

Retreating from the war on drugs ³⁷¹⁵⁻⁹

By Rachel Ehrenfeld

The malediction of illegal drugs is growing. Approximately 23 million Americans use drugs, of which at least 6 million use cocaine.

Illegal drug use among the nation's high school seniors has risen 44.6 percent in the last two years, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. And there is a decline in perceived risk which leads to an increase in actual drug use. "It is a problem which is

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getting worse at a fairly rapid pace," commented Lloyd D. Johnston, who conducted a survey at the University of Michigan of the lifestyles and attitudes of young Americans.

Mr. Johnston also found a sudden increase in pro-drug messages and "drug glorification images" aired on television news and entertainment shows. Other surveys indicate that the softening of informal and formal anti-drug attitudes contributes to the recent rise in drug use and to diminishing fear of experimenting with drugs with the young. (This government-sponsored study was ready before the November elections, but its release was delayed by the Clinton administration.)

Over 70 percent of the prison population, which is at a new high at 1.4 million, tested positive for drugs after their arrest. Although crime in general is reportedly declining, violent crime largely induced by drug use is increasing at an alarming rate. And most citizens (approximately 78 percent),

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fear the rising tide of crime, according to a recent survey by the Los Angeles Times.

Drug abuse is costing the United States about \$100 billion annually, excluding billions in taxes on illegal profits from the drug trade. But the moral cost to the U.S. social and political systems is immeasurable. The number of police officers, government agents, lawyers, accountants, judges and politicians who have been tainted by drug money has never been quantified, but the erosion of public trust is apparent.

Attacking this bleak state of affairs should be at the top of the White House agenda. But it is not. The Clinton administration did not consider the drug problem worthy of mention in the president's State of the Union Address.

In fact, the White House's choice is to downgrade federal involvement in the "war on drugs." It has resulted in dramatic funding cuts for law enforcement, although, apparently spurred on by the change in Congress last November, the administration has requested more funds for treatment and prevention. That's a reversal. Immediately upon President Clinton's assumption of office, 80 percent of the staff of the Office of National Drug Control in the White House was eliminated. Occupied (as usual) by political appointees, this smaller office now publicly supports decriminalization and "harm reduction" policies.

Other cuts soon followed with the Customs Service losing \$57.4 million, a reduction of nearly one-third of its air and marine interdiction fund. The Drug Enforcement Administration sustained a loss of 355 positions. The Coast Guard's budget for drug interdiction was cut by \$14.6 million and 1,000 military and 100 civilian positions devoted to anti-drug activities were terminated. The Defense Department's drug budget was slashed by \$300 million.

Even drug treatment and especially prevention, the totems often held up by this administration as the alternative to rigid enforcement, had their budgets trimmed by \$100 million and \$130 million respectively — despite election promises to increase such funding (fiscal 1994-1995 budget). In addition, mandatory minimum sentences for drug-related crimes have been reduced.

Until 1992, the United States was the world leader in anti-drug money laundering legislation and enforcement. But since the Clinton presidency, the Justice Department terminated the money-laundering section of the Criminal Division, and attorneys with expertise in prosecuting drug-money-laundering cases were assigned to other areas. As a result, America's capacity and stature as the leader in the war on

drugs has been seriously diminished.

The best evidence of the administration's agenda on drugs is the efforts to suppress information. At least on one occasion, the Department of Health and Human Services has issued warnings to Medical University Hospital in South Carolina to cease reporting on the treatment of drug-related pregnant women on grounds of "violation of the women's right to privacy," or face a cut off in federal funds.

It is not surprising, therefore, that current statistics about drug-addicted babies do not increase. In the Department of Defense, a political appointee successfully prevented radar tracking and information exchange with Columbia, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and Panama, on grounds of "civil rights violations," thus making it easier to import drugs into the United States.

Why? There are several hypotheses which might explain the Clinton administration's response to the

drug problem. The first and the simplest is budgetary constraints, the second is war weariness and the third is a preference to join with liberal and libertarian forces who promote the legalization of drugs.

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Following former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders' invitation to study the legalization of drugs, scattered advocacy groups throughout the country began to coalesce. And although she's no longer in office, the movement to legalize drugs is gaining momentum. Direct funding from private organizations such as the Ford and MacArthur foundations (though these gave to anti-legalization groups as well) and at least \$13

million from the Soros Foundation in 1994 alone provides them not only with the means to spread their message but also gives them the respectability they have lacked.

The foundations provide grants to individuals and organizations and sponsor studies, conferences, television "documentaries" and books which emphasize "failures" of the anti-drug enforcement strategy and point towards "decriminalization," "medicalization" and legalization of drugs as the only solution. Because of hefty funding, these groups are able to deliver their messages by radio, television and print media throughout the country with great frequency.

The groups also organize informal society gatherings to "recruit and enlighten," as Ethan Nadelmann, a well-supported leading advocate for drug legalization, said at a recent gathering on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

To judge by the information presented on that occasion, one can expect little enlightenment from these advocates, since their "facts" were often false, and their ignorance manifest. The anti-drug

American majority was portrayed as puritanical and hypocritical, as viewing any kind of "having fun — and drugs are fun," as suspect.

The pro-legalization "authorities" in attendance congratulated themselves on being "the real continuation of a progressive, civil rights, anti-hypocrisy movement for the fulfillment of personal freedom." The same group agreed that the use of terms such as "decriminalization" and "harm reduction" will help to promote their goal, namely legalization. They also argued that "it is important to see drugs as a human rights issue."

There is no doubt, as survey after survey has shown, that at least for now the majority of the American public is against legalization. Therefore, the movement to legalize drugs seems inconsequential to many.

But if the proponents of legalization are victorious, it would not be the first time that a persistent counterculture, led by highly educated individuals in elite institutions, heavily funded and supported by many in the media, was able to reverse deep-seated beliefs and the will of the majority of the American people.