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Waging War on Drugs

FROM *The Crack Attack: Politics and Media in the Crack Scare*

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This eye-opening study documents how the significant attention given by the news media and politicians to crack cocaine during the late 1980s and early 1990s greatly exaggerated the magnitude of the problem. The authors argue that constructing crack as a problem out of control and plaguing America's youth justified the government's war on drugs and reinforced the dominant set of explanations for why urban areas were simultaneously experiencing a cluster of social problems such as crime, teenage pregnancy, and school dropout.

America discovered crack and overdosed on oratory.

NEW YORK TIMES (EDITORIAL, OCTOBER 4, 1988)

This New York Times editorial had a certain unintended irony, for "America's paper of record" itself had long been one of the leading orators, supplying a steady stream of the stuff on which the nation had, as they put it, "overdosed." Irony aside, the editorial hit the mark. The use of powder cocaine by affluent people in music, film, sports, and business had been common since the 1970s. According to surveys by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), by 1985, more than twenty-two million Americans in all social classes and occupations had reported at least trying cocaine. Cocaine smoking originated with "freebasing," which began increasing by the late 1970s. Then (as now) most cocaine users bought cocaine hydrochloride (powder) for intranasal use (snorting). But by the end of the 1970s, some users had begun to "cook"

powder cocaine down to crystalline or “base” form for smoking. All phases of freebasing, from selling to smoking, took place most often in the privacy of homes and offices of middle-class or well-to-do users. They typically purchased cocaine in units of a gram or more costing \$80 to \$100 a gram. These relatively affluent “basers” had been discovering the intense rush of smoking cocaine, as well as the risks, for a number of years before the term “crack” was coined. But most such users had a stake in conventional life. Therefore, when they felt their cocaine use was too heavy or out of control, they had the incentives and resources to cut down, quit, or get private treatment.

There was no orgy of media and political attention in the late 1970s when the prevalence of cocaine use jumped sharply, or even after middle-class and upper-class users began to use heavily, especially when freebasing. Like the crack users who followed them, basers had found that this mode of ingesting cocaine produced a much more intense and far shorter “high” because it delivered more pure cocaine into the brain far more directly and rapidly than by snorting. Many basers had found that crack’s intense, brutally brief rush, combined with the painful “low” or “down” that immediately followed, produced a powerful desire immediately to repeat use—to binge.

Crack’s pharmacological power alone does not explain the attention it received. In 1986, politicians and the media focused on crack—and the drug scare began—when cocaine smoking became visible among a “dangerous” group. Crack attracted the attention of politicians and the media because of its downward mobility to and increased visibility in ghettos and barrios. The new users were a different social class, race, and status. Crack was sold in smaller, cheaper, precooked units, on ghetto streets, to poorer, younger buyers who were already seen as a threat. Crack spread cocaine smoking into poor populations already beset with a cornucopia of troubles. These people tended to have fewer bonds to conventional society, less to lose, and far fewer resources to cope with or shield themselves from drug-related problems.

The earliest mass media reference to the new form of cocaine may have been a *Los Angeles Times* article in late 1984 (November 25, p. C1) on the use of cocaine “rocks” in ghettos and barrios in Los Angeles. By late 1985, the *New York Times* made the national media’s first specific reference to “crack” in a story about three teenagers seeking treatment for cocaine abuse (November 17, p. B12). At the start of 1986, crack was known only in a few impoverished neighborhoods in Los Angeles, New York, Miami, and perhaps a few other large cities.

THE FRENZY: COCAINE AND CRACK IN THE PUBLIC EYE

When two celebrity athletes died in what news stories called “crack-related deaths” in the spring of 1986, the media seemed to sense a potential bonanza. Coverage skyrocketed and crack became widely known. “Dramatic footage” of black and Latino men being carted off in chains, or of police breaking down crack house doors, became a near nightly news event. In July 1986 alone, the three major TV networks offered seventy-four evening news segments on drugs, half of these about crack. In the months leading up to the November elections, a handful of national newspapers and magazines produced roughly a thousand stories discussing crack. Like the TV networks, leading news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* seemed determined not to be outdone; each devoted five cover stories to crack and the “drug crisis” in 1986 alone.

