

Cato's Letter

*A Quarterly
Message
on Liberty*

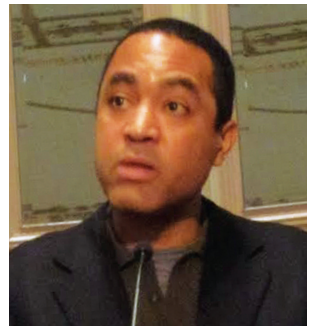
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How the War on Drugs Is Destroying Black America

JOHN McWHORTER

The main obstacle to getting black America past the illusion that racism is still a defining factor in America is the strained relationship between young black men and police forces. The massive number of black men in prison stands as an ongoing and graphically resonant rebuke to all calls to “get past racism,” exhibit initiative, or stress optimism. And the primary reason for this massive number of black men in jail is the War on Drugs.

Therefore, if the War on Drugs were terminated, the main factor keeping race-based resentment a core element in the American social fabric would no longer exist. America would be a better place for all.



John McWhorter is an associate professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley and a contributing editor to the Manhattan Institute's City Journal. This is an excerpt from a speech given at a Cato Institute seminar in New York in October.

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The War on Drugs destroys black families. It has become a norm for black children to grow up in single-parent homes, their fathers away in prison for long spells and barely knowing them. In poor and working-class black America, a man and a woman raising their children together is, of all things, an unusual sight. The War on Drugs plays a large part in this. It must stop.

The War on Drugs discourages young black men from seeking legal employment. Because the illegality of drugs keeps the prices high, there are high salaries to be made in selling them. This makes selling drugs a standing tempting alternative to seeking lower-paying legal employment. The result is usually spells in jail, as well as a failure to build the job skills for legal employment that serve as a foundation for a produc-

tive existence in middle and later life. However, the War on Drugs has made it impossible to see whether black Americans would exhibit such “pluck” themselves if drug selling were not a tempting alternative. High black employment rates in the past gave all indication that black men are no strangers to “pluck” when circumstances require it.

The War on Drugs makes spending time in prison a badge of honor. To black men involved in the drug trade, enduring prison time, regarded as an unjust punishment for merely selling people something they want (with some justification), is seen as a badge of strength: the ex-con is a hero rather than someone who went the wrong way. In the 1920s, before the War on Drugs, black Americans, regardless of class level, did not view black ex-cons as heroes.

The War on Drugs’ effects on the black community are impervious to community calls for discipline and leadership. Young black men will not be wooed from selling drugs by black leaders calling for families to take responsibility for their children and keep them off of the streets.

There are no national black leaders today who have this kind of influence over a significant portion of black people, and there is simply no chance that the NAACP, committed to antidiscrimination activities rather than community uplift, would preach in a constructive fashion any time soon, if ever—and then, black America is too diverse today for the NAACP or the National

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immigrants, including black ones, regularly make do. It is often said that because immigrants have a unique initiative or “pluck” in relocating to the United States in the first place, it is unfair to compare black Ameri-

Urban League to have any serious effect upon all. The days when the White House could invite a quorum of black people considered “representatives of the race” is over. If this were attempted today, one can imagine assorted celebrities invited—Oprah Winfrey, Spike Lee, Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, Marian Wright Edelman, John Lewis, Bill Cosby, and so on. But these people do not determine what black America as a whole thinks or does. These people do not have the wherewithal to translate their verdicts into federal policy.

What will turn black America around for good is the elimination of a policy that prevents too many people from doing their best. Legalizing marijuana is just a start, and reducing the length of sentences for possession of crack cocaine would address only the tip of the iceberg. While efforts in this vein are laudable, they would not reduce the basic financial incentive for engaging in the drug trade in the first place, and thus would leave the associated cultural pattern in place. Since the 1980s, as sentences for possessing or selling drugs have become lengthier, the price of cocaine on the street has become cheaper.

Make no mistake—I propose that hard drugs be available for purchase for prices below anything that could make a living for someone selling them on the street. They should be available in maintenance doses, possibly for free. Resources now tied up in useless enforcement

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would be used for truly effective rehabilitation programs. Fears of an addiction epidemic are unfounded: none such has occurred in Portugal, where the drug war has been significantly scaled back. Our discomfort with the idea of heroin available at drug stores is similar to that of a Prohibitionist shuddering at the thought of bourbon available at the corner store. We’ll get over it—because we should, and we must.

The elimination of the War on Drugs would entail completing the other half of the rescue of black America that welfare reform contributed in 1996. Open-ended, rather than time-limited, welfare prevented too many black women from doing their best from the late sixties to 1996. The women themselves readily confirm this, and the higher employment rates among them immediately after 1996 prove that this was the case.

In 1996 countless people genuinely thought black women would wind up shivering on sidewalk grates. These people underestimated the basic human resilience of black people. In the same way, if the War on Drugs is ended, the same kinds of people will assume that young black men will wander

about jobless and starving. They will not, because they are human beings with basic resilience and survival instincts.

Let's imagine a black America with no War on Drugs.

