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The War Against Drugs: When is a war not a war?



On June 18 1971, the American media reported that US President Richard Nixon had published a message he had sent to Congress the previous day, stating that drug abuse was “public enemy number one.”

Two years earlier, he had referred to a “War on drugs, aiming for eradication, interdiction and incarceration”.

The War on Drugs became an international soundbite for the need to resolve the crippling consequences for society on addiction and its effects on the social, economic and political fabric of society.

Illegal drugs and their criminal trade ruin lives and families. It finances terrorism, mass murder and many other egregious crimes. They destroy and exploit young and old people in all societies; sophisticated or developing. On a more trivial level, they turn people into insufferable bores and unpleasant fantasists. But that is by the by.

Who calls it “The War on Drugs” now? The term arises periodically in the UK and the US, generally in media and political circles.

But it appears to remain in the English-speaking world. The French refer to it as “la lutte”, the Spanish, “la lucha”, the Italians, “la lotta”; the Russians, the “borba”. The “struggle”; not the war.

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There is a war currently raging on the Eastern borders of Europe with Russian aggression towards Ukraine.

A more conventional, even prehistoric war, as we watch shocking newsreel of almost prehistoric reruns of thousands of soldiers mown down by batteries of conventional weapons reminiscent of the the horrors of the two 20th Century World Wars, supposedly never to happen again.

Wars end. Someone wins; someone loses. Things change. But some wars don't end; some wars are intractable. There are apologies for unending wars. Here's a quote of hubristic political sophistry (despite my suspicions, I've failed to identify the original author):

“When a problem has no solution, it ceases to be a problem, and it becomes a fact”. Facts are horrid; tough luck. Face them, tackle them or brush them under the tapestry of your life and focus on nicer things.

The War against Hunger? The War against Poverty? Can you win a war against abstractions? The War against Terrorism? How do we eradicate them? How do we tackle them? Take arms, and “by opposing, end them”? Does it rely on enormous political will? What are the solutions and how do we implement them?

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The US strategy to stem and eradicate illegal drugs trafficking between 1970-mid 2000s was called “upstream disruption”.

This entailed a plan agreed with the US allied democratic Colombian government, American's nearest illegal drugs (cocaine) provider, whose migraine about this curse on its country was as bad as anyone else's.

It entailed a package of a massive funding injection of political and military aid: training and equipment aiming to destroy the “narcobaron” who ruled and exploited the cocaine trade in a large country, with a climate suitable for the cultivation of cocaine and, to their advantage, of such breathtaking topological diversity that it made it virtually ungovernable.

We've all seen the movies about the notorious Pablo Escobar, kingpin of the notorious Medellin Cartel during the 1980's to mid-1990's, still considered the richest

criminal in history.

He engaged in battles with rival cartels resulting in massacres of judges, political officials, soldiers, policemen and ordinary citizens.

in 1981, the US and Colombian governments decided to arrest him and he offered to pay off the Colombian national debt in return for no incarceration.

This was rejected, unsurprisingly, so he forced a compromise whereby he built his own prison: La Catedral, moved his henchman in and continued his career, winning support from the local population by building homes and schools. Great Hollywood Robin Hood material, but a step too far for the authorities.

Escobar was shot dead by the Colombian army in 1993. But killing the hydra is a tricky business, as Hercules discovered when he cut off its head, which instantly grew back.

The cartel immediately splintered, rival kingpins entered the fray, and the problems of focusing all your resources on a single target became clear.

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A problem is like a balloon: you squeeze it and it pops out somewhere else. From the mid 1990's on, internal and international drugs trafficking spilled beyond Colombia into neighbouring countries with similar access to drug routes for export.

The counter narcotics programme was getting increasingly expensive and resource intensive while worsening the domestic problems for concerned governments.

Advocates of legalisation or decriminalisation of illegal drugs: heroine, cocaine, and

increasingly harmful synthetic opioids, argue that consumption is the personal responsibility of the user, and that many users have the ability to tolerate these drugs as a helpful means of tension relief.

I have heard Law Enforcement Agents distinguish "good users" from "bad users" - good users being sufficiently wealthy to enter into a commercial relationship from that nice man down the road who supplies pure drugs - a safe and useful service.

Bad users are the ones who break into your house and steal your computers and your children's video games to fund their desperate addictions.

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I've also heard from world-weary policemen that dawn raids in night clubs is a pointless tactic because there are so many unclaimed drugs scattered around the premises; users have no more need of them.

Well, that night, anyway. Certain drugs are known to be widely used by apparently functioning, earning adults who just want a bit of fun on a Saturday evening.

They're not harming anyone else, are they? Why not just legalise them, tax them and boost public expenditure on key areas of a good society: health, education, welfare?

Overnight, they continue to argue, the viciousness of the drugs trade would disappear. The splintered, ruthless remnants of the notorious cartels in producer countries: Colombia and the northern cone of Latin America for cocaine; the heroin producing poppy fields of Afghanistan controlled by and funding the Taleban: all wiped out.

They would resort to the coffee and other clean trading products. Colombia in particular would become what it should be: a

thriving, international tourist paradise.

This is a self-serving, ignorant view that fails to take account of the complexities of producer countries' problems.

The cocaine kingpins and rivals are ruthless in their disregard for the rule of law and life is cheap. If liberal countries legalise their product, they will simply undercut the government-set prices and intensify the problem by unspeakable volumes.

Do you want your country to be known as a junkie paradise, when you have such a rich architectural and cultural heritage which offers spiritual satisfaction rather than a quick rush

There are well-recorded pragmatic attempts and experiments by some liberal Western European governments to strive for a drug-free world. Some governments have tested the waters on a more liberal policy towards drug consumption.

Much is made of various approaches in the Netherlands: the proliferation of "cannabis cafés", relaxing penalties for public usage of "softer" drugs like cannabis, while complying with strict international norms on dealing in and trafficking hard drugs.

Views on this vary. Do you want your country to be known as a junkie paradise, when you have such a rich architectural and cultural heritage which offers spiritual satisfaction rather than a quick rush?

The illegal drugs trade is pernicious, cruel destructive, and inextricably linked to terrorism and serious crime, overseen by money and greed. A Utopian drug-free world is apparently unattainable. It is not a winnable war. It has estimated to have cost the US \$1 trillion. We've lost the war.

But I still support the strategy. What we are engaged in here is not a war. It's a containment strategy.

A containment strategy is not a glib payment of lip service to an embarrassing social issue that lacks sufficient political will to annul it. If you call it an unwinnable war, you risk subverting its significance and undermine concerted efforts to tackle it in the relentless human struggle to improve the quality of life.

Fight and struggle against the illegal drug trade; educate yourselves and others on the actual contents of the drugs; think upstream as well as downstream. Just don't call it a war.