JUST SAY NO: THE MEDIA, DRUGS, AND
THE ANTI-DRUG ABUSE
ACT OF 1986

by
ANDREW T. DAWS
DIANNE BRAGG, COMMITTEE CHAIR
A.J. BAUER
KARLA GOWER

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Journalism and Creative Media
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2022
ABSTRACT

While the War on Drugs has taken on different iterations since first being declared publicly by President Richard Nixon, it is perhaps best associated with President Ronald Reagan. Throughout his two terms in office, Reagan made the War on Drugs one of his administration’s top priorities. Drug trafficking was running rampant, and substance abuse was affecting communities throughout the United States. In 1986, Reagan decided to take a stand, signing into law the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. This Act allocated millions of dollars toward anti-drug programs on both the international and domestic fronts. In concurrence with First Lady Nancy Reagan’s pivotal “Just Say No” campaign, the Act allocated resources for not only international initiatives, but for community-based programs as well. In the months leading up to the Act’s signing, specifically July through October 1986, there was in-depth coverage of the War on Drugs in both newspapers and newsmagazines, including the New York Times, the Miami Herald, U.S. News & World Report, and Time. These four publications offered insight into the public’s view of Reagan’s agenda related to substance abuse, and how the media hoped to frame and shape public discussion surrounding the issue. While the New York Times and Miami Herald were not as quick to critique, they centered its discussion mainly on legislation and what was being discussed amongst politicians. Time and U.S. News & World Report took on a slightly different angle, bringing in expert opinions and thoughts from the public, offering a glimpse into the media’s perception of Reagan’s agenda and the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for this opportunity to thank all of those who have helped me with this thesis project, including many faculty, colleagues, and friends. Most importantly, I would like to thank Dianne Bragg, the chairperson for this thesis, for her invaluable insight and wisdom throughout this process. Additionally, I would like to offer thanks to all of my committee members — A.J. Bauer and Karla Gower — for their questions, feedback, and willingness to assist throughout this project. With their input, this thesis became something I can be proud of today. The three committee members offered insight as to what resources and databases would be most effective in helping me to complete this research, and I will forever be indebted for their guidance along the way. Whenever there were issues, whether it be how to structure the thesis, how to incorporate certain sources, or general formatting questions, among others, this committee was there to assist in any way possible.

Also, I must extend my thanks to the College of Communication & Information Sciences, specifically the Department of Journalism & Creative Media. This thesis is a culmination of my studies throughout my two years at The University of Alabama, and each professor and faculty I interacted with during this time have helped me to achieve my goals today. Finally, I would like to thank my fellow students, whose support and encouragement played an integral role throughout my time as a graduate student here at the University.
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHOD</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THEORY</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE WAR ON DRUGS ABROAD</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE WAR ON DRUGS AT HOME</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE WAR ON DRUGS: FROM REAGAN TO BUSH</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

“Drug traffic is public enemy number one domestically in the United States today, and we must wage a total offensive, worldwide, nationwide, government-wide, and, if I might say so, media-wide,” stated President Richard Nixon in his 1969 inaugural address.\(^1\) After Nixon’s first public statement regarding anti-drug efforts as a war, successive presidential administrations have continued to use the platform, with each one taking it on in different forms as the years progressed. Formally declared in the early 1970s, the United States’ War on Drugs is a battle that continues to this day. In the 1980s, the War on Drugs became a hallmark of President Ronald Reagan’s administration, which placed it at the forefront of American discussion. With the help of his wife, First Lady Nancy Reagan, who played a critical role in this aspect of the president’s agenda, the “Just Say No” campaign was born. This campaign inundated Americans’ lives, especially families with schoolchildren, as it raised issues of morality and the potential threat drugs might have on younger generations.

Understanding how the War on Drugs and “Just Say No” campaign garnered such great notoriety under Reagan requires looking back at the administration’s concerted efforts. By the early years of Reagan’s presidency, drug trafficking had become an international problem. Cocaine and crack cocaine, among other substances, were pouring into the United States, largely from Latin American countries. According to Reagan, cartels were gaining influence and had associates within the United States’ borders, especially in states like Florida.\(^2\) Throughout his


\(^2\) Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Federal Drug Policy,” *Ronald Reagan*
first term in office, President Reagan sought to tackle this issue head on, as he vowed to take on the cartels and curb drug trafficking into the United States. This research, though, examines media coverage of the US government’s role in this mission and how it became somewhat blurred. With increasing frequency, federal agencies too often appeared to play a role in facilitating the drug trade, bringing into question their true intentions for engaging in the War on Drugs.

At the start of President Reagan’s second term in office, which began in 1985, the idea of drugs creating problems domestically gained greater traction. Moving the focus away from trafficking, Reagan, for the most part, sought to address substance abuse problems affecting communities within the United States. Past presidential administrations had attempted to impose minimum sentencing requirements on drug-related charges, although the policies seemed to ebb and flow prior to Reagan with the short terms of Nixon, Ford, and Carter. With the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, Reagan sought to put an end to these fluctuating standards. This Act made amendments to several existing policies, such as increasing minimum sentencing guidelines for drug-related crimes and making the punishments more severe.

How Americans perceived the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, however, lends itself to further discussion. For years, questions surrounded the legitimacy of Reagan’s War on Drugs and the “Just Say No” campaign. When the administration released the tenets of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, it outlined several ways in which Reagan and governmental agencies intended to tackle drug

---


abuse in the United States. Presidential administrations have historically used the media to help push their messages, as they educated and informed the public through a variety of mediums to gain support for their agendas, as well as to galvanize voters from their respective parties. As such, it is important to study whether the media simply went along with the Reagan administration’s message, or if they were willing to take a deeper look at the intentions behind it. Examining media coverage of the federal government’s messaging on the War on Drugs can provide some answers. Specifically, this thesis will focus on several questions:

1. What was outlined in the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, specifically related to international and domestic issues?

2. How did the media cover President Reagan’s rhetoric about the Act during the time leading up to its signing?

3. How did newspaper and popular culture newsmagazine coverage reflect, and shape the narrative of, what was included in the bill?

These questions highlight the integral role media plays in disseminating government policy to the public. As First Amendment scholar Vincent Blasi writes, one of the most important functions of the media is its “checking value,” which is to serve as a watchdog of the government. If, in fact, the media does not hold the government accountable, then it becomes easier for an administration to spread misleading information and propaganda. To examine these questions, this historical thesis will analyze records from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum archives, examining speeches and other documents related to the administration’s approach to the War on Drugs. It will then examine a selection of newspapers and popular newsmagazines, all of which are positioned throughout the country and present news in their own way. Along with using various theories as a touchstone for interpretation, this research will

strive to offer a new perspective on whether they accepted the administration’s positions carte blanche or if they raised substantive questions about the campaign and its potential for effectiveness or failure.
METHOD

This research will begin by examining President Reagan’s successful use of agenda setting in the War on Drugs and will then outline and examine documents from the administration regarding the Anti-Drug Abuse Act and other initiatives in 1986 related to the War on Drugs. The year 1986 offers a glimpse into the administration’s efforts, as it was when Reagan’s War on Drugs officially began, along with a sweeping rollout of policies aimed toward tackling the drug problem facing the country. Articles from the New York Times and the Miami Herald, along with Time and U.S. News & World Report, will be examined to see how they covered the Act and other policies. In analyzing the media’s response to the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, it is essential to look beyond simply one form of media. Both the New York Times and the Miami Herald are well known and lauded as some of the most credible news sources, and both have a national audience.

However, it is also likely that the Miami Herald’s in-depth reporting centered more on localized events, as South Florida was one of the key geographic locations affected by Reagan’s War on Drugs, with cocaine trafficking a heightened issue in this region. In addition, popular newsmagazines, while curated with a national audience in mind, have the potential to show a more tailored perspective of the War on Drugs and Anti-Drug Abuse Act. Being that many of the stories published through these platforms are typically longer and are not held to the exact same standards as newspapers like the New York Times and the Miami Herald, there may be more in-depth critiques of the Act that offer a clearer perspective on how media perceived and reported on this piece of legislation. Additionally, Time and U.S. News & World Report are more
representative of the cultural aspect of American life. Niche publications with limited space, popular newsmagazines tend to focus on major issues which are significant and pertinent to society.

Analyzing these different modes of publication will offer a wide breadth of discovery into how different arms of the media covered the Anti-Drug Abuse Act and how they portrayed Reagan’s initiatives. Looking at how the media presented this issue to the public will show how its coverage might have colored Americans’ views of the Reagan Administration’s efforts to combat substance abuse in the country. Analyzing the pertinent government documents and how the media covered and interpreted them will help determine whether the media fulfilled its watchdog function — holding the government accountable and curbing the power of propaganda — during this campaign, or if it simply regurgitated the information that flowed from the Reagan administration and other political offices.

As the drug crisis continues to sweep the nation, having taken various forms over the decades, it remains imperative to examine the role of newspapers and popular newsmagazines regarding the War on Drugs. Finding whether they were critical of these initiatives, or if they simply went along with the government agenda, will enable future research to gauge the efficacy of the press in critically covering such initiatives and how to better prepare for such campaigns in the future.
THEORY

To explore this research’s main questions, three theories can be employed for further interpretation. The checking value and agenda setting theories, in conjunction with framing, will help explicate the results, which could then be used in further research. Using these theories as a frame of reference will also help to decipher what information found is of importance, and which aspects are not as pertinent.

For years, scholarly works have shown a relationship between news media and the public agenda, although it was not until recently that researchers were able to provide the empirical data necessary to prove the news media’s role in shaping the public agenda. The 1972 landmark study by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, which centered on public issues and the 1968 presidential campaign, offered one of the first insights into the degree news stories have an effect on the nature of public discourse. With seemingly limitless events occurring every day, it oftentimes falls on the media to determine what news will be covered and, inevitably, become the main topic for public discussion at the time. In gauging the value of news, media professionals are essentially charged with “setting the agenda” for news consumers, relying greatly on perceptions and ideas of what is important to readers and viewers. The agenda setting theory plays a useful role in determining which types of news are considered important, although the use of framing is also essential in this discussion. Just as politicians use agenda setting and

---

8 Bryant, Thompson, and Finklea, “Agenda Setting,” 88.
framing to shape and present a somewhat skewed message, the news media can also utilize these tools, setting the stage for public discourse on a certain issue alongside its intended reception from consumers.

A subsection of agenda setting, called attribute agenda setting, resembles framing in several ways, using different elements related to a story, including attributes of issues, candidates, or their images. The War on Drugs was an important topic of discussion throughout the entirety of the Reagan Administration. The press covered it heavily and it was at the forefront of many American’s minds. Although it is apparent that agenda setting played an important role in this, either by way of the press or federal government, or both, what is perhaps more important is how these stories were framed. Framing theory can be used to determine how the press presented information to the public. After determining newsworthiness, how did the press frame the story? What did they want the topic of discussion to be regarding, for example, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986?

Framing, a theory generally known for its ability to persuade, encourages the consumer to think about a certain issue or a topic in a particular way. It is natural to assume when a president or federal agency releases information or introduces a new bill, they are going to present it in such a way as to convey a certain message. The media, however, has the opportunity to follow along without question or to interpret the data and information so the public can view things from an entirely different angle. In order to successfully frame a story, though, information must be presented as if it is coming from an objective standpoint.

---

9 Bryant, Thompson, and Finklea, “Agenda Setting,” 88.
10 Bryant, Thompson, and Finklea, “Framing,” 101.
A multitude of factors attribute to the framing of a story, including societal norms at the
time of publication, along with pressure from politicians or certain ideologies held by the
organization reporting on a story. Framing and agenda setting theories typically go hand in
hand. Once the news media decides which stories are important to cover and report on during a
specific time period, it then falls to these same people and organizations as to how the
information will be presented to the public. With framing being influenced by a variety of
factors, including potential pressures from outside groups, the final theory used in this research,
Vincent Blasi’s checking value, offers insight into how the press should hold the government
accountable without fear or being deterred from pressure.

In his research, Blasi notes that politicians for years have tended to abuse the trust of the
public, a group which oftentimes has a strong urge to maintain faith and allegiance to those who
have been elected to govern. However, with the growing size of governments and their scope
through various agencies and department, Blasi wrote on the importance of needing media
professionals who are “capable of acquiring enough information to pass judgment on the actions
of government, and also capable of disseminating their information and judgments to the
general public.”

The checking value articulates one of the many reasons it is important to have a free
press, relinquished from the burdens of fear and worry as to what repercussions might come
about from the government or powerful figures. In order to serve as a watchdog, to hold the
government accountable, the press must have the liberty to report on what is happening from an
objective standpoint. Simply using information from the government, which achieves its own

---

11 Bryant, Thompson, and Finklea, “Framing,” 102-103.
13 Blasi, “Checking Value,” 541.
goals through agenda setting and framing, is not enough. It is essential that the press be able to present and frame stories in its own way, as it oftentimes allows for more perspectives and enables critical thinking among the public.

One of the most prominent examples of the press serving in its role as a watchdog against the government occurred during the Watergate scandal, when Richard Nixon was president. Prior to Watergate, which led to Nixon’s resignation after operatives were found to have broken into Democratic National Committee headquarters, the public held him in great regard and had a high sense of trust in the veteran politician. The ensuing print media coverage was lauded by some, while criticized by others. Using the agenda setting theory, the media pinpointed Watergate as an event worthy of increased coverage, and they framed related stories to condemn the president and unveil actions which shattered the public’s faith in Nixon. The scandal was a watershed moment for the press, being a prime example of the importance of the press’s checking value. Media coverage of Watergate and Nixon’s actions was the major contributing factors leading to his downfall.

Agenda setting theory, framing, and checking value have the potential to offer greater insight, serving as a framework during the Reagan Administration, specifically when the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 was released. These theories can be utilized to gauge the relationship between the president and the press, importantly as to how far the press was willing to go in setting and framing its stories regarding the Anti-Drug Abuse Act and its success as a watchdog, rather than a lapdog, for the president and his agenda.

---


LITERATURE REVIEW

To approach this research, it is paramount to understand the role of newspapers and popular newsmagazines after President Richard Nixon publicly declared a “war on drugs” in 1971, paving the way for the official War on Drugs which would come to define the administrations of several successive presidents. Only two years later, in 1973, Nixon established the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), setting in motion harsher penalties and longer prison sentences for drug-related activities. In examining what exactly led President Nixon to take such steps, one must look at the history of his time in office. Much of what occurred under the Nixon Administration regarding the War on Drugs would later be reflected in the Reagan Administration’s efforts, so following the evolution of Nixon’s efforts over the years helps set the stage for when Reagan assumed office, catapulting the War on Drugs to perhaps its most heightened state.

