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Democracy Dies in Darkness

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DRUG WAR NOT A FAILURE AND UNTRUE TO SAY NO EVIDENCE

It's simply not true to say "The war on drugs isn't working" [editorial, Nov. 13] and assert that it is "difficult to assert how new drug laws will affect drug usage." There is a record on both points.

Monthly recreational drug use is down almost 40 percent since the 15 percent use rate in the 1960s and 1970s to 9 percent now. Parents, teachers, religious and business leaders, coaches, community and health care leaders, national government officials and local policy makers have put an enormous effort into education, prevention, treatment, law enforcement and foreign policy to cut supply and demand and to educate. The last three years of Four Star Gen. Barry McCaffrey's Drug Czar tenure (1996-2001) under President Bill Clinton saw a 30 percent drop in youth drug use because of a multi-billion-dollar youth anti-drug advertising campaign. Clearly, a similar campaign should begin immediately for the huge spike in opioid abuse and addiction.

Now, with legalization and decriminalization and with use easier and less punitive, Washington, Oregon and Colorado have seen a 6 percent increase in car crashes according to a 2017 National Transportation Safety Board study. In November 2019, in the Journal of the American Medical Association, the New York University School of Medicine and Columbia University School of Health analyzed data from the Health and Human Services National Survey on Drug Use and found that "in states recreational marijuana is legal, problematic use increased" by 25% among adolescents 12-17, and by 26% among adults."

Imagine what the numbers for use, car crashes, treatment and hospitalizations will be if the new Oregon all-drugs decriminalization is implemented. Luckily, Congress is aware of these risks, and despite efforts by Big Pot financial interests to repeat the mistakes of Big Tobacco, has resisted. Federal law on illegality other than with Food and Drug Administration-approved medical data remains and supersedes state laws.

It's true that treatment is a better approach than prison for the individual and society where possible. That's why drug courts mandating treatment have increased exponentially, under the initial leadership of Gen. McCaffrey, Attorney General Janet Reno, and leaders of both parties, from 12 in 1995 to more than 3,000 now. Drug courts are a "no-brainer," as Gen. McCaffrey often states.

Imagine if in America we decreased by 40 percent the heart attacks, diabetes, cancer, poverty or hunger. Would we say those efforts were a failure? No, we'd say great, but we still have more to do. The same is true for drug policy.

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The writer was Director of Public Affairs and a spokesman for the Office of National Drug Control Policy from 1995 to 2001.



A drug syringe found behind a vacant property in northeast Albuquerque is placed into a container, as crews attempt to clear the lot of needles and other heroin paraphernalia. (Mary Hudetz/AP)