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The Distortion of Drugs: War, Discrimination, and Profit

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Departmental Honors in Sociology

Bridgewater State University

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## Abstract

My generation was born into and grew up exposed to the “war on drugs”. We saw announcements on television, were talked to by parents and teachers, and saw individuals affected by substance abuse. Although the term "war on drugs" is not used as freely now, its effects, consequences and gains are still playing a role in our society and culture. I performed a content analysis of public service announcements and presidential rhetoric and I interviewed six people: there were hidden motives prevalent throughout the war on drugs, especially in the selection and presentation of information given to the public.

Drug information was presented using themes of a war model society, racial discrimination, and political expediency. The propaganda used in the war on drugs was used in a particular fashion, to criminalize African Americans. However, the distortion of information used not only perpetuated racial stereotypes but also contributed to the epidemics of prescription and opioid drug use occurring today. Though the war on drugs resembled a fight for social justice and purification, its harmful tactics caused disillusionment for the American public. This war has changed over time and is currently being reborn with a tone of open-mindedness towards drug addiction and treatment.

# Introduction and Literature Review

## Introduction

The war on drugs has evolved over a period of forty plus years. The phrase “war on drugs” is not as frequently used as it once was; in fact, most would say the “war on drugs” is no longer existent. The ramifications of this social war, however, have helped mold the United States into the country it is today: a country with ongoing racism in its streets and institutions and the highest incarceration rates in the world. A country that is currently dealing with high rates of drug addictions and overdoses. Nearly every citizen is affected by these epidemics within our society. One would think that with the high numbers of incarcerations and seizing of property due to drug-related charges, the threat of drugs would be lessened but it is not.

Every war has a loser and a winner. The war is over but the problem is not solved. In retrospect, the motives and tactics used in the waging of this war may have left the country with more social problems than when it began. Drug arrests now account for a quarter of the people locked up in America, but drug use rates have remained steady (Stephanopolous 2016, 1330). Over the last thirty years, the government has spent trillions of dollars on the failed and ineffective war on drugs. Drug use has not declined, while millions of people—disproportionately people of color—have been caged and then branded with criminal records that pose barriers to employment, housing, and stability (Stephanopolous 2016, 1339).

The war on drugs is and was complex and there were two very different motives at work. One motive, the message shown to the public, was to save our society from drugs. However, groups within the population, primarily African American males, have been the targets of this war from the start. This insinuates a second, much more insidious motive which is the country’s

high incarceration rates coupled with its high rates of drug use and overdoses proves that the first motive was never true to the political forces that declared this war (Lissovoy 2016). Perhaps this has become evident to the public over time: the legalization of recreational marijuana in many states and recent polls done nationwide suggest that public opinion of drugs and drug policy is changing. This evolving political stance on drugs poses questions of how this social problem has been represented by government compared to how it is actually experienced by the people.

Being raised in the nineties, I witnessed the last wave of support for the war on drugs. When I was a child anti-drug propaganda was constantly on television. Teachers and counselors at school put together bi-annual events, including guest speakers, to warn us not to do drugs and what could happen if we did. Though I do not remember actual facts being presented, I do remember being scared at the thought of drugs while growing up. Peer pressure was the main focus of all of the lectures and discussion. The goal was to teach us to say no to those who would offer us drugs because drugs are obviously bad but the people doing them are even worse. This lesson is not helpful and dilutes the overall problem. It also did not prevent many of those I grew up with from eventually using drugs.

The abundance of anti-drug messages my generation received were intimidating but overall ineffective. The way in which drugs, addicts, and dealers were represented were drastically unrealistic and prejudice. All of this misinformation is strongly related to high incarceration rates, unequally distributed among races, as well as the growing epidemics of drug use seen today.

## Literature Review

The war on drugs affects many lives, families and communities and has included many different tactics. The war model, discrimination and political expediency have fueled a broad moral panic about drugs. This distortion of information and images related to drugs and drug users serves as the reasoning behind waging a constant offensive.

### A BRIEF HISTORY

The United States has been fighting drug abuse for almost a century. Four Presidents have vocally waged war on drugs. Unfortunately, it is a war that we are losing. Drug abusers continue to fill our courts, hospitals, and prisons in part it has focused its efforts on the criminalization of drug use. The government has, to no avail, spent countless billions of dollars in efforts to eradicate the supply and demand of drugs and to imprison drug users (Morris 2016). In theory, anti-drug images and videos were meant to target the demand side of drugs.

Propaganda has been used as a preventative measure for decades. One of the first departments to use this method the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN). They created myths and horror stories about drugs. Anti-marijuana posters printed in the 1940s and 1950s blamed it for bizarre cases of insanity, murder, and sex crimes. This early, print anti-drug propaganda of the 1940s and 1950s was often so far-fetched that people simply did not believe the government's warnings about drugs (Enns, 2014). Perhaps, this played a role in the popularization of drug use in the 1960s.

The 1960s gave birth to a rebellious movement that increased the demand for drugs. The counterculture made marijuana fashionable on college campuses. Other "hippies" sought to expand their minds with the use of hallucinogens like LSD. Many soldiers returned from the Vietnam War with marijuana and heroin habits. In short, the demand for drugs in America

skyrocketed (Enns 2014).

The Johnson Administration, in reaction to a sharp rise in drug abuse, passed the Narcotics Addict Rehabilitation Act of 1966. The act specified that “narcotic addiction” was a mental illness. The law recognized that the disease concept of alcoholism also applied to drug addiction. Drug use, however, was still considered a crime. The act did not have a major impact because the small amount of funding that was appropriated for treatment could not meet the increasing demand for drugs in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Enns 2014).

Nixon’s administration fought drug abuse on both the supply and demand fronts and his drug policies reflected both the temperance view and disease view of addiction (Enns 2014). This viewpoint sees the drug itself as the enemy. It is viewed as an addictive substance that causes illness. Reagan’s initiatives focused on “getting tough” on drugs. This rhetoric became known as the “zero tolerance” program, where punitive measures against users were emphasized. A 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse speech held drug users fully accountable. Drug users were to be prosecuted for possession and accordingly penalized. Although some grants were given for drug treatment, the rehabilitative efforts were insufficient to meet the overwhelming amount of drug abuse. Reagan’s demand side drug policy largely reflected the moralist view of addiction (Enns 2014). This stance considers the drug user to be morally defective. This is the same viewpoint Clinton seemed to express in both his words and the signing of the “Crime Bill” in 1994.

The modern view on drugs that is reflected by Obama in 2016 follows the disease concept. The view currently is that addiction is a treatable disease. Neither the drug user, nor the drug supplier is responsible for drug addiction. The disease concept calls for a drug policy that focuses on drug treatment and rehabilitation (Enns 2014). The war and the government’s approach to drugs as a social problem has been changing over time.

## THE WAR MODEL

The word “war” has created unity amongst populations throughout history. War, although aggressive and destructive, brings communities together to fight a common enemy. According to Jeremy Elkins (2010) the time after World War II was when the language of war was invoked as a national commitment to solving domestic problems in many countries. In the paradigm of war, individuals bond together in a relationship of “double negativity”. First, in sharp distinction from others and second, in opposition to them. Elkins (2010) explains that when this model is carried over to domestic problems, the group within the state identified as evil will be conceived as one of distinction and opposition. The war is then between the current state and the imagined, proper (or true) state. Elkins (2010) recalls his reading of Rousseau stating that, in the case of individuals, there is a primitive tendency to want to “introject” everything that is good and eject everything that is bad and to ascribe to the external world things that clearly organize the masses by “moral existence”( Elkins 2016, 223).