With much of his 1968 campaign centering on law and order, Nixon continued this approach as president as he tackled drug use and the growing counterculture movement. As noted by Timothy Miller, a religious studies professor, this movement, composed of generally younger individuals who opposed the practices of mainstream society, were proponents of

---

17 Brian R. Alexander, “War on Drugs Redux: Welcome to the War on Doping in Sports,” Substance Use and Misuse 49, no. 9 (2014): 1190, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3109/10826084.2014.904119?casa_token=yvPT14poxXgAAAAA%3AivbWVn4UrRIjIiNYN6EgvwV2yWx9VES0LdyHxgN0Bce3jGk15U2zG7q6kK GkILuWuB8phaHoETMnW7Q.
marijuana, although many adamantly argued the importance of its use in moderation, rather than abuse.\(^{19}\) Scholar Seth Blumenthal’s research continued along similar lines, stating that the budding counterculture put Nixon’s already somewhat tarnished reputation into a more negative light—his standing being further threatened as 18-year-olds were granted the right to vote in 1971.\(^{20}\) However, rather than seeing this as an opportunity to change his tone, Nixon charged forth with his messaging, choosing to directly attack American youth and the rising popularity of drug use throughout the country, which went along with his stand against anti-Vietnam war protesters, whom he often portrayed as hippies and drug abusers.

According to Blumenthal, Nixon believed that to “enforce the law, you’ve got to scare them.”\(^{21}\) Although his stance somewhat changed out of necessity after the May 4, 1970, Kent State shootings, where the Ohio National Guard shot at protestors and killed four students, Blumenthal’s research shows that Nixon still stressed the need for stricter regulations against drug use because of “the fall in a community’s tolerance of moral looseness.”\(^{22}\) Not surprisingly, the idea of drug use being likened to a question of morality would be used by succeeding administrations and presidents who sought to leave their own mark on the War on Drugs. Another common thread which would be seen in later years was the idea of marijuana as a gateway drug. Nixon stated that it is “marijuana, then speed, then it’s LSD, then it’s heroin, etc., then you’re done.”\(^{23}\)


\(^{20}\) Blumenthal, “Nixon’s Marijuana Problem,” 27.

\(^{21}\) Blumenthal, 26.


\(^{23}\) Blumenthal, 26.
While Nixon had originally moved the focus away from marijuana in the latter part of the 1960s, as the country entered a new decade, he continued to call for tougher enforcement of laws against it. Matthew Lassiter’s research found that Nixon believed drug use was beginning to affect upper-middle class communities, citing examples of how marijuana acting as a gateway drug was becoming true.\textsuperscript{24} Nixon sought, through his messaging, to ignite a conversation concerning drugs in the country, hoping to galvanize White voters by using various avenues, including news organizations, to help spread his message about the dangers of drugs and substance abuse facing communities throughout the country, according to researcher Stephen Siff.\textsuperscript{25}

While radio was an important tool during this period, broadcast networks also began running special programming and offering material about the administration’s efforts as a way to inform and educate the public about the dangers of drug use. Subsequent research findings show that this incited a form of fear throughout communities about the morality crisis facing the nation because of drug users and those who were distributing the drugs.\textsuperscript{26}

After President Nixon’s resignation, his successor, former Vice President Gerald Ford, continued the War on Drugs campaign, with researchers finding that in 1976 Ford stated that “we had not won the war on drugs.”\textsuperscript{27} As a result, Ford made the decision to continue fighting the


\textsuperscript{26} Lassiter, “Impossible Criminals,” 127.

war, notably by expanding its scope to tackle more than just marijuana, specifying heroin, amphetamines, and barbiturates as posing the greatest risks to the country. He then called for more aggressive strategies, introducing the Narcotic Sentencing and Seizure Act in 1976. This Act amended the Comprehensive Drug Abuse and Prevention Act of 1970, imposing “specified minimum penalties on individuals convicted of enumerated offenses related to the distribution, transportation, and manufacture of opiates.” Ford was not naive, though, having a general understanding that drugs and substance abuse would never be eradicated in the country, as noted by legal expert Rudolph J. Gerber.

In 1975, Ford introduced the “White Paper on Drug Abuse,” which looked to develop a federal strategy toward developing initiatives to tackle the War on Drugs overseas. One of the main reasons for it was the rise in the amount of heroin entering the United States, which had actually begun near the tail end of the Nixon Administration. This is one of the first examples of the United States tackling the drug issue on the international front.

The War on Drugs was moving away from solely focusing on the hippies and those who might be disruptive to Nixon and his agenda. Instead, especially after the increase in the number of drugs coming in from other countries, the government offered its first glimpse of holding other countries accountable for their part in the United States’ increasing drug problem. Namely, the “White Paper” targeted Mexico, which it said was responsible for a significant amount of

---

29 St. John and Lewis, 20.
32 Aileen Teague, “Mexico’s Dirty War on Drugs: Source Control and Dissidence in Drug Enforcement,” The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs, 33, no. 1 (2019): 1, https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/702693?casa_token=mJ_m7eX62icAAAAA%3AiMSyGnSvLa-11JP1Cl8GwWE7Yi5kvVFFjxyd8xtCpYsFJfBmAuAcDY6LJR3715FvL8Gk4EC5SkQ.
heroin being smuggled into the United States. With pressure mounting from the United States, Mexico took several steps to address the drug problem in its own country; upon undertaking this task, the United States sent DEA agents to monitor Mexico’s progress, although this was met with great resistance from the Mexican government. The “White Paper” and Ford’s role in taking the War on Drugs abroad signified a shift in the United States’ agenda. In the years to follow, as cocaine became a significant problem in the country, the federal government began to hold other foreign powers accountable for their role in the drug trade. Currently, there is a lack of research analyzing the media’s role in perpetuating the War on Drugs under the Ford Administration, although research has noted that it was, in a sense, similar to that of the Nixon Administration, which was able to garner support through a variety of programming and publications, almost none of which was met with opposition.

As President Ford’s term came to an end, and President Jimmy Carter assumed office, the tone of the War on Drugs again shifted. While Ford had attempted to redirect the conversation surrounding the War on Drugs to harder drugs, much of what Carter focused on had to do with marijuana. Scholars have noted that Carter sought to lessen the penalties surrounding low-level drug convictions, for example marijuana-related crimes, as he believed “penalties against possession of a drug should not be more damaging to an individual than the use of the drug itself.” In fact, Carter even suggested decriminalizing marijuana in a 1977 speech, although this

---

35 Andrew B. Whitford and Jeff Yates, Presidential Rhetoric and the Public Agenda: Constructing the War on Drugs (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 286-287.
36 St. John and Lewis, “‘Vilify Them at Night,’” 20.
proposal was swiftly quashed by other legislatures. Additionally straying from the paths of Nixon and Ford, Carter attempted to redirect the drug conversation away from war and crime, breaking it down to simply the “dealer” and the “user.” As noted earlier, the Nixon Administration had attempted to approach the War on Drugs through a lens of violence and as an imminent threat to the country. This was, in large part, continued throughout the Ford Administration, but took a significant shift when Carter assumed office.

After Ronald Reagan’s victory over President Carter in 1980, the War on Drugs received greater attention and publicity. At the onset of President Reagan’s time in office, drug trafficking had become a significant issue both internationally and nationally. In the early 1980s, cocaine and marijuana use were sweeping the nation, and scholar Bruce Michael Bagley noted that “the wholesale value of all illegal drugs smuggled into the United States in 1986 was around $25 billion.” In what many saw as a sharp increase from previous years, United States citizens were spending around $150 billion on illicit drugs each year, the majority of which was being imported from Latin American countries.

While marijuana was still considered a problem in the country, cocaine had begun eclipsing marijuana sales and production, raising concerns because, as Bagley stated, “Cocaine syndicates tend to be more vertically integrated, more hierarchical and more violent.”

---

38 Valenzuela, “The ‘War on Drugs,’” 253.
40 Bagley, 163-164.
41 Bruce Michael Bagley, “Colombia and the War on Drugs,” *Foreign Affairs* 67, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 76, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20043675?casa_token=T2yy2wO6-1cAAAAA%3AjP2nTMEX4S4WP9Rbs7Tb5aAZ
previous administrations had taken different approaches to the War on Drugs, there now appeared to be an even greater cry for reform. Acceptance of drug use in the 1980s was further declining, and the thought of it becoming an everyday part of American life became deeply concerning for many citizens — perhaps due to the Reagan Administration’s public relations campaigns in addressing this issue. In September of 1986, President Reagan made an address to the nation, one of the first times he discussed the issues surrounding substance abuse directly. In a speech filled with emotional appeal, he described drugs as a menace to society that had the potential to turn young people’s dreams into nightmares.\(^{42}\) While the Reagan Administration’s War on Drugs officially began in 1986, his administration’s efforts regarding drug trafficking and abuse actually began making preemptive strikes in the early years of his presidency. In October of 1982, Reagan addressed the nation and explicitly spoke about drug use and drug trafficking in the United States. He announced a comprehensive plan to combat these issues and announced the administration would be cracking down on trafficking, specifically in South Florida.\(^{43}\)

Prior to Reagan’s War on Drugs focusing mainly on the domestic front, the United States had engaged in international controversies, specifically in Latin America, related to drug trafficking. Most of the drugs coming into the US, like cocaine, which would then be used to manufacture crack cocaine, came from countries throughout South America, something Reagan made a decision to tackle early on. In Nicaragua, a social political party — the Sandinistas —

---


had taken charge of the country. In what has become historically viewed as typical fashion, the United States worked alongside another group, the Contras, in an attempt to bring democracy to the country. However, as scholars like Harry Vanden have noted, opinion regarding the United States’ government involvement in Nicaragua has been questioned throughout the years, specifically with concern over the potential violation of moral and congressional codes.\textsuperscript{44}

One of the more striking accusations that has arisen from this controversy was that the federal government, using exiled Nicaraguans living in the United States, actively sought to traffic cocaine into the country, through states like Florida, reportedly leading to the introduction of crack cocaine as it is known today.\textsuperscript{45} While investigations were initially looking into the Contras and their role in facilitating the trafficking of cocaine into the United States, researchers noted that organizations like the CIA and FDA stepped in to block these inquiries from continuing.\textsuperscript{46} Part of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 enabled the Reagan Administration to shroud many of its activities related to the War on Drugs in the name of national security.

During this period crack cocaine experienced a significant increase in use. Cocaine, which a primarily White demographic favored, had treatments readily available and had been the focus of attention of rehabilitation for years; crack cocaine, however, disproportionately affected African American communities and was not truly recognized by the media until around 1985.\textsuperscript{47}

In 1986, the Reagan Administration’s decision to pursue a direct assault on crack cocaine galvanized the War on Drugs to perhaps its greatest height in comparison to previous years, with

\textsuperscript{45} Vanden, “Contra, Crack, and the Company,” 10.
\textsuperscript{46} Vanden, 10.
various forms of media reporting horrific, lurid stories on the dangers of the drug and the impact it was having on communities throughout the country.\textsuperscript{48}

Sociology scholars Craig Reinarman and Harry Levine would later coin this phenomenon as a “drug scare,” as crack cocaine became the center of public discussion in the War on Drugs, although it was not even one of the most popular drugs being used at the time. Reinarman and Levine wrote that in the 1970s, when cocaine was becoming a major problem, the media did not pay nearly as much attention to the crisis as they did only a few years later with the emergence of crack cocaine. This raises questions as to the role of the federal government in presenting information on drug abuse in the country. As noted earlier, the Ford and Carter administrations were not as preoccupied with addressing the War on Drugs, at least in comparison to the Reagan administration. It is likely that the media’s coverage of the drug epidemic in the latter part of the 1980s was at least somewhat related to this shift in emphasis on the part of the federal government under Reagan. Further support for this can be found by looking back at the Nixon Administration, which was also a period when the media covered the War on Drugs in greater detail.\textsuperscript{49}

While the media used softer tones in describing primarily White cocaine users, the depiction of crack cocaine users was more negative and demeaning in its presentation. Crack cocaine users were often seen as irredeemable, and that no amount of help could save them. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 acted as though this opinion was fact, directly targeting communities where crack cocaine was prevalent and enacting policies which took a more hard-lined approach toward it in terms of policing and prosecution. The media featured stories of

\textsuperscript{49} Reinarman and Levine, 1.
crack babies and other sensational tales, all adding to the much-reported political spectacle of the War on Drugs. This harkens back to the Nixon era, where researchers now recognize the War on Drugs was more of a political spectacle than an actual effort to save lives. Reeves and Campbell highlight this issue, discussing how White users of substances like cocaine received more aid in terms of rehabilitation and other resources than users of crack cocaine, who tended to be African American.\(^\text{50}\)

Beginning in the late 1980s, rumors began to circulate that the federal government was actively engaging in the distribution of crack cocaine in disparate communities.\(^\text{51}\) However, some researchers have dispelled this as a conspiracy and nothing more, since it would have dismantled the entire structure of what the government was proclaiming to achieve.\(^\text{52}\) Going briefly beyond the Reagan Administration, there was actual proof of the government engaging in questionable activity, when Reagan’s successor held what was meant to be a powerful and telling moment during a press conference in the Oval Office. In 1989, George H.W. Bush held a press conference in the Oval Office, alerting the public that crack cocaine was being sold just yards away from the White House.

However, it was soon reported that the DEA, along with local police, had lured a drug dealer to Lafayette Park, which is across the street from the White House, in what essentially became known as a red herring for the War on Drugs.\(^\text{53}\) While the focus of this paper centers on President Reagan and the policies enacted in 1986, George H.W. Bush was the vice president

\(^{50}\) Reeves and Campbell, *Cracked Coverage*, 380.
\(^{52}\) Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 57.
during Reagan’s time in office, so many of his policies regarding the War on Drugs were influenced by the Reagan Administration. Although some researchers believe the federal government, at least during the Reagan Administration, did not create and manipulate scenarios to fuel a conspiracy of sorts in the War on Drugs, the H.W. Bush Administration did just that, making the War on Drugs further look like political theatre.\textsuperscript{54}

In 1986, in a seminal moment in the drug war, First Lady Nancy Reagan assumed a major role in the effort to curb drug use, introducing the iconic “Just Say No” campaign, which focused on bringing attention to drug use and how to educate young people on its dangers. As part of the campaign, “pamphlets, books, newsletters, and videotapes were offered for sale to concerned parents, teachers, and youth organizers who wanted to put a stop to drug use and abuse in their schools and communities,” in an effort to address the growing panic over drugs — garnering national media attention, according to researchers Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda.\textsuperscript{55} Similar to previous administrations, the Reagan Administration found ways to disseminate information about the dangers of drugs through various forms of media.

It would be nearly impossible to discuss the War on Drugs without highlighting the significance of Nancy Reagan’s involvement, as the “Just Say No” slogan has been remembered and credited to her. Scholars note that one of the main goals of the “Just Say No” campaign was to make drugs sound unappealing and to show the damage they did to people’s lives. Susan Mackey-Kallis and Dan Hahn found that the main goal of the “Just Say No” campaign was to shape the conversation as an issue of morality, stating, “solutions became a matter of self—will


and restraint, which, while appealing to the individual by providing a sense of control over and freedom from the social ill.”

This moral panic was carefully curated through policy and rhetoric, for example Nancy Reagan using the word “epidemic” when referring to the nation’s growing drug problem.

