

# Making Peace with the War on Drugs

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War has defined my generation. In fact, as an American I'm highly qualified to discuss war. I was born in the shadow of World War II in which my father served. The Korean Conflict conscripted him back into service and moved us from one side of the country to the other. The Cold War had us scurrying under our primary school desks in the event of an atomic attack and holding our breath for six days in May during the Cuban missile crisis. Vietnam, which I narrowly escaped by luck of the draw, maimed and killed many in my generation and scarred the psyche of the nation. In my first year of ministry, Reagan invaded the tiny island of Grenada in part to divert us from the humiliation of a Marine barracks being bombed in Beirut two days earlier. It was a swift victory leaving plenty of resources for the war in El Salvador, which diverted arms to Saddam Hussein. Bush One, who claimed to dislike taking America to war (at least alone) invaded Panama, and then convinced the "coalition of the willing" to join him in the first Gulf War to repel Iraq's forces from Kuwait. Flushed with success he then intervened in Somalia with less success, giving us the movie *Blackhawk Down*. The Bosnian War gave us a break from impeachment hearings during the Clinton years. For the last fifteen years we have been at war in the Middle East without let-up, first with Iraq, then Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen and now Syria. That Iran is not on the list is a disappointment to Republicans.

Then there are all the wars declared not on nations but on things or ideas: the war on poverty, the war on drugs, the war on terror, and Fox News' war on Christmas. After the horror this week in Orlando, where a homophobic, ISIS-inspired man with an automatic weapon killed 49 and wounded even more, there was even a call for a war on Islam by one presidential candidate. Seriously Donald? What could possibly go wrong with that? He might want to Wikipedia Pope Urban II, who called for the first crusade against "the infidel" a thousand years ago and see how that worked out.

I feel like Winston in Orwell's *1984* -- I cannot remember a time when my country was not at war with someone or some thing. I know I am preaching to the choir about my frustration with living in a time of perpetual war, but we need to know why it persists. Who gains from it? Noam Chomsky posits, "a state of perpetual war is an aid to (and is promoted by) the powerful members of dominant political and economic classes, helping maintain their positions of economic and political superiority."

To check out the verity of Chomsky's view, I decided to look in depth at just one of the wars—the war on drugs. While it seems to be a case of perpetual war, drugs have been illegal only for a hundred years, not an unprecedented length of time for a war, and there is a glimmer that suggests there might be light at the end of this tunnel.

In preparing my last sermon on loneliness I came across an engrossing book by Johann Hari, *Chasing the Scream: the first and last days of the War on Drugs*. Hari tells the story of how the war began with one man from rural Pennsylvania who, in the end, made it a world war. Then he shares the stories of those who were the collateral damage of his obsession. Finally, he makes the case for why it was a war that should never have been fought. Like all wars it was easy to start but hard to end.

Hari begins his tale by saying if the war on drugs had a Mount Rushmore it would have three faces on it: Harry Anslinger, Arnold Rothstein, and jazz singer Billie Holiday.

The seeds of the war on drugs were planted in 1904. While visiting a neighbour's farmhouse, a 12-year old Harry Anslinger heard a scream from upstairs. It was desperate and aching, leaving Harry confused. Why would a grown woman howl like an animal?

Her husband ran downstairs and gave Harry instructions to go to town as fast as he could to pick up a package from the pharmacy and hurry back. When he returned with a bag of drugs

the farmer gave them to his wife and her screaming stopped and she was calm. But Harry wasn't. He never forgot her screams. He would for ever believe that drugs made normal people, in his own words, "emotional, hysterical, degenerate, mentally deficient and vicious." When he grew into a man, this boy was going to draw together some of the deepest fears in American culture—of racial minorities, of intoxication, of losing control—and channel them into a global war to prevent those screams.

A few year's earlier in Manhattan, a wealthy Orthodox trader walked in on his 3-year old son standing over his older sleeping brother ready to stab him with a knife. When asked why, Arnold Rothstein just said he hated his brother. It turns out he would hate the majority of the human race he considered "dumbbells with rotten judgment." He would kill many personally until he had the power and wealth to pay others to do it for him. Most like him would end up in prison but his capacity for violence was rewarded, not punished. Harry's war later handed Arnold a new market for illegal drugs in North America.

