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The Role of Policy and Media in Reagan's War on Drugs

*Sage Ceja*¹

Fifteen years into the War on Drugs, cocaine had taken a prominent victim. Two days after the 1986 National Basketball Association draft, the first-round second pick had become another person to mourn. Len Bias was an exciting player to watch, expected to be on the level of Michael Jordan and other basketball legends, but ultimately, he was more influential in the War on Drugs.² The famous basketball star's untimely death from an overdose influenced the creation and approval of new, stricter drug laws, like the 1986 *Anti-Drug Abuse Act*. This act further penalized and criminalized the drug that caused Bias' death—crack cocaine. Beyond legislation, this new world of mass media and a national popular culture also influenced the battleground for the drug war. In the 1980s, one of the weapons most used to fight narcotics was popular culture and media. Music, sports, celebrities, and advertisements became quintessential pieces of weaponry in the War on Drugs. Legislation and public policy passed, like the 1986 *Anti-Drug Abuse Act*, of course, remained a way to fight against substance use. The War on Drugs was fought on both the political and cultural front. Both fronts reduced the nuance and complexity of the drug issue in America. In anti-drug media, the issue of drugs was reduced to an issue of the individual, contradicting the legislation being created. The oversimplification of drug use in the media led to the War on Drugs becoming an ineffective campaign.

Popular culture could reach a broad audience, but how anti-drug activists used it undermined the effectiveness of their campaigns. Many of the campaigns were cheesy and difficult to take seriously. They also oversimplified the causes of drug use, minimized the difficulty of quitting drugs, and demonized drugs, their users, and addiction rehabilitation. While trying to make complex concepts – like drug use, addiction, and rehabilitation – digestible to a very young demographic, the anti-drug activists reduced the genuinely complex drug issue in America to a problem with a simple solution. Like the anti-alcohol pieces released during the Prohibition era, many anti-drug works perpetuated the idea that any substance use was inherently wrong and that individuals who used them would be reduced to delinquency. Beyond that, the anti-drug propaganda of the 1980s insinuates that all drug issues could be solved via the individual.

While popular culture boiled solving the drug issue in America down to personal righteousness and discipline, the policy differed. It aimed to solve the drug issue through brute force and punitive measures. Like the measures taken in the Prohibition era, the policy created in the 1980s dealt with substance issues by preventing the use and the sale of drugs with harsh repercussions. The War on Drugs had two fronts— popular culture, which displayed a softer approach to the issue, and legal measures, which showed a rigid approach to halting drug use. Both these fronts were unsuccessful in

¹ Sage Ceja is a first-generation student from Downey, CA. She turned an obsession with bad commercials into this paper.

² Keith Harriston, "Maryland Basketball Star Len Bias Is Dead at 22", *The Washington Post*, June 20th, 1986.

their mission. The media and the legislation created led to the War on Drugs being deemed ineffective. Anti-drug media oversimplified the issues, causing them not to be taken seriously. The policy had no discernible effect on drug use or sales in the United States and had high social costs. The dichotomy between the media and the legislation further showed how the War on Drugs was unsuccessful.

The War on Drugs may have made media and culture a battleground, but the United States government waged it. The 1960s were undoubtedly difficult for Americans and their nation; a war raged overseas, and wide-scale civil unrest erupted over continued racial disparities. In order to combat these issues, President Lyndon B. Johnson started the War on Crime and the War on Poverty. The War on Crime expanded surveillance, patrol, and detention, and the War on Poverty created more opportunities for economically disadvantaged people through financial assistance and training opportunities.³ These programs, referred to as the Great Society policies, set a precedent for social programs to be active participants in law enforcement.⁴ For example, Great Society policies indicated that punitive measures to prevent crime must be implemented to support lower-income families, who were more likely to be people of color.⁵ Law enforcement became essential to furthering any social program or societal goal. However, while President Johnson attempted to fix many of the root causes of many issues in America—like poverty, unemployment, and housing—Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan decided to focus on the drug issue.⁶

On 18 June 1971, Richard Nixon waged war against America's newest and most daunting foe: illicit substances. Nixon's immediate successors would not carry on his tough on drugs approach. Both Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter would attempt a harm reduction approach, where medical and psychiatric treatment was prioritized.⁷ Nevertheless, the War on Drugs would be reignited by Ronald Reagan. The war's peak, particularly in media and popular American culture, would come in the 1980s with President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan. The two played vital roles in achieving the same goal but did so in vastly different ways.