No more gang wars over turf, no more kids shooting each other over sneakers, no more "Stop the Violence" rallies, no more agonized discussions about gun possession in the inner city. Quite simply, people who don't sell drugs for a living don't much need to kill each other over turf.

No more glum speculations about the extent to which black women's romantic choices are shaped by a "shortage of black men," no more scholarship showing that women in the ghetto get pregnant out of wedlock because they don't see the men they know as marriageable. Because there's no War on Drugs, there are no more black men up the river proportionally than white, Latino, or Asian men—because the men get jobs, as they did in the old days, even in the worst ghettos, because they have to. Black communities are now full to bursting with men, black women have their pick of them, and we can move on.

No more does a privileged man like Henry Louis Gates shout, "Why, because I'm a black man in America?" when questioned by a police-

man. Gates' take on being asked why he was breaking and entering into his own house was understandable in an America with a War on Drugs that forces cops to pay special attention to young black men. With the War on Drugs eliminated, the cops would have no reason to do this, and the understandable paranoia of men like Gates would evaporate.



No more calls for a "conversation" about race, with the real intention being that black people get to vent at white people and reveal to them the precious wisdom that racism remains more important than you might think. Because there is no longer a sense that black America is

under siege, no one is wasting time dreaming of this impossible "conversation."

The hideous drop-out rate among ghetto teens? Watch it fall as soon as there's no way to keep money in your pocket without a diploma. The War on Drugs gives ghetto males an ever-standing option for making a living without staying in school.

Do you often get a sense that many black people operate according to a belief that they are not subject to the same rules as everyone else, in terms of civility, achievement, and life plans? You probably do, and frankly, you are seeing something real. There is a kind of

black person who does feel that the rules are different for him. And what underlies this, although most would not put it in so many words, is the relationship between black men and the police. Ask a black person why they think racism still defines black lives, if they do, and count how many seconds pass before they start talking about the police. Upon which, return to my point here: with no War on Drugs, a generation would grow up without that prickly, defensive sense of what being black means.

No more exaggeration, double-talk, melodrama, no more formulaic rage, no more staged indignation. Imagine all of the energy wasted on this devoted to real things, like schools, diet, and health care.

There will be those who say that I am exaggerating the centrality of the War on Drugs to black America's problems. I believe that they are wrong, and the question we must ask is: What do you suggest?

We hope that they do not suggest more of what's been going on for the past 40 years: sonorous phrasings at forums and meetings and on websites and blogs about responsibility, expectations, institutional racism, and profile articles about individuals making a difference for a few dozen people at a time in a particular city for a few years before life moves them on.

Franklin D. Roosevelt said: "Take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it and try another. But above all, try something." What do you

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suggest we *try* instead? Community centers? Take a look at the track record on that. Or is it that we have to try a lot of things all at the same time? Well, what else have we been doing for 40 years, and where are we now? He who supposes that a random combination of unfocused, usually temporary and largely ineffective things is preferable to trying something else is responsible for explaining why, and he could not.

Let's work on something concrete. End the War on Drugs and make a better America. This is not about Tune In, Turn On, Drop Out. This is not about political partisanship. This is about making black lives better—and through that, making America better. That is, not “America” in some vague, poetic sense, but the daily lives that all of us lead.

If we truly want to get past race in this country, we must be aware that it will never happen until the futile War on Drugs so familiar to us now is a memory. All it will take is a single generation of black Americans growing up in a post-Prohibition America for us to get where we all want to go. The time to end the War on Drugs, therefore, is yesterday. ■



Cato Scholar Profile: **CHRISTOPHER A. PREBLE**

CHRISTOPHER A. PREBLE is the director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. He is the author of *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free*, which documents the enormous costs of America's military power, and proposes a new grand strategy to advance U.S. security, as well as coeditor, with Jim Harper and Benjamin Friedman, of *Terrorizing Ourselves: Why U.S. Counterterrorism Policy Is Failing and How to Fix It*. In addition, Preble has published more than 150 articles in major publications including *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Financial Times*, *National Review*, the *National Interest*, the *Harvard International Review*, and *Foreign Policy*.

How did you come to be director of foreign policy studies at Cato? You started here as an intern, is that correct?

Yes. I was an intern at Cato in the summer and fall of 1987. It was a great experience, although very different from the rigorous—and highly competitive—program that we have for interns today. After graduating from George Washington University in 1989, I served as an officer in the U.S. Navy for four years, and then went to graduate school at Temple in Philadelphia. I planned on becoming a history professor but was always interested in contemporary public policy. I remained in touch with a few of the scholars here, especially David Boaz and Ted Galen Carpenter, and wrote papers on the U.S.-Japan relationship, and later on the U.S. Navy and the Joint Strike Fighter (aka F-35), so I had a track record with the Institute before I was hired.

How does a policy of nonintervention help advance freedom internationally?