In 1920, a six-year old girl lay on the floor of a brothel in Baltimore listening to jazz records. Her mother thought it was the devil's music and wouldn't let her listen to it at home. So, she offered to do small cleaning tasks for the madam of the local brothel, but instead taking money she only wanted to be left alone to listen to her music. It gave Billie Holiday a feeling she couldn't describe and she was determined, one day, to create this feeling in other people.

Even after she was raped, and after she was pimped, and after she started to inject heroin to take away the pain, this music would still be waiting for her, but so would Harry. He pursued her for years right up to her tragic end when he had chained her to her hospital deathbed.

When Harry, Arnold and Billie were born, drugs were freely available throughout the world. You could go to an American pharmacy and buy products made from the same ingredients as heroin and cocaine. The most popular cough mixtures contained opiates and a new soft drink, Coca-Cola, was made from cocaine. In Britain, the classiest department stores sold heroin tins for society women.

But by 1914 Americans were feeling anxious. The cause was rapid societal change unknown to their parents and grandparents. They needed something to make them less fearful. They needed a real, physical object that symbolised their anxiety and that they could destroy. They decided heroin and cocaine were the cause of their problems. The Harrison Act made them illegal to buy over-the-counter, but not illegal to prescribe to treat addiction. It opened the door for Harry's all out war on drugs.

When Prohibition ended in America, there was no longer a need for the Department of Prohibition. Instead of abolishing it, they renamed it the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and Harry Anslinger was its first head. His corrupt and crooked staff were demoralised after fourteen years of waging war on alcohol, only to lose. Harry needed to whip them into shape to wipe drugs from the face of the earth. He had three obstacles. Many drugs were still legal, including marijuana. The Supreme Court had recently ruled that people addicted to harder drugs should be treated by doctors, not sent to prison. And third, his budget had been significantly cut.

To turn it around he decided he needed to expand what drugs were illegal. While he believed that it was an absurd fallacy that marijuana was addictive or caused violent crime, almost overnight he began arguing the opposite. The reason? He believed the two most feared groups in America, Mexican immigrants and African Americans, were using marijuana more than white people. He convinced the House Committee on Appropriations about where marijuana in the hands of these people could lead. He told them that, "coloured students at the University of Minnesota partying with white female students and getting their sympathy with stories of racial persecution resulted in the women getting pregnant." He also quoted one expert who believed marijuana was a great evil that had to be eradicated. He neglected to mention the 29 other experts he consulted who said it would be wrong to ban it and that it had been widely misrepresented in the press.

Harry then set out to scare the public. He warned that smoking weed would result in falling into a delirious rage where you would be gripped by erotic dreams and lose control of connected thought and eventually go insane, possibly killing someone. He upped the ante by arguing “if the hideous monster Frankenstein came face to face with the monster Marijuana, he would drop dead of fright.”

The most frightening claim he made to a dominant racist white population was marijuana’s negative effect was on blacks. He claimed marijuana made blacks forget appropriate racial barriers and unleashed their lust for white women.

The warnings worked. The public and the press began to clamour for his Bureau to be given more money to save them from this threat.

To cement his views in the mind of the public and assure future funding he targeted Billie Holiday. Not only did she sing jazz, which was the opposite of everything Harry believed in, she, like many jazz musicians, used marijuana and other drugs. In 1939 she went on stage and sang a song that became iconic:

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root.*

She was challenging racial barriers just as Harry had warned blacks would do under the influence. Black women were allowed on stage only as caricatures, stripped of all real feeling. But Billie expressed grief and fury at the mass murder of her brothers in the South hanging from trees. Many years later, this moment would be called the beginning of the civil rights movement. Authorities ordered her to stop singing it. She refused. The next day Harry’s Federal Bureau of Narcotics began harassing her.

Harry’s other problem was not everyone saw drugs being the danger he did, especially doctors. Most people who used drugs led normal, law-abiding lives. When the Harrison Act banned over-the-counter cocaine and heroin remedies like Mrs Winslow’s Soothing Syrup in 1914, doctors still routinely prescribed it or administered them in clinics. Many doctors stood up to Harry. They continued to prescribe opiates to their addicted patients, but Harry crushed them. Harry’s Bureau arrested over 20,000 doctors for violating the Harrison Act. 95% of them were convicted as drug dealers.

