

An essential primer for drug war's combatants

In a letter to then-drug czar William Bennett a few years back, economist Milton Friedman quoted Oliver Cromwell to say of Mr. Bennett's hard-line drug policies, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken."

Mistaken or not, those policies are probably the most entrenched of domestic programs. Even the staunchest supporters of the "drug war" admit that its victories are at best limited, yet the question of how to fix this war is one that runs in endless circles, the more so because the suggestion of any alternatives makes the political blood run cold and is therefore dismissed out of hand.

Too bad, because in the spirit of reasoned debate, some of those challenges might be well worth considering. Case in point: "America's Longest War: Rethinking Our Tragic Crusade Against Drugs," which presents a cogent argument for a less bellicose approach to the drug problem.

Unlike challenges to any other government policy, challenges to current drug policy are almost always met with alarm; this book could go a long way toward allaying that hysteria. The authors, Yale law professor Steven Duke and lawyer Albert Gross, are consistently reasonable and balanced, and their arguments are backed by an impressive array of facts, statistics and restrained appeals to common sense.

Much, of course, has been written on drug policy, but "America's Longest War" is exceptionally user-friendly, with clear, accessible writing and sensible chapter organization. For anyone concerned with drug policy, crime or civil liberties, it's an essential primer, covering a vast amount of material in short order.

For all its reasonableness, for all its lack of sensationalism, the

book packs a powerful emotional punch. Consider the following passage, which may solidify any government-directed paranoia you might harbor:

"Since the late 1970s, the Unit-

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ed States has prevailed on Mexico to aerially spray remote marijuana plantations with the herbicide paraquat, which has been shown to damage lungs. . . . A 1989 DEA study found that 7 percent of the nation's marijuana is contaminated by paraquat. Thus our government has been willing to expose millions of America's

**AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR:
RETHINKING OUR TRAGIC
CRUSADE AGAINST DRUGS**
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pot smokers to poisoning by a toxic chemical."

Anticipating the arguments — marijuana smokers know the risks and besides, they're drug users, so who cares about them? — the authors shift to a group most readers presumably do care about:

"More popular among today's youngsters than cocaine — three times as many 12- to 17-year-olds have used inhalants than have used cocaine — the inhalation of gases and fumes from household products is increasingly popular — and deadly — among our teenagers. . . . As many as 1,200 deaths each year are attributable to inhalants. . . . To the extent our drug war efforts have turned youngsters away from marijuana or cocaine and on to Freon, butane and Scotchguard, we have hardly made progress."

The authors are not unbiased; they do advocate a complete overhaul of current drug policies. But they don't duck the hard questions raised by the option of legalization — or, more correctly, relegalization: As the book notes, many currently illicit drugs, including cocaine and heroin, were once legal in the United States. Interestingly, addiction rates then were low and there was no such thing as drug-related crime.

The authors consider every argument, from the pragmatic to the moral, for continuing our current prohibitionist policies, and give due consideration to the risks of legalization. They also offer scientifically based information about the chemical properties and psychogenic effects of many drugs — information, by the way, that is vastly different from that found in government publications or most media reporting, and a marker of the inaccuracies that too often have informed the debate on drug policy. As the authors note, "One of the casualties of war is truth." In addressing that issue, this book makes an admirably clearheaded contribution to the debate.

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