

Sketches of the Drug Czars

An Illustrated History of the War

[Ricardo Cortés](#)



All illustrations are by the author. This illustration is based on a photograph from the H.J. Anslinger Papers, 1835–1970. Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University,

In 1930, Harry J. Anslinger became the first commissioner of the US Federal Bureau of Narcotics. Anslinger would lead the government's fight against illegal drugs through the administrations of seven presidents.

Anslinger fought most famously against marijuana, however he also led the ban against the coca plant and its cocaine, while simultaneously helping secure The Coca-Cola Company's special access to its leaves. I've written about this in my [book](#), and in my essay, [*The Cocainemaker, Reefer Madness, and the Vice-President of The Coca-Cola Company*](#).

But it was Anslinger's "Reefer Madness"-era crusade against marijuana that he is best remembered for. In the late 19th and early 20th century, "marijuana," previously known as "cannabis," was associated with Mexicans and Mexican immigrants through fancifully ridiculous newspaper [articles](#). The prohibition against marijuana began in 1937, under the watch of Anslinger. He argued the plant caused murder and lunacy, and used "marijuana" to further stoke racist prejudices against Mexicans and Black people. Anslinger battled for decades, but by the end of his mission more Americans were smoking grass than ever before.



Harry J. Anslinger

Anslinger helped draft the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, one of three international treaties that today define world drug control. Shortly after its ratification, President John F. Kennedy named Anslinger U.S. Representative to the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs, where he served until his resignation before President Richard Nixon in 1970.



Illustration based on a photograph from the H.J. Anslinger Papers, 1835–1970. Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

Nixon took on drugs as part of his domestic anti-crime platform. "The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people," Nixon domestic policy adviser John Ehrlichman [told](#) journalist Dan Baum in 1994. "You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or blacks, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities."

It was Richard Nixon who declared the first "War on Drugs."

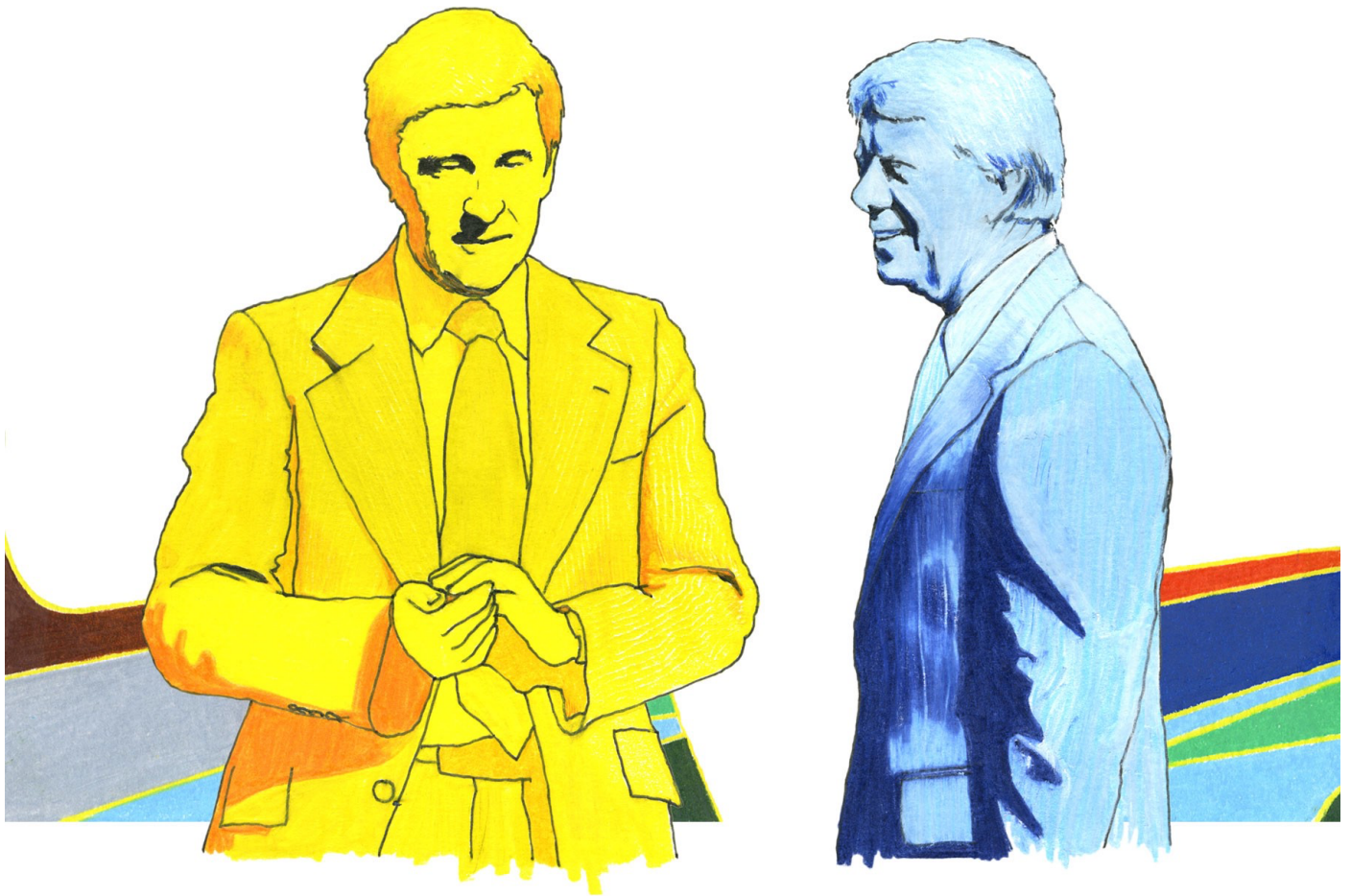
In 1970, Nixon passed the Controlled Substances Act, creating the U.S. drug-scheduling system. Marijuana was temporarily placed in Schedule I, the most restrictive, pending review by a commission to study its effects. The National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse consisted of 13 men—9 appointed by the president and 4 by Congress. In 1972, they