The first couple of the United States waged this war as a united front, with each playing a specific role. Ronald Reagan fought drugs in a way that suited his position – through legislation. By capitalizing on the fear of Americans – who were witnessing an increase in crime and deaths from drug use – he garnered support for two strict anti-drug acts. The 1984 Comprehensive Crime Control Act and the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act introduced some of the strictest federal laws regarding drugs and substance users in the United States and sharply increased the power of law enforcement. Both acts received overwhelming support from both the House of Representatives and Senate. These acts introduced mandatory minimum sentences for drug users, allowed police to seize private property,

³ Elizabeth Hinton. "A War within Our Own Boundaries: Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the Rise of the Carceral State", (*Journal of American History*, June 2015): 101.

⁴ Elizabeth Hinton. "A War within Our Own Boundaries: Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the Rise of the Carceral State", 102.

⁵ Elizabeth Hinton. "A War within Our Own Boundaries: Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the Rise of the Carceral State", 103.

⁶ Paula Mallea, *The War on Drugs: A Failed Experiment*, (Dundurn, 2014), 12-13.

⁷ Michelle Getchell. "The Enduring Legacy of Reagan's Drug War in Latin America", *War on the Rocks*, December 20, 2018.

and disproportionately affected marginalized communities.⁸ However, the modern perception of the War on Drugs sees it as an expensive failure. Rates of drug use remained relatively steady, drugs remained easy to buy, and incarceration rates have only increased. The perception that the War on Drugs was a failure is much easier to attribute to Ronald Reagan and his political role, but his partner's role in the battle is often overlooked.

Nancy Reagan may be best known as the First Lady of the United States, but her initial rise to prominence was through the media. She and her husband met as Hollywood movie stars but became significant forces in the conservative movement. While her husband helped create a more punitive drug enforcement regiment, Nancy waged her anti-drug fight through the media and popular culture. Her role and influence were understated compared to her husband's, yet she was an important force in the War on Drugs. As argued by historian Kevin Mattson, Nancy Reagan knew about Hollywood and the culture of the 1980s to know that the way to the people's hearts and minds was through images and sounds.⁹ Nancy Reagan attempted to tap into the spirit of millions of Americans through any medium she could. She understood how to weaponize popular American culture and media against drugs. The anti-drug media and Nancy Reagan's influence on it may not be the most apparent reason for the shortcomings of the War on Drugs, but it shaped subsequent perceptions of it. Anti-drug media showcased American drugs and drug use in a highly simplified manner. The lack of nuance and realism of these topics indicated that Nancy Reagan and her anti-drug supporters did not fully understand the enemy they were fighting. The War on Drugs had shortcomings on the policy and media fronts where the iconic pieces of media show a reductive and straightforward solution to a complex and nuanced issue.

The War on Drugs was not the first time in American history that the media was used to push a political agenda. The ideological predecessor to the War on Drugs, the Prohibition era, saw its fair share of media being utilized to push the dry agenda. In 1899, the song "Blue Monday" depicted a resentful miner discussing how drink brought out the worst in his coworkers, causing them to be messy and waste their money, so he pledged to commit himself to temperance and give his wages to his wife.¹⁰ The ideas regarding substance abuse during the Prohibition era are seen in the media produced during the War on Drugs. It insinuated that any amount of drinking wrecks the individual's life. The drinker, as a person, values alcohol over his wife, implying that they were not of upstanding character. The good, reformed miner quickly stopped drinking, eliminating the idea that drinking can be addictive and difficult to shake. This song, and the Prohibition era in general, set a cultural precedent for the War on Drugs. Media and popular culture would be vital to shaping public policy, but the drug media produced in the 1980s set itself apart from its predecessors in many ways.

