

Can we afford to give up the drug war?

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William F. Buckley Jr.'s National Review cover supporting drug legalization has renewed a major economic and cultural debate. Until the early 1990s, the voices to legalize drugs were not in sync. This picture changed when international financier George Soros donated \$6 million to the Drug Policy Foundation, \$4 million to his own Lindesmith Center, \$3 million to Drug Strategies, and smaller grants to a variety of institutions in the U.S. and abroad. His sponsorship unified the movement to legalize drugs and gave it the respectability and credibility that it lacked. Mr. Buckley's latest endorsement of legalization has added "intellectual" weight to the movement.

Mr. Buckley and his legalization allies proclaim that the war on drugs is lost. In fact, the two long-term, scientifically conducted annual studies — the Monitoring the Future Study and the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse — reveal that since peak usage in 1979, drug use has dropped to below 13 million from 24 million among children over age 12, despite the increases of drug use among teenagers in the past four years. Imagine, if we had reduced adolescent pregnancy or violent crime by almost 50% in the same period. Would anyone call that a failure and demand capitulation to such disruptive forces in or society? The legalization proponents' message is that drug use is here to stay, constituting a civil right. But murder, rape, and robbery are with us, too, and most occur when the perpetrator is under the

influence of mind-altering substances. Should these actions also become civil rights?

Mr. Buckley laments that nearly 50% of the one million state prisoners are there as a result of the drug war, but U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reports refute this assertion. About 94% of prisoners are there for violent or repeat offenses, according to a 1991 study. The other 6% are first-time, nonviolent offenders for all categories of crime. Furthermore, more than four times as many murders are committed while under the influence of drugs than are committed to get money to buy drugs. Drug arrests continue at a high rate because people under the influence of drugs commit antisocial acts that attract police attention. Contrary to the theory that the drug war causes our society's problems, the reality is that it is drug use that exacerbates many of society's ills.

Legalization advocates also maintain that the overdoses associated with cocaine are caused by impurities in the product. But scientific studies, such as the one in 1994 headed by Dr. Roger Weiss, prove that cocaine deaths are nearly all related to cardiovascular failure.

It is suggested that we legalize drugs, tax them, and use the vast windfall taxes to fund education and treatment to discourage drug use. Let's review our experience with legal drugs. We collect \$12 billion in taxes annually from tobacco sales, and the estimated health costs associated with tobacco use is \$75 billion a year. We collect \$20 billion in taxes from alcohol sales, and the combined figure for alcohol-related health costs is \$140 billion. How many of these bargains can we afford? How much would the government have to collect in taxes to offset the problems with wider drug use that would follow drug legalization? Would it price government drugs out of the market? Who will control drug production — the government or pharmaceutical companies?

The pro-legalizers claim that the price of government-provided “legal” drugs would significantly lower their current price, removing the necessity to steal in order to secure drugs. The current wholesale price for an ounce of pharmaceutical cocaine for medical use is about \$1,900. The wholesale price of an ounce of street cocaine in New York ranges from \$800 to \$1,200. Allowing for the difference in purity, the price is about the same. Will the pharmaceutical companies be willing to give up their profits? How much would governmental administration add to the cost, and what will happen when the “tax” is added on? Who will investigate the black market that will try to supply groups prohibited by law from receiving drugs — adolescents, airline pilots, police officers, etc.? Once the drugs are on the free market, could advertising be far behind?

Over the years, Mr. Buckley, noting the objections to adolescent drug use, has suggested that, while we legalize drugs, we should institute the death penalty for those who sell drugs to persons under 18. We have extraordinary difficulty in carrying out executions of criminals convicted of particularly heinous crimes. Does Mr. Buckley really believe that we could extend the ultimate penalty to 12-year-olds selling drugs in the school yard or on the playground?

A recent national Gallup Poll revealed that 85% of Americans reject drug legalization. The public views the issue through the lens of common sense. It realizes that being under the influence of mind-altering substances is the problem, not the drug law.

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Ms. Ehrenfeld, author of “Evil Money and Narco Terrorism” (Basic Books), is currently writing a book on the movement to legalize drugs. Wayne J. Roques, a retired Drug Enforcement Agency official, contributed to this article.

