

Reply

Fundamentalism cannot make the facts go away

Mr. Califano claims that my article “grossly misrepresents” his views, that it was “preposterous” to characterize him as an “uncritical supporter of punitive prohibition.” If in fact he has “strongly criticized” punitive prohibition, he has been brilliantly discreet about it. If after years of demonizing drugs he now advocates more treatment for imprisoned drug users, this is a small but welcome step in the direction of the public health-based drug policies I have long advocated. If drug abuse is a disease in need of treatment, however, should we not all “strongly criticize” a drug policy based predominantly on the imprisonment of sick people?

If somehow I have missed Mr. Califano’s published critiques of the failures and excesses of American drug wars, then I apologize and ask that he send me copies straight away. I shall be pleased to cite all Califano studies showing, for example, the absence of any historical relationship between punitive drug policy and levels of drug problems. I look forward to reading CASA’s cost–benefit analysis of a policy that spends billions of tax dollars arresting and imprisoning mostly impoverished people of color – whose health, education, and welfare the U.S. somehow cannot afford. I welcome Mr. Califano’s articles discussing the social sources of vulnerability to drug abuse and evaluating the effectiveness of U.S. drug policy in addressing them. I will happily read Mr. Califano’s “white paper” showing how needle exchanges have prevented thousands of AIDS deaths without increasing drug use. This

is the finding of the Centers for Disease Control, the Government Accounting Office, two Presidential AIDS Commissions, the National Academy of Sciences, and every other scientific body that has examined the evidence. Surely if Mr. Califano has thought critically about punitive prohibition, then he has written something summarizing these scientific reports and recommending that the U.S. Government join its allies in supporting needle exchange as a life-saving public health measure. Such a paper by someone of Mr. Califano’s stature is a much needed antidote to Congressional and Clintonian cowardice on this issue.

Mr. Califano next asserts that if I were “truly interested in doing a reasoned critique” of his article, I would have “obtained the White Paper” or “looked up the textbook chapter” to find the “facts” on which his article was purportedly “based.” Let me see if I have this straight: I read an article strewn with misrepresentations, but to counter them I must (1) write to the author’s organization to obtain a “white paper;” (2) go to the library to find a textbook in which he has written something else; and (3) read these other documents to find his “facts” for the first article? Does this mean he must read all my books and articles before he can comment on my piece?

I assessed what Mr. Califano wrote, there on the page for all to see; I did not find a logical case in which the known facts were presented fully and interpreted fairly. I quoted directly each of his core assertions in my article. Readers who harbor any doubt that it was a “reasoned critique” are

invited to compare his article and mine and to judge for themselves. If they do, they will also see that Mr. Califano's letter skirts most of the criticisms I made and continues to twist the truth. I have space for only a few examples here:

- To make marijuana seem dangerous, Mr. Califano cites a study showing that 9% of those who try marijuana go on to "dependence." Even if scientists agreed on what "dependence" means and other epidemiological studies found the same prevalence of it (neither of which is true), this still means that 91% of those who try marijuana *do not* become "dependent." This compares favorably to far more damaging drugs like alcohol and tobacco for which Mr. Califano thinks regulation, public health measures, and treatment are appropriate policy. I quite agree with him about alcohol and tobacco, but why his inconsistency on marijuana? It cannot be based on evidence of harm because over the last century, a half-dozen major scientific commissions on marijuana in the U.S., England, and Canada have all reached the same basic conclusion: By any measure of toxicity or addictive liability, cannabis is among the least dangerous drugs. Mr. Califano cites his own research showing alcohol to be far more highly associated with crime than marijuana. This is quite true, but does it mean he wants to bring back alcohol prohibition? If not, how does he continue to justify the arrest of over a quarter million marijuana users in the US every year?
- Mr. Califano cites "recent neuroscience studies" which he says "demonstrated in stunning detail the changes in brain chemistry that marijuana and cocaine cause." He wants us to infer from this that marijuana is addictive, but he can't get there from here (as his 91% figure suggests). He neglects to note that sex, sailing, symphonies, and most other pleasurable experiences also "affect dopamine levels," change "brain chemistry," and lead people to want to repeat them. Does Mr. Califano propose to prohibit these dangerous activities or arrest people who engage in them? No one disputes that drugs, legal and illegal, alter consciousness; that is why humans have ingested them in

virtually every culture for all of recorded history. The issue is whether it makes any sense to single out a few drugs and imprison their users. Neuroscience studies are important, but so far they have shown only that marijuana can produce a pleasurable altered state, not that it is addictive. And even if it ever were shown to be addictive for some people, it does not follow that prohibition is the only policy option.

