

E. James West. "The War on Drugs." In Scott L. Stabler and Michael S. Green ed. *Ideas and Movements That Shaped America*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013.

A 'War on Drugs' can be understood as a concerted, usually government backed campaign for the reduction of illegal drug use and trade. The term is most commonly attributed to the United States and in particular regarding United States government policy towards illegal drug use and distribution from the 1970s onwards. However, the immediate history of United States anti-drug policy can be argued to be only the most recent manifestation of an on-going war on drugs by the American government stretching back to and beyond the passage of the Harrison Narcotic Act by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914, which imposed strict regulations and taxes on the distribution and production of opiates in the United States. The war on drugs has conventionally combined an escalation of existing law enforcement agencies and the creation of new law-enforcement agencies to combat drug use and trafficking in tandem with high-profile public media campaigns against drug abuse, most notably Nancy Reagan's 'Just Say No' campaign during the Reagan administration. This can be seen as a concerted effort by the federal government to change the public perception of drugs away from illness and health concerns to the ostracization of drug users and an emphasis on the danger posed by illegal drugs to United States social, moral and political values. In addition to tackling domestic trade and consumption of illegal drugs, the war on drugs by the United States government has been expanded in an attempt to reduce narcotics production at its source, particularly within Latin and South America. This has included a number of covert campaigns which have provided substantial military aid and at times direct military intervention in an attempt to reduce the illegal drugs trade.

The term used in relation to United States drug policy has been first attributed to Richard Nixon, who declared drug abuse to be public enemy number one and called for an 'all-out offensive' on drug abuse both on the supply and demand fronts (1971). This call was primarily a response to rising heroin dependency amongst American soldiers in Vietnam and returnees, with an estimated 10 percent of American soldiers serving in Vietnam addicted to heroin. Despite Nixon's recognition that a reduction in demand for drugs through 'the prevention of new addicts, and the rehabilitation of those who are addicted' was central to destroying the drugs market, his efforts were centred on fighting the supply side of the drugs trade. Under Nixon's supervision the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) was created in 1973 to replace the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, with the primary role of

limiting the influx of marijuana into the United States from Mexico. As part of Operation Intercept, the Nixon administration put intense pressure on Mexico to crack down on domestic marijuana suppliers and spent hundreds of millions of dollars in an attempt to close up the American border to Mexican drug suppliers. Throughout the 1970s the emphasis on government drug policy shifted from marijuana to cocaine as American cocaine consumption rapidly increased. Although President Carter called for a more lenient policy towards marijuana use, suggesting that penalties for the possession 'should not be more damaging to an individual than the use of the drug itself' (1977), the Presidency of Ronald Reagan witnessed a major escalation in the 'War on Drugs', not only in the United States but also internationally. The tone for this escalation was set in a Presidential radio address in 1982, with Reagan outlining a restructuring and coordination of anti-drugs government agencies into a mass offensive against drug use, and asserting that 'we've taken down the surrender flag and run up the battle flag. And we're going to win the war on drugs.'

The 'War on Drugs' waged by Reagan was characterised by increasingly harsh measures against both suppliers and users, with the Anti-Drug Abuse Act (1986) enacting new mandatory minimum sentences for a number of drugs and changing the system of federal probation and supervised release from a rehabilitative system to a punitive system. The federal budget for drug eradication and interdiction programs rose dramatically from an annual average of around \$450 million during the Carter Presidency to nearly \$1.5 billion during the first term of the Reagan Administration. The increased emphasis on federal drug enforcement efforts also led to the expansion of the DEA and other drug enforcement agencies including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

A number of scholars have criticised the 'war on drugs' rhetoric of the Reagan administration as taking on a markedly racist and ideological component, with some going as far as to suggest that the 'war on drugs' was in reality a 'war on blacks' or a 'war on communism'. From this perspective, the 'war on drugs' was not limited to a reaction against illegal narcotic use and distribution, but also seen as justification for increasingly aggressive and punitive measures against particular minority communities and their institutions within the United States. Similarly, the phrase 'war on drugs' has been charged as a form of propaganda which has facilitated increased United States military and paramilitary intervention abroad, both through recognised campaigns and covert operations. Central to Reagan's drug policy was the use and distribution of cocaine, with a marked disparity between different forms of