Another significant reason for mentioning First Lady Nancy’s Reagans participation in the War on Drugs is the fact that the Anti-Drug Abuse Act allocated funds to be set aside for programs in schools throughout the country. The 1986 act provided $200 million for the 1987 fiscal year to be used throughout the country in developing educational programs, including intervention for high-risk youth, prevention programs and other community initiatives. Because President Reagan heavily pushed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, it enabled Nancy Reagan to take on a more hands-on role in the War on Drugs, with the Act funding almost all of the programs and initiatives the First Lady spearheaded.

Using policies and laws that had been enacted under previous administrations, Reagan took a hardline approach to the issue of drugs, letting it be known that his administration would be taking a forceful, immovable stance. With the exception of marijuana, offenses related to Schedule I and Schedule II drugs, in the case of a death or injury, would result in a prison sentence of 20 years to life. It became clear that Reagan had no intention of backing down, as is evidenced through the blunt language present in the bill and other media the administration

---


released. Amendments to the Anti-Drug Abuse Act included adding drug trafficking which, if committed while armed and after three offenses, would be punishable with a mandatory prison sentence of 15 years to life. This became known as the “three strikes and you’re out” policy.60

It appears that throughout these initiatives, without many questions, the press generally relied on the information the government provided them. This research’s examination of the coverage of Reagan’s War on Drugs will show any disparities that should have been covered. For example, the Reagan administration used the Anti-Drug Abuse Act to essentially protect itself from having to divulge certain information. Similar to the CIA’s reported involvement in cocaine trafficking, the media reported none of this. Under Reagan, doing so would have been labeled illegal, as it fell under the guise of protecting national security.

One of the more striking aspects of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act was that the federal government granted authority to state and local law enforcement to ensure that the controlled substance statutes were carried out in their respective jurisdictions.61 This is crucial, as critics have noted how the War on Drugs seemed designed to target minority communities. A key component of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act was that crack cocaine and powder cocaine were identified as two separate substances — with one researcher noting that African Americans were much more likely to be found with crack cocaine than White people.62 Possession of crack cocaine carried a much harsher sentence.63 By giving greater power to local and state law

60 Hogan, Pearl, and Ronhoude, “1986 Drug Control,” 4. Schedule I drugs are defined as drugs with no current accepted medical use, including marijuana, LSD, and ecstasy. Schedule II drugs are defined as those with a high risk of abuse, including cocaine and methamphetamine. For more information on Schedule I and Schedule II drugs, see https://www.dea.gov/drug-information/drug-scheduling.
63 Free, 270.
enforcement agencies, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act enabled local and state police to arrest Black citizens at higher rates. Police were able to target minority communities, using the Anti-Drug Abuse Act as justification, a consequence which none of the media covered to any extent.

Reagan took additional steps to make sure that federal employees were not using drugs, introducing an executive order in September of 1986 that required mandatory drug testing for all federal workers.64 This order was an extension of the President’s Commission on Organized Crime and targeted organized crime, suggesting more stringent guidelines for drug testing among local, state, and federal employees.65 It is possible this was an effort to create a united front throughout the different levels of government. Reagan perhaps wanted to give the appearance that all levels of the federal government were aligned in tackling the drug problem, as the United States took the War on Drugs to the international stage, working to stem drug production and trafficking from foreign countries.

---

THE WAR ON DRUGS ABROAD

Between July and October 1986, various media reported on a variety of issues relating to the War on Drugs. One of the central pieces of coverage included international affairs, with reporters and policy experts encouraging the Reagan Administration to look outside of the United States to effectively quell the ever-rising drug crisis plaguing the nation. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 offered detailed sections as to how the United States planned to tackle drug trafficking throughout the world, also noting efforts that had already been undertaken. Two of the main countries the United States focused its efforts on were Bolivia and Mexico. Amending the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 outlined $75,445,000 in assistance for international narcotics control. 66 The first line of the Act itself reads:

To strengthen Federal efforts to encourage foreign cooperation in eradicating illicit drug crops and in halting international drug traffic, to improve enforcement of Federal drug laws and enhance interdiction of illicit drug shipments … and for other purposes. 67

A common political theme throughout much of the United States’ history is the idea that not much can be accomplished without some form of US intervention or involvement. This proved to be true in various parts of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, as the United States used its force and standing within multilateral development banks to leverage cooperation with poorer countries. 68 For those willing to cooperate, countries would be given resources to develop and promote programs which would lead to the reduction, and ultimately the eradication, of drugs and other substances. As outlined in the bill, the United States was willing to assist other

countries in helping to work toward the government’s goals, purporting to prefer programs over military intervention.\textsuperscript{69}

Journalist Martin W. Schwartz wrote a \textit{U.S. News \& World Report} article that underscored the necessity of using American funds to help fight the War on Drugs, as many drug cartels and traffickers already had financial backers who helped fuel the industry.\textsuperscript{70} As Schwartz noted, “The only way for us to win this war is for the federal government to acknowledge that the drug smugglers, their financial backers, and the foreign public officials who shield them are terrorists.”\textsuperscript{71} While the drug war was becoming an increasingly partisan issue, many were calling for politicians on both side of the aisle to come together and fight the scourge that was plaguing the nation. Some went so far as to call drug trafficking an act of terror against the United States. Because of this, Schwartz declared it was time for the government to finally acknowledge the scope of the problem. Certain foreign officials and smugglers had joined forces to help fund the trafficking of drugs, and whether the United States acted with force or quiet diplomacy, Schwartz believed the government should do whatever it took, by any means necessary, to tackle the problem head on.\textsuperscript{72} While President Reagan had organized attacks on countries like Libya for different forms of terrorism, Schwartz supported whatever means Reagan might take on in this new kind of terrorism, a type of terror killing thousands of Americans each year, writing, “Is it not now time, Mr. President, to act against a far more deadly enemy?”\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{69}Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, 68.  
\textsuperscript{71}Schwartz.  
\textsuperscript{72}Schwartz, “The Terror of Illicit Drugs.”  
\textsuperscript{73}Schwartz.
In regard to Bolivia, the Act detailed, in what was known as Operation Blast Furnace, what the United States had done and what it planned to do in the future. This operation reportedly had a significant effect on the coca industry in the region, effectively dropping the price below the cost of production.\textsuperscript{74} One of the main goals of this effort was to restore the Bolivian economy, no longer solely relying on the coca industry, as part of preserving democratic institutions which were in place. Applauding the Bolivian government for its cooperation, despite domestic criticism and the potential for economic upset, the United States committed to giving Bolivia access to its portion of the assistance fund so long as the government continued its efforts against the coca industry.\textsuperscript{75}

Additionally, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 dealt specifically with Mexico and curbing the production of drugs in the country. While in Bolivia the United States was particularly concerned about the coca industry, issues in Mexico spanned from the production of marijuana and trafficking of other illicit substances. The Act outlined authorizations granted to US Secretary of the Interior Donald Hodel for appropriating $500,000 for each of the fiscal years 1987, 1988, and 1989 to use at his discretion specifically toward monitoring the flow of illegal narcotics stemming from the Mexican border along the Papago Reservation in Arizona.\textsuperscript{76}

Furthermore, the Act granted President Reagan permission to establish a Mexico-United States Intergovernmental Commission on Narcotics and Psychotropic Drug Abuse and Control. US Secretary of State George Shultz was to direct the Commission and would be responsible for education, prevention, treatment, and law enforcement to tackle drug abuse. As part of the Act, the Secretary of State had no more than 90 days after the signing of this Act to report to

\textsuperscript{74} Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, 65-66.  
\textsuperscript{75} Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, 66.  
\textsuperscript{76} Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, 146.
Congress on the progress being made in establishing such a commission.\textsuperscript{77} This commission was likely included because of the United States’ opinion that Mexico had thus far given a weak response to the War on Drugs, specifically in the country’s perceived “inadequate response.”\textsuperscript{78}

Throughout 1986, Reagan and other government officials made several addresses and speeches to both the American people and the international community on the United States’ mission to stop the production and trafficking of drugs throughout the world. In early August of 1986, Reagan spoke to a group of reporters on the goals of his administration and future legislative action he would take to further promote his mission to tackle drug abuse in the nation. One of the major components he cited was the need for international cooperation, recently having declared drug abuse as a major threat to national security.\textsuperscript{79} The president stated, “I believe we’ve come to a time when the American people are willing to make it clear that illegal drug and alcohol use will no longer be tolerated, a time when we will take those steps necessary to rid America of this deeply disruptive and corrosive evil.”\textsuperscript{80} Reagan promised to defeat international drug trafficking, hurting traffickers where he believed it to be the most effective — their wallets. Following his remarks, President Reagan did not engage with the press in great detail, announcing that this was more of a preliminary announcement and no concrete plans had been specifically outlined.

About one week after making this general announcement, President Reagan met with President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado of Mexico. In describing their discussions, President

\textsuperscript{77} Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, 71.
\textsuperscript{78} Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, 72.
\textsuperscript{80} Reagan, “Remarks Announcing the Campaign Against Drug.”
Reagan explained how the two men had agreed it was imperative to maintain a strong campaign against drug trafficking and abuse:

One area of solid agreement was our recognition of the necessity of maintaining our countries' strong campaign against drugs. We pledged to bolster our eradication programs and our efforts to bring to justice vicious drug traffickers, who have been such a corrupting influence in both our countries. We also pledged to do all possible to attack the demand side of this evil by aggressively discouraging the consumption of narcotic drugs.  

Reagan added that their agreement extended to continue finding and prosecuting traffickers, an issue negatively affecting both countries and further lending itself to the consumption of illegal drugs. In response, the President of Mexico further aligned himself with Reagan and the overall mission purported as part of the War on Drugs. Hurtado agreed that working on this mission was mutually beneficial to both countries, and something that would only further strengthen the bond between the two countries:

I am referring now to the war against drug trafficking. The Government of Mexico maintains that international cooperation is absolutely necessary in order to efficiently face drug trafficking. We agreed that it's necessary to simultaneously attack all the links of the chains; that is, production, distribution, and consumption. I have said to President Reagan that we believe that the campaign that, under his leadership, has been established in the United States is very important to combat the consumption and the distribution of drugs. We shall continue to strengthen the cooperation between both governments in order to combat this cancer of modern society.  

This meeting was then followed by a question-and-answer session between Reagan and the press, although he offered only written responses. Again, the press pushed Reagan on details regarding the two presidents’ conversation, with a majority of the questions centering on the drug issue. Once more, Reagan stressed the importance of international cooperation, with each

---

82 Reagan and Hurtado, “Remarks Following Discussions.”
country looking out for the best interests of the other in this fight, adding that this meeting with the President of Mexico served as an opportunity to have a “friendly, frank, and open dialog between friends.” All the while, Congress was working diligently to construct legislation that reflected the message being promoted by Reagan in his various speeches and discussions with world leaders.

Relating to President Reagan’s talks with the president of Mexico, the *Miami Herald* published an article detailing the event. However, it offered no critique or analysis of the meeting, simply reporting a play-by-play of the two men’s dialogue. The article provided no critique or in-depth analysis, with journalist David Hess simply leading with, “de la Madrid … stressed the need to block drug trafficking in all its phases — production, transportation, distribution, and consumption. He won a promise from Reagan to establish the enforcement machinery to do so, U.S. officials said.” One of the more interesting aspects of this articles as it relates to others published in the *New York Times*, is it appears to show differing opinions about Mexico’s level of involvement in the War on Drugs. It appears to show a willingness on the part of the Mexican government in the War on Drugs that was largely disregarded in articles other publications printed.

There was significant news coverage of Congress’s actions in crafting legislation related to the War on Drugs. These articles offer a glimpse into the innerworkings of politicians and the federal government joining together, or against each other, with President Reagan and other

---

85 Hess, “Mexico Chief Vows.”
86 Brinkley, “Mexico and the Narcotics Traffic.”
influential leaders in the War on Drugs effort to curb international drug production and trafficking. As reported by the *New York Times*, the US House of Representatives approved the use of military intervention in the War on Drugs, almost serving as a precursor to the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986.\(^\text{87}\) This bill was set to curb the flow of narcotics pouring into the country, although the package in its entirety was estimated to cost billions of dollars over a three to four-year period. Parts of this bill also stiffened the length and severity of federal drug sentences, while also promising to penalize other countries that did not remain true to their promises on working toward eradication. The military amendment, which was approved 237 to 177 in the House, also granted Reagan the authority to inhibit the flow of drugs coming into the country, whether it be by plane or ship, within 45 days of the bill’s enactment. As reported by Jonathan Fuerbringer, Representative Brian Donnelly, a Democrat from Massachusetts, was quoted as saying, “I sure wouldn’t want to be a drug pusher in this country when this passes.”\(^\text{88}\)

However, there was some concern among certain politicians as to how the government should go about intervening in the War on Drugs. Although Senator Paula Hawkins, a Republican from Florida, and Senator Dennis DeConcini, a Democrat from Arizona, believed in military intervention to curb drug trafficking into the United States, others like Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger believed this was not the answer.\(^\text{89}\) In an 83-4 vote in the Senate, the Pentagon was charged with seeing how it could better help in the War on Drugs, albeit with the goal of avoiding military involvement if at all possible. Once passed by the US House of


\(^\text{88}\) Fuerbringer.

Representatives, the bill approved the use of troops and military equipment to seal the borders and curb the flow of drugs coming into the country.

Members of both the Senate and the President’s cabinet were against the use of military force because it could potentially distract from other issues. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger was one of those who stood in opposition, believing the military’s ultimate goal was to be prepared for war, rather than dealing with worries over drugs like cocaine, heroin, and marijuana coming in from other countries. There was a clear disconnect between politicians and government officials as to how the United States should go about tackling the War on Drugs. While many of Reagan’s discussions and other communication presented a story where military involvement was not seen as the best option, subsequent articles in both newspapers and newsmagazines proved that this was not always taken into consideration, especially with politicians like Senator Hawkins stating, “The American people do not have the perception that there’s any actions” being taken by the Department of Defense.

*U.S. News & World Report* also offered a glimpse into the drug problem, publishing an article by James Mills, a man who had spent more than six years studying the international issues related to the War on Drugs. Mills agreed with the minority opinion of most people on Capitol Hill, that the United States should not solely rely on overwhelmingly robust solutions to tackle drug trafficking and production in foreign countries. As Mills said, “Some people think that because the drug problem is enormous, the solution must also be enormous.” Instead of developing all of these programs and overcomplicating the issue, Mills said the United States

---

90 Herald Wire Services, “Vote Oks Pentagon Drug Role.”
91 Herald Wire Services.
must go straight to the source, where drugs were being produced and trafficked, so the drug situation would in a sense resolve itself.