As mentioned earlier, War on Drugs media was the personal project of First Lady Nancy Reagan, as opposed to the anti-alcohol media, which was made by private individuals, like the author of *Blue Monday* or prohibitionist organizations. This sets the anti-drug media apart from its

⁸ Congress.gov. "S.1762 - 98th Congress (1983-1984): Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984." September 25, 1984. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/98th-congress/senate-bill/1762>.

⁹ Kevin Mattson, *We're Not Here to Entertain: Punk Rock, Ronald Reagan, and the Real Culture*, (Oxford University Press, 2020), 217.

¹⁰ Korson, George Gershon, and Michael F Barry. *Blue Monday*. Library of Congress, 1965

predecessors. This media was directly tied to the Reagan administration through the First Lady. Beyond that, due to technological advancements, the scope of the media was broader, circulating on mediums that reached vast and diverse audiences. While media has been used to push many thoughts and ideas, the anti-drug work was directly tied to the First Lady's cause and circulated on various mediums.

By the 1980s, television was a quintessential part of American life. With millions of Americans from almost all demographics watching a select handful of broadcasting networks, it became the perfect medium to advertise concepts and ideas. The War on Drugs used television as a primary weapon.¹¹ Anti-drug rhetoric was quickly and constantly put on screen. Many of the most iconic anti-drug commercials came out during this decade. Television series, particularly those aimed at a younger audience, began to have special anti-drug episodes. Because this media was created with adolescent audiences in mind, many of these works appeared less earnest to older audiences, who likely grasped the complexity of drug issues. Television scenarios used over-the-top scare tactics to influence young audiences, encouraging them to be vehemently anti-drug. Cartoon characters and inanimate beings were used to show the dangers American youth would face regarding drugs. Advertisements reached this exalted status not by being good or necessarily effective but by being ridiculous and grossly oversimplifying many of the concerns surrounding drugs. Television was easily digestible for children and young audiences, but this digestibility came at the cost of nuance and realism regarding drug use concerns.

Ranked as the eighth-best commercial of all time by Entertainment Weekly in 1997, "Fried Egg," sponsored by The Partnership for a Drug Free America, is an infamous cultural force.¹² The premise of the work is simple. The narrator, serious and exasperated, is holding an egg over a hot frying pan and sternly says that this egg is a brain, and the pan represents drugs. The egg is then cracked onto the pan, instantly splattering. The whites quickly set and the egg fries immediately. The narrator quickly declares that this was what a brain on drugs looked like and asks the audience, "Any questions?"¹³ Most audiences would very quickly understand the message presented by this commercial, but it vastly oversimplified and misrepresented the effects of drug use. This iconic commercial perpetuated the concept that drug use will undoubtedly ruin an individual's life. It also insinuated that one experience with the fry pan drugs would lead to irreparable damage. The explanation for the War on Drugs lacked any room for nuance, exemplified by this commercial that implied that just as the egg cannot be unfried, those who use drugs could never be fully sober. Drug use and its effects are incredibly personal and individual, but instead of portraying it as such, the media portrayed a problematic all-or-nothing message. However, this simple commercial did not reach its iconic status due to its reception as a successful anti-drug commercial, but through its delivery and ability to be parodied.

While the commercial attempted to scare individuals into sobriety, this iconic piece was not well-received by teenagers. Students who had grown up watching this commercial—and similar

¹¹ Ron Miller, "The 80s Were Big for TV", *The Washington Post*, December 24, 1989.

¹² EW Staff, "The 50 Best Commercials of All Time", *Entertainment Weekly*, March 28, 1977.

