

The Trillion Dollar War: Presidential Budgets and the War on Drugs

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ABSTRACT

Officially coined by Richard Nixon in 1971, the “War on Drugs” was greatly expanded under the Reagan administration. Regardless of party, subsequent presidents have continued fighting this so-called ‘War,’ as evidenced in their speeches. In this paper, I examine presidential speeches and initiatives ranging from Reagan to Trump. In doing so, I consider how their respective rhetoric and the funding they sought for their administrations’ initiatives have resulted in chronic overspending on this War. Not only have these efforts largely not had their intended results in eliminating drug use, but they also resulted in high incarceration rates, while drug overdoses have increased since Reagan’s presidency.

Introduction

Few topics have remained as relevant in American media and politics as drug use and regulation. Throughout the history of the United States, Americans have argued for stricter laws and harsher prison sentences. After Richard Nixon officially declared a “War on Drugs” in June 1971, succeeding presidents used various strategies to reduce drug usage. Earlier presidents, from Reagan to Clinton, focused on incarceration and controlling drug crimes. In contrast, more recent presidents, Obama and Trump, have focused more on rehabilitation and treatment for drug users. By examining past presidents’ laws and initiatives through their rhetoric and policies, specifically regarding funding, we can better explain how these numbers increased significantly throughout the past six presidential administrations and help us determine what the future may look like.

Although the regulation of drugs in the United States began in the 1800s, it was not until the official declaration of the War on Drugs that these efforts were formalized and revitalized with the support of the U.S. government. The War on Drugs is a symbolic war aiming to stop illegal drug use, distribution, and trade. While the War lost traction during the mid-1970s, it was resurrected during Ronald Reagan’s term, expanding it further than Nixon ever did. Following Reagan’s strict drug use and possession policies, every president who followed him has participated in and sustained the War on Drugs.¹

Presidential Actions

Examining how different presidents have reached and used funding provides us with a unique insight into the different presidents’ views and the goals they looked to carry out through their policies. In this essay, I examine each president's most effective policies and initiatives following Reagan: George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack

¹ “War on Drugs.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 31 May 2017, <https://www.history.com/topics/crime/the-war-on-drugs>.

Obama, and Donald Trump. While some presidents had similar approaches, no two did the same thing nor had the same outcomes. Their different actions illustrate their distinct priorities and help us consider their effectiveness and make predictions for the future.

Ronald Reagan

Ronald Reagan's presidency signaled a new era of the War on Drugs. His administration brought greater public attention to drug use and crime control. Reagan's emphasis on the War was recognized in his 1983 State of the Union address when he said, "This administration hereby declares an all-out war on big-time organized crime and the drug racketeers who are poisoning our young people."² At a time when 5.8 million people (about twice the population of Arkansas) routinely used crack cocaine, one of the most notable initiatives of Reagan's presidency was the "Just Say No campaign."³ First Lady Nancy Reagan launched this campaign to decrease the number of children who tried drugs by encouraging them to "just say no." The message was promoted on television programs, talk shows, rehabilitation centers, and nationwide schools.⁴ The following noteworthy action of Reagan's term was the 1986 signing of The Anti-Drug Abuse Act. This initiative supplied \$1.7 billion (about \$5 per person in the US) (about \$5 per person in the US) in funding for the War on Drugs. Broken down, this meant that \$97 million went to the construction of new prisons and the restoration of old ones, \$200 million for education on drugs in schools and the public, and \$241 million for rehabilitation treatment. This Act sets up mandatory minimum sentences for certain drug offenses, like possession and selling. Under this policy, possession of 1 kilogram or more of heroin or five kilograms of cocaine was punishable by ten or more years in prison and selling five grams of either drug led to a five-year sentence.⁵

George H.W. Bush

George H.W. Bush's ideals and actions resembled Reagan's because his main goal for the War was to expand Reagan's actions. H.W.'s approach to the War was "more prisons, more jails, more courts, more prosecutors."⁶ H.W. Bush's most expensive initiative concerning the Drug War was a proposed escalation of almost \$1 billion in funding efforts to cut drug use. The new budget allowed for expanding treatment of poor and young mothers, protecting the borders from new drugs, stricter punishment, minimizing organized crime, introducing harsher sentences with the inclusion of the death penalty, and education on drug prevention.⁷ The second most notable contribution H. W. Bush made to the War on Drugs was creating the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). H.W. created it to reduce drug activity, including illicit use, trafficking, crime, and violence due to drugs, manufacturing, and drug-

² "Presidential Speeches." *Miller Center*, 14 July 2020, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches>.

