



Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure

By Dan Baum

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For sheer government absurdity, the War on Drugs is hard to beat. After three decades of increasingly punitive policies, illicit drugs are more easily available, drug potencies are greater, drug killings are more common, and drug barons are richer than ever. The War on Drugs costs Washington more than the Commerce, Interior, and State departments combined - and it's the one budget item whose growth is never questioned. A strangled court system, exploding prisons, and wasted lives push the cost beyond measure. What began as a flourish of campaign rhetoric in 1968 has grown into a monster. And while nobody claims that the War on Drugs is a success, nobody suggests an alternative. Because to do so, as Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders learned, is political suicide. Dan Baum interviewed more than 175 people - from John Ehrlichman to Janet Reno - to tell the story of how Drug War fever has been escalated; who has benefited along the way; and how the mounting price in dollars, lives, and liberties has been willfully ignored. Smoke and Mirrors takes you right into the offices where each new stage was planned and executed, then takes you to the streets where policies have produced bloody warfare. This is a tale of the nation run amok - in a way the American people are not yet ready to confront.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In a retrospective look at the war on drugs in the United States, journalist Dan Baum calls the nation's drug policy "as expensive, ineffective, delusional and destructive as government gets." He examines the Nixon White House's effort to turn the drug war to political advantage and the Carter Administration's brief flirtation with decriminalizing marijuana. He also details the cover-ups and blunders of some of the biggest drug busts in the country's history. Yet despite the policy's ineffectiveness, at least 85 percent of Americans oppose legalization. Baum sheds light on the reasons for this issue and calls for radical compromise.

From Publishers Weekly

Many sensible analysts have argued the folly of our contradictory and damaging drug policies, but Baum manages to make his argument fresh by tracing what he sees as the escalating missteps and ironies that led us into the "war on drugs." A former Wall Street Journal reporter, Baum weaves a brisk, episodic tale, beginning in the Vietnam era, when the media conflated widespread use of less dangerous marijuana and small-scale use of heroin into a "drug problem" that Richard Nixon exploited. Meanwhile, he contends, the fusion of contradictory schemes—such as the idea of prison sentences that are both long and mandatory—has led to "a prison-filling monster" denounced even by conservatives. According to Baum, Jimmy Carter's drug strategists were the last to offer nuanced policy, but they lost the political fight, and White House drug policy moved from the province of public health to law enforcement. Fighting drugs has made the executive branch look good, and under Ronald Reagan, federal prosecutors expanded hungrily into drug cases. Reagan, taking a page from Nixon and abetted by wife Nancy's "Just Say No" campaign, Baum says, positioned government's role as primarily crime fighting, not attacking the social problems that might underlie drug abuse. The author chillingly portrays how the 1980s Supreme Court, caught up in the hysteria over drugs, weakened the Fourth Amendment's protections against police excesses; equally disturbing to him is how the media accepted the myth of the "crack baby," while prenatal care may mean much more to a baby's health than maternal drug use. Though Baum had hoped the Clinton presidency might adopt a different drug policy, he laments that the law enforcement approach continues. Still, he maintains, a shift from prosecuting pot smokers and "generally peaceful growers" to treating desperate drug dependents "would be an act of medical logic and fiscal genius." The author reminds us of an H.L. Mencken thought: sooner or later, a democracy tells the truth about itself. This book should help it do that.

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From Library Journal

Since 1968 the federal government has been bent on waging an all-out "War on Drugs." Journalist Baum provides a thorough journalistic examination of the public policy, pointing out the false premises behind Richard Nixon's decision to declare such a war, how vested interests used "smoke and mirrors" to keep the money flowing, how the Supreme Court has weakened Fourth Amendment protections in drug cases, and the policy's ultimate failure. Baum interviewed over 200 individuals who spoke on the record?no anonymous sources are quoted. Using numerous case studies, he shows the negative constitutional and social aspects of the criminal justice system's effort to stem drug abuse in America. While not arguing for legalization, Baum hopes his study will motivate decision makers to devise a more humane and cost-effective drug policy.

Highly recommended for most libraries.

-?Gary D. Barber, SUNY at Fredonia Lib., Silver Creek, N.Y.

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