

Trump: Overpromising on Drugs

The media would pounce on failure.

by Conrad Black



Even five weeks after the inauguration, the president is still, as he demonstrated at CPAC, speaking in absolute terms of reducing crime and shutting down the sale and use of narcotics. Electorates make allowance for the exaggerated claims of politicians seeking election, and the media tend to overlook all but the greatest whoppers of inflated promises. But this president can't, as he as forcefully remarked, expect much fairness from the national media, and if he keeps promising draconian reductions in crime and especially drug abuse, and doesn't act accordingly, it will haunt him. The War on Drugs has largely been a fraud and a complete failure. After the imprisonment of nearly 7 million people and the spending of at least \$1.5 trillion, narcotics are as readily available – and as or more widely used – and absorb more of the GDP than ever. And the United States is not blameless in the inflammation of virtual civil wars in Mexico, Colombia and elsewhere, though there were many other contributing causes in those countries.

Every informed person in America knows that if the entire enforcement apparatus of the United States were employed to prevent drug imports, all aircraft entering American air space illegally and delivering drugs would be shot down or seized on arrival with their air crews and cargoes. Though it would require a serious increase in personnel at border crossings, all entering vehicles and persons could be swiftly checked for the transportation of any sizeable quantities of drugs, and the Mexican frontier could have been sealed to smugglers and unauthorized migrants at any point since General Pershing's (unsuccessful) punitive raid against Pancho Villa and others in 1916, by allocating a larger number of adequately equipped people to patrol it. Practically every university campus in America is awash with drugs and every upper-income neighborhood in every city has home delivery of illegal drugs, as reliably as the morning newspaper, and on a more flexible timetable, i.e., at any hour of the day or night requested by a paying customer.

Instead of conducting a serious war, which would entail a massive sweep of campuses and a severe interdiction of delivery, as well as a tight control of border points and the air approaches to the country, it has been easier, these 40 years, just to troll through African-American and Latino areas, round up users, give first offenders a soft ride for denunciations of their suppliers, and send 7 million of such easily replaceable people to prison on absurdly extreme sentences, and masquerade as warriors against drugs. If the anti-drug war were conducted against white middle- and upper-income-area users, and the university students of America, with the same zeal it is waged against the non-white poor, the demand for and supply of drugs would decline sharply, the obscenely inflated number of incarcerated people would skyrocket, the ranks of students in institutions of higher learning would be thinned out sharply; and practically every elected official in the country would be impeached, recalled, or hammered at the polls.

Hypocrisy, selective permissiveness, and in-built failure are not the only problems with the War on Drugs. For the prevention campaign to be so porous, it is almost certain that there is a great deal of official corruption involved also. The legal system is such that anyone guilty of possession is effectively able to inculcate the alleged supplier, whether there is any truth in the denunciation or not. Grandstanding politicians have ensured heavy sentences, often by legislating themselves into the equation ahead of judges and requiring drastic mandatory minimum sentences, regardless of special circumstances, reducing judges who are (for the most part mistakenly) perceived to be a gang of indulgent, addled softies, to the role of rubber stamps.

The consequences of this phony war are not just to ensure that drugs are as pervasive as always, but to give the United States six to twelve times as many incarcerated people per capita as other prosperous democracies facing the same drug problems but applying less blunderbuss methods to them (Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom). In 50 years, the United States has gone from the mid-point of those countries in terms of incarceration levels and only a somewhat high ratio of prosecutions that produce convictions to the appalling point where, with less than 5 percent of the world's population, it has 25 percent of its incarcerated people, and 99 percent of prosecutions are successful, 97 percent without trial. A high proportion of the majority of incarcerated people are in state prisons and fester in barbarous conditions for unconscionably long sentences and no real effort is made to prepare them for a successful return to civil society. The prison system is infested with incompetent and maladjusted correctional officers, and the cost of housing this unseen host, even in miserable conditions, is about \$150 billion a year.

I have written here and elsewhere before of my concern about the vagaries of the U.S. justice system, but am here concerned

only with the new president's promise to deal with the drug problem. There are, broadly speaking, two ways to do this. The president can use the armed forces and vastly increased border personnel to stop imports and go after users and suppliers in the middle class, including universities. Or he can legalize all drugs, require treatment for addicts to hard drugs, and tax the sale of marijuana and other less offensive drugs and transform them into a large source of revenue. This could assist the strapped states and municipalities, many of which are on the verge of insolvency, because they lack the federal government's ability to keep going with overt or disguised expansions of the money supply (as the Obama administration did, increasing 233 years' worth of accumulated federal debt by 150 percent in eight years).

Marijuana may indeed be a gateway drug to worse substances, but Colorado and Oregon have already discovered the fiscal joys of the revenue it can produce, now that legalized pot is following the well-trodden path of liquor and gambling. All were long prohibited as incompatible with sober and virtuous behavior, diabolical temptations that public policy and Christian ethics required the state to defend the people against, until filthy lucre jostled out righteousness as the flavor of the sugar plums dancing in the heads of those who governed. The grace of conversion swiftly ensued: Liquor was wrested back from the gangsters and casinos sprang up all over. If President Trump really wants to reduce drug use, as he has often pledged – as far back as New Hampshire, where he was apparently genuinely appalled to learn of the proportions of the problem in that state – nothing short of a massive escalation of the forces applied to that end will achieve anything useful. Conditions are complicated by the fact that some of the strongest drugs can be created by children buying a variety of legal medicines and blending them in the correct proportions and conditions. This can be and is being done in every community in the country, and cannot be blamed on conditions in Mexico and has nothing to do with the borders.

The president will soon have to put up or shut up on this issue. He appears to have in mind a substantial increase in the country's police forces, and the possible use of the Army or National Guard in Chicago and other cities with chronic problems of violence in some (minority) neighborhoods. Some such program as that, plus sealing the Mexican border, and tightening the screws partially on middle-class drug use would probably generate enough progress to represent to the country as delivering on his promises, if he didn't want to become radically more, or less, permissive. (And the country, though it wants radical results, may not, as has been mentioned, be ready for the methods that would produce them.) He could legalize marijuana and concentrate on more dangerous drugs, and pay for increased constabulary costs by releasing most of the country's non-violent prison inmates and transferring them to a system of contributed work, Spartan living, and careful monitoring. The vacated prisons and jails could be cleaned up and repurposed as assisted housing for slum-dwellers. These problems are so profound and complicated, and have been the subject of sleazy political posturing for so long, that it is a disservice to toss off policy suggestions flippantly, but there are a number of plausible alternatives to the failed status quo.

It need hardly be said that both black and blue lives matter (and many police qualify on both counts), and that all lives are important. Americans can easily be persuaded that their urban ecosystems are degenerating into shooting galleries by and of the police. Those who wish the country and the administration well can only hope that serious planning is afoot. The sociological need is urgent and the political consequences of doing nothing about rising crime rates and the rampant illicit-drug industry would be so catastrophic they would obscure achievements in other areas. It will not take the president's enemies in the media long to pounce on failure, and for once they would not be faking it.

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