

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #072

The War on Drugs

[00:00:00] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The War on Drugs.

[00:00:29] In 1971, President Richard Nixon declared drugs to be a [menace](#)¹ to society, and that there was to be a war against them.

[00:00:40] Almost 50 years later, we are going to tell the story of why this war was [waged](#)², what actually happened, what its impact was and who, if anyone has won the war.

¹ threat, something that is likely to cause harm

² start (a war)

The War on Drugs

[00:00:54] Before we get right into that, though if you are listening to this episode on your favourite podcast app, let me just remind you that you can get all of them bonus episodes, plus subtitles, transcripts, and key vocabulary over at the website, which is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:13] This is also where you can check out becoming a member of Leonardo English and join a community of curious minds from, I think it's almost 20 different countries now, doing meetups exchanging ideas and generally improving their English in a more interesting way.

[00:01:30] So if that is of interest, and I hope it is, then the place to go to is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:38] Okay then let's talk about The War on Drugs, a war that has cost the United States over a trillion dollars.

[00:01:48] To understand why this war was declared we need to go a little bit further back, as Nixon's [declaration](#)³ didn't come out of nothing, it was to a certain degree, the next logical step to what US policy had been over the past a hundred years or so.

[00:02:08] When, what we now consider hard drugs were first [synthesised](#)⁴, so things like cocaine and heroin their effects weren't as well known as they are today.

³ an official announcement

⁴ produce a substance via a chemical reaction

The War on Drugs

[00:02:19] [Morphine](#)⁵ was [isolated](#)⁶ at the start of the 19th century and [syringes](#)⁷, which allow direct insertion of substances into your [veins](#)⁸ were first invented in 1851.

[00:02:33] And during the American Civil War, tens of thousands of soldiers were given [morphine](#) for pain relief, and after the end of the war, there were a large number of addicted [veterans](#)⁹.

[00:02:46] Up until the start of the 20th century, heroin was still available over the counter in pharmacies.

[00:02:55] It was something that you could be prescribed to treat a sore throat or for [insomnia](#)¹⁰.

[00:03:01] Cocaine was also widely available, and this wasn't only in the United States; Sherlock Holmes, the famous British detective is often found injecting himself with cocaine as a way to get inspired and to keep his energy levels up.

[00:03:20] If you didn't know that well, you should read some Sherlock Holmes.

⁵ a drug made from opium, often used for pain relief

⁶ obtained or extracted

⁷ a medical piece of equipment used for sucking liquid out or inserting liquid into somewhere

⁸ the tubes that carry blood to the heart

⁹ soldiers who fought in a war

¹⁰ the condition of not being able to sleep

The War on Drugs

[00:03:24] Even in the 1890s, Sears, the [iconic](#)¹¹ American department store had a popular [catalogue](#)¹² with an offer for a [syringe](#) and some cocaine for \$1 50,

[00:03:37] You could literally buy it from a [catalogue](#).

[00:03:39] The point is that these drugs that are now highly illegal were not only legal, but they were completely [tolerated](#)¹³, more so than things like alcohol or tobacco are in most societies in 2020.

[00:03:54] At the turn of the 20th century, the United States started to pass more regulation on these previously unregulated drugs.

[00:04:05] And of course, on one of the world's most popular drugs, alcohol.

[00:04:10] The [prohibition](#)¹⁴ era, which lasted from 1919 to 1933, banned the production and sale of all alcohol, although drugs like heroin and cocaine were still allowed.

[00:04:25] Strange, right?

[00:04:26] It's a complete reversal of the situation we have today.

¹¹ very famous or well known

¹² a magazine with a list of things you can buy

¹³ accepted, allowed

¹⁴ officially not allowing something

The War on Drugs

[00:04:30] As the world started to recover from the [trauma](#)¹⁵ of two world wars, in the United States, [recreational](#)¹⁶ drug use started to rise and particularly marijuana, which was associated with the [hippy](#)¹⁷ antiwar movement.

