

## THE WAR ON DRUGS



## A modest proposal to end narcotics epidemic

*In These Times* has been reporting on government-sanctioned cocaine smuggling by Nicaraguan contra supporters since December 1986, when our lead story asked "Is North network cocaine connected?" Since then, while the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other major media outlets ignored administration tolerance of drug smuggling, we kept at it. Among other things, we pointed out that the administration's efforts to circumvent the law had led it to rely on drug money to finance its war against Nicaragua in a manner similar to the CIA's smuggling of heroin in the '60s to pay for the secret wars in Laos and Cambodia.

Finally—last week—the *New York Times*, in a full-page story, discovered that "U.S. Security Interests Thwart War on the Narcotics Trade." The administration's "preoccupation with the contra war," the *Times* wrote, has contributed to a "lack of urgency" in the war on drugs. In both Honduras and Panama, it reported, strong evidence of cocaine trafficking was ignored by the Reagan administration. But even though Sen. John Kerry (D-MA) insists that "there is a network of drug trafficking through the contras" that "goes right up to Mario Calero, Adolfo Calero and Enrique Bermudez," and that he "can produce specific law-enforcement officials who will tell you that they have been called off drug investigations because the CIA is involved," the story concluded that "no solid evidence has been found to document that the main contra group, led by Adolfo Calero, financed the war with drug profits."

**Showcasing:** In fact, the evidence that U.S. officials closed their eyes to the contras' drug shipments into this country as a way of paying for their war grows daily. Administration officials put on a great show of diligence in the "war against drugs," most recently with the arrest in Honduras of Medellin drug cartel member Juan Ramon Matta Ballesteros (see story on page 3) and Attorney General Edwin Meese's recent week-long tour of Latin America. But these showcase exercises don't wash.

As Rep. Charles B. Rangle (D-NY) charges, administration officials "don't want to talk [to Congress] about drugs. They want to talk about arms and communists and terrorists." But, Rangle adds, "com-

munists aren't killing our kids. Drugs and drug traffickers are." And Rangle is more in tune than the administration with the wishes of the American people. A *New York Times*/CBS News poll last week found that by a margin of 63-21 percent, Americans thought it more important to put a stop to drug dealing than to support anti-Communist regimes in Central America.

Drugs are a serious social problem, but as the Indochina war and the wars in Central America made clear, drug trafficking is so lucrative that it is virtually impossible to control, especially when the interests of the drug runners and covert government operators coincide. The upsurge in cocaine traffic in recent years has created an industry that generates an estimated \$60 billion-\$120 billion a year in the U.S. And it has led to more widespread corruption within the American criminal justice system than at any time since Prohibition.

Yet the experts agree that drug abuse is not a raging epidemic, and that the number of addicts—some 3 million—is much less than the number of alcoholics. In 1984, for example, tobacco consumption was responsible for 320,000 deaths in the U.S., while alcohol contributed to 10 percent of all work-related injuries, 40 percent of all suicides and another 40 percent of highway deaths. The National Council on Alcoholism says that the total number of deaths attributed to all illicit drugs that year combined was only 3,500.

Meanwhile, an estimated \$8 billion a year is being spent by government at various levels to combat drugs. A bill now before Congress would allocate \$2.4 billion in federal money to beef up administration anti-drug activity, and local enforcement efforts are being increased everywhere.

**Beyond "just say no":** The tragedy of drug abuse, especially in the inner cities, is real. But it should be separated from the enormous criminal machine that has developed to supply illicit drugs. Telling a young person to "just say no" is pointless when he can make \$5,000 a day as a pusher. If these same drugs were decriminalized and regulated by law in the same way alcohol and tobacco are, the motive for the drug trade would disappear and our efforts could be shifted to the real problems of addiction. If that happened, the enormous cost to fight drugs, the corruption of our officials and drug-related violence on our streets could be ended. Then as Hugh Downs suggested on ABC News last week, the next time American intelligence agents decide to wage a war, they might have to go to Congress—instead of the drug barons—to get the money.