He cited the success of similar efforts in Mexico and Turkey in prior years, while noting this could not have been done without financial assistance from the United States. One of the more important aspects of this article, though, was the question of whether this particular rendition of the War on Drugs was politically driven. In an effort to avoid political pressure, did President Reagan craft the war as a public-relations program, promoting the idea that drugs could actually be stopped at the border. In describing how presidents have typically gone about avoiding political pressure related to the drug war, Mills wrote:

You create a war on drugs — a politically motivated public-relations program founded upon the falsehood that you can stop drugs at the border. You go for fast, high-visibility operations with lots of arrests and seized drugs. Bust the people who are being arrested are for the most part middle and low-level dealers within the United States. Viewed from the perspective of the international drug trade, they are not significant figures.93

During this time, there was also significant discourse surrounding international issues, specifically Bolivia, related to the War on Drugs in both newspapers and popular newsmagazines. Beginning in the month of July 1986, American forces and Bolivian law enforcement joined together to create a task force specifically aimed at targeting the drug trade, a multimillion-dollar industry, in Bolivia.94 While the Miami Herald reported that the scope of this operation and its length were unclear, Bolivian leaders announced plans to work alongside American troops, including pilots and communications specialists, to go after the cocaine trade which, at the time, was generating nearly $1 billion dollars in revenue per year. Being the second-largest coca producing country, Bolivian leaders admitted that stopping drug trafficking

93 Mills, “Stop Drugs at the Source.”
was not something one country could do alone. Multiple countries had to work together.

Although the War on Drugs appeared to be a concerted effort resting on the shoulders of the United States, the media reported a desire from foreign governments to aid in the fight against drug trafficking.\(^95\)

The day after this operation was formally announced, a cocaine laboratory in Bolivia was raided, which the *Miami Herald* said began “peacefully.”\(^96\) While no deadly force was used in the strike, the article noted that the Bolivian government had granted permission for authorities to destroy any and all cocaine labs. More often than not, there was a lack of transparency into the operations themselves and how governments were working with one another to address the drug issue. In a press conference held after the strike, Whitefield reported that, “They were tight-lipped about the operation and say they were not authorized to issue any information. The more talk, the more possibility that information on potential raid sites will be leaked, said Capt. Charles Grebinger, a US Army public affairs officer.”\(^97\)

*Time* also covered this development, delving more into the creation of this task force aligned with the long-term goals of President Reagan’s agenda, all the while making more targeted claims as to how the president could better address the drug issue.\(^98\) It described the raids and the task force itself as a little too “Wild West,” too “Reagan-style,” suggesting that rather than focusing energy on international affairs, the government could be more focused on the then-recent deaths of notable college athletes from cocaine overdoses. This is not to say that *Time* did not believe the entirety of the effort was beneficial and working toward addressing the

\(^95\) Mimi Whitefield, “Bolivian, U.S. Forces Ready.”
\(^97\) Whitefield, “U.S., Bolivia Strike.”
problem head on. It later reported the cooperative effort had instilled fears in drug traffickers based in Bolivia, driving the price of a bundle of cocaine to $20, significantly lower than the $700 per bundle it had been two years prior. However, even though the raids momentarily stymied drug production, they did nothing to decrease demand. *Time* wrote that, “Despite the showiness of the Bolivia raid, there is a growing belief in the US, shared by many governments in Latin America, that the only way to get at the nation’s drug infestation is by discouraging its domestic demand, not by nibbling away at suppliers in Latin America.”

Around this same time, *U.S. News & World Report* was also covering the raids and cocaine busts occurring in Bolivia. Much like *Time*, however, this article offered a more pointed critique from a US perspective, showing that the War on Drugs was ever more becoming an issue of partisanship in the federal government. Similar to other articles, it highlighted the use of helicopters and cooperation between US forces and the Bolivian government. One of the most significant differences between this report and other coverage, though, was the direct mention of the early stages of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which would be introduced and signed into law in the following months. The Drug Enforcement Agency, or DEA, announced they had increased their overseas presence by 25% over the previous three years, and would continue to expand, calling it “their own dirty little war.” At the same time, “With Congress set to consider a new, multibillion-dollar anti-drug program and the Reagan Administration proposing $200 to $300 million more next year, it’s likely the situation will get hotter.”

---

100 DeMott, Seaman, and Stanley, “Striking at the Source,” 12.
103 Duffy, “Fighting the Drug War.”
Rather than coming together in support of making progress in curbing the production of cocaine, many Democrats seized this opportunity to go after the Reagan Administration and suggest ways anti-drug efforts could be improved. Representative Charles Rangel, a Democrat from New York who also chaired the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, stated that the Reagan Administration “has failed to provide the leadership and coordinated strategy needed to combat this national drug epidemic.” *U.S. News & World Report* continued, “so much for bipartisanship.” It is worth noting that this increased partisanship, around the same time politicians were claiming there were crack houses just blocks from the Capitol, began to emerge simultaneously with the campaign in Bolivia, suggesting the government was focusing its energies on the wrong issue.

*U.S. News & World Report* focused on issues both domestic and international. While the federal government was focusing the War on Drugs outside of the United States, there was a strong desire for it to be focused on the domestic front. In a section similar to a Letters to the Editor, a reader named Judd Hermann from St. Louis, Missouri, expressed their frustrations with the Reagan Administration, writing, “Let’s ask the First Lady to get our helicopters out of Bolivia and into North Carolina where they can really do some good.”

Clearly, some American citizens did not agree with the federal government’s agenda, though it was also reported that the efforts in Bolivia were serving as a litmus test for future operations in other Latin American countries, positing that “US troops may be sent to other nations besides Bolivia to help destroy crops and drug-processing plants.” Closer to the United

---

104 Duffy and Robbins, “A Jungle War.”
States’ border, in Mexico, other issues related to the War on Drugs were arising, with the *New York Times* providing in-depth articles regarding the federal government’s plan to tackle trafficking in the region, one of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act’s greatest missions.

On July 1, 1986, the *New York Times* published an opinion piece centering on what the United States should do regarding the developing drug crisis in Mexico. Citing the 30 million marijuana users and cocaine users, and 500,000 heroin addicts at the time, Samuel del Villar, a law professor at El Colegio de Mexico and former adviser to President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado, not only mentioned the failed policies of the War on Drugs, but more importantly the wealth and power these people were giving to the so-called corrupt government in Mexico.\(^{108}\) But, this article was not written simply as an attack on Mexico and its people. Rather, it commented on the potential failings of American drug policies related to the War on Drugs. In describing the true victims of the War on Drugs, del Villar wrote:

> The victims of American antidrug policies are foreign farmers and peasants who are voiceless and voteless in the American political process. They are subject to loss of freedom and destruction of their property while the estimated five million marijuana growers and tens of millions of consumers in the United States are virtually immune from penalties.\(^{109}\)

With the United States choosing to focus most of its efforts on tackling drug production and trafficking abroad, countries like Mexico were most negatively impacted. Farmers and other low-income workers were leaving their jobs to help cultivate marijuana and other drugs, where they could make more money, to meet demand coming from the United States — putting Mexico and its economy in dire straits. The article quoted Secretary of State George P. Shultz as having


\(^{109}\) del Villar, “What to Do About Mexico.”
said, “It will be hard to convince other nations to put an end to drug cultivation if they believe we are not living up to our own responsibility to get a grip on the drug problem we have.”\textsuperscript{110}

Outside of opinion pieces, the \textit{New York Times}' coverage on Mexico also showed the disconnect between the United States and the international community related to drugs. For the most part, the United States depicted foreign countries as one of the main reasons for the scourge that was drug trafficking. At the time, there was little focus on how the demand for drugs in the United States could potentially be exacerbating this issue. In late October 1986, the \textit{New York Times} reported on an interaction between John Gavin, a former ambassador to Mexico, and officials from Mexico. The scene painted by Gavin showed Mexico to be indifferent, offering no more than “a shrug and a grimace of mock concern” when discussing the drug issue.\textsuperscript{111}

The former ambassador described the anxiety he felt during these discussions. When Mexican officials asked him to prove the government was helping to facilitate the drug trade, Gavin said, “To show the proof would be the death warrant for my sources.”\textsuperscript{112} The Mexican government, on the other hand, lambasted the United States, once again detailing how the American need for drugs was contributing to the devastation wreaking havoc across Mexico — taking lower-income people away from jobs and forcing them to work in the more dangerous drug industry. Mexican officials expressed their dismay toward the United States and how it was diminishing the government’s domestic efforts in its fight against drugs.

The article also highlighted America’s concern over the lack of transparency from the Mexican government. Mexico rarely released information about arrests of police offers or those

\textsuperscript{110} del Villar.
\textsuperscript{112} Brinkley, “Mexico and the Narcotics Traffic.”
connected to government officials concerning drug-related issues.\textsuperscript{113} As noted by \textit{U.S. News \& World Report}, though, the only other time efforts to curb drug trafficking and production in Mexico had been successful was with financial assistance from the United States government, with Mills writing, “It worked in Turkey in the early 1970s, and it worked temporarily a few years ago in Mexico, both times with U.S. financial aid.”\textsuperscript{114} In regard to international affairs in the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, the onus of the federal government’s plan to curb drug trafficking and production in foreign countries was through the use of financial assistance. This raises the question of whether these efforts would have been successful if the US had not used money as a bargaining tool, or if other countries truly believed the War on Drugs to be a pressing issue.

There is a seeming disparity in types of coverage of the War on Drugs. With more opinion-based articles, there is greater critique on the involvement of foreign governments with the United States. When reporting strictly on events between leaders, the media only show the purported commitment each country had to combatting this growing issue. When left to interpret the article itself, it does seem as though financial security was a driving factor in Mexico’s readiness to tackle drug production and trafficking arising in the country. As part of the talks, Reagan vowed to assist the Mexican government in easing some of its debts and easing up on embargoes which had been in place for several years.\textsuperscript{115}

\textit{Time} offered an in-depth look into the meeting between President Reagan and President de la Madrid Hurtado, providing more context relating to previous discussions and how multiple

\textsuperscript{113} Brinkley, “Mexico and the Narcotics Traffic.”
\textsuperscript{114} James Mills, “Stop Drugs at the Source.”
\textsuperscript{115} Hess, “Mexico Chief Vows.”
factors were at play during this time.\textsuperscript{116} The article noted that during the last four meetings between the two, they tended to agree to disagree on most issues. Tied in throughout each of these discussions, however, was the financial crisis Mexico was facing as oil prices plummeted, putting the country in its worst economic state in nearly 50 years. At this meeting, it was reported, the two presidents made an agreement to focus more on the positive issues which could bring the countries together, with Reagan remarking that the “government of the U.S. is ready to extend a hand whenever and wherever it is necessary.”\textsuperscript{117} It was also during these discussions that Reagan made an acknowledgment as to how US demand for drugs was negatively impacting countries like Mexico, and “President Reagan tactfully acknowledged the Mexican view of the problem by promising to fight consumption within the U.S. as well as production abroad.”\textsuperscript{118}

This acknowledgement seemed to reinvigorate a spirit of cooperation between the two countries, both claiming to desire headway in the War on Drugs. Most notably was “Operation Alliance,” an anti-drug effort which cost the country about $266 million. The alliance planned to send more law enforcement to the 2000-mile border, with about 600 U.S. officials and $100 million in new equipment heading to the border to improve efforts in the War on Drugs. While also trying to appease the Mexican government, President Reagan made sure to acknowledge struggles Mexico faced and concessions on part of the United States. Reagan noted that there was increased demand for illegal substances in the country, lending itself to Mexico’s dire situation where many of its people were forced to leave other jobs to help fuel drug production and trafficking. As has been seen, the international drug issue was becoming intrinsically tied to

\textsuperscript{117} Iyer, “Mexico Shaking Hands.”
\textsuperscript{118} Iyer.
the domestic drug issue in the United States, turning into one of President Reagan’s most critical
and important battles throughout the War on Drugs.\textsuperscript{119}

Both newspaper and popular newsmagazine coverage provided great detailed related to
international issues and the War on Drugs. These four publications presented much of what was
being discussed within the federal government, as actionable steps were being taken in foreign
territories. Articles from the \textit{New York Times} and \textit{Miami Herald} typically did not feature content
which was as detailed and targeted as pieces written in \textit{Time} and \textit{U.S. News & World Report},
which also focused more on American’s opinions. One article from \textit{Time} discussing the War on
Drugs offered insight into people’s sentiments and how they viewed the drug issue and what they
believed should be done about it.\textsuperscript{120}

This same article suggested that the federal justice system in the United States should
take note of what officials in Malaysia, specifically in Kuala Lumpur, did in retaliation to drug
traffickers entering their country. In this instance, two drug traffickers from Australia were
hanged. The two had smuggled heroin into the country, which was described as a “loaded
weapon,” that would not be tolerated under any circumstance.\textsuperscript{121} Klepinger praised the
Malaysian government for not bowing to international pressure and granting clemency to the
smugglers, which had become the norm. He also commented on the almost hypocritical response
from the international community, including the United States, with many being outraged and
expressing disgust. Ending on a powerful note, Klepinger wrote, “If more governments would
take the no-nonsense approach in combatting the drug trade, pushers would think twice before
engaging in their activities. The two Australians got exactly what they were selling: death.”\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{119} Iyer, “Mexico Shaking Hands.”
\textsuperscript{120} Lawrence H. Klepinger, “Hanging in Malaysia,” \textit{Time}, August 11, 1986, 9.
\textsuperscript{121} Klepinger, “Hanging.”
\textsuperscript{122} Klepinger, “Hanging in Malaysia.”
This article highlighted the anger and resentment beginning to boil over in relation to substance abuse and drugs in the United States at this time. With some promoting the use of programs and education over military intervention, others believed in using force and doing whatever necessary to send a message to the international community.

This is not to say that newspapers did not offer criticism regarding the Reagan Administration’s international efforts related to the War on Drugs. In fact, along with traditional news articles, there were editorial pieces written which offered detail critiques. However, the majority of criticisms related to international efforts were found in popular newsmagazines. Focused more specifically on the cultural aspects of American life, they offered a more pointed view of public opinion than newspapers did. Aside from international affairs and the War on Drugs, there were also several struggles facing the United States on the home front. Because of this, the Reagan Administration also focused many of its efforts in tackling the War on Drugs of the domestic level, reaching out to communities in an effort to combat the drug crisis.
THE WAR ON DRUGS AT HOME

While the Reagan Administration’s War on Drugs tackled a myriad of international issues, one of its greatest initiatives was also targeting the domestic aspect of substance abuse, in itself receiving $241 million in funding to accomplish these goals.\textsuperscript{123} The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 contained an abundance of initiatives and guidelines for how the government planned to go after drugs in communities throughout the United States. One of the most important aspects of the Act was designating funds to educational programs for cities across the country. This would be discretionary — allocating funds to areas where drug abuse was most prevalent or communities with the highest propensity of being affected by drugs. The Act, in part, read:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[a)] The nature and extent, in the State and in particular areas of the State, of the demand for effective programs and activities for the treatment and rehabilitation of alcohol use and drug abuse.
  \item[b)] The number of individuals in the State who abuse alcohol or drugs and the capacity of the State to provide treatment and rehabilitation for such individuals.
  \item[c)] The ability of the State to provide additional services for the treatment and rehabilitation of alcohol abuse and drug abuse.\textsuperscript{124}
\end{itemize}

With these three main factors in mind, states had greater opportunity to expand their efforts related to offering not only rehabilitation services, but also educational programs, in their efforts to stem drug abuse in their respective cities. Examples of the outlined services include inpatient hospital services, cash payments to service recipients, major medical equipment purchases, and funds to improve, purchase, or construct buildings to offer these services.

