

## LAW ENFORCEMENT AGAINST PROHIBITION: LEAP

Howard Woolridge was outside of Utica, New York. It was a beautiful late summer day: sunny, low humidity, 80 degrees. He was riding his horse, Misty and wearing a tee-shirt that bears the slogan: Cops Say Legalize Drugs. Ask me why. Woolridge is not a lunatic and he's not been out in the sun too long. He's a retired law enforcement officer with 18-years on the job who some time ago decided that the war on drugs was more of a problem than the illicit drugs it was purporting to fight. Woolridge is also a long-rider, a real life cowboy who lives in Fort Worth and has an 817 area code. He's been riding Misty and a relief horse, Sam, since March 4, when he left Los Angeles for the 3,400 mile ride to New York Harbor. It's the second time Woolridge has crossed the US to end drug prohibition. In 2002??? he rode from Georgia to Oregon. When he finishes his trip on October 5, looking out at the Statue of Liberty he'll become the first person in recorded history to ever cross the states in both directions. He's been wearing his tee-shirt—he has several—for the last six years.

“When I first started wearing it,” he says, “people in Texas thought I was crazy. They thought my idea would destroy Texas and America. They believed the government propaganda that millions of people would pick up heroin or methamphetamine become junkies overnight if you legalized it.” But in the last two-to-three years, he says, he believes there has been a sea change in the attitude of the American public regarding the War on Drugs. “At any given Arbees, McDonalds, Rotary Club or Veterans hall people are overwhelmingly in favor of calling a halt to drug prohibition. Overwhelmingly.”

The area Woolridge is riding through was once part of the underground railroad that funneled slaves from the south up to Canada. “There are plaques on some of these houses saying they were part of it,” he says. “And seeing them reminds me of a guy I know, Bernie Ellis. For 10 years he provided free medical marijuana to three oncologists in the Nashville, Tennessee area for their patients undergoing chemotherapy. He never once met the doctors of course, it was all cloak and dagger. He'd bring the marijuana to an office worker who'd get it to the patient.”

“Well, he finally got busted last year. Now he's looking at five-years mandatory federal prison time, though that might go up to 10 because he had a shotgun on his farm when he got busted. And of course his million dollar farm has been forfeited because he grew the medical marijuana there.”

Howard's cell phone goes quiet for a minute. Then I hear what sounds like Howard choking back a low sob. Then quiet again. “Sorry. Got a little choked up for a second. Just came on me.”

He pauses to say hello to someone who pulled their car up next to him. “That's right. Cops say legalize,” he says in a strong, deep voice. “Why? Because if we do, we just might be able to keep drugs out of the hands of your 14-year old.” The person in the car shouts “Right on!” then drives off. “Okay, I'm back. What was I saying? Oh, yeah. Bernie. This is a guy who broke the law to help people and is now facing the consequences of that. Poor son of a bitch. Next time I see him he'll be in prison.”

Woolridge is not a lone ranger as an ex-cop looking to end prohibition. He's a Founding Member of an organization called Law Enforcement Against Prohibition or LEAP, an organization made up entirely of current or former members of all branches of law enforcement, who feel the drug war's a failure and would prefer to see legalization and regulation to the black market and incarceration. Founded in March, 2002 by five police officers, its membership now numbers 3,000, and come from the ranks of policemen, prison guards, DEA agents, judges and even prosecutors. They live in 48 states and 45 foreign countries. Modeled after the group Vietnam Veterans Against the War, LEAP's members hope that their experience in fighting the war on drugs will make their decision to call for an end to the war on drugs—they're after legalization and regulation of ALL illegal drugs—unassailable.

“We're the ones who fought the war,” says Jack Cole, LEAP's Executive Director and a retired detective lieutenant—26 years with the New Jersey State Police and 14 in their Narcotic Bureau, mostly undercover. “And I bear witness to the abject failure of the U.S. war on drugs and to the horrors these prohibitionist policies have produced.”