[00:04:46] At the same time, heroin use was starting to increase, in particular in African American communities.

[00:04:54] There was an increasing fear in America about the impact on society of drug use, and it's thought by many that this declaration of The War on Drugs was just a reaction to public opinion.

[00:05:12] However, there is another interesting angle.

[00:05:16] A man called John Ehrlichman, who was an [aide](#)¹⁸ to Nixon said that The War on Drugs was actually a way to disrupt both the antiwar [hippie](#) community and the African American population.

[00:05:32] He said, and I'm quoting directly here, " the Nixon White House had two enemies, the antiwar left and black people. We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with

¹⁵ severe shock

¹⁶ (of drugs) non-medical

¹⁷ someone in the 1960s and 1970s who was against violence

¹⁸ an important assistant

The War on Drugs

marijuana, and blacks with heroin, and then criminalising both heavily, we could disrupt those communities.

[00:05:55] We could arrest their leaders, [raid](#)¹⁹ their homes, break up their meetings and [vilify](#)²⁰ them night after night on the evening news."

[00:06:05] Marijuana was put into the most dangerous category of drugs, along with cocaine and heroin, and this meant that the police had incredible powers to go after the antiwar [hippy crowd](#)²¹, who they suspected of being frequent users of marijuana.

[00:06:24] Of course, the public reason for declaring The War on Drugs wasn't that.

[00:06:30] Nixon said "if we cannot destroy the drug [menace](#) in America, then it will surely in time destroy us. I am not prepared to accept this alternative."

[00:06:41] The goal of the drug war, at least from a public point of view, was to reduce and [eliminate](#)²² drug use.

¹⁹ make a surprise visit (especially by police or soldiers)

²⁰ to talk about in a negative way in order to get others to develop a negative opinion (of that person or group)

²¹ group

²² get rid of completely

The War on Drugs

[00:06:51] If you can stop the production of drugs, if you can stop them getting into the country, then you can stop them getting into the hands of citizens, then [bingo²³](#), the drug war would be won.

[00:07:04] Or more practically speaking, you make the punishment sufficiently high so that people don't want to take the risk.

[00:07:11] As a result, the price increases, so drugs become unaffordable.

[00:07:16] And what's more, not only are they expensive, but they are so hard to find that people can't find someone to buy them from, even if they can afford them.

[00:07:27] That's the idea, at least.

[00:07:29] So what actually happened?

[00:07:32] First, let's talk about what has happened to society, then we'll discuss whether The War on Drugs has worked or not.

[00:07:41] For starters, it has led to the [incarceration²⁴](#), the imprisonment of millions of people.

[00:07:49] The United States has around 5% of the world's population, but 25% of the world's imprisoned population, largely due to The War on Drugs.

²³ (colloquial) there you go

²⁴ imprisonment

The War on Drugs

[00:08:00] In 1971, when The War on Drugs was declared just under 0.2% of the US population was in prison.

[00:08:11] By 2008, this had risen to 0.8%.

[00:08:16] Of the 1.5 million Americans who are arrested each year for drug offenses, one third of them, half a million end up [behind bars](#)²⁵.

[00:08:27] And this as I'm sure we all know has an [inordinate](#)²⁶ impact on the black community, with one in five black Americans spending time [behind bars](#) for drug offenses.

[00:08:40] 13% of the American population is black, yet 40% of the [incarcerated](#)²⁷ population, the population in prison is black.

[00:08:50] So obviously The War on Drugs doesn't affect everyone equally.

[00:08:55] In terms of the effect of all this [cracking down](#)²⁸ on communities that sell and use drugs, the question to ask next is whether this has had the intended effect of making drugs harder to find and more expensive.

²⁵ in prison

²⁶ much more than expected or would be fair

²⁷ put in prison

²⁸ dealing with severely

The War on Drugs

[00:09:12] Certainly from an [accessibility](#)²⁹ point of view, it's obviously harder to buy drugs if they are illegal.