cocaine available on the market in powder cocaine and crack cocaine. The circulation and consumption of these different types of cocaine took on markedly racial dimensions, with powder cocaine used more frequently by more affluent, predominantly white users, and crack cocaine used as a cheaper, freebase form of pure powder cocaine and therefore favoured by impoverished inner city residents and ghetto constituencies dominated by minority users. The establishment of minimum mandatory drug sentences by the Reagan administration, alongside legislation which enabled the federal government to seize material and real estate assets for drug offenses proved most damaging to impoverished Americans, many of whom were black. Harsher sentencing for crack cocaine was criticised by scholars and activists who saw the Reagan administration's 'War on Drugs' as taking on a racist bent. As an extension of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, Congress passed laws that made sentencing for possession or trafficking of crack cocaine 100 times more severe than for equivalent offences involving powder cocaine, which were seen as discriminatory against poor drug users and addicts who were predominantly minorities. This was linked to disparities in arrests and incarceration relating to drug offenses, which disproportionately affected minority offenders and particularly African-Americans. During the presidencies of Reagan and Bush Sr. the incarceration rate in the United States tripled, which was in large part due to significantly increased convictions relating to drug use and distribution. Although the majority of drug users in the United States were and continue to be white, drug enforcement efforts were overwhelmingly concentrated in low income and inner-city minority neighbourhoods (1998). As a result, there are significant racial disparities in drug-related arrests and convictions, with African American drug users comprising around three-quarters of all United States citizens incarcerated on drug possession charges, despite representing a minority of overall drug users.

The 1980s also saw an expansion of anti-drug efforts as a part of United States foreign policy, with a shift away from previous focus on cannabis and heroin consumption to an emphasis on cocaine regulation, although these drugs still influenced American policy in the Middle East and South East Asia. The increase in size, power and autonomy of drug enforcement agencies, most notably the CIA, and their subsequent involvement in the Latin American drugs trade has been the source of intense speculation since the mid-1980s, and which was popularised by reporter Gary Webb in a 1996 expose linking the emergence of crack cocaine in United States communities to federal support for opposition to the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. The Kerry Committee in 1986 was established to conduct a

number of hearings regarding potential involvement by Contra forces in Nicaragua with drug trafficking to the United States. A subsequent report issued by the Committee indicated that the U.S State Department had paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to known drug producers and traffickers to supply the Contras with humanitarian aid, and criticised the U.S government for indirectly aiding the growth of international drug cartels that constitute a serious threat to the national security of the United States (1989).

The increase in federal spending on drug enforcement and restriction was continued by President Bush Sr. who established a national office of drug policy and gave additional power to law enforcement agencies. The Clinton, Bush and Obama presidencies can be seen to have continued, and at points expanded the war on drugs as inherited from their predecessors. For example, the Clinton administration supported a twenty-five percent increase in the anti-drug budget, increased drug interdiction and prosecution and also supported the expansion of drug testing rules and obligations at work and at home. However, recent administrations have also had to address growing public dissatisfaction with government drugs policy and legislation. An increasing number of critics have voiced concerns both the economic sustainability and moral integrity of the 'War on Drugs', which have been complimented by damning exposes and documentaries such as *The War on Drugs* (2008), which have presented a largely negative image of federal agencies such as the CIA and DEA in Latin America and further afield. Criticisms of government drug policy have centred around the emphasis on supply side strategies to combat illegal drug use through domestic law enforcement and international interdiction, which has proved to be an ineffective and economically unviable way of restricting drug consumption and circulation.

Support for the war on drugs has waned dramatically since the turn of the millennium, which has resulted in a turn away from the combative war on drugs rhetoric and legislation of the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations in the 1980s and early 1990s. This culminated in the announcement by the Office of National Drug Control Policy in 2009 that that the Obama administration would no longer use the term 'War on Drugs' in relation to federal drug policy, although drug enforcement policy would not be significantly altered. 2004 marked the start of a shift towards the incorporation of more demand side strategies for reducing illegal drug use through the creation of the National Drug Control Strategy, which provided increased support for drug treatment and rehabilitation programs. One component of the 2004 strategy was an increase in support for alternatives to incarceration for drug-related offenses through initiatives such as the Drug Courts Program, favours court monitoring, supervised

parole and care in the community programs over incarceration. The recent successes of programs such as the Drugs Court Program, which offer better rehabilitation prospects for drugs offenders but cost significantly less than incarceration, suggest that previous administrations and severely underestimated the value of demand side strategies for drug enforcement and addiction reduction through treatment and support programs. Criticisms of disparities in cocaine sentencing were partially addressed by the Fair Sentencing Act in 2010, which reduced the disparity between the relative amounts of crack and powder cocaine needed for criminal prosecution and also discarded the mandatory minimum sentence of 5 years for any amount of crack cocaine possession, although the weight ratio still remained heavily skewed in favour of powder cocaine (2010). In 2011, a report from the Global Commission on Drug Policy heavily criticised United States government strategies towards drug abuse and contended that fundamental reforms were urgently needed in American drug policy, suggesting a move towards new strategies for dealing with illegal drug use and distribution within the United States in the future and a transformation of the 'war on drugs' as envisioned by previous administrations.

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