

# A Concise Case Against America's War on Drugs

By Barb and Charlie Asher

## Politicians' Promises Versus Economists' Warnings

The theory was the picture of simplicity. Any problems from drugs, drug dealing, and drug use could be put to rest with one core strategy: launch America's second great adventure with Prohibition and "make America drug-free."

Accordingly, America adopted the landmark U.S. Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 that organized drug policy around one utopian strategy: *"It is the declared policy of the United States to create a Drug-Free America by 1995."*

Both major political parties gave overwhelming support to the Drug-Free America strategy, and scant pushback was heard from any quarters but one. Informed economists warned that this Drug Prohibition would not only fail in its declared policy to create a drug-free America but (1) worsen the drug problem itself and (2) create an ocean of other serious harms, including runaway violent crime.

Led by Dr. Milton Friedman, these alarmed economists insisted this new Prohibition would spawn the same kinds of lethal outcomes as Alcohol Prohibition, though likely worse. Their dire warnings can be summarized in four propositions.

- A. Prohibition would drive drugs into a criminal underground and be the opposite of drug control. Drugs would be worse, drug trade would be more violent, and all control would rest with cartels and gangs that would grow wealthier and more murderous in the competition to succeed in the illegal drug trade.

*"Illegality, high prices, high profits, [and] greater government drug-interdiction efforts encourage entry by suppliers who are more ruthless and [with] a lower regard for civility and the law."*

– Dr. Walter Williams, May 10, 2010

- B. Prohibition would increase overdose deaths as the drugs manufactured in this unregulated criminal underground became more potent, toxic, contaminated, and unknowable.

*"Thus one effect of prohibition is the tendency toward increased sales and use of more concentrated forms of drugs [including] crack, cocaine, ice, and meth."*

– Dr. Walter Williams, May 10, 2010

- C. Prohibition would come at extraordinary costs in violence, crime, erosion of constitutional liberties, and ceding of power and obscene profits to cartels.

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- D. Prohibition would block effective control measures, such as the ones America was able to use in successfully reclaiming control over alcohol only after Alcohol Prohibition was abandoned in 1933.

“Prohibition is an attempted cure that makes matters worse—for both the addict and the rest of us.”

– Dr. Milton Friedman, May 1, 1972

In short, these knowledgeable and alarmed economists warned Drug Prohibition would produce exactly the opposite effects of what the politicians were claiming.

Well, what does the half-century of excruciating evidence show?

## The Facts About a Half-Century of Drug Prohibition

1. Just as the economists had predicted, Drug Prohibition has driven drugs into a criminal underground and caused America to lose control of drugs in virtually every way possible. Drugs are more plentiful, less expensive, more contaminated and unknowable, and deadlier than ever. Three manageable organic chemicals have been replaced with thousands of constantly mutating mystery synthetics readily available both on the street and on the Internet. And to the extent there is control, it lies exclusively with outrageously enriched, violent cartels.

“Like Alcohol Prohibition, the ban on drugs has been a bonanza for organized crime.”

– Dr. Thomas Sowell, November 29, 1984

2. Just as the economists had predicted, Drug Prohibition has exploded annual overdose deaths. Drug War overdose deaths soared from 6,771 in 1971 to now over 100,000 annually—and now total more than American deaths from all our other wars combined.
3. Just as the economists had predicted, Drug Prohibition has created a host of other problems, including approximately 500,000 murders and millions of other violent crimes, widespread disease, funding of international terrorism, discrimination against poor and minorities, mass incarceration, community decay, and loss of constitutional rights at home and civil society in Central and South America.

“The War on Drugs is a monstrous social machine that is grinding poor black communities to dust.”

– Dr. Glenn Loury, 2008

4. And just as the economists had predicted, Drug Prohibition has thwarted drug control measures that would work. It has blocked such powerful and salutary drug control measures as (a) effective partnering with legitimate law-abiding companies, (b) standards for overwhelmingly safer drugs, (c) effective restriction of drugs to those that are knowable and predictable and overwhelmingly safer, (d) overwhelmingly more successful shielding of minors from drug use and drug dealing, and (e) rescuing addicts created by Drug Prohibition from the criminal element they have been forced to depend on.

In short, 50 years of brutishly clumsy tactics have been tried in service of the vision of a drug-free America. Nothing has been off-limits: midnight raids, attack dogs, multiplication of prison populations, ecocide of wise swaths of land, unrelenting discrimination against poor and minorities, sacrifice of irreplaceable protections of the Bill of Rights, emboldening and enriching of cartels, funding of international terror organizations, immiseration of communities and whole countries, and tolerance for millions of deaths and runaway disease. *All while seeing both drugs and drug trade made progressively deadlier by this policy of Prohibition.*

*"Drugs are inherently a problem for the individual who takes them. But they are a much bigger problem for society—precisely because they are illegal."*

– Dr. Thomas Sowell, November 29, 1984

The politicians could not have been more wrong, and the economists could not have been more correct. Drug Prohibition has earned many times over the judgment rendered by Dr. Friedman in a December 21, 2000, debate: "The War on Drugs is the most immoral program the United States has ever engaged in."

It would be easy to laugh today at the Drug-Free America premise necessary to the entire idea of Drug Prohibition. But the sober task before any caring American today—in or outside government—is to face the truth, listen to the actual experts, and do the work to expeditiously end this most immoral of all programs.

*"The War on Drugs is the most immoral program the United States has ever engaged in."*

– Dr. Milton Friedman, December 21, 2000

The sensible path forward is as clear as the current landscape is littered with deaths of innocents. Only by (1) legalizing drugs so they can be successfully and strictly controlled and (2) avoiding halfway feel-good measures (such as longer or shorter sentences, decriminalizing use, or making the umpteenth adjustment to allocation of Drug Prohibition resources) will America achieve the necessary goals.

- a. Replacing cartels and gangs with law-abiding partners who (like alcohol manufacturers and distributors today) are successfully incentivized to follow the law.
- b. Replacing today's toxic, contaminated, and unknowable drugs with overwhelmingly safer ones.

- c. Replacing a Prohibition system that lures children into drug use and dealing with one successfully aimed at building walls between children and drugs.
- d. Replacing a Prohibition scheme that breeds unending torrents of violence with one serving law and community harmony.
- e. Replacing a policy where the government is protecting and financing cartels with one that puts cartels out of the drug business.
- f. Replacing a scheme that leaves children and addicts (principally including addicts created by Drug Prohibition) at the mercy of cartels and dealers incentivized not to care about them with a system that protects them.

"I say legalize drugs because I want to see less drug abuse, not more. I say legalize drugs because I want to see the criminals put out of business."

– Edward Ellison, former head of Scotland Yard's Anti-Drug Squad March 10, 1988

## A Call to Action

Thanks to the War on Drugs, it's scarcely possible to fathom America's drug challenge today, let alone the anemic attention given to how Prohibition laws are the cause of this merciless and ever-widening catastrophe.

And still what Dr. Thomas Sowell called the "ego-boosting moral exhibitionism" of Prohibition carries on. "Withdrawal from Drugs," first published in The Los Angeles Times, November 29, 1984, reprinted in *Compassion Versus Guilt and Other Essays*, p. 32, William Morrow and Company, Ltd., New York (1987).

For anyone who sees the need for actual drug control and protection of the public (including children) from this relentless death, disease, violence, and social decay, delay in undoing this immoral policy should not be an option.

Watch our video entitled **"The Prohibition Blunder: Dismantling Drug Prohibition in Half an Hour"** to learn why America needs drug legalization now.

