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DRUGS

Jack Cole Interview

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By [Phillip Smith / DRCNet](#)

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The police are supposed to be the front-line warriors in the drug war, so when law enforcement figures defect from prohibitionist orthodoxy, as has prominently been the case with former San Jose Police Chief Joseph McNamara and former New Haven Police Chief Nicolas Pastore, their arguments are especially forceful. The emergence of a new group of law enforcement drug war dissidents, Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (<http://www.leap.cc>), thus marks an important crack in the solid wall of police support for the drug war. Formed in March, LEAP brings together a small core of former and current law officers on a mission to end the drug war by bringing their hard-earned street credibility to the reform cause. DRCNet spoke with LEAP executive director Jack Cole this week.

DRCNet: How did you go from drug warrior to drug war critic?

Jack Cole: I guess you could say I had always been driven by an impulse toward harm reduction, though that wasn't a term I'd even heard of back then. I joined the New Jersey State Police because I couldn't stand those images of police beating civil rights demonstrators, and I wanted to do policing to serve the community. As a cop, I saw the damage that drug abuse was doing to the community, so I joined the state narcotics bureau to fight that terrible scourge.

I did not have a sophisticated analysis of prohibition back then, although I very quickly began to understand that our "war on drugs" was a cruel, corrupting charade. We would arrest drug users on the street, but claim they were dealers. We would make people become informers for us to avoid their own drug charges. As an undercover cop, I had a career that consisted of becoming people's friend, their closest confidante, then betraying them, over and over again. And I came to see the "war on drugs" as racist. And futile.

When Richard Nixon declared the "war on drugs" in 1970, law enforcement had no idea how to stop drug abuse, but it certainly knew how to go after the money. We had seven narcotics officers for the entire state of New Jersey, but after Nixon's anti-drug grants, it shot up to 76. So we arrested people, going from town to town and making buys from everyone we could, then swooping in for mass arrests. But when we arrested a drug dealer, all we did was create a job opening for the next guy. In the meantime, lives are being ruined, families destroyed when drug users are sent to jail, we were virtually creating the next generation of addicts.

By 1973, I had concluded that the small amount of harm I prevented by arresting drug users was far outweighed by the harm I was causing to countless people. "Zero tolerance" prohibition was senseless and doomed to failure, I decided. I'm sorry to say that I continued to work narcotics for years after that realization, for reasons that have little to do with courage.

DRCNet: Surely rank and file police officers share this sense of futility you describe. What is it that keeps law enforcement from becoming a force for reform?

Cole: Many officers have told me, in classrooms or in private, that they see the uselessness and destructiveness of our drug war. But there are also a number of reasons why many police continue to support it. One reason I stayed at it was the sheer excitement of it. I was always working bigger and bigger cases, always looking for the stimulation and excitement. It was almost addicting and there was very much an element of the thrill of the chase. It's intoxicating to go up against very smart people and beat them at their own game. There is that element. And you have to understand that most police in this country are doing what's called community oriented policing, and most communities want the drug dealing and associated street crime cleaned up. The police are doing what they think the community wants.

There is also self-interest. The "war on drugs" is a seemingly endless source of funds for law enforcement. There are jobs at stake. And there is fear. Taking a public stand for ending the drug war could cost you your job in any number of departments in this country and subject you to disapproval from your peers in many more.

DRCNet: That must make it tough to get new recruits?

Cole: We recognize that problem and we address it. Members of law enforcement can join our organization anonymously, and we are very careful to ensure that their information is secure. We are also working on an anonymous electronic chat program that would allow police to enter discussions without revealing their identities. We hope to have that up and running soon.

DRCNet: What does LEAP hope to accomplish, and how will you go about doing it?

Cole: We want to end prohibition --

DRCNet: The group takes an explicit stand for ending prohibition?

Cole: Look at the name. Law Enforcement Against Prohibition. In our mission statement, we write that "the United States' drug policies have failed and that to save lives, lower the rate of addiction and conserve tax dollars, we must end drug prohibition." It's pretty clear. Right now, we are attempting to move in that direction primarily through our speakers' bureau. We have former New York police captain and ReconsiDer member Peter Christ, former Michigan police officer Howard Wooldridge, former Detroit police officer Dan Solano, and Colorado Sheriff Bill Masters (<http://www.drnet.org/wol/220.html#billmasters>)

and myself. It is a process of educating people, and between us we've given hundreds of speeches. We will continue to educate and continue to try to attract new members from the ranks of law enforcement. We know they're out there.

But we also want to restore respect for law enforcement. Our involvement in enforcing drug prohibition has only diminished respect for police. And, ultimately, we want to reduce the harm imposed by prohibition.

DRCNet: What about what happened in Nevada last week? Andy Anderson, the head of the state's largest police union organization, lost his job after he engineered a board vote in favor of marijuana legalization.

Cole: That was a real mess. Clearly, we have a ways to go. But the fact that they were ready to endorse that measure shows that law enforcement is not monolithic on this.

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