

Introduction to the Principles for a Practical Drug Policy

Who's Winning the Drug War?

The answer is the drug cartels. It is not society and it is not the individual. Drug related crime is exorbitantly high. Consumption of illegal drugs goes up every year, regardless of how much money is spent to fight it – indeed, the increase in consumption may be tied, in some researcher's view, to the increase in the money spent to stamp it out. Nothing fans the flames so successfully as a policy of zero tolerance. The consumption of illegal substances cannot be eradicated, a situation that is increasingly recognized by health and regulatory professionals. The best we can do is to moderate the spread of drug use and implement policies of harm reduction. Additionally, we can examine some of these compounds for their potential medicinal utility.

In order to get a better picture of how best to approach this world problem we need to look at it from several different angles. First, one must address the emotionality created by the word 'drugs'. We are dealing with substances that change people's inner world, make them feel differently; alter how they experience the outside world and their interior world. Various substances change the sensibilities in different ways. Some speed it up, some calm it down, others precipitate reflection and transformation.

Most importantly, a basic division needs to be made between addictive substances and the non-addictive ones. Speed, amphetamines, cocaine, barbituates and opiates such as heroin are all toxic and addictive.

Cannabis and LSD on the other hand, are examples of powerful substances have little or no addictive nature. The latter is known for being able to produce states of mind similar to those experienced by the mystics - bliss or oceanic boundlessness (Huston Smith). These substances (the entheogens) and their close relatives, psilocybin and mescaline, do not induce violence and aggression, or in any way promote criminality. Rather, they are substances which can dramatically alter the internal landscape in a positive manner. For example, the religious use of peyote as a sacrament among members of the Native American Church has occurred legally for 80 years and there is much anecdotal evidence of its power in the treatment of addiction.

It is unrealistic of the authorities to think they can stop people from consuming illegal drugs. Many responsible people argue that they have benefited from controlled use of certain compounds.

Illegal drug use has two main effects. It forces people, particularly the youth, to be and to think of themselves as criminals. For example, by smoking marijuana they are breaking the law and becoming part of the criminal classes. This downgrades their respect of the law and in the event that they are caught, the results can have disastrous consequences for their future.

Illegal drug use also blurs the identity between the non-addictive substances which do not promote crime and more deleterious drugs. Further, the youth, having lost respect for the authorities'

admonitions against drug use with regard to soft drugs, are more likely to disregard their warnings about more dangerous substances.

Illegal drugs are the second biggest industry in the world after food production. By making drugs illegal, vast amounts of money are provided to criminal organizations. These profits benefit the international criminal cartels at the expense of destabilizing countries throughout the world. By bringing production and distribution of these substances into government regulation, the criminal cartels may be considerably diminished. A study is needed of how currently illegal drugs can be best produced, controlled and distributed by responsible governments in order to minimize damage and maximize gain.

One may ask that, if the taking of a substance does not in any way damage anyone, with the possible exception of the person taking it, does society then have the right to interfere? Obviously it's the job of a benign society to educate its members about the inherent dangers of many drugs. Education should be based on fact, not prejudice. The whole subject of drugs needs to be looked at from a fresh perspective. Established prejudice has often ill-advised the role of policy makers.

Unfortunately, there will always be a problem with addictive drugs. A portion of the population will inevitably pursue an avenue of abuse. The best that civil society can do is to try to keep this population to a minimum by implementing policies of harm reduction.

Prohibition throws the distribution into the hands of criminals whose purpose is to ever widen the net of consumers. The consumers become younger and younger as street level distribution is put in the hands of children, as they are often not imprisoned if caught. Addictive drugs have arrived into the school playground despite the efforts of prohibition.

Complicating the issue, among adult users illegal psychoactive drugs must be divided up into their different categories, the non-addictive enhancement drugs (the entheogens), the addictive category, and a third category which lies somewhere in between. This category is represented by MDMA (Ecstasy). MDMA use has spread rapidly among the youth as it reportedly gives them energy and a feeling of friendliness and well being.

In Great Britain, many thousands of youth take ecstasy every weekend. Only a very few deaths have resulted so far. Impurity of the drug is a prime factor in these incidents. (see NYT, 9/30/00, p. A11 "Ecstasy Drug Cited In 6 Florida Deaths", where MDMA doses contained PMA or PMMA and caused the victim's body temperatures to rise "so high that the central nervous system burned out"). By making testing kits available to the general population, as is done by harm-reduction organizations in Holland, the danger from impure substances is greatly reduced.

On the other hand, MDMA has been shown to be a substance with potential medical value. MDMA-assisted psychotherapy has been helpful in enabling patients to deal with the psychological difficulties of trauma and cancer. In the future, new types of designer drugs will proliferate due to improved techniques of drug-development, producing novel substances with more potency or different effects than those that now exist. Thus, we need to consider how to deal with new drugs of potential use or abuse as they appear in the population.

A Sampling of Control Efforts and Their Effects

- In 1970 President Nixon launched a crusade to make America “drug free”. Since then, expenditure on the War on Drugs has risen enormously, the numbers employed in this war by the police, judiciary, legal professionals, probation services, in health services, in the bureaucracy and in the military have risen inexorably.
- Yet the problem, far from “going away”, seems to get worse rather than better. There is no significant reduction in the amount of illegal drugs consumed in the US; the number of prisoners on drug charges has risen from 50,000 in 1980 to 600,000 today; there are more blacks in prison per head of the American population than in South Africa at the height of Apartheid; 25% of young black males are in prison or on parole, most on non-violent drug charges; US government expenditures (Federal, state and local) on drugs amounts to \$37 billion per annum; many of the civil rights enshrined in the Constitution have been suspended to strengthen the hand of the anti-drug agencies, and yet 30-40 million Americans *admit* to having taken illegal drugs in the last 12 months. Meanwhile the social and political effects in the countries where the drugs are grown or transported have been devastating. In Columbia, Peru and Mexico, for instance, corruption or warfare have now reached levels where they may spiral out of control, despite the injection of massive US funds - 1.3 billion more into Columbia last month, for instance.
- In Europe, the consequences have not yet reached the crisis point of the US. The prison population in the EU is one fifth that of the US, but the figure is grave enough. 100,000 marijuana-related prison sentences are handed out per annum in Great Britain, although there is not a recorded death due to the taking of marijuana. Holland and Switzerland have in the last 5 years commenced experiments with partial legalization and state sponsored maintenance of addicts, which have produced radically different results than those found in the US and other European countries. In Britain, a policy of maintenance of heroin and morphine addicts was pursued from the 1920’s to the 1970’s, with relatively beneficial results.
- Drug prohibition appears similar to alcohol prohibition in 1920’s America, leading to an explosion of crime (violent crime dropped by 65% in the US the year Prohibition ended). It also appears to correlate with a growth in the number and powers of law-enforcers, and to a shrinking of the liberties of the citizen, without any corresponding decline in drug abuse and drug related crime.

The purpose of a conference at St. George House should be to examine the current state of the ‘War On Drugs’, and consider whether alternative strategies to those now being pursued in Europe, the former Soviet states and the United States might be more likely to achieve society’s objectives in the Drug War. Hence, we wish to discuss a new initiative, ‘Principles for a Practical Drug Policy’