The War on Drugs: A Sociopolitical Analysis

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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STS Research Paper

Introduction

"Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did" (Kahlenberg, 1995). Under President Nixon's administration, the War on Drugs was a national campaign targeting the eradication of drug use and rehabilitation through federal intervention. Through an increased allocated drug budget, policy reform, and drastic sentencing laws, the administration was able to enforce drug control, while assuring the public that work was being done to remove criminals from the streets (Fornili, 2018). However, an interview with Nixon's domestic policy chief John Ehrlichman revealed how the War on Drugs was a political stunt to disrupt the "antiwar left and black people" by "arrest[ing] their leaders, break[ing] up their meetings, and vilify[ing] them night after night" to enforce their wartime, racially-motivated political agenda (Kahlenberg, 1995). Since then, numerous presidential administrations have pushed the War on Drugs through legislation that has led to the mass incarceration and disruption of communities of color in America (Earp et al., 2021). Using the framework of political technologies, legislation by each administration, starting from the Nixon administration, is analyzed to assess the motivation and outcome behind each action, and how they have been used to alienate minorities. The social, economic, and political factors will also be assessed to answer the question of "How has legislation been used as a political technology to exacerbate the War on Drugs for minorities in United States?"

Research Question and Methods

This sociotechnical analysis of the War on Drugs is conducted via gathering of data and research. Data is primarily gathered via research papers from professionals in the field of narcotics, societal trends, politics, history, and other departments relating to the topic. Statistics are gathered from researchers who collected data regarding imprisonment, public sentiment,

economy status, and other values that quantify the impacts of legislation. Most of the data is validated by government institutions who have been conducting and collecting data surrounding imprisonment rates and race proportions for decades. The research is presented chronologically, with data from before the 1970's being discussed first, then presenting the shift that happened around the Nixon administration. Following this timeline, action taken under each presidential administration is analyzed, with a focus on domestic and foreign events that have impacted policy and an assessment of how those changes impacted societal values and racial disparities. The impact that the legislation had on minority communities over time is analyzed, tying together a comprehensive sociotechnical timeline of the War on Drugs.

Background Information

The War on Drugs was a United States government initiative and campaign to reduce the usage of drugs and increase the presence of federal intervention. While President Nixon popularized the term "War on Drugs" in his 1971 public address, drug usage had been running rampant in the United States since the late 1800's, where public sentiment welcomed the use of narcotics. The medical community utilized opioids in patient care, attributing to the first wave of addiction. The famous company Coca-Cola's original recipe contained cocaine, which was a legal and readily accessible ingredient at the time. Coca-Cola founder John Pemberton invented the drink in 1885, with the intent for the beverage to cure a wide range of ailments (Anderson). In the early 1900's, scientists began to realize the addictive properties of these substances, and began to witness accounts of overdose. In 1914, Congress passed the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act, which imposed taxes and restrictions on the producers and distributors of drugs. While this act dissuaded doctors from prescribing opioids, consumers were still abusing drugs, seeking them out from the black market rather than obtaining them legally (Sacco, 2014).

As drug enforcement grew, the prohibition movement began to grow in the 1920's. Since alcohol was being closely monitored, a new recreational drug, marijuana, took over as the common drug. During this period, federal intervention first began to rise, with the establishment of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) in 1930, designed to oversee and enforce drug laws (Anderson) . The beginning of federal intervention and drug enforcement is largely attributed to Harry J. Anslinger, the first commissioner of the FBN who served under presidents Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy. Under him, the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937 soon followed, which, similar to the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act, placed a tax on the distribution or sale of marijuana, and required distributors to be licensed. Anslinger was among the first to criminalize and target drug users, rather than doctors and pharmaceuticals, and was famous for proposing harsh sentencing punishments and creating negative public sentiment towards drug users (Hari, 2015).

Despite Anslinger's efforts, drug use continued to grow into the next era. From the 1950's to the 1970's, new drugs such as LSD grew in popularity, along with increased use of marijuana, heroin, and amphetamines. Government official were split on how to handle the exponential growth of drug users, passing the 1951 Boggs Act and the 1956 Daniel Act which radically increased penalties for possession. This methodology shifted in the 1960's when tolerance began to spread in the community, where drug education towards youth and rehabilitation programs began to grow, and federal intervention was minimized (Anderson).