The “war on drugs”, like the “war on poverty”, like the “war on cancer” contains an internal tension with language representing the problem as though it were constitutionally, essentially, external to the real nation like “an army that had invaded the national body rather than a condition that was the product of it” (Elkins 2010, 230). This boundary-drawing function presents immediate problems because it creates a contemporary civil war. Any moderately developed ego must take into account the reality of how things actually are, therefore, the ability to “introject” and eject whole groups of society is a “primitive fantasy indeed” (Elkins 2010, 216). However, in times of war, plausibility is rarely an issue. The distinction between combatants is already well settled through existing judgments and stereotypes. A declaration of war merely asserts that there is a state of armed conflict between them. Elkins (2010) explains



that the desire to accept the representation of the state as the good victim of an alien evil is powerful and the evidence for plausibility is exaggerated. “The success in depicting these existential oppositions is supported as well by an important ambiguity in the very meaning of declaring war” (Elkins 2010, 227) meaning that the rules of war, those seen as the enemy, those seen as the victim, tactics and motives may transform and change throughout the offensive. In relation to crime and drugs the enemies are the addicts and dealers living among us who stand opposed to the good nation. When the enemy is perceived in this way, the application of the war model ceases to be wholly metaphorical. As this occurs, the processes of introjections and ejection come to consist not merely in fantasy but also in policies and other decisions that distinguish insiders from outsiders, “true members from those depicted as enemies”, in very real ways (Elkins 2010, 217).

The war on crime becomes a war on (some) criminals and the war on drugs becomes a war on drug sellers and (some) drug users, however, the distinctions are rooted in the unifying ideology attempting to “introject” and eject. Stereotypes are used to identify which individuals are enemies in the war, whether they actually are or not. The statistical and qualitative research done by Lisa Moore (2008) supports this assertion that particular groups are prosecuted by the war on drugs. Moore (2008) argues that drug use in suburban areas goes unchecked and underreported, while those living in urban areas are profiled as potential drug users and dealers. This remains true today. Nonmedical prescription drug use is an increasing problem in Midwestern, rural adolescents (Park, 2016). Injection opioid use is also escalating in rural areas (Love, 2016). These recent trends are a product, in part, of strictly associating urban areas, mostly communities of color, with drug use. This effectively ignored the possibility of drug abuse developing in rural areas.

The impact of the criminal justice system criminalizing addicts is evident in urban areas which often suffer from a lack of state and federal assistance in education, health and employment. These are services that might prevent drug use, however they are underfunded while the budget for the war on drugs increases. After the initial federal budget of twelve billion dollars, “State and local governments are spending another thirty billion on the offensive against drugs, there are more than two million men and women serving sentences in United States prisons, nearly three quarters for nonviolent offenses” (Moore 2008, 784). Whether or not an individual is harmful, violent, or deserving of prison time is not what matters in these conditions. The amount of arrests is deemed as more important. A high number of arrests in a society is an indication that the war model is alive, well, and very real. High incarceration rates also indicate civil decline, meaning lower quality of living for citizens and misguided priorities for government.

Elkins, (2010) discussion of the war on drugs as prompting a need to declare the “enemies living among us” correlate directly to the “carceral state” discussed in the research of Marie Gottschalk (2016). The carceral state refers to those confined to a prison cell as well as those in poor, urban communities and minority groups (Gottschalk 2016). Gottschalk argues that the carceral state has begun to distort essential demographic, political and socioeconomic databases, leading to misunderstandings about trends in vital areas such as growth, voting turnout, unemployment, poverty and public health. As “it creates a large and permanent group of political, economic and social outcasts, the carceral state has been bluntly and subtly remaking conceptions of citizenship” (Gottschalk 2016, 31). The war model effectively groups those that do not seem to represent the good in society into the “carceral state” while the rest remain unified by the thought of this “outside” threat. Drug sellers and users in the United States have

been depicted using poverty and race. This is how the war model works. It makes new groups based on pre-existing, societal notions of good versus bad (Elkins 2010). In our society, race and class were used as the defining attribute. For the sake of this war, those that were from communities of color were the bad, “them” group. Whereas, whites were presented as the good, “us” group.

## DISCRIMINATION

The progressive incarceration of nonviolent members of society is a product of the institutionalization of an “us versus them” mentality. In the war on drugs, where drug users are seen as the enemy, discrimination is used to identify these individuals. Since stereotypes already in place within a society define who is “us” and “them”, racial discrimination is a common theme. According to Lissovoy’s (2016) research, the racial logic of today can be understood in terms of incarceration statistics.

The war on drugs has produced profoundly unequal outcomes across racial groups, manifested through racial discrimination by law enforcement and disproportionate drug war misery suffered by communities of color. Although rates of drug use and selling are comparable across racial lines, people of color are far more likely to be stopped, searched, arrested, prosecuted, convicted and incarcerated for drug law violations than are whites.

Lissovoy (2016) claims that since the 1970s, the United States has lead the world in absolute and relative numbers of those incarcerated. It also imposes sentences whose length and severity outstrip those of its closest competitors (Lissovoy 2016). This carceral state is deeply racialized. Communities of color are disproportionately the target of police surveillance and brutality. People of color are imprisoned at higher rates in comparison with whites and are given significantly longer terms for many different categories of offenses (Lissovoy 2016). Lissovoy

concludes that this builds on ideologies of racism and preserves the insidious legacy of a systematically racist juridical system. Unfair punishment can be used to legitimize paranoia that serves as the fuel for further discrimination. By depicting certain groups as more criminal, more violent, more in need of punishment than others, the “good” state is perpetuating negative images and assumptions about those individuals.

The criminalization of illicit drugs has, since its inception in the United States, been intertwined with a demonization of racialized groups. The problem is an institutionalized bias of racial division. Instead of broadening American understanding of discrimination in line with a core commitment to racial equality, “the Court has narrowed its approach in the past two decades” (Provine 2007, 264). Provine’s research of court cases, trials and sentencing depict the same discrimination as the research findings of Lisa Moore (2008). Moore reported that the rate of black men admitted to prison on drug charges is thirteen times that for white men, and in ten states, the rates are twenty-six to fifty-seven times those for white men. “Persons of color compose 60% of the incarcerated population” (Moore 2008, 783). Though black men are not more likely to do drugs than white men, they are more likely to be arrested and prosecuted.

These numbers represent the dysfunctional priorities and prejudices of society. Schmoke’s (2007, 95) research emphasizes “the number of less-educated and low-income Black men, a primary cause of the problem is the inequitable operation of the criminal justice system in general, and the rank discrimination evident in the enforcement strategies in the war on drugs”. The rationale used in the war on drugs propagates stereotyping and radical viewpoints: an offensive waged in the name of having a protected and “moral” society.

This is not a recent phenomenon. It is argued that this is a planned and organized system. The discrimination against people of color within the war on drugs is another form of the same discrimination that has been present in this country since its founding. The racist agenda of the war on drugs is a development of racism following slavery, segregation and Jim Crow Laws (López 2010). The mass incarceration of particular racial groups is the same rhetoric transformed into a new version of oppression legitimized by law (López 2010). In this war, specific groups are affected and damaged far worse than others. In a study done by Roberts (2004) both policy and individual testimony was analyzed in order to deduce the consequences on communities of color directly targeted by the war on drugs. This information reflects the affects modern drug policy had on individuals when it was first passed and offers insight to how racially bias the judicial system was in regards to these policies.

Large waves of incarcerations have occurred at particular times in the nation's history, directly correlating with the passing of new anti-drug policies (Roberts 2004). Roberts compiled laws passed regarding drugs, such as “mandatory minimums”, and individual communities with spiking incarcerations related to drugs following the passing of such laws. From these communities, Roberts sampled individuals to speak to about the effects of incarcerating people on drug charges. The information gathered concluded that sentences were far longer than one would suspect for such behaviors (Roberts 2004).

Crack cocaine sentencing presents a particularly egregious case. Since the 1980s, federal penalties for crack were 100 times harsher than those for powder cocaine, with African Americans disproportionately sentenced to much lengthier terms. The life-long penalties and exclusions that follow a drug conviction have created a permanent second-class status for millions of Americans, who may be prohibited from voting, being licensed, accessing public assistance and

any number of other activities and opportunities. The drug war's racist enforcement means that all of these exclusions fall more heavily on people and communities of color. (Roberts, 2004).

This leaves families and communities of color struggling without a chance for financial stability. Many families in these communities, mostly urban cities, are living below the poverty line and are single-parent homes (Roberts 2004). The conclusion of this study relates to Schmoke's (2007) thesis that racial discrimination is a motivator for the government and elite to wage a war on drugs as well as a tool to keep the war escalating. The negative consequences these targeted communities are left with is how the dominant group stays in power, by constantly withholding access and opportunity to the subordinate groups (Marger 1984). This concept is irrevocably involved in the everyday practices and experiences of societies, including our own. The criminalization, first through images and then through physical incarceration, perpetuates a theme evident in stratified societies. Though it seems like a classic idea, this is at the heart of how our society operates to this day.

