

Commentary...

Struggling to get clean from the war on drugs

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

Oregon has taken a bold step in weaning the state off its addiction to the “war on drugs.” Under a new bill recently approved by the legislature aiming to curb mass incarceration, first-time offenders caught with small amounts of heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and other illegal drugs will face misdemeanor rather than felony charges, meaning less jail time and expanded options for treatment.

Encouraging drug abusers to find help instead of filling up prisons is a smart play, given that 40-plus years of fighting the war on drugs has not produced even a glimmer of victory.

Given the horrible blight that drug abuse brings to so many lives, it is understandable that for some it may seem like Oregon is retreating or surrendering. But reducing drug penalties and moving toward a medical model is not surrender, it’s a shift in tactics that will hopefully prove more effective, far less expensive than incarceration — and more just.

Asked about the bill on Oregon Public Broadcasting’s “Think Out Loud,” Deschutes County District Attorney John Hummel offered his take:

“I don’t think coercion is going to get someone into treatment. I think somebody having ready access to quality treatment when they’re at the point in their life when they themselves are ready for it, that’s ... our best hope.

“We need to do better. What we’re doing now isn’t working. I support using a medical model instead of a criminal justice model — you know, for low-level possession cases. I will tell you this: For people that are dealing, for commercial drug dealers, I don’t think we’re tough enough. We need to ratchet up the penalties for commercial drug dealers, but I fully support using a medical model instead of a criminal-justice model for people who are suffering from an addiction and are merely possessing.”

Hummel has it right.

But it’s not easy getting clean after a decades-long addiction. Drugs and the war on drugs have been in the American bloodstream for a long, long time. The story has taken some weird and dark twists and turns. FX Network is currently airing a raw and compelling drama titled “Snowfall,” depicting the rise of crack cocaine in

Los Angeles in the 1980s.

The sudden explosion of a cheap drug producing a brief, intense high tore like a plague through South-Central Los Angeles and through cities across America. Murder rates skyrocketed and neighborhoods that had had their problems — but were still neighborhoods — turned into blighted war zones full of extreme violence and desperation.

And there was a weird nexus with another American addiction — addiction to foreign intervention.

The Reagan Administration was supporting Contra rebels, fighting against the leftist Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. When Congress passed the Boland Amendment in 1982-84, restricting U.S. support for the Contras, they turned to other means to fund the anti-Sandinista effort. One led to the Iran-Contra scandal, where the Reagan Administration secretly sold arms to Iran and funneled the proceeds to the Contras; another more shadowy aspect involved the cocaine trade. The Contras were smuggling massive quantities of cocaine

into the U.S. with the apparent connivance of spooks, who were willing to accept the flow of white powder as a necessary means of funding the Contra movement in the wake of Congressional restrictions.

It oversimplifies and oversells the case to say that the CIA was directly involved or responsible for the crack epidemic, but there’s ample evidence that at least one blind eye was turned. (It must be noted, too, that the Sandinistas and their Cuban backers also had their own drug connections. The snow fell everywhere.)

So we had DEA cops making cases that the CIA allegedly shut down on the grounds of national security. We had street cops dealing with an explosive epidemic of crack cocaine-related violence that was fostered at least in part by our own national security apparatus. It’s abundantly clear that guilty knowledge of this went all the way up to the White House, where George H.W. Bush (ex-CIA) was running the Contra show.

It’s not like people didn’t know about this. Journalist

Gary Webb exposed it — and lost his career and eventually his life over it. Senator John Kerry held hearings on it where spooks admitted under oath that they’d personally loaded cocaine on planes headed to the United States. Guns flew south; dope flew north. And it all just got brushed aside. Nobody, ultimately, really cared. Maybe because just about everybody was, one way or another, standing waist deep in the big muddy.

El mundo narco is seeded with landmines for anyone who ventures there in search of knowledge and understanding. You can’t fall into the trap of romanticizing the trade — it’s ended or blighted literally millions of lives and corrupted states from Mexico to Afghanistan. Despite explicit efforts by Mexican narcos to tie themselves to the legacies of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, they are no social bandits or revolutionaries fighting on behalf of the pueblo. They’re gangster terrorists. It’s no small point that ISIS ripped off their horror-show torture porn playbook from Los Zetas.

And it’s probably a bad

idea to get so jaded that you just shrug at the intertwining of el mundo narco and the black-book work of the national security state. But then what do you expect to happen when you look to fight secret wars against dirty enemies with secret and dirty money?

It’s an option to just ignore it, to look away, whistle past the vast graveyard that lies just over there. But it’s our tax dollars that fund the endless — and fruitless — war on drugs and the prison-industrial complex, and it’s our society’s craving for dope that creates the market. As much as we’d like to pretend otherwise, hard drugs are present right here in Sisters, and, as always, they are associated with crime and destruction.

And it’s us who turn the pages on the narco thrillers, crank up the narcocorridos, and watch the TV shows that dramatize it all. We’re all, one way or another, caught up in a powerful addiction, living la vida loca in el mundo narco.

The passage of HB 2355 is a step in the right direction, a step toward recovery.

NEW LOCATION IN FIR STREET PARK
June-September
Fridays
 EXTENDED HOURS
2 to 5:30 PM

Local Organic Veggies
 plus a
**Cornucopia of Artisans,
 Food Carts & More!**
 Live Music every week!

SISTERS Park & Recreation
 SNAP Benefits Accepted

SistersFarmersMarket.com

Hot July Savings!
\$300 DISCOUNT
 For the month of July when you start a comprehensive treatment program!
New Patients Only. Not valid with any other offer.

Call today for a FREE exam including X-ray and photos!

Smile by Mykaela
541-382-0410
 410 E. Cascade Ave., Sisters

THE BRACE PLACE
 Central Oregon Orthodontic Specialists

CentralOregonBracePlace.com

BESTVUE BLINDS
A division of Lakeview Millworks

Visit our Sisters showroom
 141 E. Cascade Ave., #202

A&I Manufacturing GRABER HunterDouglas

BestVueBlinds.com | 541-588-6201

Smokin' Good Time!

SISTERS MEAT AND SMOKEHOUSE

Treat your friends and family to the BEST STEAK THEY'VE EVER HAD!

Everything in our meat case is cut by third-generation, old-school experts — and we'll cut your meat to order!
 Experience the difference in our food, NW craft beer, and wine.

541-719-1186 | 110 S. Spruce St. | 9AM-7PM Every Day