The LEAP website makes its position clear. “After nearly four decades of fueling the U.S. policy of a war on drugs with over half-a-trillion tax dollars and increasingly punitive policies, our confined population has quadrupled—More than 2.2 million of our citizens are currently incarcerated and every year we arrest an additional 1.6 million for nonviolent drug offenses—more per capita than any country in the world—Meanwhile, people continue dying in our streets while drug barons and terrorists continue to grow richer than ever before. We would suggest that this scenario must be the very definition of a failed public policy.”

To get that message out, in 2003 LEAP formed a speaker's bureau and since then have given nearly 1,500 speeches. But the organization has been careful not to preach to the converted. “We don't do hemp rallies or Million Man Marijuana Marches,” says Woolridge. “We do Kiwanis Clubs and PTA meetings and cop conventions. That's where the people we've got to reach go.”

And when they speak, LEAP's members tell their own stories, about their work and about how they came to feel the drug war was not the answer.

Woolridge, for instance, was a street cop in Michigan for 15 of his 18

years of service, before moving up to the rank of Detective for his last three years. "I didn't work directly with the drug war," he told the Weekly, "in that I wasn't in narcotics. Still, as a detective I was constantly working with felonies that touched on the drug war. Eight of ten burglary suspects I dealt with were on crack at the time. They were stealing for drug money."

To Woolridge, a house burglary is akin to rape, a deep personal violation. "The people I dealt with were all in real pain," he says. "And I got so fed up with it I began saying 'Why not let these guys have all the crack they want until they die.' Now I'd say 'Have all you want for a dollar.' That makes it their choice to live or die. Either way you don't have people breaking into houses for drug money anymore."

Jack Cole was directly involved in the drug war, with 14 years in a narcotics unit, and most of that as an undercover. To Cole, the whole concept of the war on drugs is wrong. "You declare war, you need soldiers. You have soldiers, they need an enemy. So we've effectively taken a peacekeeping force—the police—and turned them into soldiers whose enemies are the 110 million people who have tried illegal substances in the US." And to be an effective soldier, of course, you've got to dehumanize your enemy. "When I started out in narcotics," says Cole, a no-bs straight-talker, "I believed everything they told me. Drugs were bad. The people who did them were less than human. I was all for locking them up." Worse, he says, he and others often applied what they called a little "street justice" to the people they were arresting. "In our training we were taught to believe that drug users were the worst people in the world and whatever we did to them to try to stop their drug use was justified by the war on drugs." What they did was kick in home or apartment doors and have every man woman and child inside lie on the floor. If people didn't cooperate immediately, they were thrown to the floor. Then the place was ransacked. "When we searched for drugs we pretty much did as much damage as possible. We'd break bureaus, turn over beds, smash mirrors, throw things on the floor. Didn't matter because the people there weren't humans, right? And then if we did find any drugs we'd arrest everyone in the house: parents, sisters, brothers. And since we'd already kicked the door down when we came in it would be left open and anyone who wanted to enter could steal what they wanted. We never cared about that." Street justice in the war on drugs didn't stop there, says Cole. In court he says officers routinely changed testimony—time, locations and amounts of drug buys to insure convictions. "Anything that couldn't be checked to catch the officer in a lie." For Cole, he now admits that it didn't take long in doing undercover work to realize that the drug war was wrong and that street justice wasn't for him. He was mostly going after small timers who were involved in a business transaction in which both parties wanted to be involved. "My job as the undercover was to insinuate myself into that private transaction. To do that I had to become someone's confidant, their best friend. And once I was I would bust them." Asked why he didn't quit he admits that by the time he'd had his realization he too was hooked—on the adrenaline high of the game. "By the time I came to my senses I was I was working on big timers and pitting your mind against theirs was a great rush. But also it was hard to quit because we were considered by the public and our peers as heroes."

And then given that I'd worked with a lot of cops who applied bad street justice, I let myself believe that at least if I was the one catching them they'd be legally caught and I'd tell the truth and justice would prevail." He laughs. "Know what was the worst? When I realized that I liked and respected a lot of the bad guys much more than I liked or respected the guys I was working with."