Mass incarceration is an important indicator of civil decline. The number of people imprisoned in this country is a sign that the racist conditions at work are fatal, not just to those victimized but to the whole populous (Thompson 2010). Thompson's (2010) research argues that the state of imprisonment existing today is a sign of social, political and economic decay. The thesis Thompson (2010) presents is that incarcerating mass numbers of people should never be a government's goal. Rather its goals should be upholding civil liberties and defending those in need of rehabilitation. "The speed at which the state imprisons citizens, therefore, is needless, reckless and done with insidious motives" (Thompson 2010, 732).

## POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY

High incarceration rates result in a profit equal to what a country sees in times of actual war. Militarization of local police departments has escalated in the past twenty years due to the monetary gain made off of black men going to prison. The prison system, for instance, functions on a system that equates each human body convicted as dollars (Morris, 2016). Police in local and state departments are encouraged to incarcerate individuals, their success based on numbers of arrests rather than on the severity of the crimes committed (Morris, 2016). “The spectacular nature of political and military intervention should not obscure the daily war confronted by those ‘at home,’ whose continuing repression supplies the symbolic and material resources for the aggrandizement of capital and whiteness” (Lissovoy 2016, 52). In this sense, the war on drugs benefits the political and military landscape of the United States the same way an international war would. There is the same motive for support, unity, profit and production of militarized equipment and ideologies.

Andrew Whitford’s (2010) analysis of presidential rhetoric and campaigns in the United States concludes that the concepts and endorsement of the war on drugs has been promoted as a call for social unity and purification. Much like Elkins (2010), the language regarding the war on drugs has been propagating in order to create a dominant, good group within society versus an opposing, criminal group. Whitford (2010) explains that presidential rhetoric is a means to offer and secure a national agenda, supported not by public opinion of the president but public opinion of the issue itself. The president and administration rallies support for their personal concerns or biases by presenting them as real social problems. Political leaders, therefore, effectively act on issues that personally affect or profit themselves, “their position of power is used to select

bureaucrats from the same ideological background and push strict incentive schemes” (Whitford 2010, 1000).

Fels (1998) research discusses the economic advantages federal and local government receives from the war on drugs alone. This analysis of monetary gain from search and seizures, incarceration and fines focuses on the profit gained directly following the passing of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (Fels 1998). The “Crime Bill” of Clinton's Administration created incentives for states to build prisons and increase sentences, thereby contributing to increased incarceration. The new policies put forth by the “Crime Bill” evolved around drug offenses and included the three-strike rule, meaning that once an individual is charged three times, a life sentence is mandatory (Fels 1998). This increases incentive for arrests, which already make a profit regardless of sentencing. The “Crime Bill” also included the “truth-in sentencing policies”. These “stances on sentencing aim to abolish parole so that convicts serve the entire period to which they have been sentenced” (Fels 1998, 237). The profit motive behind these policies is evident and can offer the only reasoning for locking up one’s own citizens who have only committed nonviolent offenses. Considering the United States holds the highest incarceration rates in the world, this pattern seems to still exist today.

These incentives end up playing a role in the development of modern social problems. Fortunato and Martin (2016) analyzed presidential campaigns in relation to cultural hot topics at the time of elections. The resulting concepts of the research argue that the public identifies issues as important problems only after awareness has been pushed by political agenda (Fortunato & Martin 2016). Social and political topics in news, media and private networking groups reflect the topics covered in debates and by campaign ads during elections “immediately following the



broadcast” (Fortunato & Martin 2016, 131). The relationship between campaign promises, the media and policy is both powerful and dangerous.

The power relations that identify topics as issues of importance for the public allow groups within society to be made. As Elkins (2010) discusses, a group of true members will assimilate with the ideologies represented by the dominant group in power. Therefore, a group of enemies is made apparent by these political agendas (Elkins 2010). In the case of the war on drugs, these “enemies” are mostly those suffering from substance abuse disorder (Husak 2000). Husak’s (2000) research represents the war on drugs as a violation of the constitution. In this sense, “drug prohibition is contradictory to the ideologies” that helped develop the United States as an independent nation of free individuals (Husak 2000, 56). A country grounded in “ideals of democracy is being hypocritical by locking away those who live a lifestyle deemed unfit” by politicians (Husak 2000, 57).

Policy makers and incentives work to align the public agenda with personal bias and opinions, according to Schmoke (2007, 101), a “brew of power relations that perpetuates institutionalized inequality”. The rationale and reform of the war on drugs affects all systems of society and aspects of an individual’s life, especially when the individual is a person of color or from an urban community. Private individuals and policymakers often utilize prohibition as a means of controlling the sale, manufacture, and consumption of particular goods. While the Eighteenth Amendment, which was passed and subsequently repealed in the early 20th century, is often regarded as the first major prohibition in the United States, it certainly was not the last. The War on Drugs, begun under President Richard Nixon, continues to utilize policies of prohibition to achieve a variety of objectives.

Proponents of drug prohibition claim that such policies reduce drug-related crime, decrease drug-related disease and overdose, and are an effective means of disrupting and dismantling organized criminal enterprises (Whitford, 2010). Writing in 1925, journalist, social critic, and satirist H. L. Mencken wrote of the complete and utter failure of the U.S. government's "noble experiment" with alcohol prohibition. He said: "Prohibition has not only failed in its promises but actually created additional serious and disturbing social problems throughout society. There is not less drunkenness in the Republic but more. There is not less crime, but more... The cost of government is not smaller, but vastly greater. Respect for the law has not increased, but diminished" (Mencken, 1925 as cited by Whitford, 2010, 997).

Under prohibition quality and flow of information would predict an increase in drug-related deaths. This is precisely what we observe. In 1971, two years before the creation of the DEA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that slightly more than 1 death per 100,000 people in the United States was related to drug overdose. This figure rose to 3.4 deaths per 100,000 people by 1990 and by 2008, there were 12 overdose deaths per 100,000 people. The latest estimate, published in 2015, was that ninety-one Americans die a day from an overdose. The numbers of overdoses are large in modern day society. So, other than the monetary profit gained by those in political power, the war on drugs has served no purpose and is no closer to reaching its goals of a drug-free America.

## Methods

The war on drugs was a fascinating crusade against a perceived social problem; within this war motives, tactics, and reactions changed drastically over a period of decades. To look at how this war was started, maintained, used as well as whether it was effective, I decided to look at propaganda, political discussion of the war, and federal efforts to confront the problem. I also interviewed individuals who have personal experience dealing with drug abuse and the impact the war on drugs has had.

### PROPAGANDA

I analyzed two forms of propaganda in my research: public service announcements and political rhetoric. First, I conducted content analysis on public service announcements. This involved watching pieces of propaganda aired to the public during the war on drugs and coding the images and language used for common themes. I looked at seven public service announcements from each decade, starting with the 1970s. By conducting content analysis on these anti-drug announcements I was able to study how this declared social issue was depicted and what tools were used to legitimize the problem to the public. I used the funding of these announcements as criteria, studying only the ones funded by federal government dollars. While watching the public service announcements I asked who the audience was intended to be, whom and what the message was warning against, how individuals and groups were represented, the language used, and whether the message was relayed clearly.

I began with *Curious Alice*, a twelve minute animated film funded by the Department of Public Health in 1971. This was the first recorded public service announcement funded by the federal government that I could locate. I then looked at two public service announcements from the 1980s sponsored by Partnership for a Drug-Free America, part of the National Young Anti-

Drug Media Campaign. The first, “Snake-man” was aired in 1986 as a commercial and the second, “This is your brain on drugs”, appeared in 1987.

Beginning in the early 1990s the Department of Public Health began paying television programs to work anti-drug messages into the shows. One of the first stations to do this was NBC in the show “Saved by the Bell”. “No Hope with Dope” is a public service announcement from 1994 that stars the characters from the show, as well as the chairman of NBC entertainment. In the same year Partnership for a Drug-Free America aired a public service announcement called “Long Way Home” with the opposite appeal and imagery of “No Hope with Dope”.