While efforts to condemn and minimize drug use were already in play, the most impactful change began in 1970 under the Nixon administration. President Nixon famously coined the term "War on Drugs" and vehemently enforced drug-targeted legislation. First came the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention or Control Substances Act (CSA) of 1970. The CSA

was the first comprehensive piece of legislation to combine all previous acts, such as the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act and the Marijuana Tax Act, and provide a single overhead enforcement. The CSA created drug classifications, as well as established the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to serve as the central agency for drug enforcement in the United States (Barber, 2016).

STS Framework – Political Technologies

The War on Drugs was largely fueled by government officials passing legislation to federally intervene and eradicate drug use. Despite the legislation working to improve the public, societal factors at the time impacted decision making, and the policy that was implemented contained bias. The analysis of the underlying bias for each decision aligns into the STS framework of political technologies, a framework posed by political theorist Langdon Winner. In his piece "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" Winner presents the notion that technologies are closely linked with social relations and contain political qualities in two ways. First, Winner outlines how technology "becomes a way of settling an issue in a particular community," showing how the process of technological development determines the politics associated with the artifact. Second, Winner defines the phrase of "inherently political technologies," where these technologies strongly correlate with particular kinds of political relationships. This framework considers the stakeholders in the development of the technology, and what their purpose was in its creation. Artifacts work in favor of systems of authority and are implemented to serve a purpose, leading to "wonderful breakthroughs by some social interests and crushing setbacks by others" (Winner, 1980).

While this framework is widely accepted and studied in society, German professor of sociology Bernward Joerges offers a rebuttal in his piece "Do Politics Have Artefacts?" where he

specifically comments on the example of how Robert Moses' bridges of Long Island Parkway were not inherently political. Joerges states how Winner's view of political technologies diminishes the value of the technology itself, and that the power of the technology should lie with the technology itself rather than the association. Joerges argues that Robert Moses did not intend to racially discriminate when developing his bridges, but rather that it was a social consequence not accounted for by the designer, removing the inherently political nature suggested by Winner (Joerges, 1999). While Joerges' rebuttal offers praise to the original designer and the nature of the technology, Winner's framework serves as a more realistic model for analyzing how artifacts do in fact have politics and contribute greatly to societal values.

In the United States, substance abuse has always and will always be a detrimental issue, and the government must play a role in averting the crisis; However, it is impossible to analyze the actions of the government without considering the social, political, and economic factors that influenced these decisions. The War on Drugs was an inherently political technology that correlated with the governing bodies motives, and each piece of legislation passed with underlying intention regarding the current political climate. In his book "Treating Drug Problems", author David T. Courtwright discusses how narcotics policy has gone through numerous phases from the late 1800's to the early 2000's, and how each period was influenced by social factors such as war, public sentiment, and changing political climate, with underlying tones of racism and discrimination against minority groups (Study et al., 1992). By implementing the framework of political technologies, the motive and effect for legislation passed regarding the War on Drugs is assessed.

Results and Discussion

The War on Drugs is a 50-year and ongoing war attempting to eradicate drug usage and distribution from the streets of the United States. The failed efforts of numerous legislative and government bodies and the ongoing push to continue funneling money into drug reform elucidate how the motives for drug legislation have never been transparent. Since the 1800's, drug policies have alienated poor and minority communities, weaponizing their instability and inequalities against them to create a negative public sentiment. This research paper discusses the history of the War on Drugs policies to support that legislation has been used to push personal agendas, suppress social movements to isolate minority groups, and enforce war-time efforts and global relationships.

Nixon and Anslinger – Federal Intervention

The War on Drugs officially began on June 17th, 1971, when President Nixon gave an address regarding drugs as "public enemy number one" and declaring a "worldwide… government-wide… nationwide" offensive to combat illegal drug usage (Barber, 2016). From increased recreational domestic drug usage, to fear of drug-riddled soldiers returning from the Vietnam War, President Nixon famously passed the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 (CSA). The CSA merged all previously existing drug laws into one piece of legislation and established a five-tier classification system of drugs which is still used today. The CSA also established the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), which acted to centrally enforce all drug policies. Nixon feared that use of drugs overseas would hinder America's military performance in Southeast Asia, and that once the war was over, soldiers would bring their heroin addiction back to the states (Anderson). Stronger federal intervention was also established by Nixon to attempt to limit opium production and distribution from Turkey, which was the leading producer at the time.