[00:09:18] Unlike in 1900, you can't just walk into a chemist and ask someone for some [morphine](#) or buy a [syringe](#) with some cocaine from a catalogue.

[00:09:29] But that's the easy part.

[00:09:31] Yes, drugs might still be quite easy to find in large parts of America, but they are still harder to find than if they were sold in supermarkets.

[00:09:41] Next up is the price question.

[00:09:44] Has The War on Drugs made drugs so unaffordable that people can't keep up with their [habits](#)³⁰?

[00:09:51] The answer to that is it's complicated, but probably not.

[00:09:57] For some drugs, in fact, completely the opposite has happened.

[00:10:01] The price of heroin reduced by 93% from 1891 to 2007, and the price of cocaine fell by 87%.

²⁹ ease of use, ease to get

³⁰ (of drugs) addiction

The War on Drugs

[00:10:12] Marijuana, one of the main drugs that The War on Drugs was intended to [eradicate](#)³¹ has remained a similar price since The War on Drugs was declared.

[00:10:24] In fact, no drug has become much more expensive; drugs are cheaper than ever before.

[00:10:32] Economists have a name for this: the balloon effect.

[00:10:37] If you think of a balloon, if you squeeze it the air moves, it doesn't disappear, it just goes somewhere else.

[00:10:44] With drugs, they are so [lucrative](#)³², so profitable, that even if the production is stopped in one area, it will be taken up by another group in another area.

[00:10:56] This is exactly what happened with the [clamping down](#)³³ on cocaine production in Peru and Bolivia, it just moved to Colombia.

[00:11:05] And when marijuana farms were burned in certain areas of Mexico, production just moved elsewhere.

³¹ get rid of completely

³² produces a lot of money

³³ to take action against something

The War on Drugs

[00:11:13] And even in areas further away from the United States, where The War on Drugs was first declared, the [crackdown](#)³⁴ on production often doesn't have any real impact at all.

[00:11:24] In Afghanistan, where not only has the US spent almost \$8 billion [cracking down](#) on [opium](#)³⁵ production, but it has a substantial military force based there, [opium](#) production reached historic record levels in 2013.

[00:11:43] The reality is, even though drugs are cheaper than ever before, there is still so much money to be made from them, especially in countries where the drug trade offers excellent economic opportunities, and it will be incredibly difficult, [nigh](#)³⁶ impossible for the production of drugs to stop while there are still millions of buyers across the world who are hungry for the product

[00:12:12] So The War on Drugs continues, but there have been a lot of hard questions asked over the past few years

[00:12:20] In June, 2011, the Global Commission on Drug Policy, which is as the name suggests a global [panel](#)³⁷ of world leaders, released its first report on The War on Drugs.

³⁴ see 'cracking down'

³⁵ a drug made from poppy seeds

³⁶ or even

³⁷ a small group

The War on Drugs

[00:12:34] It started with the words, "the global war on drugs has failed with [devastating³⁸](#) consequences for individuals and societies around the world."

[00:12:46] It went on to call for [urgent³⁹](#) [reforms⁴⁰](#) in drug policy, [decriminalising⁴¹](#) the nonviolent users of drugs and challenging [taboos⁴²](#) around usage.

[00:12:58] Yet, since that report, almost 10 years ago now, nothing significant has happened in The War on Drugs.

[00:13:06] Thanks to the ease with which prescription [opiates⁴³](#) have been handed out by doctors, there is a new generation of drug users who have turned to things like heroin when the prescription drugs don't work anymore.

[00:13:21] But there are constantly new and interesting ideas proposed.

[00:13:27] The first thing to say, which is important to clarify is that drug policy requires a country to choose between different, bad choices.

³⁸ very bad, causing a lot of damage

³⁹ very important and requiring action

⁴⁰ changes

⁴¹ stopping something from being illegal

⁴² subjects that are avoided

⁴³ drugs that contain opium, often used for pain relief

The War on Drugs

[00:13:38] There is an interesting interview with a man called Keith Humphries from Stanford university.

