

World leaders catch up to Cato

Opposition to Drug Prohibition Gains Steam

Last November, the Cato Institute hosted a conference, “Ending the Global War on Drugs,” where international leaders and prominent scholars came together to review the widespread impact of drug prohibition. In his closing address that day, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former president of Brazil, suggested a “paradigm shift” in the current battle, offering a way forward “from just repression to a more humane and comprehensive approach.”

This spring, the *Wall Street Journal* noted that a transformation may already be underway. At a regional conference intended to tout U.S. trade policies in Colombia, the administration met with unexpected resistance against its global efforts to stem the use of narcotics. “The uprising on drug policy is led by some of Washington’s closest and best-funded allies in Latin America”—statesmen who, according to the *Journal*, “say the current approach isn’t working, after hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of drug-related murders.”

The revolt is just the latest acknowledgment that the mounting costs of the war on drugs are becoming intolerable. Last year, the Global Commission on Drug Policy—a 19-member panel which included former U.N. secretary general Kofi Annan, former secretary of state George Shultz, and former Fed

chairman Paul Volcker—released a groundbreaking report. “The global war on drugs has failed,” they concluded, “with devastating consequences.”

Across the world, leaders are beginning to search for alternatives to this endless battle. In a 2009 Cato study, best-selling author Glenn Greenwald described one such option: Portugal’s 2001 decision to decriminalize all drugs, including cocaine and heroine. He concluded that none of the nightmare scenarios predicted by critics—from rampant increases in usage among the

young to the transformation of Lisbon into a haven for “drug tourists”—had occurred in the seven years since the policy shift. To the contrary, usage rates remained roughly the same, while drug-related pathologies—from sexually transmitted diseases to deaths after overdose—decreased dramatically.

The study quickly made international waves. Earlier this year, Portugal’s top drug official himself acknowledged its impact. “Greenwald’s report has been the starting point of the enormous visibility of the Por-



At a Cato Institute Conference last November, leaders from around the world gathered to criticize the manifest failure of the global battle against narcotics. The day closed with an address by former Brazilian president **FERNANDO HENRIQUE CARDOSO**, who called for “a more humane approach” to the war.

tuguese policies,” João Goulão wrote in a February e-mail. Although prohibition has manifestly failed to stem illicit drug use, it has generated enormous costs with perverse outcomes. Throughout the world, leaders are beginning to acknowledge this fact and demand change.

As Moises Naim, former editor of *Foreign Policy*, told the *Journal*, “I think 2012 will go down in history as the year when the pillars of Washington’s drug policy began to erode.” ■

Sex Offenders, Gas Tank Leaks, and Politicized Policymaking

Since the mid-1990s, sex offenders have become subject to some of the most novel crime laws in U.S. history. In the new issue of *Regulation* magazine, University of Michigan law professor J. J. Prescott asks whether sex offender registries in particular make us more or less safe. The author examines data from the experiences of 15 states over almost 10 years and finds that laws purporting to protect the public may actually be increasing sex offender recidivism rates. “Indeed, the idea that notification regimes may make registered offenders more dangerous is consistent with the fact that notification causes these individuals significant financial, social, and psychological harm,” Prescott writes.

Elsewhere in the issue, Michael L. Marlow and Sherzod Abdukadirov ask whether behavioral economics can combat obesity, while Henry G. Manne considers whether the SEC’s new embrace of cost-benefit analysis is a watershed moment for the agency.

Henry I. Miller offers a cautionary tale by examining the regulation of biotechnology in “The Use and Abuse of Science in Policymaking.” Haitao Yin, Howard Kunreuther, and Matthew W. White explore the prevention of underground gas tank leaks and ask, “Does Private Insurance Reduce Environmental Accidents?”

The Summer 2012 issue features reviews of books on the U.S. health care system, government involvement in financial markets, the politics of oil, the fruits of global capitalism, and the life of a famous physicist—as well as Peter Van Doren’s roundup of recent academic papers.

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