- I listed in my article a series of falsehoods and fallacies that Mr. Califano put forward about Swiss drug policy. He does not mention these in his letter. Instead he attacks the recent Swiss heroin maintenance experiment, calling it "hardly a success by rigorous standards." The fact is the Swiss conducted the largest, best designed, and most scientifically rigorous study of heroin maintenance in history. The results showed significant improvements in health, employment, functioning, and family life, and reduced drug use, crime, and costs. What seems to threaten Mr. Califano is that Swiss health officials achieved such success by giving addicts a legal supply of the drug they need along with other services. He may not approve of this approach, but his moral proclivities are not in the definition of scientific rigor. The only support he offers for his accusation is a strained analogy to the quite different British policy, on the history of which he has been seriously misinformed. Unlike Mr. Califano, the Swiss medical scientists who evaluated this experiment support their statements with solid empirical evidence and publish their findings in peer-reviewed scientific journals. On the basis of their evidence, the Swiss people this year voted overwhelming to extend heroin maintenance nationwide.
- Again Mr. Califano attributes increases in marijuana use in the Netherlands to their policy of *de facto* decriminalization. Again he implies falsely that use is automatically harmful and abusive. Again he avoids mentioning that marijuana use also increased in many other countries that have precisely the harsh drug laws he seems to prefer. Again he fails to grasp that correlation is not the same as causation. If it were, then clearly punitive prohibition is the

“cause” of increased drug use. Since 1990, the U.S. has massively increased drug war spending, the imprisonment of drug offenders, and anti-drug “education.” And in five of the last six years, American youth increased their illicit drug use. By Mr. Califano’s logic, this very strong correlation also proves causation; one does not get to claim causation only when the causal arrow points in the direction dictated by one’s ideology. The basic muddy truth is that drug use and abuse are complex human behaviors that increase and decrease for many reasons that have little to do with laws.

- Mr. Califano’s account of recent changes in Dutch drug policy again tells only part of the story and again gets that partly wrong. The Dutch Parliament did, for example, reduce the quantity of cannabis individuals can purchase in any one transaction. But at the same time they increased the quantity coffeeshops can legally stock, thereby institutionalizing cannabis coffeeshops more formally than before. Both the Minister of Health and the Minister of Justice supported this *strengthening* of the coffeeshop system because they have found that it helps keep heroin use rates low. Parliament did *not* “cut in half” the number of coffeeshops; municipal governments have this power. The Mayor of Amsterdam recently reduced the number of coffeeshops there from about 400 to about 350, but at least five other smaller city governments have recently encouraged the *opening* of cannabis coffeeshops in their towns as a sensible means for regulating distribution. Mr. Califano originally claimed that such adjustments showed the Dutch did not support their own drug policy. He was wrong about that then, as I showed, and he is wrong about it now. Dutch drug policy remains essentially unchanged, and most Dutch citizens seem to approve of that. In Parliamentary elections in May, 1998, for example, the Christian Democratic Party, which criticized Dutch drug policy, lost seats; the Social Democrats and other parties which supported the policy gained seats.
- Perhaps the most blatant of the distortions in Mr. Califano’s letter concerns crime. When he

writes, for example, “I am pleased ... that Reinerman agrees with my statement that organized crime is up in the Netherlands,” he is clearly hoping readers will not go back and check my article. For there they would find his original claim of a rapid rise in Dutch “criminal organizations” exposed by official Dutch police sources as statistical sleight-of-hand. There, his claim that cannabis decriminalization *causes* surges in organized crime or gun-related deaths is shown to be nonsensical. Mr. Califano’s missionary zeal seems to have subverted his common sense, for he approvingly repeats the most absurd assertion in his original article: “any short-term reduction in arrests after a repeal of criminal drug laws would quickly evaporate as drug use increased and the criminal conduct – assault, murder, rape, child molestation, violence, vandalism – that drug use spawns exploded.” It is deceptive to raise the specter of total legalization when the Dutch have decriminalized only cannabis, but it is simply erroneous to claim that drug use, the vast bulk of it cannabis, is capable of causing explosions of murder, child molestation, etc. Indeed, here he goes beyond asserting mere cause to the word “spawn,” rhetorically anthropomorphizing malevolent molecules into conscious alien agents.

To dwell on such details, however, is to risk missing the two core facts with which Mr. Califano cannot contend: After two decades of decriminalization Dutch crime rates remain a fraction of U.S. crime rates, and a higher proportion of people have used marijuana in the U.S., where millions have been arrested for it, than in the Netherlands where people can buy it lawfully. For those who support drug wars, these facts are blasphemous. But no amount of selective citations, misleading interpretations, obfuscating omissions, or leaps of illogic can make them go away.

I do not dispute Mr. Califano’s sincerity, only his narrow vision of drug policy. We are too deep into modernity to reduce the harms drugs can cause by stomping our feet and demanding that people stop using them or go to jail. Mr. Califano was caught with his evidentiary pants down when

he tried to argue that his is the only sane approach to drug policy. He masks moralism in a scarf of science, an old-fashioned Temperance crusader in scholarly drag. At the end of the 19th century, the Women's Christian Temperance Union claimed that Satan's demon drink was an omnipotent evil that was surely destroying civilization. Here at the end of the 20th, Mr.

Califano seems intent on keeping their fundamentalist fires burning.

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