³ "Just Say No." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 31 May 2017, <https://www.history.com/topics/1980s/just-say-no>.

⁴ History.com Editors. "War on Drugs." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 31 May 2017, <https://www.history.com/topics/crime/the-war-on-drugs>.

⁵ "Thirty Years of America's Drug War | Drug Wars | Frontline." *PBS*, WGBH Educational Foundation, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/cron/>.

⁶ Pembleton, Matthew R. "Perspective | George H.W. Bush's Biggest Failure? the War on Drugs." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 6 Dec. 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/12/06/george-hw-bushs-biggest-failure-war-drugs/>.

⁷ "Thirty Years of America's Drug War | Drug Wars | Frontline." *PBS*, WGBH Educational Foundation, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/cron/>.

related health issues. He appointed William Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education, to head the new agency. These days, the Director of the ONDCP is known colloquially as the “Drug Czar.” The purpose of this office is to update national policies with the intent of improving the health of Americans⁸, and in 2022 the requested budget for this agency’s operations was \$447.4 million.⁹

Bill Clinton

Bill Clinton, the first Democratic president to partake in the Drug War, was notorious for his controversial methods due to much of his legislation of drug-related issues having negative repercussions that continue to affect the nation today. One of the most famous parts of Clinton’s term was the “Three Strikes and You’re Out” proposal. This bill was created to reduce violent crimes by using jail time as an incentive to stay away from violent acts. If a person was convicted of three or more violent crimes or drug offenses, they could face a lifetime in prison. President Clinton explained, “Those who commit repeated violent crimes should be told that when you commit a third violent crime, you will be put away, and put away for good... Three strikes and you are out.” This piece of legislation was the most controversial in Clinton’s two terms.¹⁰ The next major task Clinton headed was federal legislation on tobacco use by proposing \$368.5 billion for settlements with tobacco companies. This legislation aimed to reduce the number of teens smoking by granting the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) the authority to regulate the tobacco industry. Such efforts included keeping the tobacco companies accountable for targeted marketing, protecting low-income tobacco farmers, and creating punishments if the reduction numbers for teen smoking were not met.¹¹

George W. Bush

While George W. Bush’s term seemed to have only a minor emphasis on the War on Drugs, he gathered the most funding for the cause among his presidential predecessors. His one significant contribution to the War resulted in the most considerable sum of money used by the U.S government to battle the War on Drugs. On February 12, 2002, Bush spoke about his National Drug Control Strategy program as an attempt to “limit drug supply, to reduce demand, and to provide addicts with effective and compassionate drug treatment,” Bush proposed \$19 billion to support this cause. He further elaborated on where the money would go. The most sizable part of this funding was \$2.3 billion for the interception of illicit drugs. An added \$731 million would target international drug affairs (including relations with Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela). The following \$10 million was to support coalition formation, current coalitions, and faith programs that help people keep people away from drugs. These efforts were primarily concerned with prevention rather than stopping those already using drugs. By supporting these programs, Bush hoped to build community involvement which, in turn, would reduce the demand for drugs. The next \$644 million in this request and a separate \$180 million went toward education. This money directly supported the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Community Program, drug prevention programs going to U.S schools. In W. Bush’s 2004 State of the Union, he said, “the worst decisions our children can make is to gamble their lives and futures on

⁸ “Office of National Drug Control Policy.” *The White House*, The United States Government, 11 Aug. 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/>.

⁹ “May 2021 - White House.” *National-Drug-Control-Budget*, May 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/National-Drug-Control-Budget-FY-2022-Funding-Highlights.pdf>.

¹⁰ Whitley, Joe D. “Federal Sentencing Reporter Vol. 7, No. 2, September / October 1994 63 ...” *Three Strikes and You're out: More Harm than Good*, JSTOR, 1994, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20639748>.