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By Salim Muwakkil

## Martin Luther King's legacy withstands test of time

**E**VEN BEFORE AN ASSASSIN'S BULLET felled Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. 20 years ago, the need for his style of leadership was already dying.

A singular, sainted leader may ring some bells with the disenfranchised castes, but when a group gains a secure identity and some measure of social empowerment it seldom has a need for such figures.

King's civil rights victories spurred a growing sense of power among black Americans and allowed them access to sectors of society from which other kinds of black leadership could emerge:

- The passage of civil rights legislations in the mid-'60s greased the way for a proliferation of black elected officials, their administrative aides and appointees;

- Aggressive recruitment and affirmative-action strategies adopted during the King era added blacks (though far too few) to the ranks of corporate and academic America; and

- The nation's cultural media became more receptive to black contributions and perceptions.

Black leadership is no longer located exclusively in the pulpit or at the head of demonstrations, but is varied and multifaceted. Messiahs lose their jobs when their flocks lose their limitations, and King did more than most to reduce blacks' external limitations.

**Gains and losses:** During the period of social activity ushered in by the civil rights movement, some blacks made significant gains. In 1960, for example, only 38 percent of young black adults had a high school education, and by 1978 the figure was 81 percent. The proportion of blacks with incomes of \$30,000 or more is larger than it has ever been (in comparative dollars) and a solid black middle class has emerged.

But there's also been a simultaneous trend: median black income is only 57 percent of whites', just 2 percent higher than in 1964. What's more, the interracial class gap is also widening. The ranks of the so-called black underclass—an urban, poverty-stricken population—have grown dramatically. According to University of Chicago sociologist William J. Wilson, "In the 10 largest cities, the number of blacks in extreme poverty areas increased 104 percent between 1970 and 1980."

In a perverse sense, King can also be blamed for that. After all, he fought to kill the restrictive racial covenants that had previously confined the black working and middle classes to their inner-city neighborhoods. When residential segregation was outlawed, many relatively well-off blacks left for greener pastures. And, Wilson argues, their exodus increased the cultural and economic isolation of those left behind.

"I believe that the exodus of middle- and working-class families from many ghetto neighborhoods removes an important 'social buffer' that could deflect the full impact of the kind of prolonged and increasing joblessness that plagued inner-city neighborhoods in the '70s and early '80s," Wilson wrote in his widely-heralded book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

The inner cities were particularly vulnerable to the economic changes of the last two decades because black workers were concentrated in those industries that have been most severely affected by deindus-

trialization and the changes in the overall economy. Wilson argues for a restructuring of the country's industrial base to provide new jobs for those in the expanding underclass, and he says he believes King was beginning to focus more on such issues before he was assassinated.

While it has become fashionable in some circles to blame various Great Society programs for the increase of black poverty and its attendant ills (such as out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, welfare dependency, joblessness, crime, academic underachievement and vandalism), Wilson's data reveals that the expansion of the underclass is a much more complicated story. An important part of that story, however, has been the growing estrangement of the black middle and working classes from their less-fortunate brethren.

**King's legacy?** The deterioration of the inner city is not generally considered a part of King's legacy, but according to some authorities it should be. Harold Cruse, professor emeritus at the University of Michigan, has condemned the entire civil rights movement for what he argues was its faulty emphasis on integration.

In his view, the notion that social equality and cultural assimilation are more important than black economic development is the primary reason blacks remained trapped at the bottom of the economic ladder. Cruse has been a consistent critic of integrationist strategies since his landmark 1967 book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, and he steps up the attack with his latest book *Plural But Equal* (see *In These Times*, Feb. 3).

Cruse's argument that economic and cultural solidarity for blacks is the most pragmatic way to gain power in a society molded by ethnic pluralism reinforces his reputation as one of the country's most unpredictable black nationalists. His criticism of civil rights tactics avoids the mystical obscurantism usually offered by more ideological nationalists, yet his prescriptions are more exotic than the dry self-help nostrums of the nationalists-conservatives of the Booker T. Washington tradition (such as Robert Woodson, Tony Brown and Glenn Loury).