¹³"Fried Egg", John Pytka, (1987, Pytka Productions), Public Service Announcement.

media—appeared to be skeptical of the hard anti-drug ideas shown. One student, who ended up studying at the University of California Berkeley, noted that the commercial was inaccurate and that many students on the honor roll also smoked marijuana.¹⁴ The student stated that she does not “believe that scare tactics ever work in preventing kids from doing anything.”¹⁵ This statement on scare tactics aligns with research on anti-drug PSAs done in 2013, which found that teenagers respond best to anti-drug pieces that show the negative impacts of drug use in an emotionally compelling way that is not overly aggressive.¹⁶ “This is your brain on drugs” is not an emotionally compelling piece; it shows the supposed effects of drug use in a very matter-of-fact way. Beyond that, the piece feels passive-aggressive due to its closing ‘Any questions?’ line. This work used scare tactics, which may influence its inability to connect with many teens.

“This is your brain on drugs” is the best-known line from the advertisement and was quickly co-opted by other popular television programs, being used as a joke. For example, the popular 1980s and 1990s sitcom “Married... with Children” parodied the advertisement. The main character, dealing with the idea of being an unhappily married man, recreates the commercial. He loosely follows the format of the commercial. An egg representing the brain is held up and then slammed onto the floor. He then declared that is what a brain on marriage is like. He finishes by asking his female friends if they have any questions and a classic 90s laugh track ensues.¹⁷ “Fried Egg” was widely known enough to be parodied and laughed at by thousands of viewers. This sitcom is just one of many examples of how this commercial got reclaimed in popular culture. It intended to be a serious warning against drug use the world of American pop culture warped it. Yet, for all its sincerity and positive intent, the American people did not take the anti-drug commercial seriously. The commercial was ineffective as anti-drug media but was well-known enough to be a funny gag in future media. Its simplicity and attempt at being earnest played a significant role in making it such a fun work to parody.

Anti-drug PSAs continue to be parodied in popular media. In 2019, Saturday Night Live spoofed the anti-drug works in a skit simply titled, “’80s Drug PSA”. The skit depicts three men, who are supposed to be young, being swayed away from using crack cocaine by two supposed anti-drug advocates. In the typical fashion of anti-drug media, the work ends with the iconic line, ‘just say no.’¹⁸ The dialogue and exchanges are awkward and almost unnatural – emulating how many of the actual PSAs are perceived. African American Vernacular English is ironically used throughout this skit, showing an awareness of the racial biases found in many anti-drug works. One of the funniest parts of this anti-drug skit is its recognition that anti-drug propaganda can be ineffective. One of the men who is supposed to be pushing for sobriety expresses interest in doing crack when he learns that it is less expensive and just as potent as cocaine. The individual who represents anti-drug propaganda does

¹⁴ Erika Alexander, “Students debate effectiveness, accuracy of well-known anti-drug commercials”, CNN Student Bureau, 2000.

¹⁵ Erika Alexander, “Students debate effectiveness, accuracy of well-known anti-drug commercials”, 2000.

¹⁶ Ian S. Ramsay, et al, “Affective and Executive Network Processing Associated with Persuasive Antidrug Messages”, *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 2013.

¹⁷ *Married... With Children*, Season 4, Episode 18, “What Goes Around Comes Around”, Directed by Gerry Cohen, Aired February 25, 1990, Fox.

¹⁸ “’80s Drug PSA”, *Saturday Night Live*, 2019.

not fully believe in anti-drug messaging. This skit shows the everlasting effect of the 1980s' anti-drug media on popular culture and the overall ineffectiveness of War on Drugs media.

Although television shows sometimes parodied the ineffective War on Drugs media, they also supported the cause. Cartoons served an important role because much of War on Drugs media in the 1980s focused on preventing drug use in younger, elementary school-aged audiences. Animated series already had a younger fan base, and the fantasy world they lived in made television shows an ideal format for promoting anti-drug messages. The cartoons portrayed drug use—ranging from smoking marijuana to doing crack—simply and in a binary manner that was easy for children to understand. They also stripped the issues of their complexity and nuance.

