

We're losing the drug war

The much ballyhooed crusade against drugs looks like a bust. According to a recent U.S. state department report, drug production is rising around the world.

Output of coca leaf, the raw material for cocaine, is up 7.2% from 1987 to 1988. Marijuana is up a heady 22%. Opium, the base material for heroin, has risen 15% and hashish is up a more modest 11%. No doubt about it, drugs are a strong growth industry.

In spite of all the hysteria and ballyhoo in North America about the war on drugs, consumption and distribution are rising. But not, in my opinion, to the point where we are swamped by a "drug epidemic." Heavy drug use remains confined to a small percentage of the population. Only among the black and Hispanic communities in the U.S. is drug use near to being an epidemic.

Four points emerge from the drug study.

- 1) The war against drugs is being lost.
- 2) Recreational drug use is slowly but steadily spreading to other nations — particularly in Latin America and Europe.
- 3) Where there is demand the supply will find a way of getting in.
- 4) Previous attempts to eradicate drug use in North America have backfired.

Let's look at these last two points. A massive, multi-billion-dollar effort by the U.S. has managed to substantially cut down imports of marijuana to the U.S. and Canada. So politicians have beaten their tiny chests and claimed a major victory against reefer madness.

Wrong. Home-grown has not only replaced imports, it now appears more pot is being smoked today than in the high times of the early '70s.

What's far worse, the crackdown on marijuana has simply driven importers to switch to cocaine. Unlike marijuana, which is very bulky and smelly, cocaine is compact and hugely profitable. The price of coke fell and supplies went up. People —

Punch



"As soon as I saw you, I said to myself, there's a man who isn't married."

ERIC MARGOLIS



particularly the young — have switched in droves away from pot to coke. So the government has succeeded in driving people from a relatively benign drug to a harder and far more injurious substance.

Even if cocaine is somehow stopped, I'm willing to bet a substitute will quickly come onto the market. Chemists are no doubt already hard at work on a synthetic substitute — a sort of instant coffee of cocaine.

Meanwhile, south of the border, drugs are doing far more damage than in North America. Colombia, Bolivia and Panama are already under the thumb of drug barons. The governments of Ecuador, Peru, Jamaica, the Bahamas and Belize are riddled with drug-money corruption.

During my recent trip to Central America, I saw first hand how governments there — both communist and capitalist — are becoming ensnared in the tentacles of the drug trade.

Up in North America, politicians love to pound tables and demand that Latin nations crack down on farmers who grow pot, coca or poppies. But they also happen to be the same politicians who wouldn't dream of demanding that our farmers stop growing tobacco — which kills far more people than drugs, or ordering burger vendors to stop dishing out saturated fats, the No. 1 cause of deaths in our society.

Or telling our tobacco companies to stop exporting cigarettes. Or demanding that farmers stop poisoning the food supply with pesticides. Or telling the big drug companies to stop producing the tranquilizers, like Valium, which are the leading source of drug abuse in North America.

Nope. It's much easier to blast drug barons and corrupt politicians in Colombia or Mexico. I wonder when the Latins are going to start firing back, charging that Canada is run by liquor barons or tobacco barons who buy and sell politicians like pork bellies.

All this hot air aside, one thing remains painfully clear: The crusade against drugs is going to end up like earlier crusades against the Saracens — stuck in the sand. New thinking is needed.

One unpleasant answer is, quite obviously, to begin legalizing some drugs and regulating them as we do alcohol and tobacco. Pot, hashish and maybe cocaine should be on this list. Impose harsher penalties for other drugs.

I've seen nations in the Mideast, the West Indies and Asia where drugs are virtually legal and very common. I have not liked what I've seen: Generations of stoned-out vegetoids. Still, this seems marginally better than Jane-Finch's mean streets, or the Bronx's human sewers.

But how do you get politicians who don't have the guts to let people shop on Sunday face the hard realities and harder decisions about drugs?