Still, Cruse's core argument against the civil rights strain of the black movement is virtually identical to those other nationalist variants: integration is irrelevant to black progress and a dependence on governmen-



tal largesse has devitalized the black community. Together with the newly empowered conservatives, nationalists have been successfully making that argument for the last decade or so. But the times are changing, and new information is proving them wrong.

**New data:** In addition to Wilson's path-breaking scholarship, a welter of new research is revealing that contemporary criticisms of the social spending programs of the '60s and '70s were way off base. Rather than encouraging dependence and sociopathic behavior, as its many detractors claimed, the programs offered crucial assistance to those ravaged by wrenching economic shifts.

A new study by John Schwarz, a professor of political science at the University of Arizona, is another in a lengthening line that counters the conventional wisdom of the Reagan era. Entitled *Americans' Hidden Success*, the study argues that the anti-pov-

erty and public-assistance programs of the '60s and '70s had "a positive effect in reducing poverty at a time when the addition of nearly 30 million Baby-Boom workers created an era of surplus labor," Schwarz writes.

"Even during the economically flaccid '70s, the American economy outperformed the record of the '50s and the '80s. But since the 'Reagan revolution,' our economy's growth rates have actually slowed, poverty has increased and America has fallen disastrously in debt to foreign nations as well as future generations of our own citizens."

While this new study documents the gains made by the poorest citizens during a period of increased social spending—"between 1965 and 1979, the proportion of Americans living in poverty declined from 13 percent to 6.8 percent..."—it also emphasizes the benefits to society at large. "A little history helps us to understand that social programs do work," writes Schwarz, "and cutting social spending hurts us all."

Two decades after his death, King's urgings to increase investments in human capital are being echoed in the most unlikely places. The April edition of the Dow Jones & Company's *American Demographics* contains an article that links the well-being of black America to a consumer windfall for American corporations.

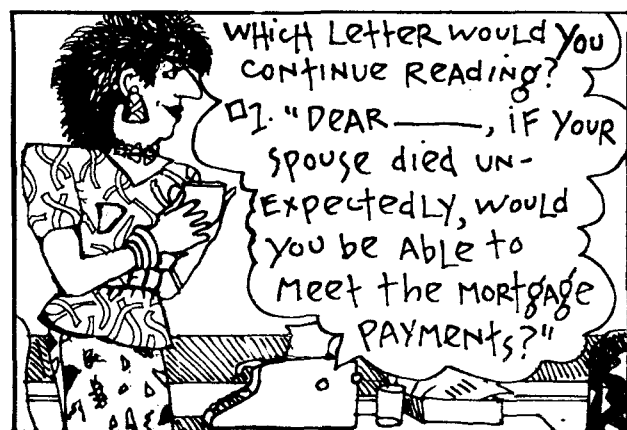
"If reality could be altered—if black households and incomes matched those of all Americans, there would be more than a \$100 billion increase in the personal income of Americans, a 3 percent increase in the nation's GNP, and a consumer market that stirs the imagination," writes George Sternlieb and James Hughes. "The windfall would be roughly equivalent to the total GNP of countries like Switzerland, Belgium or Sweden."

When the voices of raw capitalism begin echoing Great Society rhetoric, there's evidence of a shifting current. "As the black share of the population grows, the burden of black economic deprivation becomes increasingly significant," Sternlieb and Hughes continue. "The high price of being black in the U.S. is paid by all of society."

What's more, they add, there are enormous benefits to all Americans if black incomes matched those of Americans in general. "Put another way, the American economy will lose \$111 billion annually by 1995 because of the fragmentation of black households and their lower household incomes.... American marketers have a vital interest in the economic prospects of blacks. Black economic progress makes business sense." King couldn't have agreed more.

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SYLVIA



by Nicole Hollander