A new wave of federally funded, anti-drug public service announcements began following the attacks of 9/11. To study this change I looked at “I Helped”, an announcement that aired during the 2002 Super Bowl by the Office of National Drug Control Policy. In 2007, the National Drug Control Policy aired another announcement, “Talking Dog”, as a part of the “Above the Influence” campaign.

I also conducted content analysis of political rhetoric pertaining to the war on drugs. I selected one speech from each decade, focusing particularly on presidents who changed drug policy while in office. While watching these speeches I directed my attention towards the message, the audience, language used, groups discussed, reasoning used and body language as well. I began with President Nixon’s press conference where he declared drug abuse as “public enemy number one”, which began the “war on drugs” on June 17, 1971. President and Nancy Reagan’s Anti-Drug Speech to America aired on September 14, 1986 after Nancy campaigned her “just say no” slogan in America’s schools.

Following Reagan’s offensive on drugs, the next president to publically wage a war on

drugs was Bill Clinton. After passing the Crime Bill of 1994, Clinton campaigned across the nation to talk about the new legislation and gain support for his tactics. I studied two clips from speeches he gave, at high schools and middle schools across the United States. Since the passing of the Crime Bill, the war on drugs has escalated to include mass incarceration and larger numbers of addiction and overdoses each year. In March of 2016 at the National Prescription Drug Abuse and Heroin Summit in Atlanta, President Obama gave a speech about the problem of drug abuse and changes that must be made to legislation and the country's perception of the issue. These presidential discussions of the war on drugs show how the war and its goals have shifted over time and allow us to consider how societal problems are shaped.

## INTERVIEWS

Lastly, I conducted a number of qualitative interviews to get a more personal sense of people's interpretation of anti-drug messaging as well as to see how people remember the war on drugs in their own lives. I used convenience sampling and snowball sampling to gather my interviewees. This means that four of my interviewees were people I happened to know and did not mind speaking with me about drugs and their interactions with the war on drugs in particular. The other two were referred to me by one of the first individuals. I assembled a list of ten open-ended questions to ask in order to understand how others see the war on drugs represented as well as how they are affected by it in everyday life. I asked questions like: When was the first time you heard the phrase war on drugs? How has this war affected you? Who is the enemy in the war on drugs? Unlike my content analysis research, these interviews allowed me to observe the practical implications drug policies have had on individuals.

Many of my discussions focused on racism, incarceration and the distortion of information given to the public. I was able to code the interviews for themes of discrimination,

political expediency and the evolution of the war on drugs. For this research, discrimination refers to the human, social definition of the word: “the treatment or distinction in favor of or against, a person based on the group or category to which that person is perceived to belong rather than on individual attributes” (Giddens, 2009, 334). Political expediency refers to something one does to advance themselves politically, this may be practical in purpose, however, is not necessarily fair. In this research I am using political expediency to discuss the war on drugs as a strategy, though beneficial to those in political power in terms of monetary gain and positive public opinion, it was not necessarily a moral solution. These ideas were common themes amongst all of my interviews. Whether they agree with drug policies or disagree, whether their view has changed over time or is the same, all could agree that the government’s war on drugs has been an unsuccessful one.

## Data

### Political Rhetoric and Public Service Announcements

I conducted content analysis of political rhetoric and public service announcements. For the sake of organization, I discuss it by decade. I will talk about presidential discussion of the war on drugs as well as information presented to the public in the form of short videos. I will, first, include a transcription of the videos before discussing their themes and overall message.

### Nixon and the Declaration of War

The war on drugs began in 1971 with Nixon’s declaration that “America's public enemy number one in the United States is drug abuse. In order to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive” (Richard Nixon Foundation). He was speaking at a

press conference, summarizing a meeting that had just been held in the White House to plan new policies and programs to stop “the problem” of young Americans becoming addicts. He spoke to the American people and asked them to join in on this war, speaking about how drugs would surely destroy the American way of life. His business-like, solemn tone suggested sincerity, however, he repeated himself several times in this short speech and kept the information regarding the actual plans very vague. Most of the information he did share about the meeting was structural, speaking of who would be playing which roles in this new White House initiative.

One thing that was made incredibly clear was that money for this war was not going to be an issue. He says:

“If we are going to have a successful offensive, we need more money. Consequently, I am asking the Congress for \$155 million in new funds, which will bring the total amount this year in the budget for drug abuse, both in enforcement and treatment, to over \$350 million. As far as the new money is concerned, incidentally, I have made it clear to the leaders that if this is not enough, if more can be used, if Dr. Jaffe, after studying this problem, finds that we can use more, more will be provided. In order to defeat this enemy which is causing such great concern, and correctly so, to so many American families, money will be provided to the extent that it is necessary and to the extent that it will be useful” (Richard Nixon Foundation).

This view that money is expendable in the face of this domestic enemy is a strange place to start. However, this is an honest aspect of the speech considering how much money has been put into the war. In order to emphasize the message to the public and unite the American people as a force against drugs, the federal government put millions into anti-drug images and videos.

In the same year as Nixon’s “Enemy number one” speech the first anti-drug public service announcement funded by the federal government aired on television. Contrasting Nixon’s serious, aggressive tone, *Curious Alice* was a twelve minute, mostly animated, video that played as a short film and reached out to audiences of seven to nine year olds. In this film Alice is a real

girl who follows a white rabbit into an animated world, like the original story by Lewis Carroll. However, in this story all of the characters Alice encounters in Wonderland are abusing different types of substances. The King and Queen of Cards do heroin, the hare is addicted to Speed, the mouse uses barbiturates, and the mad hatter is using LSD.



(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1fc-h018Uo>)  
The first captured images depict Alice, the main character. In the background there are various pieces of paraphernalia, bottles of pills and alcohol bottles which is the background in several scenes. The second is a captured image of the mouse that uses barbiturates falling asleep at the tea table.

The film is very confusing and it was surprising to me that it was shown to small children because some of the images are serious and unnerving. For instance, when the King and Queen are shown giving heroin to the cards of their army, the images and language were very real and scary; showing needles and the psychological dependence the cards, as characters, had.



(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1fc-h018Uo>)  
This captured image is of the King holding a needle and calling his card army to inject them with heroin.



Alice even says, “Why don’t they run? When they obey the king you can’t tell one from the other” (US National Archives). In that sense, the film does depict substance abuse as a destructive path which would be the message they would want to send. However, there are other parts of the film that make drugs seem fashionable.

In the beginning of the film, for instance, Alice equates cigarettes, alcohol and pills to medicine from a doctor. This piece of the film may have been attempting to show how Americans feel about the substances they use: at first seeming medicinal, however, as the film progresses Alice reaches a dark place in Wonderland. The climax of the film is when Alice has met all of the characters and witnessed their substance use. They all start to peer pressure her to use them through singing a creepy song whose lyrics are basically a list of all the drugs they have shown so far in the film. Alice starts screaming “NO!” and eventually the story ends with her real life character waking up. Overall, the film seemed to relay a strong anti-drug message even though some of the parts may have been confusing, especially to younger audiences. The beginning parts where Alice is questioning the nature of a drug and the fact that the characters all do a different substance seems to normalize drug use for the viewer, implying that everyone does some sort of drug.

In my research I found that drugs were depicted as scary but tempting in the 1970s. The social aspect of drugs was clearly represented to Americans while also alluding to how dangerous they can be. The Nixon administration inserted drug abuse into the minds of Americans as something to rally either behind or against. In this time it was seen as a clear social problem to which there were only two, completely opposite stances to take. This is something I expected to find at the start of the war on drugs. However, the motives seemed genuine: to protect the lives and quality of life for Americans, especially children as *Curious Alice* would make it seem.

