behave and how would their health fare with abundant access to cocaine? Would it be used widely or intensively or both? Finally, comparative studies from countries such as Holland can tell us a great deal about the effects of more freely available cannabis and heroin. We have a lot to learn from the Dutch.

There is a paradox here: the use of less legal force may actually result in producing more control over the drug situation in this country. Consider the analogy of a panic stop in an automobile. In a typical scenario, a driver observes a sudden obstruction in the road and slams on the brakes in order to avoid a collision. If too much force is used on the pedal, the sudden forward weight transfer will very likely induce front-wheel lockup. At that point, the car starts skidding out of control. If the driver turns the wheel left or right, the car will simply keep on skidding forward toward the very obstacle that the driver is trying to avoid. In this moment of panic, the “logical” or instinctive thing to do is to stomp the brake pedal even harder. But that is absolutely wrong. The correct thing to do to stop the skid is to modulate the brake pressure, releasing the pedal just enough to permit the front wheels to begin rolling again so that steering control is restored. Thus, the correct and safe response is counter-intuitive, while the instinctive response sends the driver skidding toward disaster.

Square Pegs, Round Holes

Tom Flynn

Opposition to the Bush administration’s War on Drugs is beginning to emerge across a broad front and from every part of the ideological spectrum. It may be the only issue that brings together Alan Dershowitz, Ira Glasser, Milton Friedman, and William F. Buckley. (Buckley called it as unwinnable as the war in Vietnam.) They and many others agree that most of the damage drugs have wrought in our inner cities and in Latin America proceeds from their illegality, not from their chemical effects. Critics suggest that legalization would not increase drug use; the experience of the Netherlands, where most drugs are legal, bears this out, as does applicable U.S. data. (For example, in a University of Alaska study, marijuana use among high-school students dropped below the national average after private use of the drug was decriminalized.) Critics also charge that the government stance obstructs promising programs, from nonjudgmental treatment centers to free-needle programs, that might combat the spread of AIDS and other diseases linked to drug use. They note that alcohol and tobacco killed almost half a million people last year, while less than 2,000 died due to drugs—mostly in shootouts, not from shooting up. Finally, critics call our attention to the corrosive effects that “wartime” zeal has on civil liberties.

But the White House will have none of it. Urine testing continues; so do “zero-tolerance” seizures of personal property prior to due process, indiscriminate police searches of entire streets, and all the rest. How far can it go? Last October, drug agents seized the mailing lists of garden-supply stores in forty-six states to obtain names of people who had bought home hydroponic gardening equipment, which can be used to grow marijuana. When officers raided homes across the country, they mainly rounded up wastefully tomato growers.

It seems increasingly obvious to everyone but the administration that the War on Drugs cannot work. Why the myopia? Drug czar William Bennett gives us a hint when he writes, “I remain an ardent defender of our nation’s laws against illegal drug use and our nation’s efforts to enforce them, because I believe drug use is wrong. . . . A true friend of freedom understands that government has a responsibility to craft and uphold laws that help educate citizens about right and wrong.”

In other words, never mind the logical-sounding rhetoric about lost productivity due to drug use on the job. The real motive behind the War on Drugs is nothing other than the hoary authoritarian lust to legislate morals. For most FREE INQUIRY readers, this is not news. But a closer look at the political and philosophical implications of this mindset reveals the real threat the War on Drugs represents: a return to pre-humanistic ways of thinking at the highest levels of government.

Humanists can play an important role in the drug-war debate by stressing why it is pointless to legislate morality. It is important to discuss the human and economic costs of forcing drugs underground, and to be critical when antidrug zeal rides roughshod over civil liberties. But these are symptoms, single chips from the politico-moral “workbench” where square pegs are being pounded one after another into a very round hole. We should strive to keep the debate focused there, because nothing will improve until Bush, Bennett, et al. can be persuaded to put away their hammers.