Social Institutions and the War Against Drugs

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I. Drugs as a Social Problem

Drugs have emerged as the nation's most urgent domestic problem. The most visible feature of the problem is the violence associated with drug trafficking and use. As compelling is the tragedy of "cocaine babies" born addicted, disabled, and for all practical purposes, motherless. The cocaine epidemic also threatens the future of older children not only in the nation's ghettos, but also its suburbs.

Given the urgency and concreteness of these elements of the drug problem, it is hardly surprising that the society tends to view the drug problem as a series of particular events and conditions that must be controlled. The operational objectives of drug policy are defined in terms of reducing levels of use, bringing down rates of drug induced crime, and dealing more effectively with the adverse health consequences (including AIDS) of illicit drug use.

II. The Institutional Impact of Drug Use

What this perspective obscures, however, is an equally important way of measuring the devastating impacts of drug use -- one that emphasizes the impact that drug use is having on the nation's social institutions. In this alternative conception, what seems bad about drugs is not just that they produce a series of bad particular consequences for particular individuals, but also that they erode key social institutions on which the society is relying to do its daily work. Families may be demolished by the effects of crack on the financial or parenting capacity of drug using parents, or by the conflicts generated in the family by drug dealing or drug using children. The capacity of schools to teach may be undermined by widespread drug use among the students. Small businesses anchoring ghetto communities may be destroyed by the combined effects of drug induced criminal attacks on property, and drug induced carelessness among the firm's employees.

III. Institutional Impacts of the War on Drugs

Once one begins thinking in institutional terms, one also begins to see that many of the problems associated with the drug problem come from the particular way the society chooses to fight the war on drugs as well as from drug use in itself. For example, the nation has chosen to make its criminal justice system central to this war. That may well be wise, but in reaching this conclusion, one must reckon the effect of engaging that set of institutions in the war on drugs on the institutions themselves as well as the effect they have on the problem beyond their boundaries.

One must recognize, for example, that fighting the drug war through the criminal justice system alone threatens not only to overwhelm those institutions, but to undermine them. The sheer mass of cases may well destroy what residual commitment the institutions had to individualized justice, or the hope of rehabilitation. The enormous sums of money held by illicit traffickers may corrupt the officials. The urgency of getting on with the job may lead officials to cut corners in the use of the particularly intrusive investigative methods that the officials must use to make drug cases.

Moreover, society's efforts to mobilize institutions to control drug use have not been limited to its own criminal justice system. It has reached out to other institutions in the society such as families, schools, the medical profession, the business community, even the military to join the fight. That may turn out to be quite helpful in dealing with the drug problem, but again there may be a price to be paid in terms of the distorting impact that the drug fighting efforts might have on the capacity of these institutions to achieve their original social purposes. Schools pre-occupied with drug control may find it difficult to teach reading and writing. Military institutions focused on interdicting drug smugglers may be less ready to deal with other threats to national security.

Society has even reached out to institutions beyond its borders to help it deal with the drug problem. It has made demands on foreign countries and international institutions to help it deal with its domestic drug problem. Such efforts have potentially grave consequences for the broader success of its foreign policy, and the state of its international relations. In this sense, the drug war threatens institutions as well as drug use itself.

IV. A Proposal to Study the Effects of Drugs and the War on Drugs on Society's Key Institutions

Given the potential threat to key institutions in the society posed both by drugs and by the war against drugs, it seems important that some group begin identifying and keeping track of this neglected set of consequences. The task is not easy, for the methodology is not well developed, nor is it clear how the relevant data may be collected. It is the sort of task that requires exploratory conceptual effort.

The best way to make that exploration is for a diverse group of scholars - distinguished by their diverse methodological backgrounds and their common concern for exploring this question - to be asked to report to the country on the impact that drugs and the war on drugs are having on some of the nation's key institutions, and how drug policy might be adapted to insure that the key institutions were strengthened rather than weakened by the nation's efforts to deal with drugs.

The process would be: 1) to select an appropriate group of scholars to essay the task; 2) have them meet in a two day session to discuss the general question and formulate individual and collective plans of attack; 3) produce the analyses that represent their best ideas about how to attack the problem; 4) meet again to discuss what they had learned in their own efforts and from the work of their colleagues; 5) redraft their reports based on that second discussion; 6) hold a larger meeting at which the complete set of final reports would be presented to the media and to key policy makers.

The anticipated result would be the development of a new perspective on the nation's drug problem and its drug war at a time when longer run concerns could probably be usefully discussed. There might also be an important methodological contribution made to the nation's ability to address other important problems, for there are many problems that might usefully be addressed from a long terms institutional as well as a short run substantive perspective.

The project could be undertaken jointly by the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences and Harvard's Law School and Kennedy School of Government. These institutions are well positioned to convene the appropriate group of scholars, focus their attention on the drug problem, and encourage them to think originally, accurately, and usefully about how social institutions are being strengthened and weakened by drugs, and the way that we are now fighting the war against drugs.