**PROHIBITION: HAS IT WORKED BY ITS OWN STANDARDS?** For members of LEAP, for former and current members of law enforcement and the millions of Americans—as well as those impacted by US policy overseas—who have been caught up in the drug war, the subject is a serious one. Tens of thousands of lives have been lost to drug-turf wars in this country and more than that in drug producing and conduit nations like Colombia, Peru, Afghanistan, Burma, Mexico, Jamaica and dozens of others. Thousands of peace officers have died in the line of duty fighting the drug war; thousands of others have been injured physically and emotionally. Millions of us have had our homes burglarized and cars stolen to pay for drugs. Tens of millions of man-years have been lost to prison for primarily non-violent drug crimes, leaving millions of kids to grow up without fathers or mothers, or with parents suffering through drug addiction.

It might be fair to say that nearly every adult in the US has been impacted by either drugs or the war on drugs. The question the LEAP membership asks is whether or not that impact has been primarily because of drugs or because of the war we have been waging on them since Richard Milhous Nixon declared a modern War on Drugs as part of his election strategy to look tough on crime in 1968. The strategy worked and Nixon was elected. Nearly 40 years later LEAP believes it's time for Americans to look at the strategy of prohibition—which has been ramped up by every presidential administration since Nixon—to see if it is working. In their opinion, it's not. The stated goals of the war on drugs have been the same since the war was declared: to lower consumption, reduce addiction and dependence, and decrease the quality and quantity of available illegal drugs on American streets. Any evaluation of its success has to be judged by those goals. --In terms of lowering consumption, the DEA says that in 1965 less than 4 million Americans had ever tried an illegal drug. According to the most recent DEA statistics, more than 110 million Americans have now tried an illegal substance at least once in their lives. --In terms of dependence and addiction, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) the executive branch of government given the task of setting and administering drug policy in the US and abroad, says that in 2002 (the most recent figures available) 7.1 million people in the US were classified either as dependent on, or abusers of illegal substances. That's nearly double the number of people who had even tried them when Nixon declared his war. --Decreasing quality has also failed: in 1970, the average street heroin had a potency of 1-2 percent. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 2000, the

