

An unhappy 40th anniversary

On June 17, 1971, President Nixon started his so-called War on Drugs.

"This nation faces a major crisis in terms of the increasing use of drugs, particularly among our young people," Nixon said. "Public enemy No. 1 in the United States is drug abuse. In order to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive."

We now mark the 40th anniversary of the War on Drugs, a war lasting longer than almost all wars in American history combined. The winners of this war are government contractors, the law enforcement "business" and the prison industrial complex.

Since 1971, the federal government has spent almost a trillion taxpayer dollars fighting drugs. A report from the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee disclosed that the government awards the majority of counter-narcotics contracts to five large defense corporations. The U.S. Government Accountability Office recently reported that the State Department does not even evaluate whether its counter-narcotics program is successful.

Our tax dollars are also being spent on the prison system and the criminal enforcement of the narcotics laws. Currently, there are 2.3 million people incarcerated in America — triple the amount in 1987 and a quantum leap over those incarcerated in 1971. An estimated 25 percent of incarcerations are for drug offenses.

Americans spend nearly \$70 billion a year dealing with these prisoners. The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the entire world. Moreover, minori-



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ties are incarcerated at significantly higher rates than whites, despite the numerous studies showing whites engaging in drug use at similar or higher rates than minorities.

We cannot sustain this incarceration rate. In May, the U.S. Supreme Court acknowledged that our over-incarceration policies have produced a crisis in California prisons, where extreme overcrowding creates unconstitutional conditions mandating the potential release of prisoners. Justice Anthony Kennedy called California prisons "incompatible with the concept of human dignity."

Drug war losers are the American taxpayers, drug addicts and civil liberties. The War on Drugs has not resulted in fewer drug addicts. In 2005, James Anthony, Ph.D., reported that the number of teenagers who experiment with recreational drugs is nearly equal to its peak years in the early 1970s.

Drug Enforcement Administration statistics assert the rate of addiction in the U.S. has remained constant at 1.3 percent of the population over the past 40 years. This directly contrasts with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's numbers, which put drug addicts at 6.7 percent of the population today using the DSM-IV criterion (used by health care professionals, not law enforcement). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says drug overdoses have "risen steadily" since the early 1970s to more than

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20,000 last year.

Moreover, the ACLU recently said: "Future generations will look back on the 'war on drugs' as a crude, barbaric and inhumane response to the social and public health problem of drug abuse. And they'll look back with dismay at how our primitive 'drug war' had ugly repercussions in so many areas.

"One of those areas is the growth of government surveillance. It is a 'war' that takes place not on some foreign battlefield, but in the lives of Americans — their homes, cars, phones, purses and bodies — and in fighting this war the authorities have found justification for extending their power into all such realms."

We are not safer from the problems that drugs have caused, nor are we free of drug abuse in our society. We are, however, systematically relieved of our rights to be free from intrusions into our persons, homes, effects and liberties.

After 40 years and nearly a trillion dollars, we have seen no success in the War on Drugs. Rather, we have only failure. Law enforcement admits that drugs today are cheaper, higher quality and more readily accessible, even to children. Casual use has either increased or remained level for 40 years, despite law enforcement's efforts to stop drug use altogether.

We need a renewed debate about the wisdom of continuing this war as presently prosecuted. A paradigm shift is needed.

Earlier this month, the Global Commission on Drug Policy called for the legalization of some drugs and an end to the criminalization of drug users. The panel includes former world leaders and international luminaries.

If certain drugs were decriminalized, the panel stated, and the money instead spent on treatment and rehabilitation, fewer people would be incarcerated and would instead be contributing to society. Based upon the failure of a 40-year policy that is unsustainable going forward, this approach deserves serious study and discussion.

According to Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., "We are wasting tax dollars and throwing money at a problem without even knowing what we are getting in return."

U.S. drug czar Gil Kerlikowske admitted to the Associated Press, "In the grand scheme, (the War on Drugs) has not been successful. Forty years later, the concern about drugs and the drug problem is, if anything, magnified, intensified."

Mr. President, Mr. Governor, it's been 40 years ... please end the War on Drugs. America is not winning.

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