

The Racial History of U.S. Drug Prohibition

Compiled by Drug Policy Alliance. August 2001.

[T]he drug laws can be used selectively and sporadically, against the poor or the otherwise undesirable, which is by no means incidental. Their enforcement is a tremendous political and economic weapon against what we call the Third World -- James Baldwin

In the United States and many other nations, it is no longer possible to talk honestly and frankly about racism without talking about the "war on drugs." Few US policies have had as disproportionate effect on Blacks, Latinos and other racial minorities than the "war on drugs". Every policy of the "war on drugs" - from racial profiling to arrests to prosecutions to length of sentencing - is disproportionately carried out against minorities. It should come as no surprise that the United States government has used the "war on drugs" to reinforce the country's historically racist attitudes towards all minorities and especially Blacks and Latinos. From its very inception the "war on drugs" has been laden with racial overtones.

A century ago opiates and cocaine were freely available and used both medicinally and recreationally by people throughout the U.S. Scores of patent medicines, elixirs and liquid concoctions contained substantial amounts of opium or cocaine. Studies published between 1871 and 1922 paint a striking portrait of the typical opiate or cocaine addict in the early 20th century: a middle aged, rural, middle- or upper-class White woman.(1) The peak of opiate dependence in the United States occurred near the turn of the century, when the number of addicts was estimated at close to 250,000 in a population of 76 million -- a rate never again equaled.(2) Yet despite the relative prevalence of addiction, the prevailing attitude at the time was that drug addiction was a health problem, best treated by physicians and pharmacists.

However public attitudes about drug use began to change as perceptions about drug users shifted. Opposition to opium smoking grew as it was increasingly linked to Chinese immigrants in the western United States. Strong anti-Chinese sentiment, exacerbated by a growing fear of competitive cheap Chinese labor, led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which forbade further immigration. Reports that the upper classes were taking up opium smoking in New York and other cities led to heightened alarm. Fears that respectable white women were being seduced into a life of prostitution and debauchery in opium dens were inflamed by vivid reports. In 1902, the Committee on the Acquirement of the Drug Habit of the American Pharmaceutical Association declared: "If the 'Chinaman' cannot get along without his 'dope,' we can get along without him." In 1909 the United States' international "war on drugs" began when California prohibited the importation of smoking opium.

In 1910 Dr. Hamilton Wright, considered by some the father of U.S. anti-narcotics laws, reported that U.S. contractors were giving cocaine to their Black employees to get more work out of them.(3) A few years later, stories began to proliferate about "cocaine-crazed Negroes" in the South who had run amuck. The New York Times published a story that alleged "most of the attacks upon white women of the South are the direct result of the 'cocaine-crazed' Negro brain." The story asserted that "Negro cocaine fiends are now a known Southern menace." Some southern police departments switched to .38 caliber revolvers, because they thought cocaine made Blacks impervious to .32 caliber bullets.(4) These stories were in part motivated by a desire to persuade Southern members of Congress to support the proposed Harrison Narcotics Act, which would greatly expand the federal government's power to control drugs.(5) This lie was also necessary since, even though drugs were widely used in America, very little crime was associated with the users.(6)

When marijuana was popularized in the 20s and 30s in the American jazz scene, Blacks and Whites sat down as equals and smoked together. The racist anti-marijuana propaganda of the time used this crumbling of racial barriers as an example of the degradation caused by marijuana. Harry Anslinger, head of the newly formed federal narcotics division, warned middle-class leaders about Blacks and Whites dancing together in "teahouses," using blatant prejudice to sell prohibition.(7) In 1931 New Orleans officials attributed many of the region's crimes to marijuana, which they believed was also a dangerous sexual stimulant.

During the Great Depression, the 1937 Marijuana Tax Act came into law, again using racism as its chief selling point. The same Mexicans who were vying with out of work Americans for the few agricultural jobs available, it was said, engaged in marijuana induced violence against Americans.

In the early 1960s nonconformist college students and 'hippies' again popularized marijuana. The growing 'counterculture' that emerged at that time questioned the value of war, the sanity of U.S. foreign policy and governmental authority in general. This period coincided with growing urban unrest by Blacks impatient with the slow pace of implementation of civil rights legislation. The reinvigorated "war on drugs" declared by President Richard Nixon targeted and effectively criminalized both groups of his staunchest critics -- youth and urban minorities.

Black, Latino, Native American, and many Asian youth were portrayed as purveyors of violence, traffickers of drugs and a danger to society. Criminality and deviance was racialized. Surveillance was focused on communities of color, immigrants, the unemployed, the undereducated, and the homeless, who continue to be the principal targets of law enforcement efforts to fight the "war on drugs".

The inherent racism in America's enforcement of its drug policy has reached crisis proportions. Failure to act will result in the continued decimation of Black, Latino and other communities of color throughout the United States. There must be a sincere effort from the US government to end the legacy of race discrimination and xenophobia of the "war on drugs."

Notes:

1. David T. Courtwright, *Dark Paradise: Opiate Addiction in America Before 1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 36-37.
2. Summarized in David F. Musto, M.D. *The History of Legislative Control Over Opium, Cocaine and their Derivatives*.
3. David F. Musto, *The American Disease: Origins of Narcotics Control*, 1973.
4. The New York Times, "*Negro Cocaine Fiends, New Southern Menace*" February 11, 1914.
5. In 1912 the first international Opium Convention meets at The Hague, and recommends various measures for the international control of the trade in opium. Subsequent Opium Conventions are held in 1913 and 1914.
6. In 1914 the U.S. Congress adopted the Harrison Narcotic Act, the first federal law to impose registration and record keeping requirements on the production and sale of opiates and cocaine. The Harrison Act was the implementation of the Hague Convention of 1912, which called upon signatories to enact domestic legislation controlling narcotics supplies and distribution.
7. "Colored students at the Univ. of Minn. partying with female students (white), smoking (marijuana) and getting their sympathy with stories of racial persecution. Result pregnancy. Two Negroes took a girl fourteen years old and kept her for two days under the influence of marihuana [sic]. Upon recovery she was found to be suffering from syphilis" Inciardi, J. A. *The War on Drugs: Heroin, Cocaine, Crime, and Public Policy*. Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1986.