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Summary

Governor Gary E. Johnson is the top elected official in the country to call for a national debate on drug policy. He argues that the war on drugs is a multi-billion dollar failure and he recommends reforms that aim to reduce the harm caused by and suffered by drug addicts.

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“In 1981 the federal government spent about \$1.5 billion on the drug war. Today we spend almost \$20 billion a year at the federal level, with the states spending at least that much again.”

The war on drugs is a bad investment

By Gary E. Johnson

As the Republican governor of New Mexico, I'm neither soft on crime nor pro-drugs in any sense. I believe a person who harms another person should be punished. But as a successful businessman, I also believe that locking up more and more people who are nonviolent drug offenders, people whose real problem is that they are addicted to drugs, is simply a waste of money and human resources.

Drugs are a handicap. I don't think anyone should use them. But if a person is using marijuana in his or her own home, doing no harm to anyone other than arguably to himself or herself, should that person be arrested and put in jail? In my opinion the answer is no.

Any social policy or endeavor should be evaluated based on its actual effectiveness, just as in business any investment should be evaluated based on its returns. By that standard the nationwide drug war is a failure. After 20-plus years of zero-tolerance policies and increasingly harsh criminal penalties, we have over half a million people behind bars on drug charges nationwide—more than the total prison population in all of Western Europe. We're spending billions of dollars to keep them locked up. Yet the federal government's own research demonstrates that drugs are cheaper, purer, and more readily available than when this war started. Heroin use is up. Ecstasy use is up. Teenagers say that marijuana is easier to get than alcohol. No matter how you slice it, this is no success story.

In 1981 the federal government spent about \$1.5 billion on the drug war. Today we spend almost \$20 billion a year at the federal level, with the states spending at least that much again. In 1980 the federal government arrested a few hundred thousand people on drug charges; today we arrest 1.6 million people a year for drug offenses. Yet we still have a drug problem.

I propose a new bottom line for evaluating our success. Currently our government measures the success of our drug policies by whether drug use went up or down, or whether seizures went up or down, or how many acres of coca we eradicated in South America. These are absolutely the wrong criteria. Instead of asking how many people smoked marijuana last year, we should ask if drug-related crime

went up or down. Instead of asking how many people did heroin last year, we should ask whether heroin overdoses went up or down. We should ask if public nuisances associated with drug use and dealing went up or down. In short, we should be trying to reduce the harm caused by and suffered by drug users, instead of simply trying to lock them all up.

We need to reform our drug policies. The answer lies in sentencing reform, in supplying treatment on demand, and in delivering honest drug education to our kids. We need policies that reflect what we know about drug addiction rather than policies that seek to punish it. The days of a drug war waged against our people should come to an end. If we take a new approach—one that deals with drugs through a medical model rather than a criminal justice model—I guarantee that prison rates will drop, violent crime will decrease, property crime will decrease, overdose deaths will decrease, AIDS and hepatitis C will decrease, and more of those needing treatment for drug abuse will receive it.

If we take these and other “harm reduction” approaches toward drug use, we will spend many times less what we currently spend on the drug war, and the benefit will be a society with less death, disease, crime, suffering, and imprisonment. By any measure, that’s a more sensible investment.

Gary E. Johnson is governor of New Mexico. On May 23 he will discuss “Rethinking the war on drugs” at a Cascade Policy Institute luncheon in downtown Portland. For information visit www.cascadepolicy.org or call (503) 242-0900.

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