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—Contributor.....Rick Holmes
—Contributor email.....holmes75@gmail.com
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HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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¹ Trump's new war on drugs

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² After 50 years of failure, the president is still following

³ Nixon's playbook

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⁴ TEXT BODY:

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⁵ IN THE SPRING of 1971, President Richard Nixon faced
⁶ crises on all sides, from the Pentagon Papers scandal to the rising
⁷ tide of opposition to his Vietnam War. So he announced a War on
⁸ Drugs.

⁹ Nixon's motivations for launching his war were largely
¹⁰ political. Use of marijuana and other drugs was associated with
¹¹ Black and Hispanic people and with long-haired college

12 students, [his chief policy advisor later explained](#), and those were
13 all groups that supported Democrats.

14 All these decades later, we have a president who got his
15 political instincts from Nixon and who exceeds Nixon in his
16 cynicism. So Donald Trump, beset by the Epstein scandal and
17 rising opposition to his economic policies, has now declared his
18 own War on Drugs.

19 Nixon's War on Drugs was built on unspoken
20 assumptions: That substance abuse was a problem better
21 addressed by the criminal justice system than the public health
22 system; that all drugs were all bad and abstinence was the only
23 acceptable policy; and that experts were best ignored.

24 Thus Nixon appointed a special commission to study
25 marijuana policy, only to renounce it when it recommended
26 decriminalizing pot possession.

27 The National Institute on Drug Abuse, created in 1974,
28 was prohibited in its founding documents from funding research
29 on potential positive uses of drugs. Psychedelics, which had
30 shown promise in the treatment of alcoholism and other illnesses,
31 were classified as no better than heroin, and all research ground
32 to a halt.

33 Police power was expanded, with anti-drug task forces
34 established at the local, state, and federal levels. New prisons
35 were built, and new laws enacted to fill them up with those who
36 used and sold the forbidden drugs.

37 * * *

38 NIXON'S WAR ON DRUGS outlasted him and then some.
39 The presidents who followed — Republican and Democrat alike
40 — bought into the old, flawed assumptions.

41 First Lady Nancy Reagan added a slogan: "Just Say No."
42 Amid public panic over crack cocaine, Bill Clinton (with an assist
43 from then-Sen. Joe Biden) made drug sentences even longer. Two
44 President Bushes kept Nixon's war going at the federal level,
45 while governors and legislatures at the state level, where most
46 drug crimes are prosecuted, followed suit.

47 War on Drugs politics ruled for generations. Politicians of
48 both parties, at all levels of government, had to appear tough on
49 drugs if they hoped to be elected.

50 For a half century, America faced a new drug crisis every
51 few years: marijuana, LSD, cocaine, ecstasy, heroin, crack,
52 methamphetamine, Oxycontin, fentanyl. The drugs changed, but
53 national drug policy was always the same: More police, more
54 mass incarceration.

55 The U.S. prison population rose from 328,000 in 1970 to
56 1.6 million in 2009. Billions in tax dollars were spent, millions of
57 American lives disrupted. The War on Drugs went on and on, but
58 the drugs kept winning.

59 * * *

60 FOR THOSE WHO looked closely, there were lessons to be
61 learned along the way. The crystal meth epidemic showed drug
62 addiction could be a rural phenomenon, not just an urban blight,
63 and that hard drugs didn't have to smuggled across the border.

64 A meth lab could be built in an isolated barn or the
65 Breaking Bad camper. The crack epidemic prompted more
66 incarceration, but those who have studied crack's impact on big
67 cities found the tide turned when young people, reinforced by
68 Black movies and hip-hop music, swore off the drug that they
69 had seen decimate their neighborhoods.

70 The opioid epidemic showed that a billion-dollar
71 pharmaceutical company can be as heartless and destructive as
72 the most notorious narcotics trafficker, and that driving up the
73 price of street drugs isn't a cure for addiction. When Oxy prices
74 spiked, users just switched to heroin and fentanyl.

75 Eventually, America's addiction crisis reached so deeply
76 into largely white suburbs and rural communities that people
77 started talking about alternatives to incarceration. In the last
78 decade or so, there's been a quiet shift in drug policy.

79 Voters, not politicians, led the charge to decriminalize
80 marijuana in half the country. Officials in conservative states, sick
81 of ever-growing corrections budgets, were the first to put the

82 brakes on mass incarceration. Biden apologized for the excesses
83 of his 1992 crime bill and pardoned nearly 2,500 nonviolent
84 drug offenders.

85 Research on psychedelics resumed, resulting in
86 promising treatments for depression and other mental illnesses.
87 Harm-reduction strategies like safe injection sites and Narcan to
88 reverse opioid overdoses are saving lives.

89 New treatments for addiction are showing some success,
90 and the stigma associated with what we now call substance-use
91 disorder is being reduced. New research on brain functions,
92 along with the experiences of families touched by the opioid
93 crisis, reinforced a consensus that addiction is an illness, not a
94 character flaw.

95 Then, a few steps down the road to a more humane drug
96 policy, along came Donald Trump.

97 * * *

98 TRUMP HAS PAID no attention to the new thinking on
99 drugs. His campaign rhetoric on the subject reflects 1980s-level
100 anti-drug hysteria: not just “lock ‘em up,” but the death penalty
101 for drug dealers.

102 But he and his administration have a mixed record when
103 it comes to drugs. Elon Musk brags about his use of ketamine and
104 other psychedelics, while his Department of Government
105 Efficiency (DOGE) cut \$11 billion from public health spending
106 on research, drug treatment, and drug use prevention.

107 Robert F. Kennedy Jr. talks frequently about his struggles
108 with heroin and alcohol addiction, but since becoming secretary
109 of the Department of Health and Human Services, he had
110 devoted his energy toward undermining childhood vaccination,
111 not helping adults dealing with substance abuse and mental
112 illness.

113 Meanwhile, Trump has pardoned nearly 100 felony drug
114 traffickers, including drug kingpins in Chicago and Baltimore.
115 This month he pardoned the former president of Honduras, who
116 had been convicted of taking bribes from the drug cartels that

117 terrorized his country and facilitating the smuggling of more than
118 400 tons of cocaine into the U.S.

119 Is that how you wage war on drugs?

120 * * *

121 "WAR ON DRUGS" is a misleading term to begin with.

122 Nations don't go to war against substances, and mental illness
123 isn't fought with guns and prisons.

124 "Narco-terrorists" — Trump's term for the enemy — is
125 even more misleading. Terrorism is the use of violence to achieve
126 a political goal. Narcotics is a global industry with billions of
127 customers. You can be a terrorist, or you can be a narcotics
128 supplier; you can't be both at the same time.

129 When it comes to the "drugs" part of Trump's War on
130 Drugs, the president's rhetoric and actions are contradictory, even
131 incoherent. But what he really likes is the "war" part.

132 So now he orders the military to blow up small boats in
133 the Caribbean and the Pacific, no matter that the boats are too
134 small to make it to the U.S. mainland. He threatens to bring his
135 war to Venezuela, no matter that Venezuela mostly sends cocaine
136 to Europe, not fentanyl to the U.S.

137 It's hard to know what's really behind Trump's war on
138 drugs. He may be more interested in regime change and grabbing
139 a piece of Venezuela's massive oil reserves than in helping
140 American families struggling with substance abuse.

141 Either way, Trump's war on drugs, like Nixon's, is
142 doomed to failure.

143 "History repeats itself," Karl Marx wrote, "first as a
144 tragedy, second as a farce."

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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145 **RICK HOLMES** is a retired newspaper editor.

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