

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# Call Off the Global Drug War

By JIMMY CARTER

Published: June 16, 2011

Atlanta

In an extraordinary new initiative announced earlier this month, the [Global Commission on Drug Policy](#) has made some courageous and profoundly important recommendations in a report on how to bring more effective control over the illicit drug trade. The commission includes the former presidents or prime ministers of five countries, a former secretary general of the United Nations, human rights leaders, and business and government leaders, including Richard Branson, George P. Shultz and Paul A. Volcker.

The report describes the total failure of the present global antidrug effort, and in particular America's "war on drugs," which was declared 40 years ago today. It notes that the global consumption of opiates has increased 34.5 percent, cocaine 27 percent and cannabis 8.5 percent from 1998 to 2008. Its primary recommendations are to substitute treatment for imprisonment for people who use drugs but do no harm to others, and to concentrate more coordinated international effort on combating violent criminal organizations rather than nonviolent, low-level offenders.

These recommendations are compatible with United States drug policy from three decades ago. In a message to Congress in 1977, I said the country should decriminalize the possession of less than an ounce of marijuana, with a full program of treatment for addicts. I also cautioned against filling our prisons with young people who were no threat to society, and summarized by saying: "Penalties against possession of a drug should not be more damaging to an individual than the use of the drug itself."

These ideas were widely accepted at the time. But in the 1980s President Ronald Reagan and Congress began to shift from balanced drug policies, including the treatment and rehabilitation of addicts, toward futile efforts to control drug imports from foreign countries.

This approach entailed an enormous expenditure of resources and the dependence on police and military forces to reduce the foreign cultivation of marijuana, coca and opium poppy and the production of cocaine and heroin. One result has been a terrible escalation in drug-related violence, corruption and gross violations of human rights in a growing number of Latin American countries.

The commission's facts and arguments are persuasive. It recommends that governments be encouraged to experiment "with models of legal regulation of drugs ... that are designed to undermine the power of organized crime and safeguard the health and security of their citizens." For effective examples, they can look to policies that have shown promising results in Europe, Australia and other places.

But they probably won't turn to the United States for advice. Drug policies here are more punitive and counterproductive than in other democracies, and have brought about an explosion in prison populations. At the end of 1980, just before I left office, 500,000 people were incarcerated in America; at the end of 2009 the number was nearly 2.3 million. There are 743 people in prison for every 100,000 Americans, a higher portion than in any other country and seven times as great as in Europe. Some 7.2 million people are either in prison or on probation or parole — more than 3 percent of all American adults!

Some of this increase has been caused by mandatory minimum sentencing and "three strikes you're out" laws. But about three-quarters of new admissions to state prisons are for nonviolent crimes. And the single greatest cause of prison population growth has been the war on drugs, with the number of people incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses increasing more than twelvefold since 1980.

Not only has this excessive punishment destroyed the lives of millions of young people and their families (disproportionately minorities), but it is wreaking havoc on state and local budgets. Former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger pointed out that, in 1980, 10 percent of his state's budget went to higher education and 3 percent to prisons; in 2010, almost 11 percent went to prisons and only 7.5 percent to higher education.

Maybe the increased tax burden on wealthy citizens necessary to pay for the war on drugs will help to bring about a reform of America's drug policies. At least the recommendations of the Global Commission will give some cover to political leaders who wish to do what is right.

A few years ago I worked side by side for four months with a group of prison inmates, who were learning the building trade, to renovate some public buildings in my hometown of Plains, Ga. They were intelligent and dedicated young men, each preparing for a productive life after the completion of his sentence. More than half of them were in prison for drug-related crimes, and would have been better off in college or trade school.

To help such men remain valuable members of society, and to make drug policies more humane and more effective, the American government should support and enact the reforms laid out by the Global Commission on Drug Policy.

*Jimmy Carter, the 39th president, is the founder of the Carter Center and the winner of the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize.*

*A version of this op-ed appeared in print on June 17, 2011, on page A35 of the New York edition with the headline: Call Off the Global Drug War.*