¹¹ Franken, Bob, and Janet Moore. “Clinton Proposes Changes To Tobacco Pact.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, <https://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1997/09/17/clinton.smoke/>.

drugs.”¹² The \$180 million put aside for education went toward media education specifically. The last portion, \$3.8 billion, went to drug treatment and research. This meant helping treat drug users and later supporting their rehabilitation into society. Bush rationalized this considerable sum of money by reminding us of the \$15 billion worth of damage drugs had already made. He believed that this investment would help the U.S. in the long run and reduce costs in the future.¹³

Barack Obama

Barack Obama was the first president during the War on Drugs to name addiction as a health problem rather than a criminal act, which caused policies to change under his term. In an interview with Rolling Stone in 2016, he said, “I do believe that treating this a public-health issue, the same way we do with cigarettes or alcohol, is the much smarter way to deal with it.”¹⁴ The most notable example of his different perspective is the 2010 Fair Sentencing Act. This piece of legislation eliminated the mandatory minimum sentencing for possession of crack cocaine while simultaneously increasing the monetary penalties for large-scale drug traffickers. A rare bipartisan agreement was reached for this Act, marking its importance and significant effort toward decreasing racial disparity and incarceration rates, an issue Obama took very seriously. This legislation also marked the first time the minimum sentence was eliminated since the 1970s.¹⁵ Another important aspect of Obama’s role in the War on Drugs was his National Drug Control Strategies, ranging from 2010 to 2016. Each year, the Strategies aimed to reduce illicit drug use nationwide, using seven main goals as a guide. They focused on preventing drug use in communities, providing early intervention for potential drug users, creating treatment plans for those with substance abuse issues, improving education, stopping the cycle of drug use leading to incarceration, and eliminating drug trafficking within the U.S. These Strategies also focused on prescription management and the heroin epidemic, both prevalent issues during Obama’s presidency.¹⁶

Donald Trump

During Donald Trump’s presidency, the opioid crisis was declared in 2017, leading most of the legislation during the time to be focused on this issue. In 2017 he announced, “As we speak, we are removing gang members, drug dealers and criminals that threaten our communities and prey on our citizens. Bad ones are going out as I speak tonight and as I have promised.”¹⁷ A year after the crisis was declared, the Trump Administration acquired \$6 billion to be spent over the next two years combating opioid abuse. The program was called the Initiative to Stop Opioid Abuse; its goal was to spread awareness, educate, terminate drug trafficking nationally and across the border, and treat addicts. A

¹² “Presidential Speeches.” *Miller Center*, 14 July 2020, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches>.

¹³ *President Bush Announces Drug Control Strategy*, U.S. Department of State, 20 Jan. 2009, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/inl/rls/rm/8451.htm>.

¹⁴ Lopez, German. “Did Obama Just Come out for Legalizing Marijuana?” *Vox*, Vox Media, 30 Nov. 2016, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/11/30/13786458/obama-marijuana-legalization>.

¹⁵ “Federal Crack Cocaine Sentencing - the Sentencing Project.” *Federal Crack Cocaine Sentencing*, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Federal-Crack-Cocaine-Sentencing.pdf>.

¹⁶ *National Drug Control Strategy*, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/ondcp/policy-and-research/ndcs#:~:text=Breaking%20the%20cycle%20of%20drug,drug%20use%20and%20its%20consequences>.

¹⁷ “Presidential Speeches.” *Miller Center*, 14 July 2020, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches>.

quick breakdown of the \$6 billion shows that \$1 billion went to State and local corporations to distribute as needed to address the situation within their communities. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration received \$930 million, and the Health Resources and Services Administration received \$396 million to disperse among healthcare centers, community groups, and schools. Finally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention presented States, territories, and tribes with \$194 million to continue prevention efforts and help collect data regarding those with substance abuse issues. At Trump's 2017 session of Congress, he stated, "My Administration is committed to fighting the drug epidemic and helping get treatment for those in need. The struggle will be long and difficult—but, as Americans always do, we will prevail."¹⁸ This initiative appeared essential when there were 64,000 drug overdoses in the U.S. in 2016 alone.¹⁹

