

## The War on Drugs

By all accounts, the War on Drugs has been an unmitigated disaster. Why do you continue to support this massive waste of taxpayer dollars and human life? In the 40 years since President Nixon inaugurated the War on Drugs in 1971, we have spent more than \$1 trillion. Today, the annual cost is over \$15 billion at the federal level and \$25.7 billion at the state and local level.<sup>44</sup> Since the war began, the use of illegal drugs has *risen*, not fallen.<sup>45</sup> An estimated 20 million Americans have used illegal drugs, and over a million are imprisoned *each year* for drug-related offenses.<sup>46</sup> It is important to note that the \$1 trillion price tag accounts only for direct costs. That figure does not include the broader social costs of imprisoning millions of people, breaking up families, or destroying communities, let alone the trillions of dollars of lost economic productivity and foregone tax revenues.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, our incarceration rate is the highest in world, at 743 per 100,000. Compare that to India's 29 or Iceland's 40.<sup>47</sup> We also have more people in prison than any other country: 2.5 million, a *five-fold* increase from the 500,000 inmates in 1971 when the War on Drugs started.<sup>48</sup>

Prohibition does not work. It fails to curb usage, and succeeds only in creating massive black markets steeped in crime and violence. We learned that the hard way with alcohol. Alcohol is a very dangerous drug. It causes severe health problems, it can be terribly addictive, and it kills tens of thousands of people every year. And yet,

alcohol can be enjoyed responsibly. Breweries, wineries and distilleries are honest businesses with a rich cultural heritage that contribute tens of billions of dollars to the global economy. Restaurants, bars and pubs that serve alcohol are similarly upstanding contributors to both our economy and our culture. For those who are able to enjoy it responsibly, alcohol can make a perfectly happy contribution to their lives. For those few for whom it becomes an addiction, effective medical treatment and rehabilitation programs are available. And many people are simply not interested in alcohol at all. There is little reason to think the situation would be significantly different with the majority of other drugs that are currently criminalized. Certainly this is so for THC – the active drug in cannabis – since it has no known lethal dose, it causes far less dangerous cognitive impairment than alcohol, and it has much lower addictive potential than, say, the nicotine in tobacco. Some illegal drugs are very dangerous, of course, such as heroin, crack cocaine and methamphetamine. But dozens of other illegal drugs pose no greater danger than alcohol or nicotine, and many legal drugs that require a prescription are extremely dangerous.<sup>49</sup> Statistically speaking, abuse of *legal* drugs actually poses a far greater threat to human health than abuse of illegal drugs.<sup>50,51</sup> This is no excuse for breaking the law, of course, but that is a separate matter. The point here is that prohibition of any kind makes for exceedingly ineffective law.

If ever there was an example of oppressive and ineffectual intrusion by government into the lives of its

citizens, the War on Drugs is certainly it. Is this not precisely the type of heavy-handed governance to which you are ideologically opposed? Where is your outrage?

The primary reason why you support the War on Drugs seems to be that today's conservatives condemn drug use as sinful. Why else would you care what consenting adults do in the privacy of their own homes? Your predecessors condemned alcohol and tobacco as vices for precisely the same reason and, like you, they used a selective reading of scripture to justify selfishly imposing their own parochial notion of morality on others. But this makes no real sense. Alcohol is worse than cannabis by every meaningful measure, so why do you not support a return to alcohol prohibition today? Why the inconsistency? I should also mention that, as with the military, I suspect more conservatives work in law enforcement than liberals – and the War on Drugs funds tens of thousands of law enforcement jobs.

Let's recap: you happily consent to our government spending billions of tax dollars punishing people for breaking woefully ill-conceived laws that directly contradict your most dearly held conservative principles of personal liberty; in 40 years you have expressed no opposition to these laws whatsoever; you object to investing in helping people avoid breaking these laws in the first place, even though that would be far cheaper than punishing them after the fact; and you use a selective reading of scripture to defend this lunacy because tens of thousands of conservatives' jobs now depend on the War on Drugs. This tangled snarl of

selfishness and hypocrisy is as contemptible as it is absurd, to say nothing of how grotesquely evil it is to destroy the lives of millions of Americans over something no different than ordering a bottle of wine with dinner.