On 21 April 1990, a special anti-drug regiment was released. It was financed by the Ronald McDonald Children's Charity and was broadcasted by NBC, ABC, FOX, and CBS with the Saturday morning cartoons. It capitalized on cartoon star power. It starred Winnie the Pooh, Tigger, the Smurfs, Huey, Dewey, Louie, and many other beloved cartoon characters. "Cartoon All-Stars to the Rescues" was set up to be a highly successful advertisement with its prime showtime, star-studded cast, and wealthy financiers.¹⁹ Despite this, it did not depict drug use and drug users with the seriousness the subject deserved because it was marketed to children. The plot was simple and came to a clear and oversimplified conclusion because it was to the benefit of anti-drug advocates to create simple pieces with binary conclusions towards children. If the anti-drug message was internalized in adolescence, it would be more difficult to approach with nuance in adulthood. While this seems like a solid idea, the simplicity of the pieces led to them being ineffective.

Cartoon All-Stars to the Rescues followed two siblings; Corey, the younger sister who cannot be older than 10, and Michael, the early-teen brother who uses drugs. Michael steals money from his sister at night, and unbeknownst to him, Papa Smurf watches his crime. The star-studded cartoon lineup then begins to follow Michael with the hopes of stopping his marijuana usage. Michelangelo from *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* tells Michael that the drugs are frying his brain, but he ignores him. After another attempt to change his path, Michael wakes up startled and throws his sister into a wall, almost breaking her arm. Another character shows Michael an older, decrepit version of himself. The cartoon character shows that using crack in his teenage years is what sets off a lifetime of hurt and states that the drugs are in charge, not Michael. This vision of the future is not enough to set Michael straight. Finally, Daphne Duck offers Michael his future, in which an even sicker and unsuccessful version of himself appears, finally scaring himself straight. Michael and his sister then talk to their parents about his drug abuse.

This show presented an anti-drug message but perpetuated many harmful concepts regarding drug use and users. Firstly, as many other media sources do, it indicates that any drug use is toxic and will send a person down the wrong path. Michael was a young man, but his future, seen through a crystal ball, was predicated solely on his drug use. This furthers the War on Drugs' all-or-nothing mentality. Just as the egg was ruined by one experience with a hot pan, in the episode, it is a safe assumption that a few instances of drug use ruin Michael's life. The TV special makes drug use unanimously bad, but it also glosses over the complexity of individual drugs. Marijuana and crack are

¹⁹ *Cartoon All-Stars to the Rescue*. Milton Gray, Marsh Lemore, et.al. (1990, The Academy of Television, Arts, and Sciences Foundation), television special.

both illicit substances, but they are vastly different, and this cartoon stripped the nuance and varying effects of these two substances. Michael was also portrayed as a danger to others by harming his sister, insinuating that those who use drugs harm society and those around them. The messaging was made explicitly for a young audience, but it undermined the complexity of preventing drug use.

The imaginary world of cartoons was the perfect place to spread anti-drug media, and it would have been a great place to showcase the intricacies and nuance of the issue. In this cartoon, the character Smoke, who represented marijuana and the dangers of the drug, was a flat character. His only purpose was to be malicious, and he was tossed away once Michael decided to stop using. Since marijuana is not necessarily a harmful drug with only adverse effects, smoke could have been more dynamic. He could have had a character arc or some redeeming quality but showcasing the nuance of the effects of drugs would not have been good enough for the conservative crusade against drugs. A complex and nuanced message would not benefit the case against drugs, so they were presented as only being malicious. This media reinforced the idea that drugs were harmful, have no use in society, and that it was up to the individual to either say no to drug use or fall victim to a substance. The issues of drugs, drug use, and drug users are much more complex than any anti-drug cartoon depicted, and that was likely done on purpose to reinforce the worldview that declared the War on Drugs.