In 2018, Trump signed the First Step Act, a bi-partisan endeavor created to reduce federal prison populations and improve criminal justice in federal courts. This act had three distinct sentencing reforms. Starting with Changes to Mandatory Minimums for Certain Drug Offenders, this modification reduced the mandatory minimum from 20 years to 15 years for an offender with a prior conviction and a life sentence to a 25-year minimum for those with two or more convictions.²⁰ Then, when the Fair Sentencing Act was enacted retroactively, the sentences for possession of crack cocaine and powder cocaine became the same. Those convicted with longer sentences for crack cocaine could then petition for a reduced sentence. Finally, expanding the Safety Valve expanded safety provisions to sentences less than the mandatory minimum for low-level and nonviolent drug offenders.²¹

Long-term Impacts

Since each president had a different idea for how to combat the War on Drugs best, each president employed different strategies and consequently yielded mixed results. In general, the \$1 trillion (about \$3,100 per person in the US) spent on this war has only done so much, with many conservatives and liberals agreeing that the negative results may outweigh the good.²² The graph below demonstrates the number of overdoses per year from 1981-2020 has only increased, showing the insufficient effects the War had on drug usage in America (see [Figure 1](#)). Each year, the U.S. hits a new record for overdoses, and the data²³ shows signs that this trend will only continue.²⁴

¹⁸ "Presidential Speeches." *Miller Center*, 14 July 2020, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches>.

¹⁹ *President Donald J. Trump's Initiative to Stop Opioid Abuse and Reduce Drug Supply and Demand*, National Archives and Records Administration, 24 Oct. 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-initiative-stop-opioid-abuse-reduce-drug-supply-demand-2/>.

²⁰ Biden vs. Trump: Who's the Actual Criminal Justice Reformer?" *POLITICO*, Politico LLC, 23 Apr. 2020, <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2020/justice-reform-biden-trump-candidate-policy-positions/>.

²¹ "Federal Bureau of Prisons." *An Overview of the First Step Act*, Federal Bureau of Prisons, <https://www.bop.gov/inmates/fsa/overview.jsp>.

²² Lee, Nathaniel. *America Has Spent over a Trillion Dollars Fighting the War on Drugs. 50 Years Later, Drug Use in the U.S. Is Climbing Again.*, CNBC, 17 June 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/06/17/the-us-has-spent-over-a-trillion-dollars-fighting-war-on-drugs.html>.

²³ "Multiple Cause of Death, 1999-2020 Request." *About Multiple Cause of Death, 1999-2020*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10.html>.

²⁴ "Compressed Mortality, 1979-1998 Request." *About Compressed Mortality, 1979-1998*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://wonder.cdc.gov/cmfc-icd9.html>.

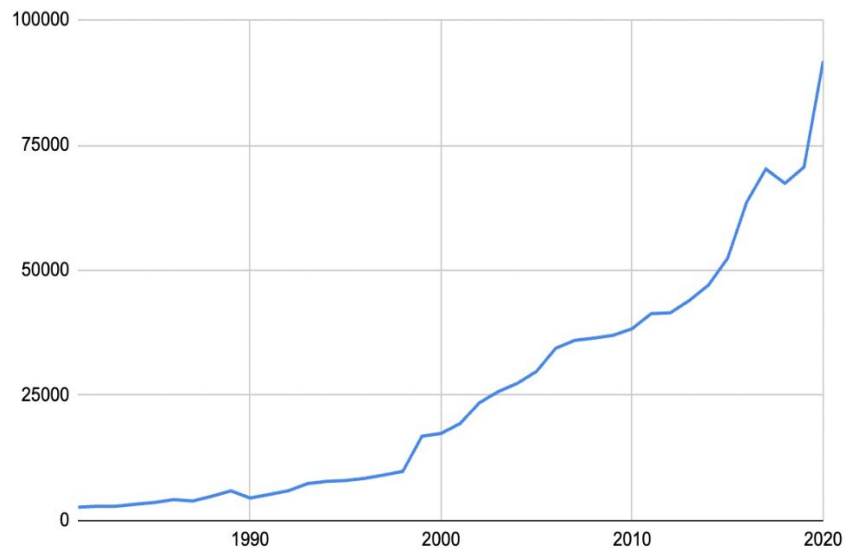


Figure 1. Overdoses in the U.S. 1981-2020

A brief dissection of each president’s specific tactics and individual impacts shows how they shaped the country’s current state around drugs. Reagan’s administration created harmful stereotypes around people who used drugs, separating them as “other” people who were not strong enough to resist temptations. These assumptions cultivated during and by this presidency define the opinions of many Americans to this day. The suppression of information regarding drugs in fear of exposing children to dangerous ideas caused the Just Say No program to be known as nothing more than a phrase. Children who received drug education and children who did not have been found to have similar substance use levels, the latter sometimes having lower.²⁵

