

“DON’T LEGALIZE DRUGS”

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The next time you hear that a drunk driver has slammed into a school bus full of children or that a stoned railroad engineer has killed 16 people in a train wreck, think about this: if the advocates or legalized drugs have their way, there will be more of this, a lot more. There will also be more unpublicized fatal and maiming crashes, more job accidents, more child neglect, more of almost everything associated with substance abuse: babies born addicted or retarded, teenagers zonked out of their chance for an education, careers destroyed, families wrecked, and people dead of overdose.

The proponents of drug legalization are right to say that some things will get better: Organized crime will be driven out of the drug business, and there will be a sharp drop in the amount of money (currently about \$10 billion per year) that society spends to enforce the drug laws. There will be some reduction in the cost of theft and injury (now about \$20 billion) by addicts to get the money to buy prohibited drugs. Internationally, Latin American governments presumably will stop being menaced by drug cartels and will peaceably export cocaine as they now do coffee.

However, this is virtually the limit of the social benefits to be derived from legalization, and they are far outweighed by the costs, which are always underplayed by legalization advocates such as the Economist, Princeton scholar Ethan A. Nadelmann, economist Milton Friedman and other libertarians, columnists William F. Buckley and Richard Cohen, and Mayors Keith Schmoke of Baltimore and Marion Barry of Washington, D.C. In lives, money, and human woe, the costs are so high, in fact, that society has no alternative but to conduct a real war on the drug trade, although perhaps a smarter one than is currently being waged.

Advocates of legalization love to draw parallels between the drug war and Prohibition. Their point, of course, is that this crusade is as doomed to failure as the last one was, and that we ought to surrender now to the inevitable drugs and alcohol. Alcohol has been part of Western culture for thousands of years; drugs have been the rage in America only since about 1962. Of the 115 million Americans who consume alcohol, 85 percent rarely become intoxicated; with drugs, intoxication is the whole idea. Alcohol is consistent chemically, even though it's dispensed in different strengths and forms as beer, wine, and “hard” liquor; with drugs, there's no limit to the variations. Do we legalize crack along with snortable cocaine, PCP as well as marijuana, and LSD and “Ecstasy” as well as heroin? If we don't—and almost certainly we won't—we have a back market, and some continued crime.

But prohibition is a useful historical parallel for measuring the costs of legalization. Almost certainly doctors are not going to want to write prescriptions for recreational use of harmful substances, so if drugs even are legalized they will be dispensed as alcohol now is—in government-regulated stores with restrictions on the age of buyers, warnings against abuse (and probably, with added restrictions on amounts, though this also will create a black market).

In the decade before Prohibition went into effect in 1920, alcohol consumption in the United

States averaged 2.6 gallons per person per year. It fell to 0.73 gallons during the Prohibition decade, then doubled to 1.5 gallons in the decade after repeal, and is now back to 2.6 gallons. So illegality suppressed usage to a third or a fourth of its former level. At the same time, incidence of cirrhosis of the liver fell by half.

So it seems fair to estimate that use of drugs will at least double, and possibly triple, if the price is cut, supplies are readily available, and society's sanction is lifted. It's widely accepted that there are now 16 million regular users of marijuana, six million of cocaine, a half million of heroin, and another half million of other drugs, totaling 23 million. Dr. Robert DuPont, former director of the National Institutes of Drug Abuse and an anti-legislation crusader says that the instant pleasure afforded by drugs—superior to that available with alcohol—will increase the number of regular users of marijuana and cocaine to about 50 or 60 million and heroin users to ten million.

Between ten percent and 15 percent of all drinkers turn into alcoholics (ten million to 17 million), and these drinkers cost the economy an estimated \$117 billion in 1983 (\$15 billion for treatment, \$89 billion in lost productivity, and \$13 billion in accident-related costs). About 200,000 people died last year as a result of alcohol abuse, about 25,000 in auto accidents. How many drug users will turn into addicts, and what will this cost? According to President's Reagan's drug abuse policy adviser, Dr. David I. McDonald, studies indicate that marijuana is about as habit-forming as alcohol, but for cocaine, 70 per cent of users become addicted, as many as with nicotine.

So it seems reasonable to conclude that at least four to six million people will become potheads if marijuana is legal, and that coke addicts will number somewhere between 8.5 million (if regular usage doubles and 70 percent become addicted) and 42 million (if DuPont's high estimate of use is correct). An optimist would have to conclude that the number of people abusing legalized drugs will come close to those hooked on alcohol. A pessimist would figure the human damage as much greater.