\textsuperscript{123} Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, 103.
\textsuperscript{124} Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, 103.
Additionally, organizations outside of nonprofits could qualify for grants and benefit from the assistance offered in the Act.

The Act detailed different programs which were aimed toward helping at-risk youth, introducing various models such as:

a) Disseminate publications by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and the Department of Education concerning alcohol and drug abuse.

b) Disseminate accurate information concerning the health effects of alcohol abuse and drug abuse.

c) Collect and disseminate information concerning successful alcohol abuse and drug abuse education and prevention curricula.

d) Collect and disseminate information on effective and ineffective school-based alcohol abuse and drug abuse education and prevention programs, particularly effective programs which stress that the use of illegal drugs and the abuse of alcohol is wrong and harmful.\textsuperscript{125}

Expanding further, the initiatives outlined above were specifically geared toward a specific demographic: children of substance abusers, latchkey children, children at risk of abuse or neglect, children at risk of dropping out of school, and children at risk of becoming adolescent parents, among others.\textsuperscript{126} Another aspect of the Act concerned how grants would be dispersed throughout different communities, specifically looking into the relationship between drug abuse and child abuse, dropping out of school, delinquency, pregnancy, violence, suicide, and other mental health problems.\textsuperscript{127} After gathering information, the director of this initiative, who would be appointed by the US Secretary of Health and Human Services, was charged with creating programs which specifically dealt with prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation of drug and alcohol abuse among this high-risk category. The Act also allowed for community-based

\textsuperscript{126} Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986.
\textsuperscript{127} Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, 113.
organizations, which had top priority, to apply for grants to have these programs implemented in their areas.\textsuperscript{128}

About one month prior to President Reagan signing the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, First Lady Nancy Reagan joined her husband on television to announce the launch of her own initiative — the “Just Say No” campaign. Writing an article in the Spring of 1986 on proposed plans and what the campaign would mean for children and families, Nancy Reagan described substance abuse as one of the greatest problems facing young people in the United States and the country’s most democratic problem — having no social or economic boundaries.\textsuperscript{129} The rhetoric used throughout the article creates a menacing picture, describing drugs as having invaded schools, city streets, and suburban neighborhoods, eroding the secure, safe, and calm environment once afforded to children.\textsuperscript{130}

After painting a picture of trouble and fear, highlighting the ways through which children could take a wayward path, Reagan signaled a call to parents and how they must step in and play a role in protecting their children’s lives.\textsuperscript{131} However, she was cognizant in making one concession. Parents would not be able to address this issue fully without the support of schools and their communities. Reagan believed that education was key and any knowledge regarding substance abuse would help better the chances of addressing the issue. She called for the establishment of drug education programs and inviting speakers to spread the anti-drug message.

\textsuperscript{128} Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, 113.
\textsuperscript{130} Reagan, “Just Say No,” 4.
\textsuperscript{131} Reagan, 4.
This, she said, would better equip young people to “just say no” when presented with the chance to partake in drugs.\textsuperscript{132}

Reagan also commented on the creation of “Just Say No” clubs in schools throughout the country, highlighting students taking the lead on effecting change in their own community. She also commended the work of parents, who were speaking with legislators and forming their own groups, which numbered around 9,000 at the time of the article’s publication. In conclusion, Reagan sent a message of concern, but also hope. She wrote that the image of the drug abuser must change, wiping away the notion that drugs are somehow cool.\textsuperscript{133} Media coverage of the War on Drugs concerning communities within the United States echoed and reported on both the sentiments expressed through the “Just Say No” campaign, along with the initiatives set forth in the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986.

The Reagans’ live television announcement of the “Just Say No” campaign was only one month prior to the signing of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act. The timing of the “Just Say No” campaign’s launch is significant, as it provided greater context for Reagan’s rhetoric as the signing of the Act approached. The day after announcing the campaign with his wife, Reagan spoke to Congress on the importance of passing legislation which would target substance abuse in local communities.\textsuperscript{134} In this speech, Reagan alluded to the Act, listing several initiatives through which he hoped to eradicate the drug problem, or, as he said, to “Reach our youngsters before drugs reach them.”\textsuperscript{135} He stated that almost $70 million would be granted to communities to establish programs targeting drug abuse and $34 million to research the best possible means of

\textsuperscript{132} Reagan, “Just Say No,” 4-5.
\textsuperscript{133} Reagan, “Just Say No,” 5.
\textsuperscript{135} Reagan, “Message to the Congress.”
treatment and rehabilitation, among others. Outlining the sweeping plans he had planned for his Administration in the War on Drugs, Reagan encouraged Congress to act swiftly and accordingly to the crisis developing throughout the United States. He called for citizens throughout the country to come together, noting however that efforts would not be possible without Congress’ passing of the Act.

There was extensive media coverage of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 and regarding the domestic front, during this time. With the Reagan Administration appearing to frame their argument around children and the importance of preventing substance abuse from negatively impact youths, this became a heavily publicized issue. The *New York Times* reported that Congress was taking great care to address this issue, keeping in line with this hot-button issue seemingly being pushed by the public. One article details Congress’ plan to allocate the more than $300 million specifically set aside for state and local governments to use at their disposal in establishing educational programs against substance abuse. However, not all members of Congress thought the bill would have its intended effect on communities and the individual, floating the idea that the Act might not be as effective as Reagan purported. Some members, including Robert H. Michel, a Republican from Illinois and then House minority leader, questioned whether this Act was in fact an effective use of taxpayer dollars. In his eyes, this would not solve the issue of substance abuse because it would not necessarily detract from the ever-rising demand of drugs. Michel was quoted as saying substance abuse “is ultimately a problem of character, of will, of family. The Government for all its power is but one small part of this fight.”

---


137 Fuerbringer.
Other representatives echoed similar statements, including those on the other side of the aisle. Leon E. Panetta, a Democrat from California, believed the issue of substance abuse might be nothing more than a passing fancy, saying, “I'm always a little skeptical about issues that get 30 seconds of attention, then become the most important issue in the nation.” He questioned whether the Act and other initiatives related to the War on Drugs was because of the upcoming presidential election, and that Congress taking action would only give Reagan, and ultimately George H.W. Bush, an opportunity to send out press releases lauding their accomplishments before disappearing from the public eye and public conversation. Ultimately, the media reported that many in government wondered how effective the Act would be, or if it would make any difference at all. While certain aspects of the legislation offered the opportunity for some change to come about, many Democrats disagreed with Republicans’ approach, which focused more on punishment than education. In his special to the Times, Jonathan Fuerbringer wrote, “

Even as Republicans and Democrats in the House today praised the main provisions of the legislation and called the drug problem was a threat to national security, they criticized each party's political strategies. Many liberal Democrats were angered because the House leadership has allowed the Republicans to offer amendments for the death penalty in drug-related deaths, the use of the armed forces to enforce drug laws on the border and the use of illegally obtained evidence in court.

Media coverage also showed there were similar discussions between lawmakers in the Senate, although the tone regarding the severity of the drug issue was slightly different than the one in the House. A little more than one week after the drug bill began circulating in the House, the Senate was charged with examining it and the potential consequences on its own. Many speakers came before the Senate and described the impending drug crisis, which would only get

---

138 Fuerbringer, “Wide Bill on Drugs.”
139 Fuerbringer.
worse as more time went by. Substance abuse was described as poisonous, tying in the rising outcry of change coming from the public. Politicians including Senator Lawton Chiles, a Democrat from Florida, described the need for change and reform, saying “The nation is angry. It’s sick of the pushers, dealers, and hoods who’ve made their living off the lives of our young.” Being that Senator Chiles was from Florida, this issue was perhaps more pressing, since Florida had become a hotbed for drug trafficking and drug-related crimes. However, others, including Senator Charles Mathias Jr., a Republican from Maryland, believed that decisions regarding this bill should not be made in haste or simply out of fear. In his eyes, maybe pieces of this legislation infringed upon the constitutional rights of citizens and was not something that should be taken lightly. Again, it was suggested that the fervor surrounding this bill and the War on Drugs in general was nothing more than a political ploy for those seeking reelection, and as journalist Steven Roberts wrote, “many of the senators facing re-election this fall rushed to the floor to make speeches in time for the evening news shows.”

A *New York Times* opinion piece critiqued President Reagan’s announcement introducing the new anti-drug legislation, accusing him of overgeneralizing the issue. Titled the “Word War on Drugs,” this opinion piece propagated that Reagan’s efforts up to that point had been but words, followed by very limited action. The emergence of crack and crack cocaine had spurred involvement from communities throughout the country to work toward some type of resolution, although Reagan responded to the outcry as more of a public relations practitioner rather than as a leader. While his mission was admirable in bringing the drug issue to the forefront of American discussion, the op-ed said his message was blurred, stating:

---

141 Roberts, “Senate Takes up Drug Bill.”
142 Roberts.
143 Roberts.
The fuzzy program he outlined yesterday proclaims a drug-free workplace for all
government employees, drug-free schools and expanded public awareness. Explaining
how such goals might be met, he lapsed into generalities like "Enlisting the help of local
educators and school officials." He deserves credit at least for giving the issue priority
attention. Yet the call to join in pursuit of the drug-free society would be more
convincing if it involved more weight. There are clear, practical steps the President could
take. Communities need help with, for one thing, drug treatment.  

Coverage in the *Miami Herald* expressed similar sentiments, with many people believing
a bill aimed toward tackling substance abuse was important, but would only be effective if it was
fleshed out and detailed a clear, concrete way forward. Again, the article stressed the importance
of focusing on education and prevention, as simply addressing trafficking and the drug trade
would only lessen competition in the industry, giving certain dealers and traffickers even more
control.  

Journalists R.A. Zaldivar and Gregory Spears quoted Representative Dante Fascell, a
Democrat from Florida, who said, “This national crisis exists in the minds of people. There's no
way you can reach that through legislation. It's only going to happen when people stop using
drugs. You're talking about changing the concepts of an entire society.” This sentiment was
also expressed from the other side of the aisle, with Senator Daniel J. Evans, a Republican from
Washington, warning that anti-drug legislation was not something that should be rushed,
especially with a presidential election right around the corner. Senator Evans accused his
colleagues of participating in a “sanctimonious, election-year stampede” that would “trample our
Constitution,” and called on representatives to “cool the passions that ruled the House.”

Similar to the *New York Times* article citing Senator Lawton Chiles, the *Miami Herald*
featured a quote from Senator Paula Hawkins, a Republican from Florida. Hawkins was a strong

---

145 “Word War on Drugs.”
147 Zaldivar and Spears, “Congress Charging.”
proponent of this legislation and warned her constituents that the American people were watching and would remember where politicians stood in regard to the drug issue, adding, “I know the people are going to be listening hard for the excuses today, and remembering who made them.”\(^{149}\) Florida had become known as a hotbed for drug trafficking and was perhaps being affected by trafficking and substance abuse more heavily than other parts of the country. With trafficking being such a large industry in the state, drug-related crimes, for example, were more pertinent to Florida. This could perhaps explain why senators and representatives from Florida were much more hard-pressed to address substance abuse. The *New York Times* touched on this, comparing many of Florida’s political campaigns for positions like senator to campaigns of someone running for sheriff.\(^{150}\) Although drugs were one of the most predominant topics of conversation in Florida, campaigns in other states were not focusing as heavily on the issue, largely because it was understood that most everyone was against drugs and favored stronger anti-drug legislation.

This, in part, can be attributed to the fact that three quarters of the cocaine smuggled into the United States in 1986 went through Florida, according to federal officials.\(^{151}\) R.W. Apple Jr. described the commercials of Senator Hawkins and her opponent, then-Governor Bob Graham, writing:

> Senator Hawkins's commercials have been full of drama, and Mr. Graham has followed suit. Hers have shown her on a "diplomatic mission" to China to persuade that country's leaders to halt the export of mood-altering drugs to the United States; his have shown him in a warehouse with bales of seized marijuana. Shots of helicopters, ambulances, squad cars and soldiers, all designed to demonstrate a commitment to fighting drug abuse, have flashed across television screens here this autumn.\(^{152}\)

\(^{149}\) Spears, “Senate Warned of Drug Bill Mania.”
\(^{151}\) Apple Jr., “Drugs Dominating Florida.”
\(^{152}\) Apple Jr.
However, experts remained uncertain as to how long the drug hysteria would last, and whether the avoidance of other issues would negatively impact either campaign. Whether the talk of substance abuse was also nothing more than public hysteria was also questioned. After all, though purporting the desire to crack down on drugs, Senator Hawkins had voted to weaken Florida’s frontline on drugs, cutting the Coast Guard’s budget. While Congress was engaged in contentious debate regarding the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 and how to tackle substance abuse, communities throughout the country were waging their own wars, establishing programs and conducting studies and research of their own, offering a glimpse as to the President’s and Congress’ goals as Reagan pushed the War on Drugs into primetime.

On July 30, President Reagan stated, “The time has come to give notice that individual drug use is threatening the health and safety of all our citizens.” This announcement came at a time when Reagan was facing much criticism over certain economic policies, trade, and sanctions against foreign countries like South Africa. Noting that the War on Drugs was an issue he had previously left to his wife, Nancy, the article foreshadows the President’s announcement of his own anti-drug plan, which he would announce in greater detail soon after. A *U.S. News & World Report* article was one of the few to make a direct comment on the media’s portrayal of substance abuse, offering insight into how government officials and the public viewed media efforts in helping to combat the issue. Robert DuPont, president of Center for Behavioral Medicine, commented on the media’s role in this fight, stating that while substance abuse was

---

155 Duffy, Thornton, Walsh, and Hildreth, “Drugs.”
previously covered as a “controversial issue, sort of a pro-and-con kind of argument,” it now was, “the con: the message is drugs are bad. Period.”156

There is not much clarity as to whether DuPont was commending media for shifting its message or if he was sending a message that the tone and conversation needs to shift — where drugs are negative and dangerous and nothing more. However, there were still people who questioned the sincerity behind this movement. James Wilson, a Harvard professor and former chairman of the National Advisory Council for Drug-Abuse Prevention, added that progress would only be made when drugs were seen as socially unacceptable. Wilson was quoted as saying, “That’s what happened with drinking and driving … with all the concern we’re seeing now over drugs, it may be that drug use is passing through the same kind of barrier.”157 With the growing popularity of crack and crack cocaine, the anti-drug sentiment was becoming louder throughout the country, taking steps to make the unacceptability of drugs a reality.