[00:13:44] He explained that there are five main factors that [policymakers](#)⁴⁴ need to choose between: freedom, pleasure, health, crime, and public safety.

[00:13:57] There is no one drug policy that allows you to optimise for all five of these.

[00:14:03] And you can't have everything.

[00:14:05] For example, if you believe that freedom and pleasure are the most important factors, then this is likely going to come to the [detriment](#)⁴⁵ of health, as drugs can be dangerous.

[00:14:19] Similarly, if you believe that reducing crime and increasing public safety are the most important things, then this is probably going to come with a reduction in freedom and pleasure.

[00:14:32] And this is really the route that The War on Drugs has taken.

[00:14:36] The [implicit](#)⁴⁶ message with The War on Drugs is that if [prohibition](#) reduces usage, then it's a good thing, whatever the other costs.

⁴⁴ people who decide policy and laws

⁴⁵ harm, negative effect

⁴⁶ suggested or understood, but not said

The War on Drugs

[00:14:46] Yet, given that there are legal drugs, legal opioids, which are now the greatest [gateway drugs](#)⁴⁷ to stronger things like heroin, one has to question whether this objective is even valid anymore.

[00:15:02] The US spends \$51 billion on The War on Drugs every year, yet allows pharmaceutical companies to make billions of dollars by selling other legal drugs to its citizens.

[00:15:17] It certainly seems like a bit of a contradiction to me. One thing that will be interesting to see in some states in the US where marijuana is legal, is how things might be different if instead of the US paying billions of dollars to stop drugs ever getting into a country, it legalised these drugs and collect taxes on them.

[00:15:41] At the moment, the [vast majority](#)⁴⁸ of the profits from the drug trade flow to organised crime gangs.

[00:15:49] But that's not how it needs to be.

[00:15:53] Drugs are expensive comparatively speaking, because of the fact that they are illegal and there is a risk involved with their production, transport, and sale.

⁴⁷ drugs that make it more likely that a harder (and more dangerous) drug will be used

⁴⁸ almost all

The War on Drugs

[00:16:04] The [raw materials](#)⁴⁹ on the other hand are typically pretty cheap, so the idea goes, what if, instead of all this money going to crime gangs, it went to the government via the tax system.

[00:16:18] It's certainly an interesting idea, and there was a study back in 2010 from the [libertarian](#)⁵⁰ Cato Institute that suggested that adding a tax to illegal drugs, similar to the one on tobacco and alcohol could raise almost \$50 billion in taxes every year, which could be spent on schools, hospitals, [drug rehabilitation](#)⁵¹, or all sorts of things that might be positive for society.

[00:16:48] The obvious [counter argument](#)⁵² to this is the fear that if drugs were legal usage would [skyrocket](#)⁵³, it would increase dramatically.

[00:16:58] However, this hasn't proved to be the case in countries that have [decriminalized](#) the use of drugs like Portugal, where the [prophecies](#)⁵⁴ about [every man and his dog](#)⁵⁵ deciding to start injecting heroin just haven't come true.

⁴⁹ the base ingredients

⁵⁰ someone who thinks that people should be free to do what they please without government interference

⁵¹ helping drug addicts stop using drugs

⁵² a point that is opposite to what was previously said

⁵³ Increase quickly

⁵⁴ statements about what will happen in the future

⁵⁵ (colloquial) everyone

The War on Drugs

[00:17:15] As almost every drug policy expert seems to repeat, there are no perfect solutions and [something has to give](#)⁵⁶.

[00:17:25] The War on Drugs will reach its 50 year anniversary next year, and what does seem to be clear is that although it may have started with [lofty](#)⁵⁷, ambitious aims, it seems that the main winners of the longest war in recent American history are the very criminal enterprises that the war set out to destroy.

[00:17:47] Okay, then that is it for today's episode on The War on Drugs.

[00:17:53] It's the kind of topic that lots of people have a strong view on, so I would love to know what you think.