Television in the 1980s revolutionized music's impact on popular culture. Music had always been an effective medium to express and push political messages, but the growing popularity of the music video took music's influence to another level. On 1 August 1981, the *Music Television Channel* aired and revolutionized popular media. Visual stories were now attached to famous songs, and anyone with cable access could listen to and watch the same piece. The rise in the *Music Television Channel* gave popular culture even more weight regarding its role in the War on Drugs.

In 1986, the War on Drugs took a different approach by releasing an anti-drug song with an accompanying music video. "Stop The Madness" united many big-time celebrities, like Whitney Houston, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the leader of the anti-drug effort herself, First Lady Nancy Reagan. This visual aspect of this work aimed to further the concept that drugs are inherently harmful and that waging war on drugs will benefit society. The music video shows images of various substances and guns, contrasted with snippets of police units violently entering homes and handcuffing people, creating a visual link between drug use, violence, and criminality.²⁰ The video then establishes two protagonists, a young, pretty white woman who looks relatively well off and a young Black man who embodies the stereotype of a low-income drug user. The two protagonists appear to be opposites in about every aspect-- gender, race, and financial income-- which aims to show that drug issues are pervasive and non-discriminatory. No one is safe from drugs, and a war on drugs is the only way to save society. Both individuals are scared straight, joining together at the end of the video to dispose of their drugs. The final moments of "Stop the Madness" show people from all backgrounds joyously dancing together, celebrating the new drug-free lives of the protagonists. The music video takes a clear anti-drug stance. It connects drug use with delinquency and then aims to show a positive and simply better, drug-free life. The work uses the power of many celebrities and their influence to appeal to a broader audience and attempt to popularize the war on drugs.

²⁰ "Stop the Madness", Tim Reed, (January 17, 1986: NBC *Friday Night Videos*), Music Video.

The visual aspect of the video appears to challenge preconceptions of drug users but still succumbs to many racial stereotypes. Many works and anti-drug videos express the idea that drug users are irredeemable and unable to change, but the finale of this video denounces that idea. Both users throw their dope in a trash bin and join the crowd of happy people, symbolizing that they are sober and can rejoin society. That being stated, this piece was overly simple in its presentation of rehabilitation. Quitting drugs and fighting addiction is not as simple as discarding a stash and moving on with life. This work appears to fight a racial bias but ultimately relies on race-based stereotypes. Drug use, addiction, and incarceration are more heavily associated with African American communities, so having a Black male lead break off from this preconception shows movement away from stereotypes.²¹ It could have challenged more stereotypes regarding drug users of color. The music video still has a Black man living in a neighborhood that appears low-income and unsafe, dressing in a stereotypical ‘hood’ way. While not great, this work portrays the issue of drug use with more nuance and is more forgiving towards users, making it a step in a better direction.

Despite these positive aspects of the video, the lyrics can undermine them. The line, “Now you’re a prisoner in a cell crying to be free,” reinforces the concept that drug users are not in control of their own lives, but the substance they use is. While the video breaks away from the racial stereotypes of drug users, the diction used, and the celebrities chosen to sing suggest a bias. Drugs are called slavery, an allusion that is rather tone-deaf with the history of America and African Americans. Individuals who believe drugs are a victimless crime are called “fools.” This is a common piece of slang in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). A drug-using “brother,” another common term used to refer to a man in AAVE, is spoken to for his issue. Adding to the lyrics, the main singer of this work is Whitney Houston, a famous African American singer. She, a Black icon put on this track for her star power and influence, sings these lyrics directly to a Black audience. The singer and diction choice diminish the concept that “Stop the Madness” was racially progressive and could challenge stereotypes. Having a Black singer directly sing to their community, using AAVE and alluding to slavery, was perceived as performative. The creators, purposefully or not, had a Black artist preach anti-drug propaganda to their community. “Stop the Madness” made strides in portraying drugs and their users as more complex but seemed to undermine its attempt to avoid racial bias.