Additionally, U.S. News & World Report published an in-depth report on the growing rage of the American people related to drugs, specifically crack and crack cocaine, infiltrating their communities.158 The article cited a report by the National Institute on Drug Abuse that said about 30 percent of college students would try cocaine before they graduated, and 80 percent of Americans would try at least on illicit drug before they reached their mid-20s; The report read, “Clearly, this nation’s high-school students and other young adults still show a level of involvement with illicit drugs greater than can be found in any other industrialized nation in the world.”159 Carlton Turner, director of the White House Drug Abuse Policy Office, expressed his

156 Duffy, Thornton, Walsh, and Hildreth, “Drugs.”
157 Duffy, Thornton, Walsh, and Hildreth.
158 Lang and Taylor, “America on Drugs.”
159 Lang and Taylor. For more information on the popularity of cocaine among college-aged people, see Herald Wire Services, “Cocaine Use Still Big on Campus, Study Says Other Illegal Drugs Losing Popularity,” Miami Herald, July 8, 1986; Jeffrey Weiss and Lori Scanlan, “University Fights Back Against Cocaine, Crack,” Miami Herald, September 23, 1986.
anger toward the situation, blaming much of the media for glamourizing drug use in past years, adding there “a chorus of critics question whether newspapers, newsmagazines, television, movies and books have glamorized drug smuggling and use — and so seduced a new generation of junkies.” The image of a drug dealer or junkie was no longer someone in a back alley peddling drugs. It now could be the average American citizen. This article also offered a warning, reminding people that substance abuse was one of the modern-day “medieval plagues” that should not go untouched.

High schools throughout the country were hyper aware of the growing trends regarding substance abuse, and were developing plans to address the issue as swiftly and effectively as possible. Key West High School in Florida, under the direction of Monroe County Schools Superintendent A.J. Henriquez, wanted to forbid students from leaving campus during lunchtime, a liberty they once were able to use freely. This would not be the first high school in Florida to become a closed campus, two others having already been approved, as the state pushed to create a drug-free environment in all of its county schools. Henriquez suggested that the lunch hour was a primetime for students to buy drugs, and afterwards many simply would not return to campus.

To help foster this desired safe environment, the U.S. Department of Education took steps to join the fight, printing millions of copies of handbooks detailing how to eliminate the drug problem in schools. Noting when drug deals were most common, for example at lunch, the 78-page booklet outlined how teachers could aid in the fight against drugs — how drug use

---

160 Lang and Taylor, “America on Drugs.”
162 Ornstein, “Closed Campuses.”
starts, how it progresses, and what can be done to stop it. The booklet also explained why educators have a right to search students for drugs and expel or suspend those found to be in possession of them, and also listed “telltale signs of use: bloodshot eyes, possession of large amounts of money and ‘distinct downward turns in ... grades.’”\textsuperscript{164} The right to search students for drugs was something becoming popular in many communities, as the Monroe County school board floated the idea of purchasing drug dogs to sniff out substances like marijuana, although it had an estimated cost of about $45,000 per year.\textsuperscript{165} The \textit{Miami Herald} carried an AP article that featured a quote from Nancy Reagan. It said, “First lady Nancy Reagan said in a foreword that ‘schools must protect children from the presence of drugs, and nurture values that help them reject drugs. Only if our schools are free from drugs can we protect our children and insure that they can get on with the enterprise of learning.’”\textsuperscript{166}

While these examples are specific to Florida, the \textit{New York Times} coverage showed substance abuse to be a problem facing high school students and young people all over the country. The \textit{Times} noted that while cocaine use remained high among college-aged and high school students, the use of marijuana dropped significantly between 1980 and 1984, leveling off in 1985.\textsuperscript{167} Providing more context of the study, financed by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and conducted by the Institute for Social Research at The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, one of the directors, Dr. Lloyd D. Johnston, stated the drug epidemic largely began on college campuses in the 1960s. While Johnston noted the percentage of college students using

\textsuperscript{164} Associated Press, “Crackdown Being Urged for Schools.”
\textsuperscript{165} Ornstein, “Closed Campuses.”
\textsuperscript{166} Associated Press, “Crackdown Being Urged for Schools.”
marijuana at the time of the study’s publication was lower than two decades prior, showing some semblance of positive change, “The survey showed that the illicit use of cocaine among college students was 17% in both 1980 and 1985. The illegal use of marijuana was 51% in 1980, 41% in 1984 and 42% in 1985.” There was still great concern regarding cocaine use among young people, as the percentage had not changed much over five years, especially after the deaths of athletes Len Bias, a basketball standout at the University of Maryland, and Don Rogers, a defensive back for the Cleveland Browns.

*Time* covered the death of Bias extensively, which in its tragedy provided an opportunity for experts to warn people about the dangers of drugs, showing that if a prominent athlete can die from an overdose, so can anyone. Upon first learning of Bias’s death, speculation arose over whether he had a chronic illness or a heart defect which led him to go into cardiac rest. However, that was not the case. The media reported on the exam, which showed nothing other than cocaine. His autopsy showed him to have a strong heart and to be in excellent shape. Because of this, doctors issued a strong warning on the dangers of cocaine, and it was clear the five million or so cocaine users throughout the United States took note. As the article reported, cocaine hotlines were inundated with calls after news broke of the athlete’s death.

One of the main questions asked during these phone calls was, “Could the nation’s ‘recreational drug’ of choice really be lethal, even on first use?“ Mitchell Rosenthal, director

---

168 Halloran, “Student Cocaine Use Remains Up.”
171 Leo, Abdo, and Doyle.
172 Leo, Abdo, and Doyle.
of a drug rehabilitation group in New York City, attributed many people’s misconceptions about the use of cocaine to the “sexy qualities” of the drug, for example its ability to be mixed with alcohol. The article also noted that even some of the most esteemed cardiology were shocked to see the severity and lethal effects cocaine could have on people. Rather than simply reporting on this death as a tragedy, *Time* tried to educate the public and issue a warning. It quoted Lefty Driesell, then head basketball coach at the University of Maryland, as saying, “These are not recreational drugs. They’re killers.”

With the drug-related deaths of notable athletes, the growing concern about young people and drugs was no longer something hiding in the shadows. Various media polls, including a joint effort by *U.S. News & World Report* and CNN, showed communities across the United States were increasingly concerned about the effects drugs were having, and would continue to have, on young people and their communities. In this poll, 86 percent of respondents believed the spread of illegal drugs was of extreme importance, beating out other concerns like the need to reduce crime. Religious leaders in communities had begun speaking out, highlighting the fear of drugs flooding the streets. Bruce Wall, a Baptist minister and one of the leaders in the Black community of Roxbury, a neighborhood in Boston, said, “In my neighborhood of Roxbury, people aren’t thinking about tax reform or Chernobyl. They’re worried about drug wars … about kids on ‘crack.’ They’re worried about their own safety. It’s a major crisis.” However, the article wondered whether Congress would act in accordance with these community concerns and

---

173 Leo, Abdo, and Doyle, “How Cocaine Killed Leonard Bias.”
174 Leo, Abdo, and Doyle.
Reagan’s anti-drug push.\textsuperscript{177} With some staff members calling it the “least contentious bill of the session,” the US House of Representatives was preparing to approve the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which would, on paper, take steps to address substance abuse and the drug problem.\textsuperscript{178}

A \textit{Time} article depicted a scene of the “glory days” of drug use in the 1960s and 1970s, and how it had changed so drastically, at least in the public eye, since then.\textsuperscript{179} In Harlem, residents painted red X’s on doors and placed stuffed animals in the windows of abandoned buildings in an attempt to reclaim their community from crack dealers. The article said, cocaine, “the glamour dust of the late 1970s,” had been “boiled down to little pellets of crack.”\textsuperscript{180} The article described crack cocaine as the current topic, although people had been outspoken about other drugs like marijuana in the past, highlighting how the popularity of a given drug ebbs and flows over time, one day being popular and the next replaced by something new. In a direct and detailed account, the article likens substance abuse to a failure of the country’s character and the price for freedom in an instant-gratification, consumptive society, noting:

Although drug abuse is not a problem unique to the U.S., the nation's cultural values and attitudes make it unlikely that the problem will ever be erased by even the most concerted Government crusade. The freedom inherent in American society assures that people will always be able, and often willing, to pursue their desired indulgences, however illicit. A society filled with wealth and the ability to consume, along with failure and despair, provides a ripe market for the world's drug supply, which will always exist as long as there is the demand for it. Experts point to other deep-seated causes that produce a continued national craving for drugs: lack of community, disintegration of the family, moral laxity, the relentless pressure to perform in a fast-paced society.\textsuperscript{181}

\textsuperscript{177} Gibson and Hildreth, “What Americans Want,” 14.
\textsuperscript{178} Gibson and Hildreth, 14.
\textsuperscript{180} Thomas, Beaty, Moody, and Thompson, “America’s Crusade.”
\textsuperscript{181} Thomas, Beaty, Moody, and Thompson.
Time partly credits President Reagan for his decision to make the War on Drugs one of his top initiatives, working to make drugs socially unacceptable and to protect children through the “Just Say No” campaign.

While agreeing that substance abuse and drugs like crack cocaine were a threat to society, the article also posited that the press and politicians might have played a role in hyping up the issue. Touching on the acceptability of drugs, Time reported that some crack dealers walked around proudly through neighborhoods, including Harlem, in New York. Even if substance abuse was addressed and the rosy picture was shattered, there still would have to remain a degree of self-awareness, realizing that it is a problem that never truly goes away. The article stated:

A true change can come only if Americans are willing to say clearly — to their workmates and schoolmates, to their neighbors and friends, to their communities and to themselves — that drug use is not acceptable. If that is, in fact, one result of the current frenzy over what has been a recurring crisis for successive generations of Americans, then even all the hype and excess may in retrospect be worthwhile.182

Beyond these communities, people were becoming more enraged regarding the drug issue, with many people, including parents, discovering substance abuse might be a more prevalent problem then they had previously realized.

While most parents felt like they knew their children well, and assumed they had never tried drugs, many were surprised to find the opposite to be true. In a New York Times and CBS News Poll, 253 parents were interviewed during a four-day period and were asked to answer whether their child had tried illicit drugs on a scale from one to five — one meaning they were certain their child had used drugs, and five meaning they knew their child had never used

182 Thomas, Beaty, Moody, and Thompson, “America’s Crusade.”
drugs.\textsuperscript{183} The initial findings revealed that 75 percent of respondents knew for a fact their children had never used drugs, ten percent being certain they had, and the remainder showing mixed results.

However, follow-up conversations with some of the parents revealed that, after all, they were no longer quite as sure. After taking the poll, one father, a police officer, said his perspective on the conversation surrounding drugs changed. He said, “It opened up a conversation between me and the kids. I was naïve.”\textsuperscript{184} The father learned his kids had smoked marijuana in the past, shattering his original response of knowing without a doubt that they had not used drugs. Further results from the study found that 89 percent of parents said they previously had a serious discussion with their children about illegal drugs, 49 percent thought the schools were already doing an adequate job regarding that discussion, although 45 percent thought schools were not doing enough in addressing substance abuse with their children.\textsuperscript{185}

One of the outcomes from the “Just Say No” campaign, and perhaps one of the driving factors in devoting so much money and resources to community-based and educational programs to curb drug abuse in the Act, was the rising tide of parental involvement. As Nancy Reagan had noted, parent groups were popping up throughout the country as the War on Drugs continued on.\textsuperscript{186} The Miami Herald reported on a group of concerned parents in Naples, Florida, who hoped to continue their efforts in educating young people and the community at large of the dangers of drugs, something they had done for years when marijuana was the country’s major issue at the time of its founding in 1978.\textsuperscript{187} As part of its mission, the organization planned to

\textsuperscript{184} Hevesi, “Worried Parents Hope.”
\textsuperscript{185} Hevesi.
\textsuperscript{186} Reagan, “Just Say No,” 5.
\textsuperscript{187} Todd Holzman, “Naples Parents Unite Against Drugs,” Miami Herald, September 27, 1986.
host a forum titled “Drug Danger: A Lost Generation?” to gauge community interest in getting involved in the crusade against substance abuse.

The organization sent fliers home with the nearly 7,000 schoolchildren, highlighting the group’s main concern, crack cocaine, and how education was the best weapon parents could utilize. One of the main messages the parents hoped to get across was that preventing substance abuse was a much more effective means of combatting drug abuse than rehabilitation. They hoped by featuring first-hand accounts of drug abuse, and having speakers who were experts in the field of substance abuse, from police officers to treatment program employees, that parents and community members would gain a greater understanding of the threat facing their town.\(^\text{188}\)

Months before community groups in Naples hosted such forums, a former drug addict spoke before a Senate subcommittee, pleading with members to take a hardline against drug dealers.\(^\text{189}\) Speaking under the condition of anonymity, for fear of retaliation from other dealers, he said one of the most effective ways of disrupting the industry was to educate and alert people on the dangers of drugs like cocaine, and how it can kill.\(^\text{190}\)

The \emph{Miami Herald} also covered a Florida event where a representative from Nancy Reagan’s anti-drug speaker’s bureau spoke to the Naples P.O.L.O. club, an organization of young professionals, further detailing the dangers of crack cocaine.\(^\text{191}\) Shirley Coletti, speaking to a crowd of about 100 people, said that if elementary school children were adequately informed at a young age, they would be better equipped to refuse drugs by the time they enter high school. Coletti was involved in drug-related initiatives on the federal level, being a presidential appointee to the U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control and the founder of

\(^{188}\) Holzman, “Naples Parents Unite Against Drugs.”
\(^{190}\) AP, “Ex-Drug Addict Warns Panel.”
\(^{191}\) Lori Rozsa, “Speaker Says Parents Must Lead War on Drugs,” \emph{Miami Herald}, October 21, 1986.
Parents Awareness Response, one of the largest rehabilitation programs in the state of Florida. Speaking not only as an expert on substance abuse, she also relayed her family’s own personal experience with drug abuse.

She and her husband had suspected one of their children used drugs, making her feel like a failure as a mother. In her opinion, and essentially speaking as a representative of Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” campaign, Coletti further underscored why parents need to get involved in the fight against drugs. She claimed parents were at the frontline and could help solve this problem, and “If parents start teaching their kids young enough, they’ll answer a lot of questions before it gets too late.”

Making a final comparison, Coletti said that a logical parent would never leave a two-year-old child by themselves. Because of the rising tide of substance abuse, she believed it was now no longer safe to leave teenagers unattended. Knowing where children were going and who they were going with should be basic questions parents had the right to know.

However, the media expressed some doubt as to whether parental involvement and education would be enough to prevent drug abuse. For example, *U.S. News & World Report* questioned whether the drug education programs currently in place were actually effective in achieving their intended goals. With the general consensus that the frontline of the War on Drugs should begin in elementary schools, the Senate had approved $150 million, altering the House’s approved $350 million, to go toward drug education programs. William Bennett, President Reagan’s secretary of education, stated “The drug plague is seeping into lower and lower grades … as early as fourth, fifth and sixth grades.”