George H.W. Bush’s presidency led to an exacerbation of the Drug War, especially regarding funding. His presidency marked a \$7 billion increase in the War on Drugs’ budget and the most significant increase in drug enforcement with \$1.5 billion.²⁶ H.W. chose to fully sentence a person with drug-related issues of the law, leading to mass incarceration and contributing to the U.S.’s place as the leader of imprisonment in the world.²⁷ However, Clinton’s Three Strikes and You’re Out law may have been the most harmful of all policies during the War. This piece of legislation led to an even more considerable increase in the incarceration of Americans than H.W.’s policies ever did. It escalated the prison populations, lengthened sentences, and boosted the construction of new jails. Furthermore, it created a need for higher budgets to enforce drug policies, heightened negative stigmas against people who used drugs and even resulted in higher violent crime rates. It would not have been unexpected if George W. Bush had followed in his father’s footsteps in further escalating the War on Drugs. After all, they were both politically conservative and

²⁵ Lilienfeld, Scott O. “Why ‘Just Say No’ Doesn’t Work.” *Why “Just Say No” Doesn’t Work*, Scientific American, 1 Jan. 2014, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-just-say-no-doesnt-work/>.

²⁶ Pembleton, Matthew R. “Perspective | George H.W. Bush’s Biggest Failure? the War on Drugs.” *George H.W. Bush’s Biggest Failure? The War on Drugs.*, WP Company, 6 Dec. 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/12/06/george-hw-bushs-biggest-failure-war-drugs/>.

²⁷ Mann, Brian. “After 50 Years of the War on Drugs, ‘What Good Is It Doing for Us?’.” *After 50 Years of The War on Drugs, ‘What Good Is It Doing for Us?’*, NPR, 17 June 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/17/1006495476/after-50-years-of-the-war-on-drugs-what-good-is-it-doing-for-us>.

from the same party as Reagan. However, after 9/11, the War on Terror supplanted whatever strategies W. Bush planned to employ in the War on Drugs. Consequently, his role in the Drug War was not relevant to his or the War's legacy.

Obama's presidency signaled a changing tide in the War on Drugs. Obama's refusal to see addiction as an individual or criminal problem rather than a public health problem resulted in an upsurge in funding for drug treatment. Through the passing of the Affordable Care Act, access to substance abuse treatment by meeting the four primary mechanisms for minimizing the opioid epidemic: expanding insurance coverage, requiring substance abuse inclusion in insurance, amplified parity, and widespread implementation of treatment in healthcare.²⁸ This trend continued with Trump's spotlight on the opioid epidemic, which led to positive treatment results and reduced incarceration. This focus resulted in increased compassionate release sentence reductions and even home confinement within the Bureau of Prisons, a positive change since most of the War has led to an increase in harsh incarceration and treatment of drug offenders.

Joe Biden is only halfway through his term, but we can still reflect on his current actions. Although the Covid-19 pandemic put the War on Drugs on the back burner, on October 6, 2022, Joe Biden announced his plan for decriminalizing marijuana laws. This would include pardoning all federal offenses of marijuana possession, enforcement at state levels, and scheduling an administrative review of marijuana as a Schedule I substance, the classification that controls marijuana criminalization.²⁹ The positive outcomes of the past three presidents show promise that reversal or, at the very least, improvements of the downfalls of the War on Drugs may be underway. We can be optimistic that future policies and laws will continue this encouraging upward trend.

²⁸ Abraham, Amanda J, et al. "The Affordable Care Act Transformation of Substance Use Disorder Treatment." *The Affordable Care Act Transformation of Substance Use Disorder Treatment*, American Public Health Association, Jan. 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5308192/>.

²⁹ Gibson, Mary Jane. "The Most Important Part of Biden's Surprise Marijuana Announcement." *The Most Important Part of Biden's Surprise Marijuana Announcement*, Vox, 8 Oct. 2022, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2022/10/8/23393412/biden-marijuana-pardons-decriminalization>.