## Reagan and the 1980s

### 1986- "Snakeman"

*A black teenager wearing khaki pants, sneakers and jeans walks away from a crowd on a dark, city street, looks at the camera and says: "Hey little dude. Send your mommy and daddy out of the room, I gotta get you up on this. You know, who I am. A snake. Dealing in weed, coke, crack, your choice. Take 1 hit and you'll do anything to cop more. Steal from yo momma, lie, cheat on your homeboys." He walks into an alley separate from the street by pillars. You see him change from a teen to a man with a giant snake-like head wearing robes with a high collar before he comes back into full view.*

*"But hey, that's the price you pay when you deal with dudes like me. Now some folks will tell you that I'm dealing in poison, but hey, do I look like the kind of guy that would do that to a kid like you?"*

### 1987- "This is your brain on drugs"

*A middle-aged, white man wearing a button down is leaning against the cabinets of a clean, white kitchen. He has a serious look on his face and crossed arms, he looks at the camera and says: "Is there anyone out there that's still unclear about what doing drugs does? Okay. Last time..."*

*He walks to an island in the middle of the kitchen when an open egg carton next to a pan on the stove. He picks up 1 egg, looks back at the camera and says: "This is your brain." He points to the pan. "This is drugs." He cracks the egg in the pan and it starts to fry and sizzle. He takes the pan by the handle and moves into view of the camera before the camera moves to show his face again. "Any questions."*

*Partnership for a Drug-Free America fades onto the bottom of the screen.*

The next president to personally speak out on drug abuse and anti-drug policies was Ronald Reagan. Throughout his campaign and presidency, drugs were a primary topic for both him and his wife, Nancy Reagan. On September 14, 1986 the couple spoke from their personal living room of the White House to capture the hearts of parents across the country and unite them against the danger that is drugs. The language and tone of this speech contrasts Nixon's greatly. Where Nixon was aggressive and business-like, the Reagan's are heart-felt and parental. They are talking as "parents, grand-parents and fellow Americans" and making a plea for Americans to act as a moral front against drugs (US National Archives). The enemy in this era has changed from drug abuse to drugs. Seemingly a small change in language, however, this means that the focus is no longer those who mistreat and overuse drugs, instead the enemy is all drugs and drug dealers.

The Reagan's spoke about marijuana, heroin and cocaine as if they are all the same drugs and those that do them are all the same brand of criminal. However, when they introduced crack cocaine as a substance, the tone got even more serious. This drug is spoken about as a "new epidemic", the "most lethal" and most "destructive" and quickly becomes the drug focused on throughout the rest of the speech. The biggest target of this new drug, the Reagan's insisted, were "our children". They talked about Nancy visiting cities all across America to talk to youths about "just saying no" and spoke about the drug criminals in these areas. The language was very indicative to a perceived enemy worse than just drugs: drug dealers. Nancy says: "They work every day to plot a new and better way to steal our children's lives, just as they've done by developing this new drug, crack. For every door that we close, they open a new door to death. They prosper on our unwillingness to act. So, we must be smarter and stronger and tougher than they are." This creation of a new enemy, specifically those dealing crack in urban areas, is reflected in the public service announcements aired at this time. Crack was a drug mostly associated with inner cities and racial minorities. Choosing to focus on this drug particularly helped to create the misunderstanding that this drug, and those doing it, were worse than any other drug or people.

In 1986 a public service announcement aired as a commercial depicting the exact situation Nancy was speaking about. In this short video a black teenager is talking directly to children telling them about the drugs he sells: "weed, coke, crack" and how one hit will make you "steal", "lie, cheat" (Williams). After he makes his sales pitch he turns into a snake-headed creature before the viewer's eyes. The image is even complete with his street clothes turning into a long robe with a high collar like some sort of evil villain from a cartoon. This announcement clearly depicts the enemy as young, black males living in cities. These types of portrayals helped create the stereotype that drug dealers and users belong to a specific racial identity. Minority groups and inner cities therefore became the obvious targets in the war on drugs.



([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KCAGzNv\\_QI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KCAGzNv_QI))

These captured images of the “Snake-man” video show the before and after shots of this teen’s transformation into a snake-man.

This message was not only seen by children but adults as well, seeming to validate racist viewpoints that had already existed. These negative characters and representations acted as a call to continue, and even escalate, feelings of white superiority with a new legitimization that blacks are drug dealers, criminals and endangering white children. Of course, this is a falsehood considering people of all races certainly do partake in substance use and selling. By using these exaggerations to insinuate that all drug dealers are black, this propaganda not only instilled racist ideology through socialization but also misrepresented the actual dangers of drugs. Other anti-drug videos were made to deter kids from drugs, all either obviously racist or incredibly vague: not offering any factual information or helpful advice.

Another public service announcement was aired the following year, in 1987. This well-known commercial featured a middle-aged white man cracking an egg in a frying pan to simulate what drugs do to the human brain. The audience was children or young adults considering he looks at the camera and says “This is your brain. This is your brain on drugs”, an overly simplified representation (Kalamut). Although the image and message is clear and quite accurate for some drugs, the information is vague and it comes across as a lecture. The concern of this dad-like character is widely innocent compared to the persona in the previous video. Though they were only released one year apart, the two anti-drug segments could not be more opposite.

A totally different environment is depicted here. This man is well-dressed and speaking out from a white and blue kitchen of some suburban home. Nothing at all like the first which depicts a grimy, city street and a totally different personality as the spokesperson. This suggests that there are two separate populations being spoken to and about. The first public service announcement where a snake-man evolves from a black teen who is a drug dealer seems to be representing the population that is the problem. The second is depicting a warning, perhaps from a white father to his children, to stay away from this population and the drugs they are associated with.

The two populations existing within society that the Reagan's were discussing the drug dealers and the innocent, the bad and the good, were being represented visually as blacks and whites. These discriminatory concepts were embedded in the anti-drug politics and propaganda. Though the presidential administration was not openly naming the enemy in this war as African Americans, that is what the images is endorsed were showing the American public.

## Clinton and the 90s

1994- "No Hope with Dope"

*A teenage girl is sitting doing her make-up, she looks at the camera and says: "Dumb."*

*A teenage boy is coming down the stairs in a high school, looks at the camera and says: "Stupid."*

*A teenage girl is in a public bathroom fixing her hair in the mirror, she looks at the camera and says: "Crazy."*

*A teenage girl is doing homework at a desk, looks at the camera and says: "Dangerous."*

*A teenage boy crammed into a locker looks out at the camera and says: "Stinks." In the background an audience laughs. A blonde, white teen is casually sitting on a teacher's desk staring into the camera with a serious expression and says: "In one word, would I use dope? Nope."*

*He is joined by the rest of the teenagers previously shown and an older, white man in a suit and tie. He sits next to the young man and the desk, looks at the camera and says: "These kids are right. Drugs will hurt your mind, your body and your life. Hi, I'm Brandon Tartikoff, chairman of NBC entertainment and I've got a hit idea for the new fall season: Don't do drugs!" He points at the camera for a moment before the teens say in*

*unison: “There’s no hope with dope!” The chairman holds up his fist and the picture of them freezes before it fades out with upbeat music playing in the background.*

1994- “Long Way Home”

*A young, black boy is hopping fences in an urban neighborhood. It is set in black and white with slow, sad, ominous music playing in the background. The boy runs through yards and alleys while his voice begins to play in the background just above the music.*

*“Our teacher tells us all we gotta do is just say no and the other day a policeman came to our class about just saying no too. Well my teacher doesn’t have to walk home through this neighborhood and maybe the dealers are scared of police but they’re not scared of me.”*

*He turns the corner onto a main street and runs past a convertible with black teens sitting inside and standing all around the car. His voice says: “and they sure don’t take no for an answer.”*

*An older man’s voice comes on as the boy runs into another alley between two houses.*

*He says: “To Kevin Scott and all the other kids that take the long way home, we hear ya. Don’t give up.”*

*A picture of the boy running with his back toward the camera, down the alley is frozen on the screen and Partnership for a Drug-Free America fades into the bottom of the screen.*

In the 1990s the Clinton Administration passed a number of new anti-drug policies. Nearly all of them targeted those who were charged with possession or distribution and changed specific protocol in sentencing, making it so mandatory minimums and sentencing without parole was the new norm for drug criminals. Drug criminals at this time were mostly seen as citizens belonging to a minority, especially African American males. Following his signing of this bill, known as the “Crime Bill”, Clinton spoke at middle schools and high schools across the country about these new policies. What was interesting in watching these speeches was the tone in which Bill Clinton spoke to this specific audience. Even though his audience was young adults, Clinton droned on and on about the specifics of these laws using seriously confusing legal language to address middle schoolers. In one video, taken in 1995, Clinton says: “And now I will read straight from the legislation, making things clearer here” (Clintonlibrary42). This seems strange to look at when considering how serious many of these policies actually were and how much they changed and affected the war on drugs. Perhaps that is why he chose to speak to mostly adolescents about it. The motive behind speaking on these kinds of platforms about such a severe

matter is unclear. Perhaps it was in hopes of not being questioned too seriously or, maybe, it was to present these policies as the new way of conducting business against drug offenses.