most recent year for which statistics are available on the ONDCP website, the national average purity for retail heroin was 36.8%. (On Sept 1, 2005, Drug Czar John Walters did offer effusive praise to the Drug Warriors fighting in Plan Colombia for reducing the strength of street heroin coming to the US from South America to 32.1 percent. No mention was made that that figure was between 1,600 and 2,400 times more potent than street heroin was when the War on Drugs was launched.) Similarly, street cocaine in the US was roughly 2-4 percent pure in 1968. In 2001, according to the ONDCP, that figure had jumped to a strength of 56 percent for average street buys. Marijuana, the most prevalent of all street drugs by far, was never tested for strength (quantity of the active ingredient THC) until the late 1970s. At that time the average pot confiscated by police tested roughly between 2 and 4 percent for THC. By 2001, the average THC content in confiscated marijuana had jumped to 5.2 percent. So if quality of illegal drugs is a barometer of the success of the war on drugs, thus far it's a failure, with heroin and cocaine quality rising between 1,500 and 3,000 percent and marijuana quality nearly doubling in the last 35 or so years. —Quantities of illegal drugs have also, unfortunately, increased considerably since the onset of the war on drugs. Heroin addicts have jumped from a few hundred thousand at that time to between 750,000 and one million today according to the ONDCP. Moreover, in 2001 roughly 3.1 million Americans (1.4% of the total population) 12 years and older had used heroin at least once in their lives. The good news, according to the ONDCP, is that more people are snorting it now as opposed to injecting it—though the ONDCP admits that snorting is more prevalent than it has been in the past because the quality is “up considerably” compared to what had been previously available on the street. Cocaine quantities have moved up and down over the years, according to the ONDCP. In 2000, there were an estimated 2,707,000 chronic cocaine users and 3,035,000 occasional users in the US, while a total of more than 33 million people aged 12 or older had used cocaine at least once in their lives. That last figure represents more than an 800 percent increase over the total number of people who had used any illegal drug in 1968, and is only for cocaine. The good news, according to the ONDCP, is that while Americans spent nearly 70 billion dollars on cocaine and crack in 1990, that number had decreased to 35.3 billion in 2000. Similarly, Americans smoked, injected or snorted only 259 metric tons of cocaine in 2000, compared to 447 in 1990. The bad news is that in 2002 more than 3.6 percent of 8th graders reported using cocaine at least once in their lifetime, and 2.5 % of 8th graders reported having tried crack. The price of cocaine, meanwhile, dropped from \$100 per gram of 2-4 percent pure cocaine in 1970 to \$25-\$50 per gram of 59 percent pure cocaine in 2002. In 1970 a kilogram of cocaine (2.2 pounds at roughly 25 percent pure) cost \$45,000 in New York City. Today, in any large city in the US it costs less than \$15,000 per kilo of 65% pure. Marijuana was the only drug of the big three which showed a price increase. In 1970, a bag of Mexican ditchweed (roughly an ounce) cost \$20. In 2005, that same bag costs nearly \$50. But most Americans who can afford it don't smoke Mexican ditchweed. They smoke US grown sensemilla, which runs up to \$400 per ounce. Given that the four areas by which the war on drugs has to be judged have proven dismal failures, say LEAP's members, prohibition hasn't worked. The only other barometer of the success of prohibition would be to ask whether it's every stopped anyone from trying drugs. To which question one LEAP member commented: Hell, it didn't work in the Garden of Eden, why would anyone believe it would work here? COLLATERAL DAMAGE And the problems of prohibition, say LEAP's membership, go beyond trying to save people from themselves; they cut deep into our American freedoms, costing us constitutional rights, promoting institutionalized racism and creating an uncontrollable and system-wide level of corruption among law enforcement unheard of prior to the war on drugs. The rights we've sacrificed in the name of the drug war are familiar to most of us: warrantless searches, the rights of policemen to demand identification without provocation, the loss of property to forfeiture laws and so forth. More horrendous than that is the institutionalized racism the war on drugs has promoted. It appears not only in the fact that inner city blacks caught with crack cocaine are sentenced federally for 5 grams to the same 5 year mandatory sentence that white middle-class powder-cocaine-snorting drug users get for 500 grams. Racism appears in the racial profiling that's been used by every policing agency in the US during the past 20 years, it appears in every aspect of the drug war. While the ONDCP claims that whites use more than 70% of all illegal drugs—Blacks use 13% and Latinos about 11%—blacks are sentenced to prison for drugs more than seven-times more frequently than whites. “Imagine,” says Cole, “one of the most racist places in the world: South Africa, 1993. At that time the South African government was incarcerating black males at the rate of 859 per 100,000 population. “In the United States today—the world's leading incarcerator—the overall rate of imprisonment is 726 per 100,000. Of that, the rate of incarceration for white males in the US in 2004—according to Federal Government statistics—was 717 per 100,000. But the rate of incarceration for black males that same year, 2004, was 4,919 per 100,000. “The FBI, in 2004, released this number: 1 in 3 black male babies born in that year has an expectation of going to prison during their lifetimes. That just blows my mind.” And then there is corruption, which has tainted every policing agency in the US. Locally, major drug related corruption scandals in the recent past have included the Dallas fake-drugs scandal—in which a snitch was paid more than \$200,000 over a two-year period to provide local cops with drug dealers. The “dealers” turned out to be nearly all illegal immigrants; their “drugs” turned out to be crushed sheetrock and pool chalk. And then there was Tulia, in the Panhandle, in which a