While Nixon began the official campaign against drugs, the war had been raging since the late 1800's, and the motivations for previous drug policy can help explain how modern-day legislation functions. The most prominent figure before Nixon in regard to combating drug usage was Harry J. Anslinger. Anslinger served over 32 years from President Hoover's term to President Kennedy's term and was known for advocating criminalization of drug use through harsh sentencing penalties, with a specific focus on criminalizing marijuana. To promote anti-marijuana sentiment to Americans, Anslinger utilized "Gore Files," a collection of quotes and records from police reports which depicted violent offenses committed by drug users. Gore Files were broadcasted by Anslinger across mass media as a scare tactic to prevent young Americans from leisurely using marijuana; However, Anslinger's compilation of reports were filled with distortion and racist themes, wrongly depicting actions taken by drug users and exaggerating images to push his cause (Däumichen, 2016). Anslinger's efforts spread misinformation and disdain towards African Americans and Mexican immigrants, vilifying communities of color for drug usage. A rise in xenophobia during the 1930's is largely attributed to Anslinger's propaganda, fortifying the belief in Americans that immigrant Mexican workers introduced marijuana to the youth, and that black communities, integrated within the jazz and swing communities, propagated the use of drugs (*Unsung Partner against Crime: Harry J. Anslinger and the Federal Bureau of Narcotics,* 1989). Anslinger is a prime example of utilizing legislation as a political technology to push forward his racist agenda, working to save Americans from drug usage while also spreading negative sentiment about communities of color.

Ford and Carter – An Era of Peace

Following the harsh policies of the Nixon era, the late 1970's showed leniency towards drug policy under the Ford and Carter administrations, with an emphasis towards rehabilitation

rather than prison punishment. Having to deal with the remains of Watergate and Nixon's resignation, Ford's presidency prioritized domestic economic struggles, dealing with rising inflation and a recession, and foreign policy due to rising international tensions in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Ford worked to alter Nixon's existing drug policies to refocus the effort on treatment for heroin addicts, with his federal budget towards enforcement being equal to that of prevention (*Gerald R. Ford*, 2006). Carter's presidency furthered the push towards rehabilitation rather than punishment, even advocating for the decriminalization of marijuana. This was the first time since the 1930's where some states adopted decriminalization, with Alaska being the first state to legalize marijuana. Carter's personal beliefs that drugs could be used responsibly and not cause harm was reflected in his policy, similar to how Nixon's belief that drug users were dangerous was reflected in his policies. These policies are more reflective of the first notion of how an artifact contains political technology, where the legislation works to "[settle] an issue in a particular community" through rehabilitative measures rather than causing harm (Winner, 1980). Despite Carter's leniency towards drug users, the end of his presidency reflected the highest use of illicit substances of the time, and the highest rate of adolescent drug usage, with drug use in the U.S. peaking at 53% among teenagers (*A Focus on Harm Reduction under Ford and Carter (1974-1981)*, 2017).

Reagan – Intolerance and Punishment

The hiatus on federal drug enforcement and punishment under Ford and Carter ended in the 1980's under the presidency of Ronald Reagan. On October 14th, 1982, President Reagan addressed the nation and reignited the war on drugs that Nixon had started, stressing the importance of reducing drug usage through federal intervention. Reagan's approach was two-tiered: domestic campaigning of prevention and zero-tolerance, and international efforts of

supply reduction (*Reagan's National Drug Strategy*). On the domestic front, First Lady Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign provided education and prevention of drug use towards adolescences, answering the rising complaints of political lobby groups and parent organizations alarmed at teenage drug use. The "Just Say No" campaign helped in the cause to raise awareness of teenage drug usage, but was often labeled as a grossly oversimplified solution to combatting drug use, criticized for ignoring the real systemic cause of drug usage in minority communities (MADEO). Overseas, Reagan was raging a drug war with Latin American in a process known as Narcoterrorism. Countries such as Peru and Columbia were prime suppliers of opium and marijuana, and pesticides were introduced to try and destroy the crops at the source. Another component of the drug in Latin America was the presence of radical left-wing guerrilla movements, where countries like Cuba and Nicaragua held Marxist-Leninist regimes that were viewed as national security threats to the United States. Reagan aided military efforts in the region to counter drug trafficking while also pushing a foreign agenda of opposing the growing leftist insurgence during the Cold War Era (*The Enduring Legacy of Reagan's Drug War in Latin America*, 2018).

