

Prairie U-U Society, June 11, 2000

"The War on Drugs," Nancy Graham and Warren Hagstrom

Recorded prelude: "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," the Beatles

Welcome (Erin), Chalice (Nancy), Joys & Sorrows (Erin)

Hymn #79 in Prairie Songbook

1. Preliminaries:

a. For about a century, the sale and possession of a wide variety of drugs has been made illegal in the U.S. Many people have been imprisoned. The traders, to protect themselves from the law and one another, are often quite violent. Many of the drugs are produced in third world countries. The U.S. supports extensive military efforts to suppress the production and transmission of drugs. It's a real war, and it's a costly war.

Our government does lots of stupid things, but in our opinions the war on drugs is the second most stupid and immoral program, exceeded only by the arms program.

b. We'll start with the domestic costs of the war and go on to the costs we incur on the producing and transmitting countries. Then, to the extent that time allows, we'll discuss the myths justifying the war. It has been pointed out that the first casualty in wars is often truth; the war on drugs is legitimated by myths that demonize drugs.

c. But let us start with a disclaimer. We are aware that substance abuse is a very serious problem. Human beings for millennia have found ways of poisoning themselves and devise new ways at an expanding rate. While I'm sure some of you favor free trade in mind altering substances, Nancy and I favor regulation. We won't have much to say about how to regulate drugs and welcome your comments.

d. We welcome questions and interruptions at any point in the program. We are sure that some of you are better informed than we are, and that you have different values about these things.

2. Varieties of Drugs

Lots of drugs have been made illegal — old drugs, such as opium and its derivatives, coca and its derivatives, marijuana and its derivatives — and new drugs, such as LSD and amphetamine.

Lets start off with marijuana, hashish, pot, cannabis, hash, grass^{reefers},.....there is a strong tendency to multiply the names of illegal substances and activities.

To make the point that the war on drugs is stupid, it's easiest to start with marijuana.

Nancy Graham

3. If we make the sale and possession of drugs illegal, and if we enforce the laws, we are likely to put lots of people in jail. And in fact the penalties for drug offenses are draconian. New York State is probably the worst:

quote NYT 5/24/00 (Fn 6/5/00)

But Wisconsin's penalties are also draconian: WSJ 9/5/99 (& Isthmus 8/5/99, but it's too long)Does anyone know how the laws were changed, if they were, in the last session of the legislature?

These laws can affect each of us and our families. Those of us who are parents and

grandparents have good reasons to fear for our children. It's very likely that the kids experiment with pot. And then, if a kid needs money, or even if the kid just wants to be popular in his crowd, it's very easy to become a small dealer. And the laws are such that such a kid might end up in jail for a couple of years, or even a lot longer. Smoking pot may have its bad effects, but the effects of the war on drugs for our kids seem to me to be much worse.

(I suppose I could ask if you know if your kids have consumed marijuana, or even if you have yourselves. But I'm shy about these things, although maybe Nancy isn't.....)

The war on drugs puts lots of people in prison. The prison population of the U.S. today is about 2,000,000. This is about 1/4 of all the prisoners in the world, a far higher rate than in any other country. Two-thirds of the prisoners are in for non-violent offenses; about 1/4 are for violating drug laws. The cost is immense. We're probably spending more than \$25 billion per year on the war on drugs. [I've found it hard to get good figures. The budget of the DEA is over \$1 billion annually, and I estimate that the costs of imprisoning drug offenders is more than \$24 billion annually, but there are many other costs. To put it into context, the federal budget for the NSF is about \$3.2 billion, and public higher education costs about \$60 billion annually.] Those 250,000 prisoners are expensive, more than \$25,000 per year. But trying to put a monetary value on the costs is perverse. Many of those people in jail have lost a very large part of their lives. We're sorry we couldn't have Marty Drapkin here today, since he works with these prisoners, and he's more indignant than Nancy or me. And the lives of the prisoners are not the only ones lost. They start off with families and lose them with long prison sentences. Their children are likely to be destitute. Many of the children end up in foster care, especially if their mothers are in prison.

Nancy?

— and foster care also ends up costing taxpayers lots of money....while providing much less adequate child socialization, on the average.

The war on drugs is in large part a racist war, even if whites like me have to fear for our children and grandchildren. Most of the people in prison today are black, and a very large fraction of them are in for drug offenses.

Quote Grey in Fish, p. 176; see graph, p. 185.

3. The criminalization of drugs has all sorts of perverse effects. Since it is dangerous to transport drugs, manufacturers and traders are motivated to produce and sell more potent drugs, drugs that take much less volume. ^{It's easier to ship} The potency of marijuana today is much greater than 20 years ago. (Our DA Nix hedged in a newspaper interview about whether she used pot in college, but she said her prosecutorial policies were justified now because the potency of pot had grown.) Crack cocaine is a similar response to the economic problem. I'm told one can get a high on an amount as big as the head of a matchstick....hard to interdict. This is a case where history repeats itself. When Prohibition was introduced in the 1920s, low potency beverages like beer and wine were displaced by higher proof distilled beverages. ^{And then AIDS, prohibition of needle exchanges} Another perverse effect is on children. The draconian laws for dealers were for adults, not children. So, if you're a drug dealer, what do you do? Naturally, recruit children.

And another perverse effect of the war is the corruption of police and other law

enforcement people. There is so much money in the business, it's easy to bribe police. I have no good idea about the extent to which this has occurred in this state or this country.

\does anyone?

But it very clearly is very widespread in the producing countries and the transmitting countries.