This audience was also the audience targeted in the public service announcements in those years. In the early 1990s the Department of Public Health began paying television programs to work anti-drug messages into the shows. One of the first stations to do this was NBC in the show “Saved by the Bell”. “No Hope with Dope” is a public service announcement from 1994 that stars the characters from the show, as well as the chairman of NBC entertainment. Kids who watch “Saved by the Bell” would have seen this and though the message is clear it all seemed a bit unrealistic. The chairman of NBC is hanging out with these high schoolers as if they are best friends. Given the audience was of the same age as the characters, the image of this man being so friendly was probably off-putting. It was very fake to imply that the relationships between teens and the adults in their lives is so trusting and happy. The surreal and wholesome picture painted by the cast of “Saved by the Bell” was totally opposite of another public service aired in the same year, just as in the previous anti-drug campaign a decade earlier.

“Long Way Home” was released in 1994 as well, however, it depicted a different community and youth dealing with the temptations of drugs. In this video a young, black boy is running through alleys and backyards trying to avoid the gangs of black teens dealing drugs in his urban neighborhood.



(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHH1-JFaDOK>)

These captured images show the main character [the boy running through alleys to get home] as well as the car full of teenagers that is depicted in the video.

Like the “Snake-man” video of 1986, this video disseminates stereotypes that urban areas are overrun with dangerous, drug dealing black teenagers. However false this may actually be, the same images being shown to the public leads individuals to associate these drugs with these populations and perpetuates racial discrimination.

The most disturbing part of these two contrasting videos is the tone in which the youths are addressed. Both videos are supposed to be anti-drug and directed towards rejecting peer pressure. However, the one in which the “Saved by the Bell” characters starred in was a school environment where even though it may seem safe a situation may arise in which they may have to say no. This is a hopeful, optimistic way to present the problem, that though drugs are around you can avoid them if you choose. For the audience and population depicted by the second video, however, there is much less optimism. In fact, the speaker at the end of this video only has one message, he says: “To Kevin Scott and all the other kids that take the long way home, we hear ya. Don’t give up” (Wilson). This is disheartening because it offers no comfort, solution or hope.

These two anti-drug, television segments from the 1990s offer a clear assessment of how this problem was being interpreted by those in power. The same administration that signed legislation into action that locked drug offenders away for longer periods of time without parole endorsed videos such as these. By depicting communities of color as despondent in the face of drugs, they were reasserting racial discrimination as the prime tactic of this war.

## The War on Drugs and Terror

### 2002- “I Helped”

*Close-ups of a Hispanic boys face shows on the screen, he says: “I helped murder families in Colombia. A close-up of a white teen shows him smiling saying: “It was just innocent fun.” A young, black girl is shown in a close-up, she says: “I helped kidnap people’s dads.” A white teenage girl’s face is shown while she says: “Hey, some harmless fun.” The same teen shown in the second clip is shown again saying: “I helped kids learn how to kill.” The first boy is shown saying: “I was just having some fun ya know.” A Hispanic*



*teen is shown saying: "I helped kill policeman." A white teenage girl says: "I was just having fun." The first kid is shown saying: "I helped the bomber get a fake passport." The girl says: "All the other kids do it." Another white teenage girl is shown, she says: "I helped kill a judge." The young black girl is shown again saying: "I helped blow up buildings." A white, teenage girl says: "My life, my body." Before the screen goes black and bold, white words are shown in the middle of the screen that read: Drug Money Supports Terror. Then those words disappear replaced by news words saying: If You Buy Drugs You Might Too. Then a girl's voice plays in the background that says: "It's not like I was hurting anybody else." theantidrug.com is shown on a black screen.*

#### 2007- "Talking Dog"

*A white, teenage girl walks into an empty kitchen with her back to the camera. She tosses her backpack onto the counter and gets a bottle of soda from the fridge. A male voice says: "Hey Lindsey."*

*She looks around to see whose talking. Her dog jumps onto a kitchen chair and looks at her. With a confused look she slowly walks over to it. The dog's mouth forms into a human mouth, he says: "I wish you didn't smoke weed."*

*She looks scared, crosses her arms and stares at the dog. He says: "You're not the same when you smoke and I miss my friend... I'll be outside." He jumps down and runs away. She is left on camera looking regretful and sad while a message comes onto the screen that reads: How would you tell a friend? Then an above the influence logo appears in the corner (an arrow pointing upward inside a circle).*

Though the Bush administration did not change any anti-drug policies they did endorse anti-drug public service announcements. A new wave of federally funded, anti-drug public service announcements began following the attacks of 9/11. To study this change I looked at "I Helped", an announcement that aired during the 2002 Super Bowl by the Office of National Drug Control Policy. At first the message of this video was very unclear. Teenagers are shown on camera talking about horrible atrocities they have helped with. All of them, except one, are either Latin American or African American. One teenage girl says she helped kidnap people's dads while another teen after her says it was just harmless fun. Watching young teens say things like this is very concerning and confusing. The real message of the announcement arrives right before the screen goes black. Then bold, white words are shown in the middle of the screen that read: "Drug Money Supports Terror". Then those words disappear replaced by news words say-

ing: “If You Buy Drugs You Might Too”. Then a girl’s voice plays in the background that says: “It’s not like I was hurting anybody else” (Farmer).

This video is making the assertion that teens buying drugs, again not mentioning a specific drug, provides the money for terrorists to use to do the all of the things the teenagers were talking about doing themselves. Once the viewer realizes what this video is suggesting the whole thing seems more like propaganda than an actual announcement against the dangers of drug use. It is preposterous to think a young, teen girl could “help the bomber get a fake passport” and even more absurd to think these words aired shortly after the attacks. This video asserting that American teens buying drugs played a large role in that act of terror is not necessarily true, however, it does serve to endorse two wars at once: the war on drugs and the war on terror.

The association being made between war and terror in this segment could only have a political motive. The actual message being delivered is both ludicrous and perhaps could have been received as offensive in the time. However, it did seem to unite to moral causes through a horrible message being delivered by children. The fact that the teens speaking are also people of color seem to indicate another message as well. This message, again, being that communities of color buy drugs. To say that these are the populations giving money to terrorists through drug use is preposterous but resonates with the ideologies depicted in the war up until this point.

These racial stereotypes were common and again differ greatly from another anti-drug commercial aired in 2007. Much like the commercial from 1987, a suburban kitchen is the setting. This time a white, teenage girl enters the scene grabbing a soda from the fridge. Her dog then talks to her from a seat at the kitchen table. He pleads with her to stop smoking because it impedes on the time she would be using to play with him. He insists it changes her and is bad to

do. Though the message is clear and somewhat reasonable, the images used make the video more comical than influential. It insinuates that the effects of smoking marijuana include your dog being able to talk to you which seems to be a weird choice for representation. It also is a generic warning that smoking is morally bad but completely avoidable for this population: white, suburban teens specifically.

Though the teen shown in this commercial obviously had to have gotten what she smoked from somewhere, the video itself makes no reference to her supporting crime or terrorism by buying marijuana. This theme of innocence when talking about whites and drugs was also common throughout the war. Though everyone depicted in these videos is partaking in the same action, one group is being shown as aspirant while the other is illustrated as irrevocably criminal.

The ideology represented in these anti-drug segments is seemingly unchanging, as was the political discussion and rhetoric. Though anti-drug policy was not a primary topic of his campaign or administration, Obama quickly became involved in publically addressing the issue of drug overdoses. The shift in language and public perspective towards drugs has made it impossible to ignore as a modern concern. Nowadays, drugs are not so much talked about as an enemy. Now the ramifications of the war on drugs: high incarceration rates and raised pharmaceutical and narcotic abuse rates, are real social problems of today.