The “Stop the Madness” music video, simply put, aged horrendously. Looking back at this video, with modern hindsight, is both an amusing and disconcerting experience. The star-studded lineup was instrumental in drawing audiences in and was a significant selling point of the piece. Still, the video highlighted many weaknesses of the Reagan Administration’s anti-drug campaign. With Nancy Reagan’s approval, the song discussed ending drug use, and the video successfully showcased that message. However, many of the prominent cultural figures in the video had used illicit drugs. Basketball superstar Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was in the video throwing a basketball at the head of the protagonist, who was just about to inhale an unspecified substance. Just three years prior to the release of this video, Abdul-Jabbar had admitted to smoking weed, using LSD, snorting cocaine, and trying heroin while in college.²² He wanted to use his life experiences to show young people to stay away

²¹ Rebecca Tiger, “Race, Class, and the Framing of Drug Epidemics” (*Contexts*, 2017): 48.

²² “Kareem Abdul-Jabbar Expects Negative Reactions”, *United Press International Archives*, November 5th, 1983.

from illicit drugs. Despite this, just two decades later, in 2000, he was caught driving under the influence of marijuana, his second time coming into conflict with the law over the drug since 1988.²³ Arnold Schwarzenegger not only admitted to using anabolic steroids and performance-enhancing drugs, but he also admitted that he did not regret using them.²⁴ Whitney Houston, the music video star, publicly battled drug use and addiction throughout her career. In 2012, at the age of 48, the music icon drowned while overdosing on cocaine.²⁵ Looking at this primary source through a modern lens is immensely ironic. Here are the top celebrities and icons of the era, preaching an anti-drug stance with Nancy Reagan while they would publicly struggle with their own substance issues for decades to come.

The popular culture and media, created in support of the War on Drugs and influenced by Nancy Reagan, reached a relatively straightforward conclusion. All drug use, regardless of the substance, was terrible. Issues stemming from drugs were color-blind and affected every group. The American drug issue could be solved through personal willpower and moral commitment. In “Fried Egg,” it was up to everyone to ensure that their brain was safe from drugs. *Cartoon All-Stars to the Rescues* clarifies that Michael’s drug use is his fault and his responsibility to be sober. “Stop the Madness” shows two very different individuals who come together and consciously choose to be drug-free. Drugs became the individual’s problem, and morals and discipline would fix this seemingly simple issue, according to the media created by Nancy Reagan. The political actions of Nancy Reagan’s other half contradicted the message shared.

While Nancy Reagan placed the drug issue on the individual, according to her husband, it could only be solved through raw, punitive state power. Media created during this era insinuated that all drug use was equally bad, but the drug laws being enforced heavily penalized one drug. During the War on Drugs, Ronald Reagan’s tough-on-crime mentality contradicted his wife’s “just say no” mentality. The issue of drug use in America was not simple enough to be solved through individuals practicing moral rigidity and discipline, and Ronald Reagan understood this. His solution also lacked nuance and presented sheer state power and punitive measures. The harsh actions taken by the presidential administration to solve the drug issue contradicted the solutions the media suggested and resulted in the War on Drugs being deemed ineffective.

Unlike Nancy Reagan’s suggestion, the drug issue in America was not as simple as saying no. If solving the drug issue was as simple as turning down offers to do drugs and throwing substances in the trash, there would be little need for harsh and punitive measures. Drugs were presented as the issue of the individual in the media, but in real life, they were the issue of the tough-on-crime government. In order to meet the goals of Reagan’s War on Drugs—which included slowing the drug trade, reducing drug-related crime, and promoting sobriety in general—local law enforcement would need to become more active in the President’s mission. In 1988, under the Reagan administration, Congress introduced the Edward Byrne Memorial State and Local Law Enforcement Assistance Program, which offered millions of dollars in aid to agencies that would commit to reducing drug-

²³ “Kareem Abdul-Jabbar Arrested on DUI Charge”, ABC News, January 2006.

²⁴ “Schwarzenegger Has No Regrets About Steroid Use”, ABC News, January 2006.

