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WASHINGTON, D.C. — America ended Prohibition 75 years ago this week. The ban on the sale of alcohol unleashed a crime wave, as gangsters fought over the illicit booze trade. It sure didn't stop drinking. People turned to speakeasies and bathtub gin for their daily cocktail.

Prohibition — and the violence, corruption and health hazards that followed — lives on in its modern version, the so-called War on Drugs. Former law-enforcement officers gathered in Washington to draw the parallels. Their group, Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (LEAP), has called for nothing less than the legalization of drugs.

And before you say, "We can't do that," hear the officers out. They have an answer for every objection.

Doesn't the War on Drugs take narcotics off the street, raising their price beyond most Americans' means?

Obviously not. The retail price of cocaine is now about half what it was in 1990. When the value of something goes up, more people go into the business.

In some Dallas junior high schools, kids can buy two hits of "cheese" — a mix of Tylenol PM and heroin — for \$5, Terry Nelson, a former U.S. Customs and Border Patrol officer, told me. Lunch costs more.

Wouldn't legalizing drugs create new users? Not necessarily. LEAP wants drugs to be regulated like alcohol and cigarettes. Regulations are why it's harder to buy alcohol or cigarettes in many schoolyards than drugs. By regulating the purity and strength of drugs, they become less deadly.

Isn't drug addiction a scourge that tears families apart? Yes, it is, and so are arrests and incarceration and criminal records for kids caught smoking pot behind the bleachers. There are 2.1 million people in federal, state and local prisons, 1.7 million of them for non-violent drug offenses.

Removing the stigma of drug use lets addicts come out into the open for treatment.

We have treatments for alcoholism, but we don't ban alcohol.

LEAP's members want to legalize drugs because they're tired of being shot at in a war they can't win. They're tired of making new business for dealers every time they arrest a competitor. They're tired of busting people in the streets of America's cities over an ounce of cocaine, while the Andean region produces over 1,000 tons of it a year. They're tired of enriching terrorists.

"In 2009, the violence of al-Qaida will be financed by drug profits," said Eric Sterling, head of the Criminal Justice Policy Foundation, which joined the call for legalization. As counsel to the House Judiciary Committee in the 1980s, Sterling helped write the anti-drug laws he now opposes.

Harvard economist Jeffrey Miron estimates that legalizing drugs would save federal, state and local governments \$44 billion in enforcement costs. Governments could collect another \$33 billion in revenues were they to tax drugs as heavily as alcohol and tobacco.

No one here likes drugs or advocates putting heroin on store shelves alongside ibuprofen and dental floss. Each state or county could set its own rules on who could buy which drugs and where and taxes levied — as they now do with alcohol.

What about taking gradual steps — say, starting with marijuana. And couldn't we first try decriminalization — leaving users alone but still arresting dealers? Those were my questions.

The LEAP people want the laws gone, period. "We're whole hog on it," Nelson said. Keeping the sale of drugs illegal, he said, "doesn't take the cartels out of it."

Ending this "war" won't be easy. Too many police, drug agents, bureaucrats, lawyers, judges, prison guards and sprayers of poppy fields have a stake in it. But Prohibition was repealed once. Perhaps it can happen again.

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