In the fall of 1986, the CBS news show *48 Hours* aired a heavily promoted documentary called “48 Hours on Crack Street,” which Dan Rather previewed on his evening news show: “Tonight, CBS News takes you to the streets, to the war zone, for an unusual two hours of hands on horror.” . . .

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The crack scare began in 1986, but it waned somewhat in 1987 (a non-election year). In 1988, drugs returned to the national stage as stories about the “crack epidemic” again appeared regularly on front pages and TV screens. One politician after another reenlisted in the War on Drugs. In that election year, as in 1986, overwhelming majorities of both houses of Congress voted for new antidrug laws with long mandatory prison terms, death sentences, and large increases in funding for police and prisons. The annual federal budget for antidrug efforts surged from less than \$2 billion in 1981 to more than \$12 billion in 1993. The budget for the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) quadrupled between 1981 and 1992. The Bush administration alone spent \$45 billion—more than all other presidents since Nixon combined—mostly for law enforcement.

Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives alike called repeatedly for an “all-out war on drugs.” In 1986, President and Nancy Reagan led a string of prominent politicians in asserting that drugs, especially crack, were “tearing our country apart” and “killing . . . a whole generation [of] . . . our children.” In the 1988 election season, even more politicians claimed that crack was destroying American youth and causing much of the crime, violence, prostitution, and child abuse in the nation.

An April 1988 ABC News special report termed crack “a plague” that was “eating away at the fabric of America.” According to this documentary, Americans spend “\$20 billion a year on cocaine,” American businesses lose “\$60 billion” a year in productivity because their workers use drugs, “the educational system is being undermined” by student drug use, and “the family” is “disintegrating” in the face of this “epidemic.” This program did not give its millions of viewers any evidence to support such dramatic claims, but it did give them a powerful *vocabulary of attribution*: “drugs,” especially crack, threatened all the central institutions in American life—families, communities, schools, businesses, law enforcement, even national sovereignty.

This media frenzy continued into 1989. Between October 1988 and October 1989, for example, the *Washington Post* alone ran 1565 stories—28,476 column inches—about the drug crisis. Even Richard Harwood, the *Post*’s own ombudsman, editorialized against what he called the loss of “a proper sense of perspective” due to such a “hyperbole epidemic.” He said that “politicians are doing a number on people’s heads.” In the fall of 1989, another major new federal antidrug bill to further increase drug war funding (S-1233) began winding its way through Congress. In September, President Bush’s “drug czar,” William Bennett, unveiled his comprehensive battle plan, the *National Drug Control Strategy*. His introduction asks, “What . . . accounts for the intensifying drug-related chaos that we see every day in our newspapers and on television? One word explains much of it. That word is *crack*. . . . Crack is responsible for the fact that vast patches of the American urban landscape are rapidly deteriorating.”

Bennett’s plan proposed yet another \$2.2 billion increase in drug war spending, 70% of which was to be allocated to police and prisons, a percentage unchanged since the Nixon administration. The funds were to be used nearly to double prison capacity so that even casual users as well as dealers could be incarcerated. The plan also proposed the sale of drug war bonds (reminiscent of World War II) as a means of financing the \$7.9 billion first-year costs. President Bush returned to Washington early from summer vacation at his estate on the Maine coast to rehearse with his media advisors the presentation of the plan.

On September 5, 1989, President Bush, speaking from the presidential desk in the Oval Office, announced his plan for achieving “victory over drugs” in his first major prime-time address to the nation, broadcast on all three national television networks. We want to focus on this incident as an example of the way politicians and the media systematically misinformed and deceived the public in order to promote the War on Drugs. During the address, Bush held

up to the cameras a clear plastic bag of crack labeled "EVIDENCE." He announced that it was "seized a few days ago in a park across the street from the White House." Its contents, Bush said, were "turning our cities into battle zones and murdering our children." The president proclaimed that, because of crack and other drugs, he would "more than double" federal assistance to state and local law enforcement. The next morning the picture of the president holding a bag of crack was on the front pages of newspapers across America.