Despite growing tensions internationally, Reagan was left with a new drug emerging. It is impossible to discuss drug law history without the mention of cocaine – specifically the introduction of crack cocaine in the mid-1980's. Crack cocaine was a form of cocaine that was inexpensively processed into the form of rocks, and thus cheaper and more widely accessible than its counterpart powder cocaine. Crack cocaine became widely accessible in urban, inner-city neighborhoods, which were primarily low income and inhabited by black Americans and working-class immigrants (*Cracks in the System*). A crack epidemic rampaged the lower-class streets of America, with a negative sentiment rising around crack cocaine and the communities

associated with them. What failed to receive media presence at the time was the rising rates of powder cocaine addiction. Powder cocaine was a more expensive form of cocaine that was primarily used by upper-class white Americans as leisure, and a period of job insecurity and mass overdose was concurrently seen during the 1980's due to cocaine addiction (Anderson).

To combat the rise of drug addiction, President Reagan introduced the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which budgeted $1.7 billion towards federal drug funding and established mandatory minimum prison sentencing, defining prison terms based on the quantity and type of drug involved in the offense. The largest distinction was the minimum sentencing of cocaine, which held a 100:1 disparity between powder and crack cocaine, requiring 100 times more grams of powder cocaine than crack cocaine to trigger the severe sentencing laws; Five grams of crack cocaine would elicit a 5-year mandatory minimum sentence (*Cracks in the System*). This form of legislation is "strongly compatible" with "political relationships" in that the raw and inherent nature of the act discriminates against cocaine use which is notably different between income and racial groups (Winner, 1980). Despite the intended effort to intimidate large-scale distributors, this policy greatly affected local users and street dealers. Due to this policy, a massive increase in incarcerations was seen for nonviolent drug offenses, from 50,000 arrests in 1980 to 400,000 in 1997 (*Reagan's National Drug Strategy*). Despite similar drug usage trends of both crack and powder cocaine, prison populations consisted of primarily African Americans, which were heavily targeted by the police.

Bush and Clinton – The Continuous, Failed Efforts

Drug reform continued to push into the 1990's under the administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Continuing the punitive-centered approach of drug reduction, the Bush and Clinton administrations continued to increase the federal budget in support of ending the

War on Drugs, yet cases continued to rise well into the start of the 21st century. Both presidents failed to internationally control drug supply through narcoterrorism, where the amount of money allocated to counter-narcotics increased from $6.7 billion to $18.5 billion from 1989 to 2000, but no considerable decrease in domestic drug-use trends was seen (Check, 1995).

Under the Bush administration, the "*Smoke a joint, lose your license*" program suspended drug users' license for 6-months if they were caught with possession of drugs. Dealing with the largest domestic issue, Bush also established the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) to reorganize federal agencies and budgeting towards drugs and appointed "Drug Czar" William Bennet to take lead (Check, 1995). Bennet held similar beliefs as Anslinger and Nixon, focusing his efforts on supply reduction and punitive force, and imposing his personal beliefs through politically motivated legislation that drug addiction was a moral inadequacy rather than illness. Despite these policies, the Bush administration heavily directed its efforts towards foreign affairs such as the Iraqi war, the invasion of Panama, and the Gulf War. At the end of Bush's presidency, with more than $7 billion federally allocated for the drug war, crime and drug-use rates continued to increase (Sacco, 2014).

