

The Drug War and Terrorism

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Lessons to Learn

By Kevin B. Zeese President, Common Sense for Drug Policy

Advocates of the war on drugs have used the recent terrorist catastrophe to urge expansion of the drug war. But as we embark on a renewed war against terrorism it would be wise to more honestly look at the war on drugs – since like terrorism it is without national boundaries against an undefined enemy. We cannot afford to have our anti-terrorism efforts fail as clearly as the drug war has failed so we better learn from our mistakes.

The American public recognizes the drug war's failure – a recent Pew poll shows 75% see the failure. Only the most diehard drug warriors continue to urge escalation. We have spent a half a trillion dollars since 1980 and developed the largest prison system in world history but heroin and cocaine are less expensive and more pure, overdoses and emergency room mentions of drugs are at record highs and adolescent drug use has increased by 50% since 1990.

"To wage a successful war on terrorism there are many lessons that need to be drawn from the failed War on Drugs. Unless we come to terms with these, we are likely to spiral into a cycle of violence that may well exceed September 11 and leave Americans with far fewer rights and freedoms than we have even known."

-- Kevin Zeese, President, Common Sense for Drug Policy

The failed drug war is a luxury we can no longer afford it drains our resources costing \$40 billion dollars annually. Investigators working on drug enforcement could be working on counter terrorism; drug enforcement agents could be sky marshals. We are dividing the nation by arresting nearly two million non-violent offenders each year on drug charges. If we are going to war we can no longer afford the drug war – it is counterproductive, divisive and draining.

In addition to draining our resources drug prohibition is funding terrorism. Interpol has already noted that the chief source of funding of terrorism is the drug trade. The UN reports it is a \$400 billion annual business – 8 percent of the world's trade – bigger than the budget of the Pentagon. Of course, drug trafficking and production takes place in many countries where terrorism is fostered – e.g., Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, Yugoslavia, Sudan, Peru. Because of prohibition the drug market is a criminal market that wreaks chaos – empowering criminal cartels, killing the legitimate economy and creating conditions that breed terrorism. By continuing drug prohibition we are providing a massive and empowering revenue stream to terrorists.

We must ask: Can we fight two wars with vague enemies at the same time? Also, to develop an effective counter terrorism strategy we can learn some lessons from the failures of the drug war.

First, while it is important to bring Osama bin Laden to justice, it would be a mistake to think that killing him will end the problem. While Bin Laden should be brought to justice so the truth of his

involvement can be brought out, making him the target risks empowering him if we fail and martyring him if we succeed. The drug war made this mistake with Pablo Escobar. Escobar bombed the Colombian Supreme Court, assassinated the leading presidential candidate, assassinated many other elected officials, blew up civilian airplanes and indiscriminately spread terror through Colombia. He was arrested and killed. The result – there is more violence then ever in Colombia and now the US is in a jungle war including US troops and US civilian mercenaries; allied with paramilitaries and the Colombian military, both known for their human rights violations.

In the drug war rather than killing replaceable individuals we should have dealt with the underlying issues of addiction, prevention and ending the criminal market. There are also underlying issues at the root of terrorism. A personal target can confuse the issue and results in escalation. As Dr. King said: “Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate....” When the personal strategy fails and our leaders have used the rhetoric of war – the war on drugs or war on terror – escalation is the likely outcome. With terrorism making this mistake could lead to World War III.

Another error made in the drug war is that we allowed prejudice to cloud our judgment. The domestic drug war in the US has included community profiling of poor, often black and brown, neighborhoods, racial profiling of individuals and disproportionate incarceration of African Americans. As a result the injustice and discrimination of drug enforcement has made it less popular and less effective. Now the war on terrorism is going down the same path – looking at browns, Arabs and Moslems – even though the last big terror incident involved the very white Timothy McVeigh.

Finally, we will learn – again – that all sides are infected by drug prohibition profits. In Colombia our left wing enemies profit from the trade, but so do our allies in the right wing paramilitary and individuals in the government. In Afghanistan, bin Laden has profited, so has the Taliban, but our new allies - the Northern Alliance - have also been reportedly involved in the heroin trade. So, so long as there is drug prohibition we will find ourselves the allies of drug dealers in many circumstances.

To wage a successful war on terrorism there are many lessons that need to be drawn from the failed War on Drugs. Unless we come to terms with these, we are likely to spiral into a cycle of violence that may well exceed September 11 and leave Americans with far fewer rights and freedoms than we have even known.

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This is a public service advertisement from Common Sense in Fall of 2001 dealing with the question of prohibition's funding of terrorism, ["Is The Funding Of Terrorism Another Unintended Consequence Of Drug Prohibition?"](#).

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