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Conservatives should oppose the drug war

By Steve Buckstein

On a cold December day about nineteen years ago a woman asked her big brother to buy her some marijuana. She was undergoing "an agonizing jolt of chemotherapy resulting in wracking nausea" and believed pot would make the therapy bearable. Big brother turned her down because he was a self described "coward." He knew nothing about such things, and was sure that a "lurking narc" would spot him and bask in the glory of busting such a famous person.

Who is "big brother"? None other than the now late conservative icon William F. Buckley, Jr. He didn't have to oppose the drug war for ideological reasons; he had very practical ones. Other conservatives, should follow his lead.

The war on drugs has done more damage, for a longer period of time, than prohibition in the 1920s. Then, alcohol was the demon of choice. Crime and gangs exploded during that failed experiment, just as they thrive on the current drug prohibition.

Horrified by the violence and corruption that alcohol prohibition fostered, lifelong Republican Pauline Morton Sabin told Congress in 1930, "...women played a large part in the enactment [of prohibition]... They are now realizing with heart burning and heart aching that if the spirit is not within, legislation can be of no avail. They thought they could make prohibition as strong as the Constitution, but instead have made the Constitution as weak as prohibition..." She went on to say that before prohibition, her children had no access to alcohol. During prohibition they could get it anywhere.

The same is true for drugs today. We've been fighting this war for decades, yet the average American family is more worried now that Johnny or Jane will use drugs and ruin their lives. With the advent of asset forfeiture laws, drugs in Johnny's room can lead to your family losing its home. "Zero tolerance" is the antithesis of the conservative's regard for private property and the protections secured in the Bill of Rights. The Founding Fathers didn't say that Americans should be secure in their persons and property unless the teenager of the household smoked pot.

If you think decriminalization would lead to more lives destroyed by drugs, think again. Cigarette use has declined dramatically through education, not prohibition. Health experts tell us that a much higher percentage of cigarette smokers get hooked than users of either heroin or cocaine, yet more adults have quit cigarettes than currently smoke. If 48 million Americans can quit smoking without going to jail, we should be optimistic that other drug users can do the same.

Why do drug dealers hang around schools, while cigarette dealers don't? Cigarettes are legal, at least for now. Prices are so low that it doesn't make sense for pushers to hook your kids. Cocaine and heroin are another matter. The high profits created by

prohibition make it inevitable that hooking your kids is worth the risk. Before the drug war, the worst schools were safer than the best schools are today.

Conservatives should understand that prohibition leads to black markets, which lead to crime. Condemn the heroin addict for his self-destructive ways. But would you rather he nod off on a two dollar a day habit, or break into your home to feed a two hundred dollar a day addiction? The difference in price is a direct function of prohibition.

Drug violence is also a function of prohibition more than any chemical property of the drugs themselves. When society tells dealers their activities are outside the law, don't be surprised when they take the law into their own hands to protect their turf. And don't be surprised when innocent people die in the crossfire.

So, what have we learned? That it isn't drugs, but the war on drugs that allows our own government to seize assets from innocent Americans. That it isn't drugs, but the war on drugs that is more likely to lead our children into self-destructive drug addiction. That it isn't drugs, but the war on drugs that leads to property crimes and violence.

The question for conservatives isn't whether drugs are good or bad. The question is whether government can do a better job ridding our streets of drugs than it has ridding our society of poverty. Or whether government can do a better job keeping our kids off drugs than it has educating them in government schools. Bill Buckley and other conservatives understand that government is not capable of solving these problems, but it can make them worse.

It's time for conservatives to return the drug problem back to where the poverty and education problems belong; in the church, the community, the family. Only then will drugs be less of a problem in America.

Remember Pauline Sabin's words, "They thought they could make prohibition as strong as the Constitution, but instead have made the Constitution as weak as prohibition."

Steve Buckstein is Senior Policy Analyst and founder of Cascade Policy Institute.

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Cascade Policy Institute ■ 4850 SW Scholls Ferry Road, Suite 103 ■ Portland, OR 97225
cascadepolicy.org ■ (503) 242-0900 ■ steven@cascadepolicy.org