War is the health of the state; preparing for and waging war has been the primary engine behind the growth of government. Given this, I confess that I am completely baffled when people support an interventionist posture abroad and noninterventionism at home. The same cautions that advise against government attempts to build communities here in the United States—the problem of knowledge, unintended consequences, the seen versus the unseen—are manifest in foreign interventions, in spades. What's more, the notion that we need big government abroad to advance the cause of freedom does a disservice to the people

who work at Cato and countless other classical liberal NGOs around the world. It implies that liberty can only spread under the covering fire of American bombs and bullets. Experience and common sense suggests otherwise. We've distributed several million Cato Constitutions over the years; never once have we had to resort to coercion and violence to convince people that the principles of our founding documents are worth reading and emulating.

While most Americans agree that we should cut federal spending, many are hesitant to do so where the military is concerned. Would cutting defense spending make us less secure?

In a word, no. We are extraordinarily secure. Terrorism is a legitimate concern but pales in comparison to the threat of thermonuclear annihilation that we endured during the Cold War. Besides, our enormous expenditures on the military are largely irrelevant to fighting terrorism, and might be counterproductive. The U.S. military is today organized primarily around defending other countries that can and should defend themselves. We should let them, return the savings to American taxpayers, and relieve the burdens on our troops.

Military spending has nearly doubled in real terms over the past 13 years. If we restrained our impulses to meddle in foreign conflicts, and reaffirmed that the core function of government is self-defense, not the defense of others, we could make cuts without undermining our security. Such reductions would still leave us with an enormous margin of superiority over any conceivable combination of rivals. ■

All Assets Are Not Created Equal...



When it comes to making charitable gifts, all assets are not created equal. In fact, some assets are uniquely suited for charitable giving.

Gifts of appreciated property

For example, we are probably all familiar with the concept of giving appreciated assets. As long as some basic preconditions, such as a one-year holding period, are satisfied, you get an income-tax deduction for the full appreciated value of the asset. In addition, you will not be required to pay capital gains tax on the appreciation that would have been realized had you sold the asset.

Gifts of retirement assets

Retirement assets, such as IRAs, 401(k)s, Keoghs and 403(b)s, also make highly effective gifts. Because retirement assets are subject to uniquely high taxes, making a gift of them is often the best way to negate what approaches confiscatory taxation.

This vortex of taxation surrounding retirement assets comes about because those assets are subject to a wicked mix of income, estate, and generation-skipping taxes. On the income-tax side, distributions from retirement plans are subject to income taxes—and there is no way to avoid making distributions because tax laws require that distributions be made once you reach a certain age.

As for estate taxes, unless you are able to name a spouse as beneficiary, whatever is left in the account when you die is subject to estate taxes. And bear in mind that distribu-

tions from the account to your beneficiaries (whether spousal or nonspousal) will continue to be subject to income taxes.

What's more, depending on the circumstances, generation-skipping taxes may kick in as well. Generation-skipping tax (GST) is a special tax imposed on the privilege of passing property to a beneficiary more than one generation younger. So if your beneficiary is a grandchild, you need to be concerned about GST, although there are certain exemptions/protections that can sometimes shield against the imposition of GST.

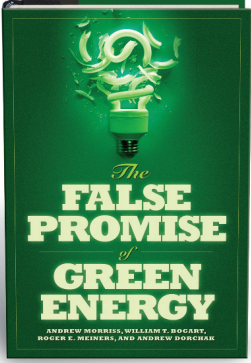
In order to avoid this trifecta of income, estate, and possibly GST taxes, consider designating Cato as the recipient of any benefit remaining in your retirement plans. Your estate will get an estate tax charitable deduction for the value of the assets passing to Cato. As a charity, Cato will not have to pay income taxes on any distributions.

A couple of final thoughts...

Although the exact shape of the estate tax is unclear at this moment, it seems that the estate tax is going to remain part of the landscape. So planning to avoid the estate tax remains viable. One important practical reminder: retirement assets do not pass under your will. They pass via beneficiary designation forms. So having an up-to-date will is not enough.

For more information about gifts of appreciated assets or retirement assets, please contact Cato's director of planned giving, [Gayllis Ward](mailto:Gayllis.Ward@cato.org), at (202) 218-4631 or at gward@cato.org. ■

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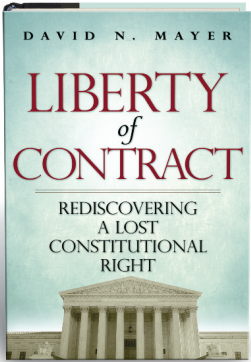


The False Promise of Green Energy

By Andrew Morriss, William T. Bogart, Roger E. Meiners, and Andrew Dorchak

Green energy promises an alluring future—more jobs in a cleaner environment. There's one problem: the lack of credible evidence that this can occur. This book examines the claims green-energy and green-jobs proponents make, and explores the politics and gamesmanship lurking below the surface.

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Liberty of Contract: Rediscovering a Lost Constitutional Right

By David N. Mayer

Is economic liberty the same as personal liberty? This question has been the subject of some of the most controversial court rulings, including major Supreme Court decisions made over the past century. Mayer examines the history of contract and shows how this right has been continuously diminished by court decisions and by our country's growing regulatory and welfare state.

HARDCOVER: \$21.95 • PAPERBACK: \$9.95 • E-BOOK: \$7.50

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