

Personal choice or social safety

the legalization of drugs

con

by Walid Abdul-Massih

In the first half of this century, the major drug problem in western nations involved the tragic effects of alcohol abuse, then, increasingly, tobacco use. Heroin, other illicit drugs and the abuse of medical drugs were not yet major problems.

In the 1960s and 1970s, new drug problems were added. In the early 1980s, the tragic cocaine experience of a century earlier was totally ignored. Expensive powdered cocaine is again widely used with disastrous consequences in middle-class and professional levels of society. The mid-80s saw the introduction of crack, a smokable, more highly addictive, but cheaper form of cocaine. Its use exploded in urban ghettos. Meanwhile, Latin-American, Asian and other drug producing nations are hard pressed to stop rampant murder, extortion, kidnapping, intimidation and bribery of officials by powerful drug traffickers. Brazen drug lords, greedily seeking to capitalize on feeding the drug habits of millions around the world have become so bold they threaten and intimidate governments and the courts — any who endanger their activities.

It is true, the war on drugs has been cranked up by governments of many alarmed nations. But the tragedy is even if government efforts could somehow stop all production of cocaine, heroin and marijuana in the nations that produce them, the drug crisis would be far from over. There is a huge demand for illicit drugs. If one drug is eliminated, another can be produced to take its place. Today synthetic drugs equally or more dangerous and addictive than cocaine and heroin are emerging from illegal laboratories using relatively inexpensive chemicals. For example, in more and more areas, locally produced methamphetamine, an intense stimulant, is replacing crack. One type of "meth" has been given the slang name crank. More recently, a smokable, highly addictive form of methamphetamine called "ice" has been created. It is beginning to flood out of certain Asian nations into foreign markets. Law enforcement officials say ice causes compulsive use. Users of crank and ice often go on binges for three or four days without eating, then fall totally exhausted into almost a comatose state.

The drug crisis has so intruded into private lives and society that government officials are getting desperate. In journals, magazine articles and meetings, alarmed

government officials and social leaders in some nations now give serious discussion to ideas that were once considered unthinkable and irresponsible. As frustrations with the drug problem and the current drug policy rise daily, growing numbers of political leaders, law enforcement officials, drug abuse experts and common citizens are insisting that a radical alternative to current policies be fairly considered: the controlled legalisation (or decriminalization) of drugs. Government and social leaders are desperately searching for less costly, more effective ways to minimize the damages to individuals and society. The latest idea is that by decriminalizing the use of illicit drugs, society could take pressure off overwhelmed law enforcement and judicial systems, take the huge profits out of drug selling and put more social controls on what drugs are allowed. But many of us fear dangerous consequences will follow such a strategy.

Clearly, neither drug legalization, nor enforcement of anti-drug laws promises to solve the drug problem.

Legalization would almost certainly increase the availability of drugs, decrease their price and remove the deterrent power of the criminal sanction — all of which would invite increases in drug use and abuse.

What a dilemma modern societies have gotten into! The war on drugs is failing. Why do so many use illicit drugs or abuse alcohol or licit drugs? Some individuals do drugs to help cope with life, to escape emptiness and boredom, to increase self-esteem, escape problems, for kicks, to relieve stress or loneliness, ease physical discomfort, lessen depression or diminish fear. Some experiment with drugs because of peer pressure, others, curiosity. Some use illicit drugs or abuse alcohol to show rebellion against the family or social authority and traditional values.

Instead of being taught to look for and deal with the true causes of their problems, millions have been educated — literally conditioned by their cultures — to look to drugs and chemicals to solve them.

Purposelessness, hopelessness, despair and rebellion are attitudes of mind resulting from broken spiritual laws. Often physical laws are also being broken.

There is a time and place to use certain drugs — some, like alcohol, socially and temperately; some medically, under careful supervision to save life or prevent worsening health problems. But persons using marijuana, cocaine and heroin socially, or experimenting on themselves

with drugs, are threatening their health and human potential. They are also threatening the well-being of loved ones, neighbours and the communities around them.

If someone has a drug or alcohol problem, it is important to understand it is not too late to stop and seek out qualified professional help to cope with it. The drug scene is changing rapidly. New types and varieties of illegal drugs are appearing on the market and being sold on our streets in Toronto. All this drug abuse causes grief, suffering and tragedy.



pro

by Ira Nayman

A new image has been imprinted on the public consciousness: The Self-Destructive Junkie. He (or, less frequently, she) is huddled against a wall, homeless. His cadaverous body shivers uncontrollably. His yellowish eyes dart around, not really focusing on anything. His clothes are rotting off his body. He is pathetic, a sad waste of human potential.

