

The War on Drugs: Is It Time to Surrender?

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Two decades after the doomed and undeclared war in Vietnam, America has declared itself at war with drugs. Recent polls have blasted illegal drugs as public enemy number one; in an era of budget retrenchments and hands-off government, the crusade against drugs has become a central priority for federal action and funding. All told, expenditures on all aspects of drug enforcement, from drug eradication in foreign countries to imprisonment of drug users and dealers in the United States, totaled in 1987 over ten billion dollars. Convicted drug offenders crowd our prisons: nationwide in 1987, 750,000 people were arrested for violating drug laws, and many faced stiff mandatory sentences. Drug “czar” William Bennett has called for capital punishment for drug dealers and remarked that “morally” he doesn’t “have any problem” with beheading as the method of execution. In unison schoolchildren shout “Just say no!” and everyone knows what it is they’re saying no to. Even legal drug use — the consumption of alcohol and tobacco — is declining steadily, as we strive toward the goal of drug-free schools, drug-free neighborhoods, a drug-free America.

Yet few think this is a war we are winning. Despite accelerated enforcement efforts, the black market in cocaine has grown to record size. Crack, the most lethal cocaine derivative, was all but unheard of five years ago; today 15 percent of infants born in the nation’s capitol suffer brain damage from exposure to crack in the womb. Drug-related murder rates soar; drug-related