

ANOTHER CAUSE TO CALL OUR OWN

by Clovis Thorn

The “War on Drugs” was intended to help society by lessening the negative impact of drugs on people’s lives. Instead, the war itself has actually done more harm than good for many people. The drug war has allowed the government to consistently overreach the bounds of its powers by intruding more and more on our personal freedoms in the name of protecting us from ourselves.

A grassroots opposition movement is calling for an end to this war. Why is this new struggle arising? What does it mean to gays and lesbians? Why should we care?

In October of 2001, while rubble in New York still smoldered and our nation was scrambling to protect itself from a new and very real threat, the Drug Enforcement Administration raided and closed down a stringently operated medical marijuana club in West Hollywood that served sick and dying cancer and AIDS patients. Over the past two years, while the government is on heightened alert due to undisclosed terrorist threats, the DEA has continued to raid medical marijuana operations in California.

At the same time, the Office of National Drug Control Policy spent tens of millions of dollars on an ad campaign blaming drug users for funding terrorism. The logic behind these ads was tenuous at best, and at worst, the height of irresponsible scapegoating. Blaming recreational drug users for terrorism is like blaming beer drinkers for Al

Capone’s gangland murders during alcohol prohibition. The taxpayers’ money for this ad campaign would have been better spent on effective treatment and education instead of useless rhetoric.

The movement to end the drug war is growing because people, some high and some not, have recognized that the war on drugs is not a war on an arbitrary group of substances, but a war on people, communities (especially of color), public health, and human rights.

Gay people are not isolated from this war. Many of us use or have used illegal drugs. Some have a friend or relative in prison on a nonviolent drug charge. Many know someone who has a problem with addiction. Some have seen how their friends suffering from AIDS finally found an appetite by smoking marijuana and thus have become “criminals”.

In every case, prohibition has made things worse. The drug war is breeding a new generation of criminals by incarcerating nonviolent drug offenders. It targets scarce resources toward law enforcement instead of treatment. It

creates a dangerous unregulated black market. And now it is being twisted to keep an AIDS patient from a cheap medicine that both works and which could be personally cultivated.

There are better ways for the state to address drug abuse than waging a war on its citizens. The best alternative to current drug policies is a shift toward harm reduction, which is a pragmatic approach to lessening the harms of both drug abuse and drug prohibition.

Gays and lesbians are pros at harm reduction because we had to step in to take care of our own community when the government didn't respond to the impending AIDS pandemic back in the 80s. Safer sex is harm reduction. While not the be-all/end-all solution to AIDS, safer sex helps the most people make wise decisions to avoid the disease. In the same way, harm reduction - while not as rhetorically appealing as "Just Say No" and "Drug Free America" - is the best way to help people who choose to use drugs remain safe and healthy. Abstinence may be the only sure way to avoid risk, but expecting everyone in our society to abstain from drugs is about as likely as expecting everyone to abstain from sex.

We look to progressive European countries as examples. The ever-tolerant Dutch were the first to recognize drug abuse as the public health problem that it is. They separated the soft and hard drug markets by decriminalizing and regulating adult marijuana use. They instituted harm reduction strategies to deal with harder drugs. Today, drug use rates in The Netherlands are lower than the United States in all categories among all age groups, and other Western countries are following the Dutch example.

Politicians are slow to adopt these reforms, but voters aren't. Citizens have passed referenda allowing marijuana as a medicine in seven states. Ten other drug reform initiatives have been approved by voters, including California's landmark Proposition 36, which mandates treatment instead of incarceration for nonviolent first- and second-time drug offenders. These reforms are especially important during this trying time when law enforcement resources need to be directed toward real and pressing threats, not medical marijuana cooperatives that serve sick and dying people. Citizens get it while Washington refuses to listen, as evidenced by the confirmation of John Walters as Drug Czar, who thinks we can arrest and spend our way out of the drug problem.

Why should the LGBT community care about drug policy reform? Because we like to party and we want to know how to be safe if we use drugs. Because our honesty with ourselves allows us to recognize when the wool is being pulled over our eyes. Our brothers and sisters in communities of color are, by the government's own statistics, disproportionately affected by unjust drug laws - they need our support. Our friends with AIDS deserve access to a cheap herb that allows them to eat without vomiting. And finally, the ongoing social justice movement, of which we are a part, must push our government to prioritize health and safety over punishment. Our community should take on this new cause - the destruction of the increasingly irrelevant war on drugs.

Clovis Thorn is the Director of Development for the Drug Policy Alliance. You can help promote alternatives to the "War on Drugs" by supporting the Alliance. To stay informed and get involved visit www.drugpolicy.org.