

W A H I N G T O N
Nuking It Out: Jonathan Marshall on
Sy Hersh's Israeli Bomb Book [25]

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War Is Over— If You Want It

BRAVO, CITY PAPER.

Let me commend Paul Ruffins' succinct guide for citizens, especially black citizens (and their public servants), to fight back against crime ("Fighting Back," 1/3).

Most significant in Paul Ruffins' analysis is that black Americans must begin to recognize that our nation's war on drugs is like the Vietnam War but directed against African-Americans.

Ostensibly, the government's side is well-intentioned. But we're killing our kids in "friendly fire," in part because it is impossible to tell the "enemy" from the "friendlies." As in the Vietnam War, the government has once again become addicted to the widespread telling of lies. Whether it is the falsehoods about drugs in drug-abuse-prevention materials, the manipulation of data for political purposes, the reliance of policy-making upon bogus "data," or the widespread commission and toleration of perjury by government informants and witnesses, official dishonesty is as much a hallmark of the war on drugs as it was in the Vietnam War.

Like the Vietnam War, the war is hurting those it is supposed to be helping more than it is hurting the so-called enemy. Basically the "war on drugs" is making our communities *more violent, not safer*.

Consider the inevitable results of drug prohibition:

1.) *Illegal drugs can only be an all-cash business.* No checks, no MasterCard, no American Express. Drug dealers, therefore, are perfect targets for robbers—but drug dealers can't call the cops. They can't insure themselves. Unlike other high-cash-volume businesses like liquor stores or supermarkets, drug dealers can't hire licensed, bonded security guards. But drug dealers

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still need protection, so they hire criminal gunslingers to provide protection. Laws that keep drugs illegal encourage every drug seller to arm his own posse—and those additional guns, on every street corner, mean more opportunities for violence.

2.) *Disputes in the drug business can't be resolved in court.* Business disputes are inevitable, but you can't take dealers who gyp you to small claims court. Dealers can't sue you for failing to pay your bills. Dealers can't sue wholesalers in disagreements over amount, quality, or quantity of goods delivered. In the illegal drug business, the only way to resolve the inevitable conflicts in business is through violence.

Considering the many conflicts in every large industry (and how many lawsuits that result), one should not be surprised that the number of drug-business shootings in D.C. is as large as it is. Drug-

selling turf conflict is inevitable without an overarching criminal system to police underworld disputes. (And establishment of such a syndicate would require complete corruption of our police.)

Lawyers should recognize that a legal, regulated, non-violent drug business would be a source of new business.

3.) *We strengthen the power of the bad guys.* Illegal drug dealing is now among the largest non-government industries in the District

of Columbia. The June 1990 study of the economics of drug dealing in Washington, D.C., by the RAND Drug Policy Research Center estimated the gross earnings of drug dealers at \$758 million in 1988 (p.93), and none of that was subject to sales tax. The illegal drug business is one of the biggest employers in the District. RAND estimated that there were about 24,000 drug dealers in D.C. in 1987. The net income from drug dealing was \$354 million—none of it was reported for income-tax purposes. All the profits have to be laundered, giving criminals more opportunity to infiltrate and corrupt our economic institutions.

4.) *We are creating more alienation in our community.* Kids are stopped and frisked on the street—lowering their self-esteem. We are dishonest about drugs. If parents use marijuana, they hide that from their children, and they lie to their children about drugs.

Illegal drugs provide a simple opportunity to set people up for crimes they didn't commit. It becomes advantageous to be a government informer, reporting about your neighbors' lifestyles. Today a large class of professional informants is supported by the taxpayers.

5.) *Like the war in Vietnam, the war on drugs is not helping the people who are supposed to be helped.* It stigmatizes drug users and addicts and makes it harder for them to get treatment. Instead of knitting the strands of our community together, the war on drugs helps tear them further apart.

6.) *The war on drugs is compounding the crisis in medical care.* The war on drugs increases the number of trauma cases in hospital emergency rooms, it increases the demand for scarce blood, and it threatens pregnant addicts with jail (instead of offering prenatal care). The war on drugs increases the number of AIDS cases by making clean needles contraband and fostering economic incentives for prostitution.

Unfortunately, simply ending the drug war will not end the crime and violence problems. But deluding ourselves (and our children) that there could ever be a "drug-free America," and adopting the policies of "zero tolerance" to bring that about, is unrealistic, impulsive, and, if focused at all, is only focused short-term. We should be mindful that criminal thinking is basically unrealistic, impulsive, and short-term.

Isn't it time to stop thinking that we can solve the problem of crime by thinking like criminals?

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