offered their unanimous conclusion: "We believe that experimental or intermittent use of this drug carries minimal risk to the public health, and should not be given overzealous attention in terms of a public health response." The panel, along with the American Medical Association and the National Institute of Mental Health, recommended decriminalizing the possession and distribution of marijuana for personal use, and the American Bar Association called for reduced penalties. Nixon rejected the report, declared "an all-out global war on the drug menace," and created the Drug Enforcement Administration (D.E.A.) by executive order in 1973.



December 21, 1970

Nixon once told his drug-policy adviser, Dr. Robert DuPont, "You're the drug expert, not me, on every issue but one, and that's decriminalization of marijuana. If you make any hint of supporting [it], you are history." As it turned out, Nixon was soon history. DuPont stayed and came out under President Gerald Ford to support decriminalization. Ford, however, largely dropped the drug issue and dismantled DuPont's office.



Dr. Peter Bourne and Jimmy Carter

President Jimmy Carter was inaugurated in January 1977. He had campaigned on a platform of decriminalization, and he appointed his friend Dr. Peter Bourne as director of the Office on Drug Abuse Policy. Bourne made it clear that he believed marijuana was not a significant health-care problem and began to explore rescheduling it. The White House pushed the National Cancer Institute to make the drug widely available to patients. On August 2nd, President Carter endorsed legislation that would end federal criminal penalties for the possession of one ounce or less of marijuana. In October, the Senate Judiciary Committee voted to decriminalize possession of up to an ounce for personal use. The tide of war was shifting.



By December 1977, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) had some reason to celebrate. The D.C.-based lobby was enjoying unprecedented access to the White House, and there was a palpable sense that America's pot policy would soon be relaxed. As part of its sixth annual convention, NORML hosted a party at an S Street town house. Counterculture mixed with the establishment; guests included Hunter S. Thompson, Christie Hefner (daughter of Hugh), Tom Forçade (founder of *High Times* magazine), *Washington Post* reporter Gary Cohn, and White House drug chief Peter Bourne.

