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# Antony Davies & James Harrigan: End lost drug war now

By Antony Davies & James Harrigan

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The week before last, Justice Department Inspector General Michael Horowitz released his findings on the Fast and Furious program, Washington's attempt to wage war on drug cartels by selling weapons to them. Unsurprisingly, Horowitz found that our government implemented the program "without adequate regard for the risk it posed to public safety in the United States and Mexico." This is not news.

America's "War on Drugs" has stretched on for four decades. Despite clear-cut evidence that we've lost, there is no end in sight. Instead of victory, we get more body bags, more violence and more prisons filled with nonviolent offenders.

Our neighbors to the south seem most aware of America's folly, and given their painful experience, it's no wonder. Recently, a group led by Mexican poet Javier Sicilia concluded a 25-city U.S. tour in Washington. Their goal was to bring attention to the estimated 34,000 to 60,000 Mexicans killed in the drug war since 2006. To put that number in perspective, 5,078 American military personnel were killed in the same period in Iraq and Afghanistan combined.

Americans should listen, because the price at home has also been absurdly high. According to economists Jeffrey Miron and Katherine Waldo of the Cato Institute, the federal government spent \$16 billion on the drug war in 2010 alone. In the same year, state and local governments spent an additional \$26 billion. That is a total of \$42 billion for just one year — enough to give an annual \$2,000 scholarship to every college student in the country.

Were we to legalize and tax drugs at the same rate that we tax liquor, we'd collect an additional \$47 billion in tax revenue. That is a net gain of \$89 billion every year, which is enough to pay for the entire Department of Education and still have almost \$10 billion left over.

Ultimately, there are only two compelling arguments against legalization. The first is that Americans should not be free to choose to do as they please with their own bodies; the second is that things would somehow be worse if they did. Yet these arguments presuppose that people are presently unable to purchase the drugs they want, and this is simply not the case.

Drugs are readily available in America and have long been so, regardless of the severity of the laws against them. Just as there was no shortage of liquor during the misguided years of Prohibition, there is no shortage of illegal drugs on the market now. The only question is who gets wealthy supplying the product and who pays for the unintended consequences of drug laws that cannot achieve their intended goals.

The War on Drugs has made drug cartels rich at American taxpayers' expense. The War on Drugs has imprisoned nonviolent offenders for victimless crimes in unfathomable numbers, destroying their lives in worse ways than many of their drugs ever could have. In the case of highly addictive drugs, the War on Drugs has replaced needed medical and psychological help with incarceration.

In 2009, 1.65 million Americans were arrested on drug charges. Drug violations accounted for 13 percent of the total arrests in the nation, making drugs the single greatest cause for arrest. Eighty percent of these were for simple possession.

At the end of 2010, almost half a million Americans were in prison on drug convictions. That's more than the population of Atlanta.

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We've lost the war because we were never fighting drugs. We were fighting economics. Throughout human history and without exception, every time a government has picked a fight with the laws of economics, it has lost, and the cost has been devastating. It is time to pack up this war while the loss is still merely monumental.

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