

## The War on Drugs: At Home and Abroad

by Polly Mann, W A M M

It's high time that the United States revise its drug policy—that it call a halt to its 40-year old “drug war.” This past December the nation of Mexico, a U.S. ally, recognized one of the war heroes in a special ceremony. He was Ensign Melquisedet Angulo Cordova, killed in a raid on a top drug lord. But the drug lord got his revenge. After the funeral several members of the drug gang burst into the Cordova home and killed four members of Cordova's family—an event unusual in that it received worldwide attention.

The vicious war persists because so much money is involved. The December 26, 2009, headline of a full-page New York Times article regarding drug sales occurring in the U.S. and Mexico explains: “Joint investigations of customs, border patrol and immigrant agents set up checkpoints on southbound lanes every day fishing for money. Customs officials have assigned 25 more teams of dogs and handlers to this task in the past two years.”

According to a 1998 UN report, the illegal trade in narcotics has a market of about 190 million addicts and users worldwide, and is estimated to be worth more than \$400 billion a year. The Paris-based International Police Organization (Interpol) says that drug business is second only to the world's arms trade that was then estimated at more than \$800 billion annually. The Vienna-based International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) reported that rising profits from the global drug trade were outstripping the national wealth of both rich and poor nations.

Drug dealers abound, not only in Mexico, but also in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Bolivia, Colombia, Singapore, even Holland—everywhere. The drug cartels seize every location, event or opportunity for sales. They'll be present at the World Cup soccer matches to be held in June in nine South African cities and most probably at the upcoming Olympic games.

Since it's a worldwide problem, the case could be made that the problem requires a worldwide solution and that it's not one that the United States alone can tackle. But not so fast. The major consumer of illegal drugs in the world is the United States. Therefore, a policy established by the U.S. would have major consequences.

Roughly 500,000 people are behind bars in the U.S. for nonviolent drug law violations--ten times more than in 1980 and more than in all of western Europe (which has a much larger population). Public health problems, such as HIV and Hepatitis C, are exacerbated by laws that restrict access to sterile syringes. Fatal drug overdoses occur in part because people are fearful of being arrested if they seek help.

Social critic Christian Parenti contends that one of the purposes of the War on Drugs is to incarcerate the nation's superfluous population of poor people—mostly black males, eviscerate the social safety net, and transfer funds into the hands of the social control network—prisons and law enforcement: While prison spending is estimated to be about \$30 billion annually, the annual overall cost for police, courts, prosecutors, probation, parole, bail bond, bounty hunting, drug treatment and prison is estimated to be as high as \$150 billion annually.”

The powerful prison guards' union joins with private operators, prosecutors and police departments to lobby legislators who are already predisposed to punitive drug laws and massive incarceration of poor people.

Drug policy, national and state, reveals the racism of this country. Although African Americans comprise only 12.2% of the population and 1.3% of drug users, they make up 38% of those arrested for drug offenses and 59% of those convicted of drug offenses. In general, African Americans serve almost as much time in federal prison for a drug offense (58.7 months) as whites do for a violent offense (61.7 months). In 2002 about 2.4% of all marijuana users were arrested for marijuana possession, but the arrest rate of African Americans for possession was 94% higher than the rate for all users.

In the land of Lake Woebegone, a number of years ago an African-American Minnesota judge in line for a federal appointment, ruled that the penalty assessed against crack cocaine users (mostly African Americans) could not exceed the penalty assessed against people using cocaine in other ways (mostly Caucasian). The appointment was not forthcoming and many blamed the ruling. However, more recently, the Minnesota State Auditor office reported that Minnesota's state approach has held down the public costs of the criminal justice system because nonviolent property and drug offenders must have an extensive felony criminal history before they are imprisoned in a state correctional facility. (<http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/Ped/pedrep/0105int.pdf>)

In 2007, the Sentencing Project, as reported in a New York Times article, stated that “Minnesota looks more like Sweden than Texas.” Sweden imprisons about 80 people per 100,000, whereas Minnesota sentences 300 per 100,000, which may be a reflection of its state policy on drug related offenses. Minnesota may be one of the better states, but it has a long way to go and the nation, as a whole, has even further to go in improving its drug policies. And there is a general trend in public attitudes, fueled by scapegoating and fear mongering, toward retribution as opposed to rehabilitation.

However, the organization, Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, made up of current and former law enforcement officers, believe that existing drug policies have failed in addressing crime, drug abuse, addiction and stopping the illegal flow of drugs. Their ultimate goal is the de-criminalization of drug use. The use of the word “prohibition” in their name is a reminder that prohibition as applied to the use

of alcohol was deemed a failure and abandoned over 70 years ago. Granted were drugs de-criminalized, some problems would remain, but obviously not those as great as with our current drug policy.

Why should the decriminalization of the use of drugs be of concern to members of an organization addressing military madness? Because the use of the military and the expenditure of funds allocated to the military are being used to combat drug usage. In a statement of 1997 Coletta Youngers of the Washington Office on Latin American stated: "To date, U.S. taxpayers have provided nearly \$290 billion for the 'war on drugs.' She further commented, "As the Cold War evolved the drug war emerged as a convenient rationale for U.S. military presence in the hemisphere and for a continued engagement in Latin American and Caribbean militarism via training, assistance and joint operations."

Jeff Dietrich of the Los Angeles Catholic Agitator says it best: "When we first began to research this issue, we thought that a call for legalized drugs, was the most radical, idealistic statement one could make, short of say "peace on earth." However, even a cursory examination reveals it (the War on Drugs) as nothing more than a war on the poor. . . a system that sucks vast chunks of the commonwealth out of the social safety net of healthcare, welfare, housing and education, and places it directly into the hands of the social repression network of the U.S.A.'s vast gulag known as the 'prison industrial complex.'" Decriminalization would accompanied by programs designed to discourage the use of recreational drugs and to provide services to the addicted.

The U.S. Decriminalization of Recreational Drug Use is Essential for the following Reasons:

Worldwide

There would be a reduction in the destruction and mayhem, worldwide, resulting from U.S. policy.

If the sale of drugs was controlled and legal, prices would be greatly reduced.

There would be a reduction in costs associated with policing for drug usage.

Agricultural policies would be affected. Countries growing marijuana, coca and poppies because of their high prices would plant other crops.

The U.S. government could not allocate military funds to foreign nations for the alleged purpose of dealing with drug violence.

Rogue elements of the U.S. government would not be able to sell drugs to pay for illegal foreign operations.

Violence would be greatly reduced.

At Home

There would be a reduction in the use and cost of U.S. border police as the sale and possession of drugs would not be illegal.

There would be a tremendous reduction in costs related to imprisonment. At present crimes connected with recreational drugs are responsible for the majority of people imprisoned.

Drug users could seek medical help for their addiction and other ailments without fear of reprisal.

There would be a halt to the escalating industry built around the construction and maintenance of prisons.