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A Brief History of the Drug War

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This video from hip hop legend Jay Z and acclaimed artist Molly Crabapple depicts the drug war's devastating impact on the Black community from decades of biased law enforcement.

The video traces the drug war from President Nixon to the draconian Rockefeller Drug Laws to the emerging aboveground marijuana market that is poised to make legal millions for wealthy investors doing the same thing that generations of people of color have been arrested and locked up for. After you watch the video, read on to learn more about the discriminatory history of the war on drugs.

The Early Stages of Drug Prohibition

Many currently illegal drugs, such as marijuana, opium, coca, and psychedelics have been used for thousands of years for both medical and spiritual purposes. So why are some drugs legal and other drugs illegal today? It's not based on any scientific assessment of the relative risks of these drugs – but it has everything to do with who is associated with these drugs.

The first anti-opium laws in the 1870s were directed at Chinese immigrants. The first anti-cocaine laws in the early 1900s were directed at black men in the South. The first anti-marijuana laws, in the Midwest and the Southwest in the 1910s and 20s, were directed at Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans. Today, Latino and especially black communities are still subject to wildly disproportionate drug enforcement and sentencing practices.

Nixon and the Generation Gap

In the 1960s, as drugs became symbols of youthful rebellion, social upheaval, and political dissent, the government halted scientific research to evaluate their medical safety and efficacy.

Take Action.

Stand against Attorney General Sessions' new attempt to escalate the drug war.

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You can help promote drug policies based on science, compassion, health, and human rights.



In June 1971, President Nixon declared a “war on drugs.” He dramatically increased the size and presence of federal drug control agencies, and pushed through measures such as mandatory sentencing and no-knock warrants.

A top Nixon aide, John Ehrlichman, later admitted: “You want to know what this was really all about. The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying. We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies

with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.” Nixon temporarily placed marijuana in Schedule One, the most restrictive category of drugs, pending review by a commission he appointed led by Republican Pennsylvania Governor Raymond Shafer.

In 1972, the commission unanimously recommended decriminalizing the possession and distribution of marijuana for personal use. Nixon ignored the report and rejected its recommendations.

Between 1973 and 1977, however, eleven states decriminalized marijuana possession. In January 1977, President Jimmy Carter was inaugurated on a campaign platform that included marijuana decriminalization. In October 1977, the Senate Judiciary Committee voted to decriminalize possession of up to an ounce of marijuana for personal use.

Within just a few years, though, the tide had shifted. Proposals to decriminalize marijuana were abandoned as parents became increasingly concerned about high

rates of teen marijuana use. Marijuana was ultimately caught up in a broader cultural backlash against the perceived permissiveness of the 1970s.

The 1980s and 90s: Drug Hysteria and Skyrocketing Incarceration Rates

The presidency of Ronald Reagan marked the start of a long period of skyrocketing rates of incarceration, largely thanks to his unprecedented expansion of the drug war. The number of people behind bars for nonviolent drug law offenses increased from 50,000 in 1980 to over 400,000 by 1997.



Public concern about illicit drug use built throughout the 1980s, largely due to media portrayals of people addicted to the smokeable form of cocaine dubbed “crack.” Soon after Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, his wife, Nancy Reagan, began a highly-publicized anti-drug campaign, coining the slogan “Just Say No.”

This set the stage for the zero tolerance policies implemented in the mid-to-late 1980s. Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates, who believed that “casual drug users should be taken out and shot,” founded the DARE drug education program, which was quickly adopted nationwide despite the lack of evidence of its effectiveness. The increasingly harsh drug policies also blocked the expansion of syringe access programs and other harm reduction policies to reduce the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS.

In the late 1980s, a political hysteria about drugs led to the passage of draconian penalties in Congress and state legislatures that rapidly increased the prison population. In 1985, the proportion of Americans polled who saw drug abuse as the nation's “number one problem” was just 2-6 percent. The figure grew through the

remainder of the 1980s until, in September 1989, it reached a remarkable 64 percent – one of the most intense fixations by the American public on any issue in polling history. Within less than a year, however, the figure plummeted to less than 10 percent, as the media lost interest. The draconian policies enacted during the hysteria remained, however, and continued to result in escalating levels of arrests and incarceration.