4. The War on Drugs Destabilizes and Threatens Democracy in Third World Countries

Because drugs are illegal, they are hard to get, and the prices are high. Because prices are high, farmers in the producing areas such as the Andes and SE Asia find that they can earn far more producing coca leaves and opium poppies than other crops. Since it is illegal to do so, they need to find protection from the government. They are willing and able to do so. The effect is pervasive corruption of government officials in producing and transmitting countries. It has been estimated that drug traders in Northern Mexico have earnings up to \$30 billion annually, and they can easily afford to pay \$500 million in bribes to officials. *... can make effective threats against officials who don't cooperate*

The U.S. government is naturally strongly opposed to this. It tries to get corrupt officials dismissed, and will threaten to cut off foreign aid if this isn't done. American ambassadors have the power to dismiss officials in countries like Peru and Bolivia. The effect is to press those in the drug trade to organize and get their own paramilitary forces. The American response is to pay for military action against the drug trade. It's expensive. In 1990 we spent about \$25 million in aid for the military and police in the Andes, and now the Clinton administration proposes to spend \$1.6 billion on Colombia alone.

Again I apologize for starting with monetary costs. The war on drugs in the Andes is also inhumane. Here is a recent story from the NYT, May 1, 2000

NYT 5/1/00

Escalating the military war on drugs in other countries has destabilizing effects. The best example is what has happened in Colombia. Let me quote from a recent article by Michael Massing about Mexico. He recognizes that the drug trade leads to official corruption, but his is a sober article; he points out that there are far larger aspects of the economy and the polity that lead to corruption. But sending the army in to fight the drug traffickers might be disastrous:

NYR, 6/15/00, p. 28

5. The war on drugs is legitimated by myths that demonize drugs

To get people to fight a war we need an enemy, an enemy that is dangerous and evil. In every war there is a tendency to demonize our enemies, and this is so in the war on drugs. There are all sorts of myths about drugs. That these are myths is most easily seen by contrasting the beliefs with those we have about legal drugs such as tobacco and alcohol.

The most general myth is that use of these forbidden drugs is itself a disease. Once a person uses the drug, the person is hooked for life. The drugs are alleged to have serious consequences for physical health.....all the drugs, although there is no evidence that anyone has ever died as a physiological result of consuming marijuana. The drugs are believed to have profound effects on personality and behavior. They stimulate people to engage in unrestrained sex, they are a direct cause of crime; once hooked, the person cannot control himself or herself from these actions. Some 40 or 50 years back, the charge was made that marijuana consumption leads one to become a communist.

1.6 B 9
.25 B 8 670

Some of the beliefs are absurd, and there are all sorts of inconsistencies in the beliefs. The use of drugs is felt to have dramatic consequences on behavior.....yet it is felt that much drug use is covert and that drug users can conceal their use. Hence we have many programs to require the drug testing of employees, and we attempt to find tests that will show if the employee has used drugs months or years ago. (By the way, this can be costly too. The Firefighters union estimates that drug testing in the Madison department might cost more than \$200,000 per year, *Isthmus*, 5/19/00.)

The beliefs us non-users have about drugs have powerful effects on our behavior, regardless of how well they correspond to biological reality. The same is true for the users. A basic principal of social psychology is that we live in symbolic environments and respond not only to physical stimuli but to the meanings they have for us. That is true for legal medicinal drugs. A few years ago Dr. Michael Schinitzky gave a talk here about this. He noted that placebos often work to cure illnesses; if we believe they work, they often do. He also noted that the relationship between the dose of a drug and the physiological response is far weaker for humans than for other animals; much of our response is mediated by the symbolic meaning the drug has for us.

What is true for legal drugs is probably even more true for nonmedical drugs. Casual observations suggest this. My Mother didn't like alcoholic beverages and probably had only one or two drinks a year. She said they just made her drowsy, and indeed they do; alcohol is a depressant. But alcohol has quite different effects on those college students who believe that it reduces inhibitions and shyness and makes it possible to have fun.

More than 30 years ago the sociologist Howard Becker wrote a paper on "How to Become a Marijuana User." He said it wasn't all that easy and required three steps. First one needs to know how to get the active ingredient into one's system; it's possible to light up without having that happen. Then, one needs to be able to recognize the sought for reaction. This isn't easy. My Mother identified drowsiness as her reaction to alcohol and missed what lovers of those drinks like. When I first tried a cigar, I was sick to my stomach, but tobacco users recognized other effects. Finally, one needs to define the effects as desirable. This is by no means automatic; lots of people define alcohol as undesirable for the very reason that drinkers find it desirable.

There are ebbs and flows in the use of illegal drugs, and a large part of this has to do with changes in the shared images of the drugs. I doubt very much that the myths spread by the drug enforcement people have much effect on those changes. That old film on "Reefer Madness" is still shown for amusement by people smoking pot.

6. Effective Regulation

Since I do believe in the regulation of these drugs, I would like to believe that education can be effective in coping with abuse, but I think the education has to be honest. More generally, in seeking to regulate drugs like marijuana, cocaine, and opium, we can look at what works and what doesn't with alcohol and tobacco. The U.S. has done a reasonably good job in the past 15 years at reducing the use of tobacco. I'm one of the success stories, since Chancellor Donna Shalala cut me off some 10 years ago. We have good ideas about doing more about tobacco. We can also look at the efforts of European countries that have more rational approaches to the problem. An adult can legally buy pot in licensed shops in the Netherlands; it doesn't seem to have increased pot use or the use of other drugs.....

But regulation isn't our topic today. And it's not as exciting as something like "The French Connection".

7. Discussion

Introduction of guests and visitors
Prairie Announcements

Hymn: "Die Gedanken Sind Frei," #28