---

192 Rozsa, “Speaker Says Parents Must Lead.”
193 Rozsa.
programs in place, the article referred to them as dismal failures, offering alternatives as to how they could be bettered. A survey of 935 middle school students from Michigan who had taken substance abuse courses found that after taking those courses students were more likely to try drugs. A study funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse examined seven strategies to improve self-esteem, finding almost all of them to be ineffective.\footnote{Levine, “Drug Education Gets an F.”}

The article said two of these strategies included working to develop coping skills and finding drug-free alternatives. In terms of coping skills, a theory posited that people who are prone to abuse are often insecure, antisocial, and under great stress.\footnote{Levine.} A person who exhibits these characteristics was more likely to be prone to drug abuse, falling under a classification listed in the Act.\footnote{Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, 113.} The article said proponents of this approach claimed that by addressing these factors, for example if social skills were sharpened and approved upon, the desire for drugs would lessen. However, this approach was unapproved for drug and alcohol abuse. Secondly, schools attempted to offer drug-free alternatives to students in the hopes it would improve their likelihood to avoid substance abuse. For example, schools experimented with spearheading student-run stores which sold supplies and snacks, along with tutoring other children. Again, this approach was not to specifically target substance abuse or drugs. Rather, it was seen as an opportunity to boost students’ confidence, self-esteem, and social skills. After two federally-sponsored studies, these programs were found to not achieve its intended goals, instead simply offering short-term gratification.\footnote{Levine, “Drug Education Gets an F.”}

Although these types of activities were not effective, this did not prevent student groups throughout the country from forming rallies to warn their peers on the dangers of substance

\begin{footnotes}
\item[195] Levine, “Drug Education Gets an F.”
\item[196] Levine.
\item[198] Levine, “Drug Education Gets an F.”
\end{footnotes}
abuse. Described as being similar to a religious revival, thousands of middle school and high school students gathered in Sunrise, Florida, to spread the message about the “devil:” alcohol and other drugs.\textsuperscript{199} Wearing t-shirts featuring phrases like “Proud To Be Drug Free” and “See Dick Drink. See Dick Drive. See Dick Die,” the 2,500 youths hoped to encourage, rather than discourage, their peers to stop drunk driving. In terms of the “Just Say No” campaign, this event lined up perfectly with the Reagans’ view of eliminating drug use. While studies determined that these types of rallies were not very effective, many young people still hoped that by showing drinking and using drugs was not cool, they could still affect some type of change.\textsuperscript{200} Finishing the remainder of his second term, President Reagan established a Cabinet-level National Drug Policy Control Board in 1987, followed by the Drug Abuse Act of 1988, which he signed shortly before George H.W. Bush succeeded him as president.\textsuperscript{201}


\textsuperscript{200} Demarest, “Students Urge Peers.”

\textsuperscript{201} Herald Staff, “Chronology of the Drug War,” \textit{Miami Herald}, September 6, 1989.
THE WAR ON DRUGS: FROM REAGAN TO BUSH

While Ronald Reagan may have called it a War on Drugs, George H.W. Bush made it one. Reagan’s Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 granted presidents the power to introduce long-range goals for reducing drug abuse in the United States and to review drug control at all levels of government, among other authorizations. This Act laid the foundation for Bush’s National Defense Authorization Act, which became law on November 29, 1989. Under this Act, the Department of Defense was given greater control over drug efforts in the United States, essentially making the department the lead agency for the drug interdiction efforts and counterdrug activities. Additionally, the Act granted governors permission to request funds for the National Guards of each respective state. More importantly, the Department of Defense was now able to transfer personal property, including military equipment, from agencies like the Pentagon to state governments as needed in their anti-drug efforts. While educational programs and offering avenues for rehabilitation were still considered essential tools in fighting drug abuse in the United States, President Bush focused more on the use of law enforcement and the military to tackle the rise of illegal drugs throughout the country. One administration source told the

---


*Miami Herald* that the package in its entirety would cost nearly $8 billion, with many parts of the
document remaining classified.\(^{206}\)

Much like Reagan, President Bush also used the power of media to push his anti-drug
message to citizens — even if it meant fabricating scenarios to get the point across. In a televised
address to the nation on September 5, 1989, the day he announced his own anti-drug policies,
Bush pulled a bag of crack out of his desk drawer, telling the public it had been seized from a
drug deal occurring near the White House in Lafayette Park.\(^{207}\) However, it was quickly
discovered that the entire scenario was nothing more than a political spectacle, an event the
president could use as a prop to send a strong message against drugs to the American people.
According to the *New York Times*, government officials had lured a drug dealer to Lafayette
Park, directly across from the White House, although Bush was quick to defend the
government’s decision to do so, saying it sent a strong message to the country about how
pervasive the drug issue was becoming.\(^{208}\) While this may be true, the *Times* also pondered
whether there was a need to manufacture a drug deal, with Maureen Dowd, in her special to the
*Times*, writing:

> It was an embarrassing turn of events for the White House, however. With the country
> and the nation's capital ensnared in a drug problem of immense proportions, there did not
> seem to be a need to confect a situation to suit the needs of a speech. In the District's
> Southeast section, within a couple miles of the White House, drug dealers can be found in
> abundance.\(^{209}\)

Even though President Bush had fabricated one of the key factors of his televised
address, the media lauded the administration’s public approach to tackling the drug epidemic as a


September 23, 1989. For a more in-depth report on the Lafayette Park drug bust, see Michael Isikoff, “Drug Buy Set

\(^{208}\) Dowd, “White House.”

\(^{209}\) Dowd, “White House.”
success. The day after making his address, President Bush visited a hospital where he held a small child whose mother had died as a result of substance abuse. Holding the child, the baby smiled at Bush, and Bush smiled back. In the words of Alixe Glen, White House deputy press secretary, “It worked!” While the administration floated the idea of using a photograph of the president with law enforcement as the face of Bush’s War on Drugs, they felt the photo of Bush holding the child best encapsulated the devastation drug abuse was having on families and children. Using the media’s preoccupation with drugs, the Bush Administration sought to capitalize on American fears, sending hundreds of copies of the proposed drug plan to media outlets across the country, with the hopes of earning favorable reviews. While there were photo-ops and public support of Bush’s drug plan, Ellen Warren of the Miami Herald wrote that using children to touch the hearts of millions of Americans “served up as a ‘soft’ second-day angle to the president's first Oval Office speech — to unveil his drug program — the night before.”

Declaring a war on drugs had become almost a formality for every presidential administration since Richard Nixon was in office. However, President Bush’s came at an opportune time, as it coincided with crack flooding the streets of communities throughout the country. People argued that the existing anti-drug efforts were not tough enough, and that perhaps resources were being directed toward the wrong programs and initiatives. Some believed that instead of being quick to call on law enforcement and capitalize on the threat of prison, more attention should be spent on drug education and rehabilitation. It was a difficult situation because drugs were rampant as drug dealers had more control over certain areas than the local law

---

enforcement. There were differing opinions throughout the country as how to best handle the War on Drugs, leading journalist Aaron Epstein to write:

Understandably, growing numbers of people believe that the tough anti-drug measures already taken are not tough enough. Some experts say there will be no real progress until the police roust the bad guys and the government puts more prosecutors and judges on the payroll, builds more jails and puts the bad guys in them for long stretches.213

With Bush’s outlined drug plan granting such great authority to law enforcement, allowing states to use military equipment from the Department of Defense, it appeared as though the president was taking the latter approach — choosing to use force rather than educational and rehabilitation programs.214

Noting the efforts of past administrations, the Miami Herald depicted a bleak scene for Bush and his intended efforts in tackling the drug issue. Citing the previous attempts and failures of past administrations addressing this “unbelievably complicated” task, journalist Charles Whited wrote it was time for the government to try alternative methods to reduce the flow of drugs and rise of substance abuse plaguing the nation.215 One potential solution, at least according to Joseph L. Galiber, a state senator from New York, was to legalize certain drugs, which would take away the profit motive fueling drug cartels. Galiber believed the drug problem "could be ended tonight. Legalize it! Control it! Take away the profit and not a boat will leave port."216 Many feared the current approach to the War on Drugs would also further infringe on citizen’s civil rights, with the mandatory drug testing of workers and athletes, the federal seizure of innocent suspects’ property, and intrusions on financial privacy, among others.217

216 Whited, “War on Drugs Bound.”
217 Whited.
There also seemed to be this idea that if citizens were stripped of certain civil liberties, then drug use would also decline. Published by *Time*, a Letter to the Editor written by an inmate at a federal correctional institute critiqued the government’s approach to the War on Drugs, detailing how stripping citizens of their civil liberties was not the answer:

There has been a strong emphasis on combating drug usage inside federal prisons for a long time. Everyone is subjected to frequent quarters searches, pat-downs, urine analyses, and strip searches after visits. These measures appear to me to be largely ineffective. If the Government cannot stop people from using drugs in a few fenced-off acres over which it has total control, why should Americans forfeit any of their traditional civil rights in the hope of reducing the drug problem?

There was significant concern regarding Bush’s use of law enforcement and decision to focus largely on the domestic front, although it did help to show the devastations drugs were having on different communities throughout the country and the growing division even amongst the American people.

While the Bush Administration was promoting a no-tolerance policy related to drug in its domestic fight, the image of drug dealers and substance abusers was slightly skewed. In what was similar to a Letters to the Editor section in *Time*, a reader from Anderson, Indiana, expressed their distaste for how the media had gone about portraying the War on Drugs. Oftentimes, newsmagazines would feature photographs of Black people, a group which represented only 12% of the population at the time, when describing the country’s drug problem. This notion was also reflected in an article published by *U.S. News & World Report*, which noted the push to

---

221 Adams, “The Lonely War.”
ignore substance abuse facing the White population and instead focusing on the drug plague in predominantly African American communities.\textsuperscript{222}

However, there were statistics which supported the notion that Black communities should be one of the main focuses of the Bush’s War on Drugs, as they accounted for 50% of hospital patients given emergency treatment for heroin and 55% of those treated for cocaine. Nonetheless, David Gergen wrote it would be unwise to completely ignore substance abuse in White communities, when about 76% of those who used drugs were White.\textsuperscript{223} The fight to end drug use in communities across the country had to be fair — it would need to bring people together, rather than divide them. Some Black people believed Whites were allowing drugs to spread through their communities as a form of genocide, while at the same many White citizens were blaming Black Americans for the spread of drugs in their communities. In the article, Gergen wrote it was important for Americans, both Black and White, to understand the reality of the situation, rather than fighting back and forth as to from where the problem stemmed.\textsuperscript{224}

Regardless of skin color, it appeared citizens in all parts of the country were becoming increasingly angered by the drug problem facing their communities. One \textit{Time} article, “On the Front Lines,” noted that people were beginning to realize that the frontline of the War on Drugs was not in South America or countries where drug production was running rampant. Instead, it was happening right outside their door.\textsuperscript{225} The article noted from California to Texas to Massachusetts and everywhere in between, crack had infiltrated communities and the lives of most Americans. Citizens rallied together, promising to rid their towns of drug dealers and

\textsuperscript{223} Gergen, “Drugs and White America.”
\textsuperscript{224} Gergen.
protect the lives of those they love. The article noted several ways concerned citizens planned to go about this, including “organizing to patrol their own turf, seal up the abandoned houses that serve as crack dens, even bring suits against absentee landlords who own the buildings. Some go in for a more dangerous tactic: direct harassment of drug sellers.” However, simply running drug dealers out of town was not the solution, as they would just move to another community and continue selling drugs there. It would have to begin on a small-scale basis at home, mostly through education, informing groups, including people, about the dangers of drugs and the risk they pose.

Once again, media framed many of their stories regarding drugs and substance abuse on children and the impact at home. The New York Times published a story featuring a third-grade boy named Jerome, a young child who was caught in a custody battle between his alcoholic father and drug-addicted mother. Although this is the story of only one child, it served as a representation of what the drug epidemic was doing to the lives of countless children throughout the United States. Schools struggled to address these issues in the classroom — how to deal with the pain and neglect many of these children were dealing with daily. Gone were the days when children could turn to any adult in their life for advice or guidance. Now, with the scourge of substance abuse, this was oftentimes left to educators to deal with alone, leaving them to “confront the fundamental problem overwhelming inner-city public schools across the country:

---

227 Lacayo, Behar, Gwynne, and Woodbury.
228 Susan Chira, “Education: When Drugs and Despair Vie With 3 R’s,” New York Times, November 15, 1989. This article is similar to a story by Janet Cooke for the Washington Post on September 28, 1980. It detailed the life of an 8-year-old heroin addict, with the story eventually winning a Pulitzer Prize. However, it was later discovered Cooke had fabricated the young boy, Tyrone, by condensing the stories of several people into one. This evidence shows that substance abuse related to children had been a hot-button issue for years, not just during the “Just Say No” campaign. For more information on the Janet Cooke story, see Mike Sager, “The Fabulist Who Changed Journalism,” Columbia Journalism Review.
how to educate children who bring the despair, neglect and violence of their lives into the classroom.”

While educators once had to worry about drug deals occurring outside of school grounds, some now had to worry about deals happening on school grounds. At one elementary school in Boston, teachers had to warn their young students to avoid stepping on or touching needles which were scattered across the ground on the playground. Drugs had reached that far in. A prime example of these efforts failings can be found in the case of Sergio, a 15-year-old boy who was too old to be at the school, but had to choose between attending classes or going to jail. As Susan Chira, a former executive at the New York Times wrote, “The boy disappeared, landed in jail for drug dealing, and reappeared at school last week waving a court order. He has given the school an address, but his teachers suspect he is living on the streets.”

With scenes like this occurring more frequently, some schools began searching for ways to incentivize children to perform well and stay away from drugs. The Miami Herald wrote about a Fort Lauderdale, Florida, school where supplies were handed out to elementary school students as part of a back-to-school bash. After playing games which challenged the children both mentally and physically, the paper wrote, “the younger children received notebook paper, crayons, a school box, and glue stick. High school students got spiral notebooks, pens, and pencils. Each packet contained a folder and ruler bearing the slogan, ‘Say No to Drugs.’” This event was hosted by a local homeowner’s association, the school board, and neighborhood merchants, showing the community coming together to support and education children, doing

---

229 Chira, “Education.”
230 Chira, “Education.”
what they thought could help keep children away from drugs — even if it meant starting with small steps such as this. Along with incentives, the approach toward educating children on the dangers of drugs became less of an opportunity to scare them and more of an opportunity to help them develop positive traits which could benefit them in the long run.\textsuperscript{232}

These traits included strengthening a child’s ability to make sound decisions, to handle stressful times, and to resist peer pressure from friends, among others.\textsuperscript{233} Although there were indications that these initiatives had the potential to be effective, it is important to note that the Bush Administration’s drug plan did not provide enough resources in-depth research to be conducted. Nonetheless, schools charged forth with this effort. In some middle schools, teachers created skits in which a young person was propositioned with drugs, then teaching how to say no. Joseph Berger wrote how previous attempts at drug education had failed, in large part because:

\begin{quote}
The scare tactics implicit in earlier programs, particularly those of the 60's and early 70's, were based on the notion that stark facts and figures about the intoxicating effects and health perils of drugs would speak for themselves and send the message. But the thinking now is that the presentation of simple facts without helping a child deal with them has sometimes had the opposite effect. Particularly among children of poor neighborhoods, the facts often seemed to make drugs more enticing.\textsuperscript{234}
\end{quote}

Even though a majority of the Bush Administration’s drug plan targeted domestic issues like education, there were still concerns of drug trafficking and production in other countries — something the administration could not simply just turn a blind eye to.

More than 100 government officials had been assassinated in Colombia since 1980, waging its own war with drug lords and cartels — mostly fueled and financed by the United


\textsuperscript{233} Berger, “Learning to Say No.”