Seven months later, Dr. Bourne wrote a prescription sedative for a White House aide using a pseudonym to mask the woman's identity. The incident was discovered, and the minor scandal prompted Cohn to break a story he had been holding. On July 21, *The Washington Post* reported that Bourne had used cocaine and marijuana at the December NORML party. Bourne resigned from his position at the Office on Drug Abuse Policy within 24 hours. Carter retreated from drug-law reform for the rest of his embattled

term.



Ronald Reagan and Rudolph Giuliani

In 1980, Ronald Reagan shifted responsibility for the anti-drug effort from the health department to the Department of Justice. "I would say that this is the most intense federal effort ever against drugs," said Associate Attorney General Rudolph Giuliani, who oversaw the D.E.A., the Bureau of Prisons, and who orchestrated expansion of the F.B.I. into drug enforcement.

Senator Joe Biden began advocating for a Cabinet-level position to coordinate federal agencies—a "drug czar." So began the era of "zero tolerance."

Even as President Nixon pushed through such tough measures as mandatory sentencing and "no-knock warrants," he also poured resources into drug-abuse prevention and treatment, which were funded at twice the level of law-enforcement efforts. Under Reagan and Biden's unified

direction, funding for law enforcement rose to three times that for abuse-prevention and treatment programs.



September 5, 1989

President George H. W. Bush appointed the first Cabinet-level drug czar to head the Office of National Drug Control Policy (O.N.D.C.P.). His choice, William Bennett, called for an "all-out war on drugs—with more resources for police, more prosecutors, more convictions." Bennett was the first U.S. drug chief in 20 years with no professional expertise in health or science. He was also a heavy smoker—he went through two packs a day, or about one ounce of tobacco—and promised to kick his addiction upon taking office.

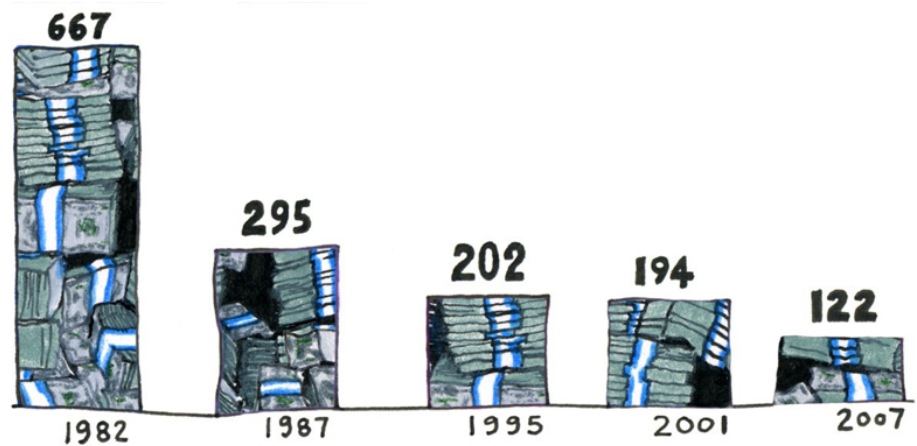


William J. Bennett

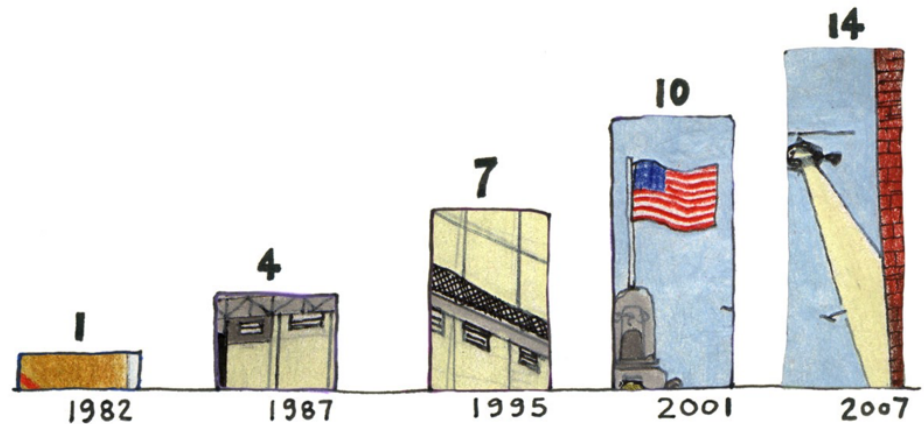
In 1990, one year into his term, Bennett proposed extending capital punishment to "drug kingpins."



