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WHY IT'S TIME TO LEGALIZE DRUGS

A LEADING ADVOCATE MAKES THE CASE FOR ENDING THE DRUG WAR

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The “war” on drugs cannot be won. But the United States continues to insist on failed prohibitionist policies that enrich international drug cartels, fuel narcoviolence, and do unnecessary harm to users, says Ethan Nadelmann in the current issue of FOREIGN POLICY magazine. In the September/October cover story, he says that it’s time to end prohibition.

“Many cities, states, and even countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia are reminiscent of Chicago under Al Capone—times 50,” Nadelmann says. “Legalization would radically change all that for the better.”

Like the repeal of alcohol Prohibition in 1933 in the United States, legalization of drugs would eliminate the incentives that enrich criminals and corrupt public officials by bringing the market for drugs out into the open, he argues.

Abandoning the “war” on drugs would also end the government’s cruel indifference for the lives of drug users by stripping the problem of addiction down to the health problem that it really is, Nadelmann argues.

“Zero tolerance policies deter some people, but they also dramatically increase the harms and costs for those who don’t resist,” he says. “Drugs become more potent, drug use becomes more hazardous, and people who use drugs are marginalized in ways that serve no one.”

The better approach is for governments to concentrate on reducing the harm associated with drug use, Nadelmann argues. Such “harm reduction” programs include syringe-exchange programs, making antidotes to overdose readily available, and allowing heroin addicts to obtain methadone from doctors and even pharmaceutical heroin from clinics.

He estimates that the United States could have saved millions of lives at home and abroad by dropping its resistance to syringe-exchange programs that prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

But despite its dismal record, Nadelmann argues the United States has dominated the drug control agencies of the United Nations and imposed an international drug prohibition regime modeled after its own punitive and moralistic approach.

“Looking to the United States as a role model for drug control is like looking to apartheid-era South Africa for how to deal with race,” he says. “Rarely has one country so successfully promoted its own failed policies to the rest of the world.”

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