

FOREWORD

President Richard Nixon officially declared a “war on drugs” in 1971. This declaration of war escalated in the 1980s, and the debate over its justification became pronounced. For two decades forceful arguments have arisen on both sides of the drug debate, with traditional proponents of a legalistic, rules-oriented, societal-values approach on one side and advocates of individualistic decision-making and libertarian arguments on the other. Today, what was once an almost unspeakable prospect—the decriminalization of illegal drugs—has been proposed by respected figures across the country. As arguments for decriminalization, harm reduction, and legalization become more strident and calls for zero tolerance and harsher penalties more vociferous, it sometimes seems as though the divide between the two camps has become an unbridgeable abyss.

The question of a society’s drug policy remains important. Does the apparent stalemate prevailing in the United States represent an optimal position? If the debate heats up once again, what arguments and facts should citizens and government leaders take into account? What should our drug laws look like? Should the possession and sale of drugs be against the law, and all drug violators be imprisoned; or is treatment for addicts and abusers a wiser policy? Do adults have the right to use drugs for recreational purposes, and should they be permitted to purchase drugs legally in state-controlled commercial establishments? Should we criminalize or decriminalize?

Such questions have inspired exceptional scholars and experts, including several fellows at the Hoover Institution, to offer constructive arguments in shaping the drug debate. We are pleased to present herein *Drug War Deadlock*. This primer provides a summary of the widely varying perspectives in the debate over controlled substances in the United States. In selecting and presenting examples from the

current literature, this volume strives to provide an educational tool that interested parties can use to make informed assessments of the situation.

Drugs are pervasive in our culture, and many believe that our drug policy is flawed. However, the alternatives can be confounding. Legalization, decriminalization, and harm reduction are not uniformly understood concepts—a fact that leads many to opt out of the discussion. This primer hopefully lays the foundation for a bridge across the great abyss dividing American opinion on drug policy. The next step in construction of that bridge must be resumption of a productive national dialogue.

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