

Originally published 12:00 a.m., February 6, 2010, updated 05:48 a.m., February 8, 2010

LYNCH: Drug czar should go

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Voters are disgusted by the reckless spending of politicians in Washington. The backlash is coming, so policymakers are now scrambling to do something, or at least be seen as doing something, about the enormous federal debt. Now is a good time for Congress to abolish government agencies that are outdated, dysfunctional or just unnecessary.

A prime candidate for abolition is the office of the so-called "drug czar."

The position of the drug czar was created by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act in 1988. It was a time of drug war hysteria. Former first lady Nancy Reagan called casual drug users "accomplices to murder." President George H.W. Bush vowed to make the war one of his top priorities. During his inaugural address, he said, "Take my word for it. This scourge will stop." The conservative firebrand William Bennett became the first czar and made headlines with brash talk of beheading drug dealers. The nation's capital was declared to be a "high intensity drug-trafficking" zone. There were raids and arrests - including the notorious trial of then-Mayor Marion Barry.

In theory, the drug czar's office was supposed to develop a long-term strategy to win the drug war and bring about a "drug-free society." Each year, the czar would call for more governmental efforts to "reduce demand" and to "disrupt the supply" of narcotics. Instead of millions, the government started to spend billions.

The bureaucracy flourished as more agents were hired and more high-tech equipment was purchased. The criminal justice system expanded to handle the influx of cases. More prosecutors. More judges. More prison guards.

And yet, millions and millions of Americans continued using drugs. We now know that Presidents Obama and Clinton were among them. Indeed, nowadays, police agencies like the FBI can only recruit young people if the agencies are willing to overlook past drug use.

The goal of "disrupting supply" has been proved farcical. Drugs are as widely available as ever. Indeed, Washington remains a city with thriving drug traffic. There are open-air drug markets in many neighborhoods. More than a decade after the drug czar went into business, a commission on federal law enforcement practices gave this blunt assessment: "Despite a record number of seizures and a flood of legislation, this Commission is not aware of any evidence that the flow of narcotics into the United States has been reduced." No one thinks that hiring more Border Patrol agents will make a dent.

The violence and destabilization have become most acute at our southern border. According to the Los Angeles Times' ongoing project on the drug war in Mexico, more than 9,900 people have been slain in Mexican drug-related violence since January 2007. The kidnappings and killings that have become commonplace across the border are now spilling into the American Southwest. Government efforts in Colombia have already cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$5 billion, and Mexico is slated to receive about \$1.4 billion. Meanwhile, the killings continue at a rate that has prompted the State Department to issue travel advisories to Americans traveling to our southern neighbor.

The drug czar has also meddled in local politics. Some states, for example, have moved to change their laws to allow marijuana to be used by certain patients in consultation with doctors. Whenever a state has a referendum about medical marijuana on the ballot, the federal drug czar typically comes in to lobby against the measure. Since the czar was created to oversee federal policies, such politicking at the local level is outside his sphere - and is thus an abuse of power.

The office of the drug czar issues an annual report regarding the efficacy of drug policies. Scholars are skeptical of those reports because the bureaucrats invariably prepare reports that come to the defense of existing policy and "spin" the data to find good news and "progress." An independent analysis of the drug office in 2007 found "overwhelming evidence of consistently false and dishonest claims."

Perversely, Congress tends to reward government agencies that perform poorly. When the drug czar's office was created in 1990, its budget was \$12 million; this year, the office will cost more than \$400 million.

If Congress wants to take a serious step to curb reckless and wasteful spending, it ought to admit the futility of the drug war in the same way we came to realize that alcohol prohibition was misguided. If Congress is only ready to abolish some of its very worst mistakes, it should get rid of our drug czar.

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