Although Bill Clinton advocated for treatment instead of incarceration during his 1992 presidential campaign, after his first few months in the White House he reverted to the drug war strategies of his Republican predecessors by continuing to escalate the drug war. Notoriously, Clinton rejected a U.S. Sentencing Commission recommendation to eliminate the disparity between crack and powder cocaine sentences.

He also rejected, with the encouragement of drug czar General Barry McCaffrey, Health Secretary Donna Shalala's advice to end the federal ban on funding for syringe access programs. Yet, a month before leaving office, Clinton asserted in a Rolling Stone interview that "we really need a re-examination of our entire policy on imprisonment" of people who use drugs, and said that marijuana use "should be decriminalized."

At the height of the drug war hysteria in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a movement emerged seeking a new approach to drug policy. In 1987, Arnold Trebach and Kevin Zeese founded the Drug Policy Foundation – describing it as the “loyal opposition to the war on drugs.” Prominent conservatives such as William Buckley and Milton Friedman had long advocated for ending drug prohibition, as had civil libertarians such as longtime ACLU Executive Director Ira Glasser. In the late 1980s they were joined by Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke, Federal Judge Robert Sweet, Princeton professor Ethan Nadelmann, and other activists, scholars and policymakers.

In 1994, Nadelmann founded The Lindesmith Center as the first U.S. project of George Soros' Open Society Institute. In 2000, the growing Center merged with the Drug Policy Foundation to create the Drug Policy Alliance.

The New Millennium: The Pendulum Shifts – Slowly – Toward

Sensible Drug Policy

George W. Bush arrived in the White House as the drug war was running out of steam – yet he allocated more money than ever to it. His drug czar, John Walters, zealously focused on marijuana and launched a major campaign to promote student drug testing. While rates of illicit drug use remained constant, overdose fatalities rose rapidly.

The era of George W. Bush also witnessed the rapid escalation of the militarization of domestic drug law enforcement. By the end of Bush's term, there were about 40,000 paramilitary-style SWAT raids on Americans every year – mostly for nonviolent drug law offenses, often misdemeanors. While federal reform mostly stalled under Bush, state-level reforms finally began to slow the growth of the drug war.

Politicians now routinely admit to having used marijuana, and even cocaine, when they were younger. When Michael Bloomberg was questioned during his 2001 mayoral campaign about whether he had ever used marijuana, he said, "You bet I did – and I enjoyed it." Barack Obama also candidly discussed his prior cocaine and marijuana use: "When I was a kid, I inhaled frequently – that was the point."

Public opinion has shifted dramatically in favor of sensible reforms that expand health-based approaches while reducing the role of criminalization in drug policy.

Marijuana reform has gained unprecedented momentum throughout the Americas. Alaska, California, Colorado, Nevada, Oregon, Maine, Massachusetts, Washington State, and Washington D.C. have legalized marijuana for adults. In December 2013, Uruguay became the first country in the world to legally regulate marijuana. In Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau plans to legalize marijuana for adults by 2018.

In response to a worsening overdose epidemic, dozens of U.S. states passed laws to increase access to the overdose antidote, naloxone, as well as "911 Good Samaritan" laws to encourage people to seek medical help in the event of an overdose.

Yet the assault on American citizens and others continues, with 700,000 people still

arrested for marijuana offenses each year and almost 500,000 people still behind bars for nothing more than a drug law violation.

President Obama, despite supporting several successful policy changes – such as reducing the crack/powder sentencing disparity, ending the ban on federal funding for syringe access programs, and ending federal interference with state medical marijuana laws – did not shift the majority of drug policy funding to a health-based approach.



Now, the new administration is threatening to take us backward toward a 1980s style drug war. President Trump is calling for a wall to keep drugs out of the country, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions has made it clear that he does not support the sovereignty of states to legalize marijuana, and believes “good people don’t smoke marijuana.”

Progress is inevitably slow, and even with an administration hostile to reform there is still unprecedented momentum behind drug policy reform in states and localities across the country. The Drug Policy Alliance and its allies will continue to advocate for health-based reforms such as marijuana legalization, drug decriminalization, safe consumption sites, naloxone access, bail reform, and more.

We look forward to a future where drug policies are shaped by science and compassion rather than political hysteria.

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