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Publication Details

L. Gomez Romero, 'What does Donald Trump think about drugs?' (2017) 18 January *The Conversation* 1-6.

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What does Donald Trump think about drugs?

Abstract

In recent years, many countries - with the conspicuous exception of Indonesia and the Philippines - have been rethinking the international war on drugs. The world, it seems, has grown tired of mass incarceration, militarised law enforcement and endless interdiction of drug shipments that nonetheless keep arriving at borders.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

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THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

What does Donald Trump think about drugs?

January 18, 2017 6.40pm AEDT

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Eight US states plus the District of Columbia have legalised cannabis, in conflict with US federal law.

Steve Diapola/Reuters

In recent years, many countries – with the conspicuous exception of Indonesia and the Philippines – have been rethinking the international war on drugs. The world, it seems, has grown tired of mass incarceration, militarised law enforcement and endless interdiction of drug shipments that nonetheless keep arriving at borders.

Even the United States, the key enforcer of this relentless and violent obsession with narcotics, started to ease up during the Barack Obama administration.

Will Donald Trump continue his predecessor's reform path? Or will he reheat the 40-year drug war, domestically and abroad?

A hemisphere behind bars

These questions are not abstract in the Americas.

In the US, eight states have legalised marijuana, in conflict with federal law. This reform movement is partly rooted in the country's outrageous incarceration rates.

Human Rights Watch has dubbed the US a "nation behind bars", because it locks up more of its citizens than any other country in the world. A disproportionate number of them are black.



Draconian sentences for non-violent drug offenders have contributed to America's mass incarceration epidemic. Joshua Lott/Reuters

Long jail sentences for drug offenders, even for low-level crimes such as possession, which represents 80% of drug arrests, are the greatest contributor to the country's massive federal prison population.

President Barack Obama's compassionate approach to non-violent drug offenders has helped incarceration rates drop by 13% since 2012, back to 1998 levels. But one decade of reform is insufficient to undo a half century of harsh policy; drug offenders still represent 46.4% of federal inmates.

Stakes are just as high in Latin America, where the war on drugs has fueled record levels of violence, corruption, criminality, and social inequality.

Cabinet of drug warriors

So what is Trump's stance on drugs and drug policy? As with many matters, he has proven inconsistent in this realm. In 1990 in a lunch with the Miami Herald newspaper, Trump deemed the

drug war a “joke” and called for the legalisation of all drugs.

By his 2016 presidential campaign, however, he seemed to have changed his mind. In a February interview with Fox News, Trump called Colorado’s legal marijuana industry a “real problem” (though he said that he’s “100%” for medical cannabis). A few months later, he declared that he would “leave [marijuana legalisation] up to the states.”

The administration’s likely approach to drugs becomes clearer when considering that his cabinet will be crammed with unwavering drug warriors, including vice president-elect Mike Pence.

Trump’s attorney general pick, Jeff Sessions, said in an April senate hearing that “good people don’t smoke marijuana” and incorrectly linked cannabis use to cocaine and heroin consumption.



Sen. Corey Booker (L) and Rep. John Lewis question Jeff Sessions’ stance on race, drugs and criminal justice. Joshua Roberts/Reuters

During his recent confirmation hearing, Sessions also opened the door to government intervention in states with legal cannabis.

Trump has tapped John Kelly as Secretary of Homeland Security. As the former head of the US Southern Command, which plays a prominent role in curbing the flow of illicit substances from Latin America into the US, Kelly argued for “destroying” drugs, not legalising them.

Kelly also opposed US marijuana legalisation, claiming it would prevent Latin American countries from staying “shoulder to shoulder” with the US “in the drug fight in their part of the world.”

The war on drugs has imposed a huge economic burden on the region. Colombia, for example, spends \$US8 billion each year just to keep up in America's fight.



Mexico's war on drug cartels has led to record-high homicide levels. Reuters

Kelly admitted during his confirmation hearing that a border wall with Mexico would not prevent the flow of drugs into the US. In his view, "the defence of the Southwest border starts 1,500 miles to the south, with Peru."

This sounds suspiciously like Kelly plans to enlist all countries from Peru to the US in preventing drugs from reaching American consumers.

The war that has not been won

Latin America may prove unwilling to continue guarding America's borders.

In December 2016, Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos accepted his Nobel Peace prize. He was awarded the honour for his efforts in negotiating a peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

In his acceptance speech, Santos called on the international community to "rethink" the war on drugs, a conflict "where Colombia has been the country that has paid the highest cost in deaths and sacrifices."

According to the National Centre of Historical Memory, Colombia's civil war has claimed at least 220,000 lives since 1958.

Add in the 150,000 casualties from Mexico's decade-long drug war, plus the unceasing flow of drugs into the US, and Santos' blunt assessment is essentially uncontroversial: "The war on drugs has not been won, and is not being won".



Colombia's Nobel Peace prize-winning President Juan Manuel Santos seems unlikely to relaunch a drug war. Norsk Telegrambyra AS/Reuters

Might does not make right

Things are changing in much of the world. But based on Trump's cabinet and law-and-order rhetoric, the incoming American administration seems poised to look backwards to a time when violence reigned and countless Latin American lives were thrown away for the pipe dream of a "drug-free world".

If the Trump administration fails to pursue President Barack Obama's reform track, which followed years of activism by a growing global reform movement, it will be incumbent on the people of all the Americas to promote change from the grassroots level.

The first step consists of acknowledging that drug consumption is a personal choice and a health issue rather than a criminal or military problem.

Latin Americans have been pioneers in reforming drug laws that fuelled organised crime and undermined democracy in the region. The Contadora Group, which contributed significantly to terminating the military conflicts in Central America in the 1980s, is one such pioneer.

Launched jointly by Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela to pressure the US to soften its militaristic stance in the region, Contadora ultimately failed to end American unilateral action. But

when it concluded in 1986, the effort had opened the possibility of negotiating shared and peaceful solutions to regional Latin American conflicts.

Today, the *Atitude* Programme in Pernambuco, Brazil, shows how local leaders can stop fighting the drug war on their turf.

The five-year-old programme, which emerged from the government's realisation that it couldn't arrest its way out of its crack problem, combines street intervention, mental health care and provisional housing for drug users. A 2016 study shows that *Atitude* has not only helped drug users' well-being, it has reduced drug-related violence in the state.

If the Trump administration seeks to draw the Americas back into a violent drug war, resisting may be a civic duty – on both sides of the border.

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