Going into the 1990's, the shift moved from cocaine to marijuana as the primary drug. From 1990 to 2002, 450,000 drug arrests were made, with 79% of that growth being attributed to marijuana possession. The African American population made up 14% of marijuana users in the general population, but accounted for 30% of arrests (Moses, 2004). President Bill Clinton was signed into office in 1992 and was most notable for passing the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, commonly referred to as the 1994 Crime Bill. In the years preceding, violent crime rates had gone up 15%, and with around 20% of those crimes being linked with drug abuse ("3 Ways the 1994 Crime Bill Continues to Hurt Communities of Color"). The Crime

Bill implemented death penalties and life sentencing punishments for violent crimes and is linked with mass incarcerations of communities of color. The death penalty was applied to 60 new federal offenses, including drug offenses that were not related with homicide; 74% of defendants that were recommended to receive the death penalty in the late 1990's were people of color that received previous sentencings and were currently imprisoned. Rather than placing money into rehabilitation programs, 88,000 additional police officers between 1994 and 2001 were placed into the streets to curb drug use and arrest individuals for drug-related crimes. The crime bill is "strongly, perhaps unavoidably, linked to particular institutionalized patterns of power and authority," blatantly targeting communities of color that have already been victimized rather than actively aiding those struggling with drug use (Winner, 1980). According to the ACLU, "the number of black men in prison (792,000)" in 2001 was been equal to "the number of men enslaved in 1820"; Racial disparities within the justice system continued to widen under the crime bill (*The Drug War Is the New Jim Crow*).

Outcome and Analysis

It was only well into the start of the 21st century that government officials began to question the morality of previous drug laws and consider the racial biases that have been clearly engrained in policy. It was only until 2010, under President Barack Obama, that the Fair Sentencing Act was passed, which reformed Reagan's Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 to reduce the disparity of crack to powder cocaine from 100:1 to 18:1, and eliminated the five-year minimum sentencing for possession (*Fair Sentencing Act*).

Despite modern day lobbyists and officials attempting to improve federal drug laws, substantial legislative action is needed to rectify the years of injustice. Drug users who faced prosecution for drug possession charges from the 1990's are still being held in prisons. A

majority of states have moved towards decimalization and even legalization of some drugs and have drastically reduced sentencing times for illegal substance possessions. Still, rehabilitation programs are not prioritized, with federal budget being greatly allocated towards police funding and government agencies. Over 50 years later and $1 trillion of federal spending, the War on Drugs is still raging, with no clear end in sight (Anderson). After years of failed and ineffective policy, the United States has yet to restructure its attack on drug use and addiction.

This research summarizes drug war policy and societal implications throughout the late 20th century but is limited by scope. The War on Drugs is a complicated crusade taken by the United States government to end drug usage, but is interwoven with domestic and foreign policy. An entire research paper could be dedicated to the foreign relationship of the United States with South America and how those interactions impacted the drug war. There are countless factors, ranging from economic turmoil to war, that have impacted drug policy and drug use, and can be analyzed through a variety of lenses. If this research were to be continued, it would be interesting to analyze the impact of the War on Drugs on modern day policy and factors such as income divisions, healthcare, and other social and economic factors that have been correlated to the drug war. Alternatively, it would be interesting to analyze America's addiction problem from a strictly foreign perspective, taking into consideration how foreign disputes may have increased drug use and racial divisions.

Conclusion

This research reflects on the War on Drugs, taking a closer look at policy decisions and factors that influenced those legislative actions. The actions taken under each presidential administration were analyzed with regards to both domestic and foreign influences at the time, and how those events impacted public perception and drug use. Throughout the paper, it was

noted that drug policy has constantly served as a political technology at the hands of the administration at that time, and how that policy has adversely affected and vilified minority groups. Public perception was the most useful tactic in alienating communities of color, utilizing media outlets and definitive language to target groups that were deemed unfavorable at the time, whether that be due to inherent racist beliefs, foreign disputes, or propaganda. The implications from previous policy regarding the War on Drugs still impacts minority communities today, predominantly African American and Latino communities that are still imprisoned and face economic and social repercussions. The war was started to end drug use in America, yet drug use continues to increase, with more reports of overdoses each day, and no true program in effect to aid those struggling with addiction. The legislation has been proven to be ineffective and misguided, serving only political motive rather than social good to help those truly suffering. The system needs to be reformed to account for years of injustice and provide help to those currently struggling with addiction. Rehabilitation, rather than punishment, needs to be the new focus of modern drug laws if the intent is to truly aid those in need.

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