[00:18:00] We have a lot of listeners in several countries outside the US which have been a centre for The War on Drugs, so if you have a view on how it has affected you or your country, I would love to know.

[00:18:15] You can email hi Hi@leonardoenglish.com

[00:18:19] And finally, one of our recent new members, an awesome guy called Mykhailo from Ukraine told me that I should do more [shout outs](#)⁵⁸ to celebrate the countries that new members have come from.

⁵⁶ you can't have everything

⁵⁷ high

⁵⁸ (colloquial) public congratulations

[00:18:30] So here we go.

[00:18:32] We had Mykhailo from Ukraine, of course, but the past few weeks have seen new members joining from Germany, Italy, Oman, Spain, France, Ireland, Czech Republic, Turkey, and Thailand.

[00:18:46] I probably missed out a few and apologies if I have, but anyway, if you recognise your country there, then welcome, it's great to have you on board.

[00:18:56] And if you would like to join them and discover a more interesting way to improve your English with access to all the bonus episodes, subtitles, transcripts, key vocabulary, and member only Q and A sessions, then the place to go to is [Leonardoenglish.com](http://leonardoenglish.com).

[00:19:13] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:19:19] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

| Word | Definition |
|-------------|---|
| Menace | threat, something that is likely to cause harm |
| Waged | start (a war) |
| Declaration | an official announcement |
| Synthesised | produce a substance via a chemical reaction |
| Morphine | a drug made from opium, often used for pain relief |
| Isolated | obtained or extracted |
| Syringes | a medical piece of equipment used for sucking liquid out or inserting liquid into somewhere |
| Veins | the tubes that carry blood to the heart |
| Veterans | soldiers who fought in a war |
| Insomnia | the condition of not being able to sleep |
| Iconic | very famous or well known |
| Catalogue | a magazine with a list of things you can buy |

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| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Tolerated | accepted, allowed |
| Prohibition | officially not allowing something |
| Trauma | severe shock |
| Recreational | (of drugs) non-medical |
| Hippy | someone in the 1960s and 1970s who was against violence |
| Aide | an important assistant |
| Raid | make a surprise visit (especially by police or soldiers) |
| Vilify | to talk about in a negative way in order to get others to develop a negative opinion (of that person or group) |
| Crowd | group |
| Eliminate | get rid of completely |
| Bingo | (colloquial) there you go |
| Incarceration | imprisonment |
| Behind bars | in prison |
| Inordinate | much more than expected or would be fair |
| Incarcerated | put in prison |

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| | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Cracking down | dealing with severely |
| Accessibility | ease of use, ease to get |
| Habits | (of drugs) addiction |
| Eradicate | get rid of completely |
| Lucrative | produces a lot of money |
| Clamping down | to take action against something |
| Crackdown | see 'cracking down' |
| Opium | a drug made from poppy seeds |
| Nigh | or even |
| Panel | a small group |
| Devastating | very bad, causing a lot of damage |
| Urgent | very important and requiring action |
| Reforms | changes |
| Decriminalising | stopping something from being illegal |
| Taboos | subjects that are avoided |

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| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Opiates | drugs that contain opium, often used for pain relief |
| Policymakers | people who decide policy and laws |
| Detriment | harm, negative effect |
| Implicit | suggested or understood, but not said |
| Gateway drugs | drugs that make it more likely that a harder (and more dangerous) drug will be used |
| Vast majority | almost all |
| Raw materials | the base ingredients |
| Libertarian | someone who thinks that people should be free to do what they please without government interference |
| Drug rehabilitation | helping drug addicts stop using drugs |
| Counter argument | a point that is opposite to what was previously said |
| Skyrocket | Increase quickly |
| Prophecies | statements about what will happen in the future |
| Every man and his dog | (colloquial) everyone |
| Something has to give | you can't have everything |

The War on Drugs

Lofty

high

Shout outs

(colloquial) public congratulations

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

You can email us at hi@leonardoenglish.com.