Another way of figuring costs is this: the same study (by the Research Triangle Institute of North Carolina) that puts the price of alcoholism at \$117 billion in 1983 figured the cost of drug abuse then at \$60 billion--\$15 billion for law enforcement and crime, and \$45 billion in lost productivity, damaged health, and other costs. The updated estimate for 1988 drug abuse is \$100 billion. If legalizing drugs would save 430 billion now being spent on law enforcement and crime, a doubling of use and abuse means that other costs will rise to \$140 billion or \$210 billion. This is no bargain for society.

If 200,000 people die every year from alcohol abuse and 320,000 from tobacco smoking, how many will die from legal drugs? Government estimates are that 4,000 to 5,000 people a year are killed in drug-related auto crashes, but this is surely low because accident victims are not as routinely bloodtested for drugs as for alcohol. Legalization advocates frequently cite figures of 3,600 or 4,100 as the number of drug deaths each year reported by hospitals, but this number too is certainly an understatement, based on reports from only 75 big hospitals in 27 metropolitan areas.

If legalization pushed the total number of drug addicts to only half the number of alcoholics, 100,000 people a year would die. That's the figure cited by McDonald. DuPont guesses that, given the potency of drugs, the debilitating effects of cocaine, the carcinogenic effects of marijuana, and the AIDS potential of injecting legalized heroin, the number of deaths actually could go as high as 500,000 a year. That's a wide range, but it's clear that legalization of drugs will not benefit human life.

All studies show that those most likely to try drugs, get hooked, and die—as opposed to those who suffer from cirrhosis and lung cancer—are young people, who are susceptible to the lure of quick thrills and are terribly adaptable to messages provided by adult society. Under pressure of the current prohibition, the number of kids who use illegal drugs at least once a month has fallen from 39 percent in the late 1970s to 25 percent in 1987, according to the annual survey of high school seniors conducted by the University of Michigan. The same survey shows that attitudes toward drug use have turned sharply negative. But use of legal drugs is still strong. Thirty-eight percent of high school seniors reported getting drunk within the past two weeks, and 27 percent said they smoke cigarettes every day. Drug prohibition is working with kids; legalization would do them harm.

And, even though legalization would lower direct costs for drug law enforcement, it's unlikely that organized crime would disappear. It might well shift to other fields—prostitution, pornography, gambling, or burglaries, extortion, and the beginning of the drug era. As DuPont puts it, “Organized crime is in the business of giving people the things that society decides in its own interest to prohibit. The only way to get rid of organized crime is to make everything legal.” Even legalization advocates such as Ethan Nadelmann admit that some paranoia, PCP insanity, and the need of unemployable addicts to get money for drugs. Domestic crime, child abuse, and neglect surely would increase.

Some legalization advocates suggest decriminalizing marijuana and retaining sanctions against other drugs. This would certainly be less costly than traffic accidents and productivity losses—and would do nothing to curtail the major drug cartels, which made most of their money trafficking in cocaine.

Legalizers also argue that the government could tax legal drug sales and use the money to pay for anti-drug education programs and treatment centers. But total taxes collected right now from alcohol sales at the local, state, and federal levels come to only \$13.1 billion per year—which is a pittance compared with the damage done to society as result of alcohol abuse. The same would have to be true for drugs—and any tax that resulted in an official drug price that was higher than the street price would operate the way once again for black markets and organized crime.

So, in the name of health, economics, and morality, there seems no alternative but to keep drugs illegal and to fight the criminals who traffic them in them. Regardless of what legalization advocates say, this is now the overwhelming opinion of the public, the Reagan administration, the prospective candidates for president, and the Congress—not one of whose members has introduced legislation to decriminalize any drug. Congress is on the verge of forcing the administration to raise anti-drug spending next year from \$3 billion to \$5.5 billion.

There is, though, room to debate how best to wage this war. A consensus is developing that it has to be done both on the supply side (at overseas of traffickers) and on the demand side (by discouraging use of drugs through education and treatment and/or by arrest and urine testing at workplaces). However, there is a disagreement about which side to emphasize and how to spend resources. Members of Congress, especially Democrats, want to blame foreigners and the Reagan administration for the fact that increasing amounts of cocaine, heroin, and marijuana are entering the country. They want to spend more money on foreign aid, use the U. S. military to seal the borders, and fund “nice” treatment and educational programs, especially those that give ongoing support to professional social welfare agencies.

