

'Dutch' Reagan's drug policy

America's second Civil War

NINETEEN-EIGHTY-ONE was a watershed year for US drugs policy. Under the previous democratic presidencies of Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, the war on drugs rhetoric of the Nixon era was watered down. The numbers of drug offenders in prison were still rising, but in 1978 Carter actually proposed the decriminalisation of marijuana.

Once Ronald Reagan rode into town, everything changed. Over the next twelve years, budgets soared from \$855 million in 1981 to more than \$7.8 billion in 1993. Underpinning the escalation of the drugs war was a domestic agenda founded on a defence of family values, conservative Christian morality and patriotism. The Reagan administration saw drugs as a key issue in uniting all the forces of the Moral Majority.

NANCY SAYS NO

Reagan was joined in his crusade by his wife Nancy. 'Just Say No' started out a public relations strategy to enhance her reputation after a mauling by the press especially from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* accusing her of prioritising the curtains and china for the White House over social concerns. The campaign appealed not only to parents, but also to a broad church of conservative opinion looking to fight back against what they saw as the unacceptable liberalism of the seventies.

Apologists for 'Just Say No' have since claimed the campaign was a huge success citing the 22 per cent reduction in casual drug use during the Reagan era. Evidence from other studies suggests that drug use in the general population goes in natural cycles, so how much credit individual strategies take for any decline is highly debatable. In the US, drug use had already peaked in 1979, two years before Reagan was elected. And one drug that was definitely not in decline was cocaine: it was rising numbers of white, middle-class cocaine users that added weight to the escalating drug war.

In the early 1980s, there was a substantial drop in the wholesale price of cocaine – from \$50,000 a kilo in 1980, down to \$35,000 in 1984 and then a further slump to \$12,000 by 1992. With the price drop came an explosive new delivery system for cocaine – crack. As well as creating enormous profits for a handful of dealers, crack generated hitherto unavailable employment for around 150,000 people in New York by the early 1990s, mainly teenagers packing vials and acting as gofers and lookouts.

GHETTO POLITICS

According to Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell in their book on media coverage of crack in the Reagan era (*Cracked Coverage*, Duke University Press 1994), the arrival of crack cocaine in the mid-1980s, "was a godsend for the Right: they used it as an ideological figleaf to place over unsightly urban ills which had

While the White House trumpeted 'Just Say No', black urban America was torn apart by crack cocaine. **Harry Shapiro** looks back at the Reagan years


increased markedly under the Reagan administration. They used it as a scapegoat on which to blame many economic and urban problems".

The long-standing problems of ghetto areas were compounded by the economic restructuring of America from the 1970s onwards and the rise of social conservatism – the philosophies of Reaganomics, the New Right and the Moral Majority who forged a new political dialectic which said that those who are *in* trouble are those who *cause* trouble. The prominence of this discourse allowed the government to slash welfare programmes and all sorts of aid for the poorest in society, do nothing to improve inner city life and then fill up the jails with the most disaffected groups in society, primarily young black males.

And as crack spread, the jails became full to bursting point. The Washington-based charity Sentencing Project calculated that in 1990, one in four African-American males aged 20–29 were either in prison or on probation – that's 600,000 – compared to the 400,000 in higher education. Why so many black people in prison, when in absolute terms the majority of drug users were and are white middle class? An assistant to William Bennett, America's first drug czar, was asked this very question. He said it was much easier for the police to spot and apprehend black dealers operating in the poorest black areas than to infiltrate white clubs and social gatherings. So if you want to be seen to be doing something about drugs, you hit the black community. And this was probably the most blatant obscenity of Reagan-era US foreign policy - while Nancy Reagan was extolling the nation to Just Say No – her husband's premier intelligence agency was at the very least turning a blind eye to cocaine running into the US which was providing funds for the anti-communist, pro-US contras fighting to overthrow the elected government of Nicaragua. And once crack use gripped the inner cities, it triggered implementation of all the processes Reagan had put into place almost as soon as he came into office whereby Federal intelligence capacity was refocused to assist the police, DEA and other civilian enforcement agencies. He also amended the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 which had outlawed any military involvement in civilian law enforcement.

ROUGH JUSTICE

Reagan was the cheerleader for anti-drug hysteria and the activities of some of those he appointed were outrageous. His drug advisor Carlton Turner told *Time*



magazine that marijuana use caused homosexuality and those put in charge of the National Institute of Drug Abuse purged the libraries of politically unsound texts. But the political reality was that the Democrats were equally culpable in the passing of some of the most draconian anti-drug legislation since the early 1950s. Anti-drug fever gripped the political establishment 'Nobody Righter than me' became the slogan on drug issues every bit as potent as 'Just Say No.' Nothing was to be gained politically by defending drug abusers from excessive punishment.

In 1986 the Democrat-led Congress enacted mandatory minimum sentencing laws, which forced judges to deliver fixed sentences to individuals convicted of a crime, regardless of culpability or other mitigating factors. Federal mandatory drug sentences were to be determined based on three factors: the type of drug, weight of the drug mixture (or alleged weight in conspiracy cases), and the number of prior convictions. Judges were unable to consider other important factors such as the offender's role, motivation, and the likelihood of recidivism. Only by providing the prosecutor with 'substantial assistance', (information that aids the government in prosecuting other offenders) could defendants reduce their mandatory sentences. This created huge incentives for people charged with drug offences to provide false information in order to receive a shorter sentence. There was also discriminatory sentencing for those in possession and dealing crack (mainly black) over cocaine powder (mainly white).

This was followed by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act 1988 which established the federal death penalty for drug traffickers and which Reagan said he signed in honour of his wife. The families of offenders are still battling against minimum mandatory sentencing policy which the US Sentencing Commission and the Department of Justice admit does nothing to deter crime.

TARNISHED

Even the ultra-conservative *National Review* magazine, which in its recent analysis called Reagan 'among the most successful of all presidents', observed that his domestic achievements were 'seriously tarnished by the massive escalation of so-called war against drugs ... The consequences for Fifth Amendment property rights, Fourth Amendment privacy rights, Second Amendment arms rights and Tenth Amendment states rights have been horrible ... the awful consequences of his drug policies continue to harm America'. The article concluded, 'even presidents with a deep affection for American traditions of freedom can be blind to their own ideals'.

So as Ronald Reagan – man of traditional family values – gallops off into the last sunset, the legacy of US drug policy in the 80s and the civil war waged against the American people, white and black, is revealed not as a limp B-movie, but a tale of X-rated horror. ■

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