The biggest winners of Harry’s War were crime syndicates. The Harrison Act and Harry’s obsessive enforcement of it as well as the criminalisation of marijuana created the perfect situation for people like Arnold Rothstein to go into drug smuggling. Tens of thousands from all walks of life craved drugs they could no longer get legally at low price. As one doctor wrote, “they must have the drugs at any hazard, at any cost.” In the pharmacies, morphine had cost two or three cents a grain. The drug dealer charged a dollar. The addicts paid whatever they were told. To feed their habit many were forced to become criminals. Harry’s war became the most potent maker of criminals in history: first the drug dealers often – like Arnold Rothstein—unpunished and then their clients who were much more likely to be punished. The long-term result is that while the US has 5% of the world’s population, it has 25% of the world’s prisoners. Of the 2.3 million incarcerated, 58% of them are either black or Hispanic. About 59% of those incarcerated have been convicted of a drug offence.

But this is not just an American problem. Harry believed the war could not be won unless drugs were prohibited everywhere. The problem was they were legal almost everywhere until the 1960s. He threatened cutting off foreign aid and restricting their free trade with the US. Eventually the world caved to Harry who was using the most powerful country on earth as his leverage.

By the time Harry retired after serving longer than even J Edgar Hoover as the head of a US security agency, no one was talking about disbanding his Bureau of Narcotics. It was an

essential part of the government machine, now called the DEA—the Drug Enforcement Agency.

The irony is his war did not succeed in eliminating drugs. There are more drugs than ever as the latest haul of \$448 million of meth recovered from a stranded boat on Ninety Mile Beach proves. But the war does generate billions for enforcement, the legal system, and the prison industry. It gives a false sense security against racist fears, incarcerating the least powerful in society, people of colour, at a much higher rate. In New Zealand, Maori and Pacific people make up 63% of our prison population. Drug possession is one of the six most common reasons for incarceration.

It would seem Chomsky is right. Only those in power have benefitted from the perpetual war on drugs Harry started as it helps maintain their economic and political superiority.

The tragedy is no war was ever needed. If you ask what causes the scream that haunted Harry, drug addiction, we would probably say drugs. But studies show addiction is neither an illness nor a moral failing—it is an adaptation. When a rat is put alone in a cage and provided access to an opiate it will use it until it kills it. When an addicted rat is put into a cage with other rats with access to an opiate it will eventually stop using it. There was an extremely high rate of heroin addiction amongst US soldiers in Vietnam. When they returned home 95% stopped using it, mostly without benefit of rehab. Other studies have discovered that when young people get addicted they often naturally stop in their mid-thirties. This suggests that stress and isolation are at the root of addiction and our task is to reduce both so the addict can recover naturally, and to keep them alive until they do. Think about it. If you ever had major surgery and were given morphine for pain relief did you become addicted when it was no longer needed?

Harry's war made addiction worse. Prison is hardly a stress reliever. Convincing society that addicts are moral degenerates that require "tough love" is hardly going to reduce a sense of isolation.

I said earlier there is a glimmer promising a light at the end of this destructive tunnel. There are states in America now permitting the use of medical marijuana and two states that have decriminalised its use. Both efforts have been strenuously resisted by the DEA. President Obama has pardoned a small number of long-term prisoners for minor drug infractions. But these are baby steps compared with Portugal. In 1999, Portugal had one of the highest rates of heroin use in the world after decades following Anslinger's formula of punishing drug users. A panel of experts recommended that "drug users should be treated as full members of society instead of cast out as criminals or other pariahs. Instead of striving toward an unachievable perfection such as zero drug use, Portugal should decriminalise all drugs." In 2001, the persecution of drug users and addicts officially ended. The new law stipulated that drug users should not be labelled or marginalised but encouraged to seek treatment from the State.

Many predicted disaster, but just the opposite happened when they turned the machinery of the drug war into an active machine to establish a drug peace. In the US, 90% of the money spent on drug policy goes to policing and punishment and 10% to treatment and prevention. In Portugal it is the exact opposite. They have the money now to treat with compassion those in recovery and then to give them hope by finding them decent jobs with decent wages that allow them to re-enter society with dignity. They do this by giving a hefty yearlong tax break to anyone who employs a recovering addict. Portugal has silenced Harry's scream and is reaping the benefits.

If the rest of the world should make peace with drugs, never fear. There are still plenty of other wars to be fought. But maybe, just maybe, making peace with this war will help the world to imagine with John Lennon all the people living life in peace.