Conservatives, on the other hand, want to employ the military to help foreign countries stamp out drug laboratories, use widespread drug testing to identify—and, often, punish—drug users, and spend more on police and prisons. As Education Secretary William Bennett puts it, “How can we surrender when we’ve never actually fought the war?” Bennett wants to fight it across all fronts, and those who have seen drafts of a forthcoming report of the White House Conference for a Drug Free America say this will be the approach recommended by the administration, although with muted emphasis on use of the U. S. military, which is reluctant to get involved in what may be another thankless war.

However, DuPont and others, including Jeffrey Eisenach of the Heritage Foundation, make a strong case that primary emphasis ought to be put on the demand side—discouraging use in the United States rather than, almost literally, trying to become the world’s policeman. Their argument, bolstered by a study conducted by Peter Reuter of the RAND Corporation, is that major profits in the drug trade are not made abroad (where the price of cocaine triples from farm to airstrip), but within the United States (where the markup from entry point to street corner is 12 times), and that foreign growing fields and processing laboratories are easily replaceable at low cost.

They say that prohibition policy should emphasize routine random urine testing in schools and places of employment, arrests for possession of drugs, and “coercive” treatment programs that compel continued enrollment as a condition of probation and employment. DuPont thinks that corporations have a right to demand that their employees be drug-free because users cause accidents and reduce productivity. He contends that urine testing is no more invasive than the use of metal detectors at airports.

“Liberals have a terrible time with this,” says DuPont. “They want to solve every problem by giving people things. They want to love people out of their problems, while conservatives want to punish it out of them. What we want to do is take the profits out of drugs by drying up demand. You do that by raising the social cost of using them to the point where people say, “I don’t want to do this.” This isn’t conservative. It’s a way to save lives.”

It is, and it’s directly parallel to the way society is dealing with drunk driving and cigarette smoking—not merely through advertising campaigns and surgeon general’s warnings, but through increased penalties, social strictures—and prohibitions. Random testing for every employee in America may be going too far; but testing those holding sensitive jobs or workers involved in accidents surely isn’t, nor is arresting users, lifting driver’s licenses, and requiring treatment. These are not nosy, moralistic intrusions on people’s individual rights, but attempts by society to protect itself from danger.

In the end, they are also humane and moral. There is a chance, with the public and policy-makers aroused to action, that ten years from now drug abuse might be reduced to its pre-1960s levels. Were drugs to be legalized now, we would be establishing a new vice—one that, over time, would end or ruin millions of lives. Worse, yet, we would be establishing a pattern of doing the easy thing, surrendering, whenever confronted with a difficult challenge.

Biography: Morton Kondracke is an American journalist who has worked for *Newsweek* and the *New Republic*. Kondracke is a regular commentator on the National Public Radio program “All Things Considered” and writes a monthly column for the *Wall Street Journal*.

THE FACTS

1. What parallels do advocates of drug legalization love to draw, according to the author?
2. What important differences between drugs and alcohol does the author cite?
3. According to the author, what is the addictive difference between marijuana and cocaine?
4. Which group of potential users, according to studies cited by the author, is most likely to get hooked on drugs?
5. What alternative proposals do some legalization advocates offer, and how does the author respond to them?

THE STRATEGIES

1. The author begins his argument by conceding that some things will get better if drugs are legalized. “Because he is adamantly against the legalization of drugs, what is the benefit of this admission to his argument?”
2. The author writes: “Of the 115 Americans who consume alcohol, 85 percent rarely become intoxicated; with drugs, intoxication is the whole idea.” What logical objection to this statement might an advocate of drug legalization make?
3. What is the thesis of the author’s argument, and where is it stated?
4. In paragraphs 6 and 7, the author deduces probable drug addiction and usage from statistics about alcohol consumption before and after prohibition. What is your opinion of the logic underlying this deduction?

5. In evaluating statistics and studies cited by the author from various agencies and institutes, what kinds of questions should a cautious reader ask before accepting their validity?

THE ISSUES

1. Which of the author's arguments against the legalization of drugs do you find the most persuasive?
2. The author says that tobacco smoking kills 320,000 people every year. Given this statistic, what is your opinion about the legalization of tobacco?
3. The author quotes an authority who claims that whereas liberals want to love people out of their problems, conservatives want to punish them. What other differences can you discern between the liberal and conservative mindset?
4. What is your opinion about mandatory drug testing in schools and places of employment?
5. Which drugs would you decriminalize, given the power and the opportunity? Why?