In March of 2016 at the National Prescription Drug Abuse and Heroin Summit in Atlanta, President Obama spoke about the problem of drug abuse and changes that must be made to legislation and the country's perception of the issue. In his discussion he took responsibility, as a member of government, for the mishandling of the problem of addiction. He also made it clear that substance abuse affects all populations within the communities of this country. Everyone

knows someone struggling to overcome addictions in this day in age. The president speaking about drugs in this sympathetic and realistic way is an obvious statement that drugs may not be seen as they once were, as an issue caused by one group that targets the children of another group. I think the goal of Obama's language was to honestly admit to the wrongdoings of the government and its depicting of the issue as problem to be associated with race.

This change in language also seems to be in reaction to what the public would want to hear from their president. Instead of the president telling the public what the problem issue is, as in the previous speeches I have discussed, here the president seems to realize that the audience has evolved passed that naïve mindset, especially now that drug abuse is such a large-scale problem. The rhetoric can no longer be full of bias and discrimination because the public is feeling and experiencing the truth of the matter, that there was and is no real war on drugs. There has been no tangible progress for the well-being of individuals and communities. This can only be because the motives were ill-intended and ill-pursued from the beginning of the "war".

The offensive against drugs has changed over time due to personal bias and federal policy. Misrepresentations and political and economic expediency have been the only ongoing factor throughout this crusade on drugs.

## Interviews

The war on drugs, retrospectively, has been serving as an active model for society for three decades. Nearly every individual has been affected by it. Many people have experienced being charged with drug related offenses. Others work for institutions playing a major role in the modern war on drugs. These are individuals working in law enforcement, social programs,

medical agencies, first respondent teams and other similar professions. For this research a variety of interviewees was necessary to get a sense of people's personal experiences with the war on drugs, its policies, and representations. I was sure to include interviewees of all ages, the youngest twenty-two and the oldest seventy-one. I spoke to both men and women. One of my interviewees was African-American and the other five were Caucasian. For the sake of personal privacy I will be using pseudonyms in the discussion of my respondents.

In spite of differences, all six interviewees discussed themes of discrimination, political expediency and the evolution of the war in their answers and our discussion. There were a variety of perspectives on the war's motives and tactics.

## Respondents Reflect on Discrimination

Four of my interviewees work in professions that offer social or medical services to drug users. One, a white, middle-aged social worker from Massachusetts, went into the field after experiencing drug-related charges. Her arrest shaped her as a human being and molded her decision to help those impacted by drug use. While working with families in an urban city she saw the discrimination of blacks over whites and refers to the war on drugs as "the genocide of the African American male" (Beth). She also reflects on the stories told to her by her ex-husband, an immigrant from Africa.

Beth said that her ex-husband owned a green Malibu at one point with legal, but dark, window tint. He would tell her when he came home, almost three times a week that he was pulled over, searched and talked down to by police. Massachusetts, considered a progressive state, had these discriminatory trends in police practices in the 1990s, when they were married. She speaks of socialization and racial stereotypes as something enforced by images she saw on

television when she was young. She says:

“I remember that one where the black kid is trying to sell kids watching drugs. He turned into a snake and I thought ‘Wow he’s really evil. How is he able to just fit in like that before? Where’s his parents?’ So even to think back on it now it’s like they were saying ‘See this kid he sells crack and his mom doesn’t care, doesn’t watch him. Stay away from kids like that from places like this. It’s pretty terrible stuff’ (Beth).

Four out of six respondents referenced the “Snake-man” commercial. Beth, the social worker, described this in her discussion of discrimination. She admits that at the time it seemed like a scary image, however, thinking back to it she is amazed at how obvious the stereotypes were. The “stereotypes jumped out at you” (Beth). The ridiculousness of these images is something many of the interviewees agreed on when asked about anti-drug ads they had seen. All of my interviewees discussed the public service announcements aimed to commit youngsters to a drug-free life. The one in particular that everyone mentioned was “This is Your Brain on Drugs” from 1987.

Margaret, a white, middle-aged counselor at a crisis center in Massachusetts, talked about this as something she feels is a factor in the escalation of the heroin addiction in her area. She talks about the ads she saw as a kid being misleading, in regards to who is doing drugs. She admitted that growing up “you would think it was only blacks doing drugs” (Margaret). But then you get older and more experienced and you see “it’s affecting everyone. And I’m not sure they meant to do... actually I’m positive it couldn’t be coincidence when you think about it but there was a problem they were trying to solve, I suppose” (Margaret). The focus on race was palpable to the audience, even though they were children at the time. Drugs were then associated with particular racial groups. This is the message children received from anti-drug images. Rather than educating those at risk for drug abuse with facts, the misrepresentations left them with more questions.

## Respondents Reflect on Exaggeration/ Glamorization

Chris, a white, middle-aged man who is a first responder from Southern Massachusetts, recalled seeing the “No Hope with Dope” ad and several like it. He even mentioned the movie “Reefer Madness” in which adults smoking marijuana are depicted as lazy, stupid and incapable of functioning. He reflects back on seeing this as a kid and admits that he was confused by the exaggerated representations, even then. He said, “You get jaded when you start seeing stuff like that, you get pissed off. You’re like come on that’s not how it really is. So you see that, I would call it propaganda, it does nothing for you except make you laugh and make you think it’s such bullshit this is stupid and then you don’t believe anything they say” (Chris). So, this view of the government’s motives and tactics in the war on drugs as being insidious and misleading is something many people have in common.

Joey, a white, twenty-three year old man from Eastern Massachusetts that I attended middle school with, spoke about how bizarre the ads he saw as a child were. He remembers seeing the “Long Way Home” video in elementary school and being very confused. “They made it seem like you would be offered drugs all the time, by whoever. Like you would just be a kid on the playground and another kid would come up and want you to take drugs but I gotta say, that never happened to me. I mean the commercials and stuff made drugs look like such a large problem, like they were everywhere which certainly wasn’t the truth” (Joey). In that sense, the embellishment raised more curiosity and even helped to glamorize them because “even though the kids you knew weren’t, you grew up thinking everyone was doing them, so it was like, ‘I must be missing out’” (Joey).

Margaret also discussed feeling uninformed, as a child, about drugs and their consequences. The representation of drugs throughout this social war was very vague. “It was

always: don't do drugs", is something five of my interviewees said specifically about anti-drug messages. These exaggerated images skewed the concept of drugs, drug users and dealers and was obvious even to small children. The images that meant to deter children from drugs, therefore, only served to give them a reason to tune out. Using stereotypes based on race discredited the entire message and fueled not only discriminatory practices in the justice system but may have also played a role in the drug abuse epidemics seen today.

## Respondents Reflect on Political Rhetoric and the Evolution of Perspectives

All of the interview discussions touched on presidential coverage of the war on drugs. The two presidents most associated with this war, I learned from interviewing, are Nixon and Reagan. The years of their administrations are considered to be where the crusade against drugs began. One older, African-American gentleman I interviewed, Jack, says that Reagan was a personal hero of his. He was his favorite president and "did a lot of good things" (Jack). When it comes to political alignment, the war on drugs, has been viewed until fairly recently in the moralistic view, blaming the user for their addiction. That is how it served as a model for society: separating the population based on their moral stance on drugs. Jack spoke about this when he discussed his brother who passed away from a heroin overdose six years ago. He says, "I feel bad now, for how I treated him. When he first started with the stuff I just disowned him and didn't think twice. I thought of him after that as less than human. Of course, he was human so that's really my thinking that was screwed up" (Jack).

An individual whom, at the time, agreed with Reagan's policies now sees drugs in a perspective that is opposed to the moralistic view. He said, "Now that I know it killed him I feel



like maybe if I thought differently about it then, I could have done something”, “maybe he needed sympathy or support or someone to listen or someone to yell at him, I didn’t do none of that” (Jack). Listening to his personal testimony and him talking about this as “one of those things he regrets” is scary, sad, humbling and emphasizes how the political rhetoric of the war on drugs has helped shaped the perspectives and therefore the lives of individuals.