\textsuperscript{234} Berger, “Learning to Say No.”
States’ drug habit.\textsuperscript{235} In response to the controversy, President Bush announced the US would be sending $65 million to Colombia, about two and a half times more than what the country was expecting to receive. However, the Bush Administration intended to only send 50 to 100 troops to Colombia to help train troops on the military equipment they would receive, a significantly smaller number than what was seen during the Reagan Administration.\textsuperscript{236} As written in the article:

> Though the U.S. has a big stake in the battle in Colombia, it cannot do much besides send materiel and cheer for Barco. Washington's antidrug policy is moving away from interdiction of supply to cutting down demand at home. Bush's program will propose shifting funds to expanded drug-education and treatment programs, and stiffer penalties for casual users.\textsuperscript{237}

According to Virgilio Barco Vargas, president of Colombia, the lack of US troops was not in itself a bad thing. In fact, he hoped the United States’ emphasis on the domestic front would help stymie drug production and trafficking in Colombia, as it was having a devastating human toll. This all, however, would depend on how hard America was willing to fight the drug war in its own country.\textsuperscript{238}

When George H.W. Bush assumed the presidency, he did not go into office with the same fervor and desire to create considerable change like previous administrations had done, and did not introduce a pledge of what he hoped to accomplish in the first 100 days. With Republicans deadlocked and distracted by other issues like abortion, Democrats went back on their word vowing cooperation.\textsuperscript{239} Journalist Frank Greve offered several reasons as to why Bush decided to


\textsuperscript{236} Church, Goodgame, Moody, and Shannon, “Going Too Far.”

\textsuperscript{237} Church, Goodgame, Moody, and Shannon.

\textsuperscript{238} Church, Goodgame, Moody, and Shannon, “Going Too Far.”

keep his goals modest, for example protecting his reputation, writing, “In short, if the drug war failed, the Congress wanted a president to blame for the failure.”240 When Bush assumed office, he made a pledge to not raise taxes, one of the ideals he hoped to stay true to throughout his time in office.241 He would, though, go back on this pledge, later signing a bill that raised taxes to fund a variety of measures, including some which were geared toward alcohol and drug abuse.242

Perhaps one of the reasons for this increase in taxes was because of the exorbitant costs related to Bush’s drug plans. Originally asking for about $8 billion for his anti-drug plan, the Senate approved $9.4 billion in funding for the president’s War on Drugs, although no action had yet been taken in the House.243 According to George J. Mitchell, a Democratic senator from Maine, one of the main reasons the Senate approved such a large sum to fight the drug war was because “The proposal submitted by the President was painfully inadequate for the task that we face in this country in dealing with drugs.”244 This differed sharply from President Reagan, who in 1986 requested $1 billion for his anti-drug plan, bringing the total cost of his administration’s efforts in the drug war to only $3 billion — less than half of what Bush received in this one bill.245 There was very little hope that even Bush’s drug plan would be effective in even making a dent in the drug problem, with the New York Times noting that “a victory over drugs” would not be achieved in this generation.246 Rather than making pledges to rid the country of substance

244 Johnston, “Senate Votes $9.4 Billion”
abuse, something Reagan frequently said, Bush was more conservative in his thinking, purporting to only want to decrease the prevalence of drug use in society, even if it was just slightly. This was more of a long-range plan, setting the stage for a decline in drug use over at least a 10-year period. After all, it would be an $8 billion fight against an industry that generated more than $100 billion per year. Critics aside, journalist Richard Berke said some defenders of the Bush Administration hoped progress could be made, writing:

Some defend the Administration for doing the best it can. And the debate goes on over whether winning the drug war is beyond the realm of social engineering. History has shown that drug epidemics often do peak, as one drug simply replaces another.247

Media held different opinions as to how Bush could help American win the drugs. Some agreed that the solution lie with law enforcement and arresting drug dealers — tackling the drug issue street by street.248 Others believed victory could be achieve through education and getting to the root of problems leading to drug addiction, dealing with people’s aversion to the pains of life, along with character and moral failings.249 As vice president, Bush played an integral role in Reagan’s War on Drugs. In his administration, Bush hoped to leave his own mark on the drug war, using legislation passed by Reagan to lay the foundation to achieve it.250

---

CONCLUSION

Without question, there was a significant amount of media coverage surrounding the War on Drugs, beginning with President Richard Nixon’s original campaign. In the months leading up to President Ronald Reagan’s signing of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, the coverage became increasingly comprehensive concerning the societal problems drugs created across the country. Throughout both newspapers and popular newsmagazines — the *New York Times*, *Miami Herald*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *Time* — there was extensive coverage related to all facets of the drug issue, including trafficking and substance abuse, providing a glimpse into the mindset of not only the government, but of the American people as well. There was a variety of coverage highlighting how drugs were affecting both the United States and the international community.

A majority of Reagan’s initiatives related to tackling drug production and trafficking abroad centered on the use of military intervention and financial aid from the US government. Two of the countries the Act mentioned most frequently were Bolivia and Mexico, and this research found that the media covered both of them in great detail. In one instance, the government sent hundreds of troops to Bolivia in a direct attack on the regions producing the cocaine that was then trafficked to the United States. There appeared to be no hesitation on the media’s support for this action, with virtually all four media outlets studied here providing at least a semblance of support in its coverage. Many politicians and policy experts the media cited said the only way drug production and trafficking, and hence the United States’ drug problem, would be addressed was if the regions where drugs like cocaine were produced were totally
destroyed. That is not to say that there was no dissention, however minimal it may have been. Some argued that Reagan’s approach was too aggressive, a show of brute force which was not necessary in attacking cartels and hotspots for drug production. Most of this criticism was found in the popular newsmagazines, which were more reflective of public opinion during this time. Newspaper coverage, on the other hand, did not offer a great deal of criticism, choosing rather to simply report on the facts and developments as they happened, providing a synopsis of events instead of any opinion on the strategies and possible outcomes.

Criticism did, however, become a more common theme in newspapers when discussing America’s efforts in Mexico, where, not surprisingly, a great many of the drugs, like marijuana and cocaine, were trafficked across the border into the US. In 1986, Mexico was under great financial pressure, and the Reagan used this as leverage to force cooperation to achieve his goals in the War on Drugs. Public opinion of Mexico was negative at this time, with press coverage of incidents such as a DEA agent who was kidnapped and murdered there. The media reported that Mexican officials looked the other way as the murder appeared to be tied to the drug cartels. Again, it was in popular newsmagazines where the opposing side was presented. Instead of simply reporting on conversations between Reagan and the president of Mexico, Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado, as the newspapers did, there was commentary on the United States’ approach. Even so, Mexico was most always blamed. President de la Madrid Hurtado addressed this himself, blaming the United States’ insatiable desire for drugs as one of the leading causes behind cartels’ power.

Overall, the New York Times and Miami Herald sparingly went beyond reporting strictly on the United States’ efforts in foreign countries, with the exception of some editorial and opinion pieces. Time and U.S. News & World Report, though, were more detailed in the
underlying issues that may have contributed to the international drug problem which was affecting the United States. The Reagan Administration was quick to blame countries like Mexico and Bolivia for the nation’s drug problem, which is reflected in most of the newspaper and newsmagazine coverage of Central and South American related to the drug problem. However, this coverage also highlights notable differences between newspapers and newsmagazines at the time, explicating the motives behind media coverage. Based on the evidence found, it appears newsmagazines had greater liberty in editorializing certain issues, as certain articles were framed with a more pointed critique of the Reagan Administration and its efforts.

In terms of agenda setting, it seems as though newsmagazines were attempting to provide a different point of view from newspapers, providing the viewpoint of everyday Americans and delving deeper into specific issues, something that newspapers do not always have the liberty of doing. When newspapers framed international coverage of the War on Drugs, it was more of a play-by-play of events, rather than offering any critique. The evidence found supports this idea, as their agenda could simply have been to keep Americans informed. Again, there was the occasional opinion or editorial piece which offered more in-depth criticism, but on the whole newspaper coverage lacked much pushback related to the Reagan Administration’s efforts. However, there was a belief found in both newspaper and newsmagazine coverage that the United States should begin taking its focus off international issues and begin focusing on the home front.

Another aspect of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 dealt严格ly with domestic issues related to the War on Drugs. Along with Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” campaign, which was publicly announced on TV about a month before the Act’s signing, these initiatives were largely
focused on educating young people on drugs and providing resources to those considered to be the most at-risk. It would be impossible to discuss the domestic aspect of the Act without discussing “Just Say No,” as their initiatives were very similar and reflected one another. Pamphlets were published and distributed in communities throughout the country, and programs were launched in schools to better equip children to avoid temptation as they grew older and became exposed to drugs. While this seemed idealistic in nature, it also did not do much to address the issue of substance abuse. The government presented substance abuse as more of a moral failing than disease, with this being reflected in the resources allocated in the Act. While there were notable differences in newspaper and newsmagazine coverage with international issues and the War on Drugs, its coverage of domestic issues and the drug problem appear to have been more aligned during this time. Both newspapers and newsmagazines commented on the potential deficiencies with Reagan’s plan, although again went about it in slightly different ways.

Whenever *The New York Times* or *Miami Herald* offered a critique of the Reagan Administration’s efforts, it almost always came from politicians. *Time* and *U.S. News & World Report*, though, included critiques from other medical or scientific experts, and even average Americans who simply wanted to provide their own commentary. This fact also lends evidence to support the different modes of framing taken by newspapers and newsmagazines. Whenever newspapers wanted to provide critique, they would feature quotes from politicians who were actively trying to make change through legislation. It was also an opportunity for newspapers to highlight partisanship within the federal government and how Republicans and Democrats had differing views on the War on Drugs. Newsmagazines, though, did not seem as concerned with the War on Drugs from a Republican versus Democrat perspective. In its coverage,
newsmagazines often highlighted the potential failings of anti-drug problems from an educational lens. *Time* and *U.S. News & World Report* published stories proving educational programs and character-building exercises truly had not impact on substance abuse or one’s likelihood to use drugs. This was yet another issue with the Reagan agenda and the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. While it presented lofty goals and the ways it would achieve them, statistics and studies detailed in various articles showed proof that they would not be effective. Even though parents and student groups rallied together at local elementary schools and high schools, hosting bake sales and informational sessions, the rate of substance abuse was little, if at all, affected. Also, it did little to eradicate drug dealing, as dealers would typically just move from community to community. From the evidence found, school rallies and coverage of parent groups were published in newspapers, mainly the *Miami Herald* as there was a major anti-drug push occurring in Florida at this time. Again, the evidence appears to show that newspaper coverage had its own set agenda compared to newsmagazine coverage. When the *New York Times* or *Miami Herald* did have critique, it almost always came from politicians. This also shows that newspapers attempted to frame its stories from a perspective of politics and policy, not necessarily from the view of the public. This is different from newsmagazines, who framed stories from a more general view, permitting people outside the realm of politics to provide input.

When President George H.W. Bush assumed office, he continued his predecessor’s legacy in his own rendition of the War on Drugs. This time, however, Bush did not see the need to focus so much attention on the international front. Rather than funneling money into foreign countries, he instead centered his approach on the home front. Unlike Reagan, though, Bush was not so much focused on education as he was law enforcement. He granted the Department of
Defense, including the Pentagon, the right to lend military equipment to states as part of his anti-drug plan. In fact, he intentionally tried to stoke the flames by staging a fake drug bust across the street from the White House. While Bush’s War on Drugs could be likened to that of Reagan, he attempted to tackle the issue in his own way. But, the results were similar. There was little to no headway in curbing the drug problem facing the United States.

Today’s statistics show that the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 and “Just Say No” campaign seem to have had little effect on the nation’s drug problem. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, about 92,000 people died from drug overdoses in 2020 — a little less than 25 years after Reagan signed the Act into law. A majority of these deaths stemmed from opioids, an epidemic which arose several years after Reagan left office. This is indicative of the problems associated with the War on Drugs, no matter who the president at the time is. In the early years of the Reagan Administration, marijuana was the major drug concerning the American people. In the latter part of the 1980s, it was crack and crack cocaine. The drug issue is ever evolving. It continues to take on different forms as the years go by, showing that there quite possibly will never be one foolproof solution to the problem. With this in mind, media can garner a significant amount of knowledge in terms of how it should report on substance abuse and the drug trade in the future. The reality of the situation must be clearly defined and clearly stated. There must be pushback and coverage of what is working and what is not working. Without media taking a stand and criticizing, rather than reporting carte blanche, many of the efforts in the War on Drugs, there may always be false hope, a false promise that a definitive solution will someday emerge.

\footnote{“Overdose Death Rates,” \textit{National Institute on Drug Abuse}, January 20, 2022.}
Future research could delve deeper into President George H.W. Bush’s efforts in his administration’s War on Drugs. It could further highlight the effect an increased law enforcement presence had on tackling the drug problem. It could offer insight into whether some semblance of progress was made, whether it was less effective than Reagan’s agenda, or if the results were about the same. This model could be repeated through the Clinton, George W. Bush, Obama, and Trump presidencies as time goes by. Future research could also examine media coverage throughout these different presidencies, providing an opportunity to see if the media’s tone changed at all after watching failures from years past. For this thesis, many of the archives from the Ronald Reagan Library & Museum had not yet been digitized. With library closures and other limitations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there was limited chance to gain access to hard copies of these documents. Moving forward, it would prove beneficial to visit these archives, to gain a better understanding of exactly what not only the Reagan Administration, but other administrations as well, were trying to do in its push to once and for all end the War on Drugs.
REFERENCES

Primary Sources

*Miami Herald*, accessed on NewsBank through The University of Alabama Library.


*Time*, accessed on EBSCOhost through The University of Alabama Library.


Secondary Sources

Alexander, Brian R. “War on Drugs Redux: Welcome to the War on Doping in Sports,” *Substance Use and Misuse* 49, no. 9 (2014), 1190-1193, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3109/10826084.2014.904119?casa_token=yvPT14poxXgAAAAA%3AivbWVn4UrRjINYN6EgwvV2yWx9VES0LdyHxgN0Bce3jGk15U2zG7q6kKGkIluWuB8phaHoETMnW7Q.

Bagley, Bruce Michael. “Colombia and the War on Drugs,” *Foreign Affairs* 67, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 70-92, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20043675?casa_token=T2yy2wO6-1cAAAAA%3Ajp2nTMEX4S4WP9Rbs7Tb5aAZ9cZgyy6Rh3O7xHm-slcd3rA6fQ3r7wBOtpEFR0DlrnBswljK08LDfjqTfuRmsaOXY7_JLHEecodvl4QVAju tFRpb_F&seq=7#metadata_info_tab_contents.


Teague, Aileen. “Mexico’s Dirty War on Drugs: Source Control and Dissidence in Drug Enforcement,” The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs, 33, no. 1 (2019), 63-87, https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/702693?casa_token=mJ_m7cX62icAAAAA%3AiMSyGnSvLa-11JP1C18GwWE7Yi5kvVFFjqxd8xtCpYsFjfBmA LAucDY6LZR3715FvL8Gk4EC5SkQ.