About two weeks later, the *Washington Post*, and then National Public Radio and other newspapers, discovered how the president of the United States had obtained his bag of crack. According to White House and DEA officials, "the idea of the President holding up crack was [first] included in some drafts" of his speech. Bush enthusiastically approved. A White House aide told the *Post* that the president "liked the prop. . . . It drove the point home." Bush and his advisors also decided that the crack should be seized in Lafayette Park across from the White House so the president could say that crack had become so pervasive that it was being sold "in front of the White House."

This decision set up a complex chain of events. White House Communications Director David Demarst asked Cabinet Affairs Secretary David Bates to instruct the Justice Department "to find some crack that fit the description in the speech." Bates called Richard Weatherbee, special assistant to Attorney General Dick Thornburgh, who then called James Milford, executive assistant to the DEA chief. Finally, Milford phoned William McMullen, special agent in charge of the DEA's Washington office, and told him to arrange an undercover crack buy near the White House because "evidently, the President wants to show it could be bought anywhere."

Despite their best efforts, the top federal drug agents were not able to find anyone selling crack (or any other drug) in Lafayette Park, or anywhere else in the vicinity of the White House. Therefore, in order to carry out their assignment, DEA agents had to entice someone to come to the park to make the sale. Apparently, the only person the DEA could convince was Keith Jackson, an eighteen-year-old African-American high school senior. McMullen reported that it was difficult because Jackson "did not even know where the White House was." The DEA's secret tape recording of the conversation revealed that the teenager seemed baffled by the request: "Where the [expletive deleted] is the White House?" he asked. Therefore, McMullen told the *Post*, "we had to manipulate him to get him down there. It wasn't easy."

The undesirability of selling crack in Lafayette Park was confirmed by men from Washington, D.C., imprisoned for drug selling, and interviewed by National Public Radio. All agreed that nobody would sell crack there because,

among other reasons, there would be no customers. The crack-using population was in Washington's poor African-American neighborhoods some distance from the White House. The *Washington Post* and other papers also reported that the undercover DEA agents had not, after all, actually seized the crack, as Bush had claimed in his speech. Rather, the DEA agents purchased it from Jackson for \$2400 and then let him go.

This incident illustrates how a drug scare distorts and perverts public knowledge and policy. The claim that crack was threatening every neighborhood in America was not based on evidence; after three years of the scare, crack remained predominantly in the inner cities where it began. Instead, this claim appears to have been based on the symbolic political value seen by Bush's speech writers. When they sought, after the fact, to purchase their own crack to prove this point, they found that reality did not match their script. Instead of changing the script to reflect reality, a series of high-level officials instructed federal drug agents to *create* a reality that would fit the script. Finally, the president of the United States displayed the procured prop on national television. Yet, when all this was revealed, neither politicians nor the media were led to question the president's policies or his claims about crack's pervasiveness.

As a result of Bush's performance and all the other antidrug publicity and propaganda, in 1988 and 1989, the drug war commanded more public attention than any other issue. The media and politicians' antidrug crusade succeeded in making many Americans even more fearful of crack and other illicit drugs. A *New York Times*/CBS News poll has periodically asked Americans to identify "the most important problem facing this country today." In January 1985, 23% answered war or nuclear war; less than 1% believed the most important problem was drugs. In September 1989, shortly after the president's speech and the blizzard of drug stories that followed, 64% of those polled believed that drugs were now the most important problem, and only 1% thought that war or nuclear war was most important. Even the *New York Times* declared in a lead editorial that this reversal was "incredible" and then gently suggested that problems like war, "homelessness and the need to give poor children a chance in life" should perhaps be given more attention.

A year later, during a lull in antidrug speeches and coverage, the percentage citing "drugs" as the nation's top problem had dropped to 10%. Noting this "precipitous fall from a remarkable height," the *Times* observed that an "alliance of Presidents and news directors" shaped public opinion about drugs. Indeed, once the White House let it be known that the president would be giving a prime-time address on the subject, all three networks tripled their

coverage of drugs in the two weeks prior to his speech and quadrupled it for a week afterward. All this occurred while nearly every index of drug use was dropping.

