it more difficult for their people to enjoy security and prosperity.

The problem starts with the demand for drugs. As Milton Friedman put it forcibly over 20 years ago in the pages of this paper: "It is demand that must operate through repressed and illegal channels.

Illegality creates obscene profits that finance the murderous tactics of the drug lords; illegality leads to the corruption of law enforcement officials."

We do not support the simple legalization of all drugs. What we do advocate is an open and honest debate on the subject. We want to find our way to a less costly and more effective method of discouraging drug use, cutting down the power of organized crime, providing better treatment and minimizing negative societal effects.

Other countries that have tried different approaches include Britain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Portugal and Australia. What can we learn from these varied experiences, some more successful than others? What can we learn from our own experience in reducing sharply the smoking of cigarettes or in the handling of alcohol after the end of Prohibition?

Simple legalization is by no means the only or safest approach. One possibility is to decriminalize the individual use of drugs while maintaining laws against supplying them, thus allowing law-enforcement efforts to focus on the drug peddlers. Some of the money that is saved can be spent on treatment centers, which drug users are more likely to seek out if doing so does not expose them to the risk of arrest.

The situation that confronts us today is dangerous. After 40 years of concentrating on one approach that has been unsuccessful, we should be willing to take a look at other ways of working to solve this pressing problem. As the global commission concludes: "Break the taboo on debate and reform. The time for action is now."

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