But, this image hasn't become so prevalent simply because there are millions of Self-Destructive Junkies roaming our streets; few of us have ever seen one, much less gotten to know one. This image has been widely disseminated by politicians eager to rally people around a witchhunt in order to take their attention away from the structural problems in society which are far more difficult to solve. It has been irresponsibly distributed by

(most) news organizations in order to bolster ratings and/or readership.

The hysteria masks the fact that the so-called "war on drugs" is failing miserably, and does not allow for rational questioning of either the basis of the war or its results. There seems to be only one reasonable response to the proliferation of drugs: legalization. The arguments include:

1. CRIMINALIZING DRUGS HAS NOT EFFECTIVELY STOPPED THEIR USE. We are shown a raid on a crack house; we are not shown the house being reopened in a location a couple of blocks away. We see pushers being arrested; we never see the people who take their place. For all the publicity big drug hauls get, drugs are ridiculously easy to obtain in large quantities.

Prohibition is an almost exact historical parallel. The attempt to stop alcohol consumption drove the industry into the hands of criminals and artificially raised prices, but it did not stop people from drinking. The same scenario is currently being played out with drugs.

2. THE WAR AGAINST DRUGS IS MORALLY UNJUSTIFIABLE. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (as quoted in the *Utne Reader*), 346,000 Americans died because of tobacco in 1988 and 125,000 died due to alcohol; but only 2,000 deaths were attributable to cocaine and only 75 were due to marijuana. Addiction Research Foundation figures show that almost 18,000 deaths in Ontario in 1985 were related to alcohol (*NOW Magazine*), but less than 100 were caused by cocaine.

We're waging a war on the wrong drugs.

Although Prohibition ended primarily because it was not practical, its end also affirmed a basic democratic principle: what individuals choose to do themselves is their own decision. As long as a person does not hurt anybody else, the state has no right to interfere in their actions.

To apply this standard to one set of drugs but not to another is, at best, muddled thinking; at worst, it is blatantly hypocritical. This is particularly ironic when the legal drugs cause far more human suffering than the illegal ones.

It should be noted that media treatment of marijuana, which is used by the vast majority of drug users (over 80 per cent, according to most studies) is especially dishonest: by lumping all drugs together, it seems as if they are equally dangerous.

Yet, studies have shown that if marijuana has any adverse health effects, they occur only after very long-term, frequent use. Furth-

ermore, no study has ever proven the myth that marijuana leads to harder drug use; most evidence suggests that there is no link.

And, U.S. president George Bush still wants \$8 billion (or, is it now \$10 billion?) to wage his war on drugs. Eight billion dollars for more drug officers, better equipment and bigger prisons. Yet, next to nothing is being spent on education or rehabilitation. The truth is, Bush is not concerned about the human consequences of drug abuse — his war is a reprehensibly cynical ploy to enhance his image as a man of action.

3. DECRIMINALIZATION WILL REMOVE SOME OF THE WORST ASPECTS OF THE CURRENT DRUG TRADE. Society creates criminals by deciding which behaviours to outlaw; society can also decide not to continue to do so. If drugs were sold in government run stores, the same way alcohol is, the criminals currently in the business would either have to join the government (accepting government standards of conduct, thus eliminating most of the violence and other criminal behaviour associated with the drug trade) or find another occupation.

Because it will be controlled by the government, decriminalizing drugs will drastically reduce the amount being sold to minors. It will also ensure that the drugs aren't laced with poisons, an important consideration if our motivation is mainly a concern for the health of the users. Finally, like alcohol and cigarettes, other drugs can become a major source of tax revenues for the federal government.

As a person who doesn't use aspirin unless he is absolutely desperate, I am appalled and deeply saddened by the widespread abuse of drugs — all drugs, legal and illegal. But, the war on certain drugs is an unnecessary and immoral waste of society's resources. It is a political ploy which, writes Lewis Lapham in "A Political Opiate: The War on Drugs is a Folly and a Menace" (*Harper's Magazine*, December 1989), "transfers the cost of the war to precisely those individuals whom the promoters of the war say they wish to protect."

This inhumane farce must stop. By all means, put more money into educating people about the dangers of drugs, alcohol as well as cocaine, tranquilizers as well as heroin. Build more rehab centres so people desperate to quit won't have to wait months to get help. Work on the conditions in society which drive people to abuse drugs in the first place.

But, before anything else, decriminalize drugs.

goodbye
goodbye
goodbye



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