The crack scare continued in 1990 and 1991, although with somewhat less media and political attention. By the beginning of 1992—the last year of the Bush administration—the War on Drugs in general, and the crack scare in particular, had begun to decline significantly in prominence and importance. However, even as the drug war was receiving less notice from politicians and the media, it remained institutionalized, bureaucratically powerful, and extremely well funded (especially police, military, and education/propaganda activities).

From the opening shots in 1986 to President Bush's national address in 1989, and through all the stories about "crack babies" in 1990 and 1991, politicians and the media depicted crack as supremely evil—the most important cause of America's problems. As recently as February of 1994, a prominent *New York Times* journalist repeated the claim that "An entire generation is being sacrificed to [crack]." As in all drug scares since the nineteenth-century crusade against alcohol, a core feature of drug war discourse is the *routinization of caricature*—worst cases framed as typical cases, the episodic rhetorically recrafted into the epidemic.

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CRACK AS AN EPIDEMIC AND PLAGUE

The empirical evidence on crack use suggests that politicians and journalists have routinely used the words "epidemic" and "plague" imprecisely and rhetorically as words of warning, alarm, and danger. Therefore, on the basis of press reports, it is difficult to determine if there was any legitimacy at all in the description of crack use as an epidemic or plague. Like most other drug researchers and epidemiologists, we have concluded that crack addiction has never been anything but relatively rare across the great middle strata of the U.S. population. If the word "epidemic" is used to mean a disease or disease-like condition that is "widespread" or "prevalent," then there has never been an epidemic of crack addiction (or even crack use) among the vast majority of Americans. Among the urban poor, however, especially African-American and Latino youth, heavy crack use has been more common. An "epidemic of crack use" might be a description of what happened among a

distinct minority of teenagers and young adults from impoverished urban neighborhoods in the mid to late 1980s. However, many more people use tobacco and alcohol heavily than use cocaine in any form. Alcohol drinking and tobacco smoking each kills far more people than all forms of cocaine and heroin use combined. Therefore, “epidemic” would be more appropriate to describe tobacco and alcohol use. But politicians and the media have not talked about tobacco and alcohol use as epidemics or plagues. The word “epidemic” also can mean a rapidly spreading disease. In this precise sense as well, in inner-city neighborhoods, crack use may have been epidemic (spreading rapidly) for a few years among impoverished young African-Americans and Latinos. However, crack use was never spreading fast or far enough among the general population to be termed an epidemic there.

“Plague” is even a stronger word than epidemic. Plague can mean a “deadly contagious disease,” an epidemic “with great mortality,” or it can refer to a “pestilence,” an “infestation of a pest, [e.g.,] a plague of caterpillars.” Crack is a central nervous system stimulant. Continuous and frequent use of crack often burns people out and does them substantial psychological and physical harm. But even very heavy use does not usually directly kill users. In this sense, crack use is not a plague. One could say that drug dealers were “infesting” some blocks of some poor neighborhoods in some cities, that there were pockets of plague in some specific areas; but that was not how “crack plague” was used.

When evaluating whether the extent and dangers of crack use match the claims of politicians and the media, it is instructive to compare how other drug use patterns are discussed. For example, an unusually balanced *New York Times* story (October 7, 1989, p. 26) compared crack and alcohol use among suburban teenagers and focused on the middle class. The *Times* reported that, except for a few “urban pockets” in suburban counties, “crack and other narcotics are rarely seen in the suburbs, whether modest or wealthy.” As the *Times* explained:

Unlike crack, which is confined mainly to poor urban neighborhoods, alcohol seems to cut across Westchester’s socio-economic lines. . . . Westchester is not unusual. Across the United States, alcohol eclipses all other drugs tried by high school students. According to a survey by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, 64 percent of 16,300 high school seniors surveyed in 1988 had drunk alcohol in the last month, compared with 18 percent who had smoked marijuana and 1.6 percent who had smoked crack.

