

Milton Friedman: Drugs Should Be Legalized (1991)

The economist and Nobel Prize winner [Milton Friedman](#) argued in 1991 for the legalization of drugs in the US. He was an opponent of government intervention. The complete transcript is available at [the NorthWestReport.com](http://theNorthWestReport.com)

Paige (Presenter) : Let us deal first with the issue of legalization of drugs. How do you see America changing for the better under that system?

Friedman: I see America with half the number of prisons, half the number of prisoners, ten thousand fewer homicides a year, inner cities in which there's a chance for these poor people to live without being afraid for their lives, citizens who might be respectable who are now addicts not being subject to becoming criminals in order to get their drug, being able to get drugs for which they're sure of the quality. You know, the same thing happened under prohibition of alcohol as is happening now.

Under prohibition of alcohol, deaths from alcohol poisoning, from poisoning by things that were mixed in with the bootleg alcohol, went up sharply. Similarly, under drug prohibition, deaths from overdose, from adulterations, from adulterated substances have gone up.

Paige: How would legalization adversely affect America, in your view?

Friedman: The one adverse effect that legalization might have is that there very likely would be more people taking drugs. That's not by any means clear. But, if you legalized, you destroy the black market, the price of drugs would go down drastically. And as an economist, lower prices tend to generate more demand. However, there are some very strong qualifications to be made to that.

The effect of criminalization, of making drugs criminal, is to drive people from mild drugs to strong drugs.

Paige: In what way?

Friedman: Marijuana is a very heavy, bulky substance and, therefore, it's relatively easy to interdict. The warriors on drugs have been more successful interdicting marijuana than, let's say, cocaine. So, marijuana prices have gone up, they've become harder to get. There's been an incentive to grow more potent marijuana and people have been driven from marijuana to heroin, or cocaine, or crack.

Paige: Let us consider another drug then, and that is the drug crack.

Friedman: Crack would never have existed, in my opinion, if you had not had drug prohibition. Why was crack created? The preferred method of taking cocaine, which I understand was by

sniffing it, snorting it, became very expensive and they were desperate to find a way of packaging cocaine...

Paige: The entrepreneurs?

Friedman: Of course, they're entrepreneurs. The people who are running the drug traffic are no different from the rest of us, except that they have more entrepreneurial ability and less concern about not hurting other people. They're more irresponsible in that way. But they're in business and they're trying to make as much as they can. And they discovered a good way to make money was to dilute this crack with baking soda or whatever else—I mean, cocaine, whatever else they do—I don't know the procedure—so that they could bring it out in five dollar and ten dollar doses.

Paige: Let's talk about that more in a minute. But with regard to crack, considering the fact that it's very addictive and considering the fact that...

Friedman: That's very dubious. It is addictive, but I understand from all the medical evidence that it's no more addictive than other drugs. In fact, the most addictive drug everybody acknowledges is tobacco.

Paige: Well, let me rephrase that then. All of the information I've seen on it suggests that it is a drug which is very pleasurable.

Friedman: Absolutely, no doubt.

Paige: And the effect of it is also very short.

Friedman: Yes.

Paige: And it is very expensive because multiple doses cost a lot of money. My question is: If drugs were legalized and if crack cocaine were available at a low cost, could it not be devastating in that it is so pleasurable, I am told, that more people could get it and stay on it for longer periods of time?

Friedman: Well, maybe. Nobody can say with certainty what will happen along those lines. But I think it's very dubious, because all of the experience with legal drugs is that there's a tendency for people to go from the stronger to the weaker and not the other way around, just as you go from regular beer to light beer. That's the tendency that there is: from cigarettes without filters to low-tar, filtered cigarettes, and so on. But I can't rule out that what you're saying might happen, but, and this is a very important but, the harm that would result from that would be much less than it is now, for several reasons. The really main thing that bothers me about the crack is not what you're talking about, it's the crack babies, because that's the real tragedy. They are innocent victims. They didn't choose to be crack babies any more than the people who are born with the fetal alcohol syndrome.

Paige: As you now, we are already experiencing epidemic proportions of that. One out of every

four babies going into one hospital, I can tell you, in Maryland is addicted.

Friedman: But I'll tell you, it isn't that crack babies are necessarily addicted, but they tend to come in at low birth weight, they tend to come in mentally impaired, and so on. But you know that the number who do that from alcohol is much greater. So, the same problem arises there. That's what bothers me.

Now suppose you legalized. Under current circumstances, a mother who is a crack addict and is carrying a baby is afraid to go the prenatal treatment because she turned herself into a criminal, she's subject to being thrown in jail. Under legalized drugs, that inhibition would be off. And, you know, even crack addicts, mothers, have a feeling of responsibility to their children.

And I have no doubt that under those circumstances, it would be possible to have a much more effective system of prenatal care, a much more effective system of trying to persuade people who are on drugs not to have children or to go off drugs while they have children.

Paige: Let us turn to the early genesis of your belief that the drug laws may not be working the way the nation would hope them to. Tell me about the elements that you saw early on that changed your mind or changed your way of thinking.

Friedman: Well, I'm not saying "changed." I would rather say "formed" my way of thinking, because I do not recall at any time that I was ever in favor of prohibition of either alcohol or drugs. I grew up—I'm old enough to have lived through some part of the Prohibition era.

Paige: And you remember it?

Friedman: I remember the occasion when a fellow graduate student at Columbia from Sweden wanted to take me downtown to a restaurant for a Swedish meal and introduced me to the Swedish drink aquavit. This was a restaurant at which this Swedish fellow had been getting aquavit all during Prohibition; they had been selling it to him. And this was just after the repeal of Prohibition. We went there and he asked them for some aquavit. They said, "Oh, no, we haven't gotten our license yet." And finally, he talked to them in Swedish and persuaded them to take us into the back where they gave us a glass of aquavit apiece. Now that shows the absurdity of it.

Prohibition was repealed in 1933 when I was 21 years old, so was a teenager during most of Prohibition. Alcohol was readily available. Bootlegging was common. Any idea that alcohol prohibition was keeping people from drinking was absurd. There were speakeasies all over the place. But more than that. We had this spectacle of Al Capone, of the hijackings, of the gang wars...

Anybody with two eyes could see that this was a bad deal, that you were doing more harm than good. In addition, I became an economist. And as an economist, I came to recognize the importance of markets and of free choice and of consumer sovereignty and came to discover the harm that was done when you interfered with them. The laws against drugs were passed in 1914, but there was no very great enforcement of it.

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