From the beginning of the war on drugs, Americans were presented with depictions that would lead them to draw the same conclusion as Jack did. These images socialized people to think that individuals that use drugs are all criminals and all the same. Just as Alice, in *Curious Alice*, speaks about the King and Queen of hearts giving the other cards heroin. When she sees it and says that you can no longer tell them apart once they are using, she is presenting the ideology that drug users have no humanity once they are abusing a substance. This close-minded view is poison to the goal of having a functioning and free society. Over time, however, public opinion as well as action taken by government has progressed.

Jake, an interviewee from Texas who is thirty-eight, reflected on this when asked how the war has changed over time. He says, “I think in certain areas it’s the same and in certain areas it’s different. I think people are more, now than ever, starting to realize that possession and drug use isn’t as much of a drain on society as they initially told us it was that what’s actually is a drain on society is locking up so many people and like overcrowded prisons and stuff like that” (Jake). However, he also says “but I think the same old people that fought the battle in the 80s are still fighting the same battle. I think and going all the way back to like the 60s and 70s, it’s not like they’ve stopped” (Jake).

In this sense the moral stance on drugs seems to be softening with each generation. However, it cannot be said for certain in which direction these changes occur. For Chris, the first

responder, this leniency is both good and bad. He responds to emergency calls of overdoses on a daily basis. He revives the unconscious and leaves them with pamphlets and brochures and business cards for rehabilitation services. He says:

“But you would be surprised to know that sometimes we get called back to revive the same guy not a day later. Sometimes you’ll even see the brochures sittin’ right on the side of them while their passed out and here I am doing it all over again”... “It’s like you want to help them but it’s like if they aren’t locked up they will never get off of the stuff and that’s sad but they’d probably find something in prison to do too so who knows?” (Chris).

The complexity and prevalence of drug abuse is astounding and may be associated with the change in rhetoric.

The political discussion of drugs may be fading out because the public recognizes racist agendas and the distortion of information. Perhaps it is because people do not see drugs as the main drain on society, as Jake put it. However, it could also be because government has softened its language in regards to drugs. Obama’s discussion of drugs in 2016 was drastically different from how the problem of drugs was first presented to the public by Nixon in 1971. In his discussion, Obama took accountability, on behalf of the federal government, for the misuse of focus and resources during the war on drugs. This much less aggressive tone that describes addicts as “those suffering” may be a direct implication of the changing public perspective. Since many different drugs affect many different populations, the public is aware that generalizations cannot be made. Also, real assistance and treatment of the problems of substance abuse are beginning to be pushed to the front of the agenda by communities suffering with epidemics.

Beth reflected on this and said, “The conversation about drugs really changed once it was white children dying from drugs. Up until then it was ‘Let’s lock all the addicts up, they’re criminals’, until it’s white kids then its ‘Oh, they need help (Beth)’”. She and Chris brought up the current drug propaganda circulating on television and in the media. Now, instead of drug use

being depicted as a crime in short commercial segments, there are ads promoting abuse hotlines, rehabilitation programs and medications that are supposed to help with withdrawal symptoms.

The language and images regarding drugs have changed from using scare tactics and demonization to offering assistance in the form of rehabilitation. Though this may be a more positive use of resources, it raises questions about why these tactics were not used in the beginning. This reinforces the argument that when racist ideologies were the primary motive, aggression and institutional bias were the chosen methods.

The interviews gave me insight into how this war, its policies and its propaganda has played a role in the lives of individuals. Many people have faced charges, known people who have died from addiction, help people with addictions, or have recovered themselves. The images and perspectives represented in the propaganda and by prominent political figures have led many to disillusionment. Others have viewpoints that have slowly evolved. Regardless, all agree that the problem of mass drug use has not been handled by the war on drugs whether it be because of obvious racial bias, exaggeration and distortion of facts or personal experiences.

## Discussion

The war on drugs is a long-lasting social crusade against drugs. The actual target of the policies and images endorsed by the federal government, however, clearly displayed the enemy as people of color within the population. In analyzing the messages and representations of anti-drug propaganda I was able to recognize themes of discrimination that served to polarize society into two groups. There was a group being demonized as criminals, using and selling drugs. This group was commonly depicted as African American males. The other group depicted, white kids and teens, were shown as innocent and unsuspecting, seemingly falling victim to drugs through

pressure from blacks. Though these images are outlandish they did serve to legitimize the fears that had been introduced by prominent, political figures.

Presidents have personally waged a war on drugs by speaking out against drugs and passing anti-drug legislation. The language and images used along with the policies, raised a society using a model of war. To declare war on one's own population implies an obvious misinterpretation of the social problem of mass overdoses and selling of illegal drugs and offers no successful solution. However, the tactics used did perpetuate racial discrimination and in turn instigated a number of other social problems. Though these negative consequences are obvious now, the political and economic gains those in power were receiving throughout the war on drugs allowed it to last as an "all-out offensive" for over thirty years, this includes search and seizure profits, incentives to incarcerate criminals and free labor exploited from prisoners.

The language regarding drugs today has a compassionate tone. This change of perspective is somewhat new and fascinating. I grew up when drug users were seen as criminals and now they are seen as addicts. Racial discrimination, though still prevalent, is not represented as obviously in current anti-drug messages. Many of the individuals I interviewed seemed to have hope that the actual problem of drug abuse is beginning to be addressed in real ways, starting with a shift in perspective.

A few commonalities in my research were surprising to me. One is the glamour of drugs. Though scare tactics and racial bias were obviously present in all the content studied, there was also a recurring aspect of peer pressure. As three of my interviewees reflected on, this only served to convince the audience that drugs were very common, something everyone did, something you would certainly be asked to do. The anti-drug message, then, became a form of peer pressure itself. The ideas associated with drugs in these images, such as *Curious Alice* or

“Talking Dog”, make drugs seem like a part of normal life. This is not something I associated with the war on drugs previously.

Another finding that was unexpected was how quickly the language revolving drugs changed. From the beginning of this social war in 1971, until 2007, the tactic seemed to be morally inflexible. Then, suddenly the enemy to the American people being represented shifted dramatically from African Americans selling drugs, to just the substances themselves. In 2016, President Obama was urging the public to change their minds about drug addiction, to see it as an illness that is preventable in all groups of society. He takes responsibility and seemingly apologizes for the mishandling of the problem of drugs. There are many possible reasons the rhetoric for drug use evolved so quickly. The many consequences of the discriminatory practices within the war on drugs has definitely played a role.

Though there is a less aggressive, racially biased tone associated with drugs, the past tactics used in this war have left society with new social problems. A realistic and honest approach to addressing the epidemics of drug abuse is long overdue. This can be said to have begun with the recent decriminalization of certain drugs in some states. However, decriminalization does not imply drug legalization.

There has been continuous and widespread debate about drug policy since Nixon waged America’s first war on drugs. Remarkably, the issues have changed very little. In fact, United States drug policy has not had many significant changes over the last 30 years. The United States needs to significantly shift its funding towards education, prevention, and treatment. Two of my interviewees, Chris and Jack, seem to think that this is the direction government resources will take in years to come.

This can be seen in the re-vamping of the “This is your brain on drugs” propaganda from the 1980s. Now a video is aired that begins with the same image: an egg in a frying pan. Afterwards, however, the video features a stream of kids asking questions to the camera like: “Mom, did you try drugs?” and “What makes heroin do addictive? (Las Vegas Time Machine)”

This concept of children being encouraged to talk openly about drugs and their dangers is ushering in a new wave of socialization. This open-minded perspective represents a change in language and rhetoric that is seemingly in a productive direction. In order to decriminalize drugs, society has to abandon the puritanical idea that drug users are morally defective. The government, which has already publicly acknowledged the disease concept of addiction, has a role to play in refocusing resources and political plans into treatment programs and preventative practices that present the facts without distortions.

# Appendix

## Interview Questions

Where did you first hear the phrase war on drugs?

Have you ever seen or heard any anti-drug public service announcements?

Who was portrayed as the enemy?

Were they effective?

Who do you think is the enemy in the war on drugs?

What is the goal of the war?

Has the war been successful?

How have you personally experienced the war on drugs?

How does the war on drugs affect you (work, school, personal life, etc.)?

How do you think this war has changed over time?

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