multi-county drug task force hired a corrupt deputy sheriff to rid the town of its drug problem; when there wasn't one, the deputy sheriff created one, and more than 40 people wound up arrested. Both of those scandals may look like the work of over-zealous officers who cut corners, but according to LEAP, cutting corners to get the numbers that will keep the fuel line of federal and state anti-drug funding open is the name of the game and rampant. And those scandals don't begin to touch on the border patrol agents, police and other law enforcement officials who have been corrupted for personal gain simply because the drug money was too available. Rusty White, another LEAP member, is a redneck who grew up hard in east Texas. At 13 he saw a friend of his shoot up black tar heroin and decided he didn't like hard drugs. By 16 he'd been to juvenile detention five times and had been asked to leave his high school. He married, had a son at 17, was in the army and divorced shortly after that. He re-enlisted once, then came home, moved to Arizona and went to work at the state pen in Florence, which he describes as "one of the most violent prisons in the United States at that time." He worked Maximum Security, Death Row and Administrative. Segregation blocks there from 1973 till 1978, where as an officer he dealt with horrors daily. "Life meant very little to those inside the walls," he says, noting that two prison guards were killed and mutilated by inmates in 1973. "And drugs were one of the biggest problems we had. They were the cause of most of the deaths and power struggles." Most of those, says White, originated with prison workers who were supplying the drugs. "I got fed up with the corruption and left to go into the oil drilling business in 1979." He worked overseas for some years, then returned to the states and moved to Oklahoma. While there, says White, he got to see the war on drugs up close and from a very different vantage point. "The county I lived in had a sheriff who controlled the drug market. And he did so with force. It was common knowledge that if you crossed him could be—and had been—deadly." But, says White, the same sheriff regularly flew around the county in National Guard helicopters for photo ops to show how tough he was on drugs. "The only thing he was getting rid of was the competition," White, who now lives in Bridgeport, just north of Ft. Worth, says disgustedly.

His only personal encounter with the sheriff and his machine occurred when White's brother-in-law, a small time pot dealer, was busted. "He was poor, didn't have a car that ran and was living off Indian commodities. Yet he was going to be played by the sheriff as a drug-dealing king pin.

"Anyway, he's the father of three little ones, all younger than six, and when the police arrived he offered to go with them willingly. But he asked that his kids be allowed to stay with an uncle who was there rather than dragging them down to the station. Well, you know how people feel about "drug dealers"; the police said no, the kids were coming to the station to watch their father get busted, and then they'd be released to the uncle.

When his trial came up, White says, it turned out the DA didn't have any evidence against him as a big time dealer. Nonetheless, he was offered a plea deal of one-to-three if he admitted being a big dealer. If he took it to trial, however, the prosecutor promised he'd ask for a full 10 years. "Well, he copped to the plea. But to see him struggle with having to lie in front of his kids and admit to something he hadn't done—well, I sort of snapped and screamed at the prosecutor and asked him if he thought he'd earned his money that day and why he was playing god and he looked at me and answered, "because in this county, I am god."

A couple of years later, says White, the DA went back into private practice and shortly after that he was arrested for dealing methamphetamine. "And found guilty. How the sheriff escaped that net I don't know. But the thing to remember is that these are the people entrusted to guard liberty and justice. And this sort of thing is happening every day in the war on drugs, all over the country. And that abuse of trust and power is far more harmful to Americans than drugs could ever be!"

White went back to work in the prison system shortly after his brother in law went to prison, and shortly thereafter was given the chance to become a K-9 drug-dog trainer and handler. It was the sort of work White says he was meant to do and he jumped at the opportunity. "I tracked several escapees from the prison and even some cop killers using my track K-9s. We helped departments all over the state. I'd be sent to prisons to look for drugs—I had no problem with that. But the more we were used with other police organizations the more my conscience started to become a problem.

Two incidents stick in White's mind: once while a partner of his was assisting an officer a part of a joint was discovered in the ashtray of an old pickup belonging to an elderly man. The dogs were brought in, and in the camper shell on the back of the truck in which the old man lived the dogs found a briefcase with more than \$9,000 in it. "That was confiscated due to being alerted to it by a drug dog. And they just stood around laughing as the old man begged them not to take his life savings. It just made me sick and ashamed. Heck, it's common knowledge that over 90% of the paper money in this country is tainted with a drug scent a dog can find. But using that to rob our people disgusts me. Heck, if you walk any K-9 into a bank vault the dog will mark on that money too. How come that money isn't confiscated?"

The second incident occurred one night when White and his K-9 were called to assist a local police department in doing a house search for drugs. When he pulled up to the house he asked to see the warrant. The officer told him it wasn't there yet but to go ahead and start the search and it would be there shortly. "I told him that's just not how it works. I needed the warrant for the search to be legal. So I put my K-9 back into the truck and brought him back to the kennel. And then I got called on the carpet for refusing to assist."

White thought getting into trouble for following the law he'd sworn