The *Times* also reported that high school seniors were outdrinking the general adult population. Compared to the 64% of teenagers, only 55% of adults had consumed alcohol in the last month. Furthermore, teenagers have been drinking more than adults since at least 1972, when the surveys began. Even more significant is the *kind* of drinking teenagers do—what the *Times* called “excessive ‘binge’ drinking”: “More than a third of the high school seniors had said that in the last two weeks they had had five or more drinks in a row.” Drinking is, of course, the most widespread form of illicit drug use among high school students. As the *Times* explained, on the weekend, “practically every town has at least one underage party, indoors or out” and that “fake identification cards, older siblings, friends, and even parents all help teenagers obtain” alcohol.

The point we wish to emphasize is that even though illicit alcohol use was far more prevalent than cocaine or crack use, and even though it held substantial risk for alcohol dependence, addiction, drinking-driving deaths, and other alcohol-related problems, the media and politicians have not campaigned against teen drunkenness. Used as a descriptive term meaning “prevalent,” the word “epidemic” fits teenage drinking far better than it does teenage crack use. Although many organizations have campaigned against drinking and driving by teenagers, the politicians and media have not used terms like “epidemic” or “plague” to call attention to illicit teenage drinking and drunkenness. Unlike the *Times* articles on crack, often on the front page, this article on teen drunkenness was placed in the second section on a Saturday.

It is also worth noting the unintentionally ironic mixing of metaphors, or of diagnoses and remedies, when advocates for the War on Drugs described crack use as an epidemic or plague. Although such disease terminology was used to call attention to the consequences of crack use, most of the federal government’s domestic responses have centered on using police to arrest users. Treatment and prevention have always received a far smaller proportion of total federal antidrug funding than police and prisons do as a means of handling the “epidemic.” If crack use is primarily a crime problem, then terms like “wave” (as in crime wave) would be more fitting. But if this truly is an “epidemic”—a widespread disease—then police and prisons are the wrong remedy, and the victims of the epidemic should be offered treatment, public health programs, and social services.

Finally, we wish to call attention to one particularly flagrant example of a prominent journalist misinforming millions of readers. . . . [I]n 1986, the editor in chief of *Newsweek*, Richard M. Smith, began a full-page editorial with the assertion that “An epidemic [of illicit drugs] is abroad in America, as per-

vasive and dangerous in its way as the plagues of medieval times.” The claim that the effect of illicit drug use in America is comparable in destruction to medieval plagues is an easy one to check. Any good encyclopedia explains that the plague is a bacterial disease that kills people, often very quickly. The bubonic plague killed roughly one hundred million people in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia during the sixth century. In the fourteenth century, the so-called “Black Death” killed one-fourth to one-half the entire population of Europe, about seventy-five million people, *in a few years*. In the United States, perhaps seven to ten thousand deaths a year are “related” to all forms of illicit drug use combined. It is simply untrue that in America the effects of illicit drug use are “as pervasive and dangerous” as medieval plagues. *Newsweek’s* statement offers falsehoods as facts. Yet it was a high-profile, well-thought-out statement, a model, given by the editor of a top news magazine, of the way reporters should write about drug issues. And reporters and editors certainly seemed to pick up the message. For example, a month later, *U.S. News and World Report* noted that “illicit drugs pervade American life . . . a situation that experts compare to medieval plagues—the No. 1 problem we face.”

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE “CRACK CRISIS”

If the many claims about an “epidemic” or “plague” endangering “a whole generation” of youth were at odds with the best official data, then what else was animating the new War on Drugs? In fact, even if all the exaggerated claims about crack had been true, it would not explain all the attention crack received. Poverty, homelessness, auto accidents, handgun deaths, and environmental hazards are also widespread, costly, even deadly, but most politicians and journalists never speak of them in terms of crisis or plague. Indeed, far more people were (and still are) injured and killed every year by domestic violence than by illicit drugs, but one would never know this from media reports or political speeches. The existence of government studies suggesting that crack contributed to the deaths of a small proportion of its users, that an unknown but somewhat larger minority of users became addicted to it, that its use was related to some forms of crime, and so on were neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for all the attention crack received.

Like other sociologists, historians, and students of drug law and public policy, we suggest that understanding antidrug campaigns requires more than evidence of drug abuse and drug-related problems, which can be found in almost any period. It requires analyzing these crusades and scares as phe-