SOMETIMES PEOPLE in law enforcement will hear it whispered that I'm a former cop who favors decriminalization of marijuana laws, and they'll approach me the way they might a traitor or snitch. So let me set the record straight.

Yes, I was a cop for 34 years, the last six of which I spent as chief of Seattle's police department.

But no, I don't favor decriminalization. I favor legalization, and not just of pot but of all drugs, including heroin, cocaine, meth, psychotropics, mushrooms and LSD.

Decriminalization, as my colleagues in the drug reform movement hasten to inform me, takes the crime out of using drugs but continues to classify possession and use as a public offense, punishable by fines.

I've never understood why adults shouldn't enjoy the same right to use verboten drugs as they have to suck on a Marlboro or knock back a scotch and water.

Prohibition of alcohol fell flat on its face. The prohibition of other drugs rests on an equally wobbly foundation. Not until we choose to frame responsible drug use — not an oxymoron in my dictionary — as a civil liberty will we be able to recognize the abuse of drugs, including alcohol, for what it is: a medical, not a criminal, matter.

As a cop, I bore witness to the multiple lunacies of the "war on drugs." Lasting far longer than any other of our national conflicts, the drug war has been prosecuted with equal vigor by Republican and Democratic administrations, with one president after another — Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Bush — delivering sanctimonious sermons, squandering vast sums of taxpayer money and cheerleading law enforcers from the safety of the sidelines.

It's not a stretch to conclude that our draconian approach to drug use is the most injurious domestic policy since slavery. Want to cut back on prison overcrowding and save a bundle on the construction of new facilities? Open the doors, let the nonviolent drug offenders go. The huge increases in federal and state prison populations during the 1980s and '90s (from 139 per 100,000 residents in 1980 to 482 per 100,000 in 2003) were mainly for drug convictions. In 1980, 580,900 Americans were arrested on drug charges. By 2003, that figure had ballooned to 1,678,200. We're making more arrests for drug
offenses than for murder, manslaughter, forcible rape and aggravated assault combined. Feel safer?

I've witnessed the devastating effects of open-air drug markets in residential neighborhoods: children recruited as runners, mules and lookouts; drug dealers and innocent citizens shot dead in firefights between rival traffickers bent on protecting or expanding their markets; dedicated narcotics officers tortured and killed in the line of duty; prisons filled with nonviolent drug offenders; and drug-related foreign policies that foster political instability, wreak health and environmental disasters, and make life even tougher for indigenous subsistence farmers in places such as Latin America and Afghanistan. All because we like our drugs — and can't have them without breaking the law.

As an illicit commodity, drugs cost and generate extravagant sums of (laundered, untaxed) money, a powerful magnet for character-challenged police officers.

Although small in numbers of offenders, there isn't a major police force — the Los Angeles Police Department included — that has escaped the problem: cops, sworn to uphold the law, seizing and converting drugs to their own use, planting dope on suspects, robbing and extorting pushers, taking up dealing themselves, intimidating or murdering witnesses.

In declaring a war on drugs, we've declared war on our fellow citizens. War requires "hostiles" — enemies we can demonize, fear and loathe. This unfortunate categorization of millions of our citizens justifies treating them as dope fiends, evil-doers, less than human. That grants political license to ban the exchange or purchase of clean needles or to withhold methadone from heroin addicts motivated to kick the addiction.

President Bush has even said no to medical marijuana. Why would he want to "coddle" the enemy? Even if the enemy is a suffering AIDS or cancer patient for whom marijuana promises palliative, if not therapeutic, powers.

As a nation, we're long overdue for a soul-searching, coldly analytical look at both the "drug scene" and the drug war. Such candor would reveal the futility of our current policies, exposing the embarrassingly meager return on our massive enforcement investment (about $69 billion a year, according to Jack Cole, founder and executive director of Law Enforcement Against Prohibition).

How would "regulated legalization" work? It would: 1) Permit private companies to compete for licenses to cultivate, harvest, manufacture, package and peddle drugs.

2) Create a new federal regulatory agency (with no apologies to libertarians or paleo-conservatives).

3) Set and enforce standards of sanitation, potency and purity.
4) Ban advertising.

5) Impose (with congressional approval) taxes, fees and fines to be used for drug-abuse prevention and treatment and to cover the costs of administering the new regulatory agency.

6) Police the industry much as alcoholic beverage control agencies keep a watch on bars and liquor stores at the state level. Such reforms would in no way excuse drug users who commit crimes: driving while impaired, providing drugs to minors, stealing an iPod or a Lexus, assaulting one's spouse, abusing one's child. The message is simple. Get loaded, commit a crime, do the time.

These reforms would yield major reductions in a host of predatory street crimes, a disproportionate number of which are committed by users who resort to stealing in order to support their habit or addiction.

Regulated legalization would soon dry up most stockpiles of currently illicit drugs — substances of uneven, often questionable quality (including "bunk," i.e., fakes such as oregano, gypsum, baking powder or even poisons passed off as the genuine article). It would extract from today's drug dealing the obscene profits that attract the needy and the greedy and fuel armed violence. And it would put most of those certifiably frightening crystal meth labs out of business once and for all.

Combined with treatment, education and other public health programs for drug abusers, regulated legalization would make your city or town an infinitely healthier place to live and raise a family.

It would make being a cop a much safer occupation, and it would lead to greater police accountability and improved morale and job satisfaction.

But wouldn't regulated legalization lead to more users and, more to the point, drug abusers? Probably, though no one knows for sure — our leaders are too timid even to broach the subject in polite circles, much less to experiment with new policy models. My own prediction? We'd see modest increases in use, negligible increases in abuse.

The demand for illicit drugs is as strong as the nation's thirst for bootleg booze during Prohibition. It's a demand that simply will not dwindle or dry up. Whether to find God, heighten sexual arousal, relieve physical pain, drown one's sorrows or simply feel good, people throughout the millenniums have turned to mood- and mind-altering substances.

They're not about to stop, no matter what their government says or does. It's time to accept drug use as a right of adult Americans, treat drug abuse as a public health problem and end the madness of an unwinnable war.

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