**AVERAGE
PRICE PER
PURE GRAM
OF COCAINE**
(IN DOLLARS)



**FEDERAL
DRUG
CONTROL
BUDGET**
(IN BILLIONS OF
DOLLARS)



Source: Office of National Drug Control Policy (July 2008). The Price of Illicit Drugs: 1981–2007. Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President. Report prepared by the Institute for Defense Analyses for ONDCP.

By 1993, President Bill Clinton increased the funding of drug-control to four times what it had been under Ronald Reagan. Clinton appointed police veteran Lee Brown as his chief drug strategist and then, taking the drug-war metaphor quite literally, replaced him with four-star army general Barry McCaffrey. Incarceration for drug-law violations increased 1,100 percent between 1980 and 2002, while cocaine and heroin prices fell by 80 percent.

2001 brought George W. Bush to the White House. His drug czar, John Walters, would allocate more than \$100 billion to the war. Illicit drug use among adult Americans during the Bush administration remained unchanged. According to John Carnevale, former director of planning and budget at the O.N.D.C.P., "The strategy totally failed to achieve any progress in this key goal area... Eight years were wasted."



President Barack Obama assumed office in 2009 after having called the war on drugs “an utter failure.” His first drug czar, R. Gil Kerlikowske, pledged to “change the conversation on our drug problem” and abandon the “drug war” metaphor. But Obama’s first budget request for the O.N.D.C.P. was \$15.1 billion—\$1 billion more than President Bush’s previous budget request—an increase in every aspect of drug-war funding except drug-use prevention (which decreased by 11 percent).

Despite the rhetoric, Obama remained at the war’s wheel. In 2010, he nominated Michele Leonhart to direct the Drug Enforcement Administration. Leonhart has over 30 years of experience in law enforcement, she joined the D.E.A. in 1980 and is an ardent drug war warrior. In each successive year of his presidency, Obama requested increases in O.N.D.C.P. funding, for a total of \$107 billion by 2013.



April 30, 2014

Addressing the epidemic of mass incarceration, Obama announced support for the [Smarter Sentencing Act](#) to eliminate some mandatory minimum sentences. But in subsequent [testimony](#) before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Leonhart expressed support in maintaining mandatory minimums as a punitive tool. In an interview with the *New Yorker*, editor David Remnick noted that Obama seemed uneager "to evolve with any dispatch and get in front of the issue of marijuana legalization," nevertheless, the president did say that he believed marijuana was less dangerous than alcohol "in terms of its impact on the individual consumer." This simple, almost banal observation was profound to hear from the president. Leonhart [criticized](#) it as irresponsible, and during [testimony](#) before Rep. Jared Polis (D-Colo.), Leonhart stubbornly (ignorantly?) refused to acknowledge any physiological differences between marijuana, heroin, and methamphetamine. Of course in 1988, D.E.A. administrative law judge Francis Young famously wrote, "Marijuana, in its natural form, is one of the safest therapeutically active substances known to man. By any measure of rational analysis marijuana can be safely used within a supervised routine of

medical care." In response to a question of how the current trends of marijuana legalization affects the moral of D.E.A. agents, Leonhart said, "[Actually, it makes us fight harder.](#)"

Obama could have ended the war. He was educated and knowledgeable about its lengthy, expensive, and traumatizing failure. Ultimately, in one of the greater lost opportunities to change the world, the president chose to abdicate, to leave the war ongoing, and pass it onto his successor.



Gotcha

An earlier version of "Sketches of the Drug Czars" was originally published on VanityFair.com

Ricardo Cortés is an author & illustrator of books, including [Go the Fuck to Sleep](#), [Sea Creatures From the Sky](#), [A Secret History of Coffee](#), [Coca & Cola](#), and [It's Just a Plant — A Children's Story of Marijuana](#).