²⁵ Mark Seals, “The Devils in The Diva”, *Vanity Fair*, May 8, 2012.

related crime.²⁶ Reagan's actions regarding the police show that drug use would not be treated as an issue of the individual but as one to be handled by the government

Along with the increase in police presence came an increase in arrests and incarcerations. These arrests and incarcerations were meant to take those committing drug crimes off the streets to create a safer society. The drastic increase in the population of incarcerated Americans indicates Ronald Reagan's tough-on-crime approach. Drug-related offenses account for about half of the rise in the state prison population between 1985 and 2000.²⁷ Despite most drug crimes being non-violent, those crimes have been met with harsh punishment. While there were many policy alternatives to incarcerating those who did drugs, like the harm reduction approach of Presidents Johnson and Carter, Reagan's administration had little grace for those who used or sold drugs. The tough-on-crime approach and the anti-drug media created in the 1980s had a lasting impact beyond the reasons for their creation.

Anti-drug media in the 1980s lumped all drugs use into one category: wrong. The "Fried Egg" commercial did not mention that a specific substance fries the brain but that drugs, in general, would. Under much of the popular culture influenced by anti-drug advocates, all drugs were equally bad, but the policy created did not reflect those thoughts. In the United States legislation, one drug was strangely targeted and penalized much more than the rest—crack. Following the tragic and untimely death of rising basketball star Len Bias, who overdosed on crack cocaine, the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act was passed. The act disproportionately penalized crack with a 100:1 ratio regarding sentencing crime. An individual possessing 1 gram of crack or 100 grams of powdered cocaine would be sentenced to an equal amount.²⁸ This policy indicated that not all drugs were equally bad; in this case, crack was one hundred times worse than cocaine. What made this policy lose credibility and become increasingly unfavorable to many Americans was the knowledge that crack was, in fact, not one hundred times worse than cocaine; they were the same substance. Crack is a less expensive derivative of cocaine, and the only significant difference between the substances are the rates of absorption.²⁹ This law directly contradicted the message portrayed by Nancy Reagan. According to her, all drugs may be wrong, but not all drugs were equal in the eyes of the law.

The increased penalization of crack indicated that the War on Drugs may not have been color-blind. This contradicted most of the color-blind media produced by anti-drug advocates. The anti-drug media was not free from stereotypes. It was for the benefit of anti-drug advocates to have very diverse people in their works. They wanted to deter drug use in the diverse nation, so it was best to show a diverse range of people who could be users. That depiction was relatively accurate. While much of the works created did sadly follow stereotypes, they showed a diversity of individuals who were substance users. "All-Stars to the Rescue" depicted abuse in a white male teen, and "Stop the

²⁶ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (2020): 93.

²⁷ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (2020): 76.

²⁸ Deborah J. Vagins, "Cracks in the System: Twenty Years of the Unjust Federal Crack Cocaine Law" *American Civil Liberties Union* (2006): i.

²⁹ Richard DeGrandpre, *The Cult of Pharmacology*, (2006): 25.

Madness” shows an upper-class white woman and a lower-class white man. Drug use rates were relatively similar among all races,³⁰ and the media did an excellent job of indicating that drug use could affect anyone. Despite the media depicting a color-blind War on Drugs, it contradicted much of the media put forth in practice. The War on Drugs more heavily hit specific racial communities, despite the accurate media depiction that anyone could fall victims to substance issues.

A racial bias became relatively clear when examining one specific drug, cocaine, and its derivatives. Racial groups in America tend to use drugs at relatively even rates, but the incarceration rates for drug-related crimes do not reflect that.³¹ Much of the legislation created to defeat drugs made one drug appear like much more of a threat—crack. Despite drugs with very comparable effects having relatively light punishment, like pure cocaine and Ritalin, the possession of crack was heavily penalized. The unequal punishment of drug users could be due to the connotations of the substances.

While they have drastically different social connotations, crack and cocaine are very similar substances. Cocaine was more expensive, becoming socially associated with advanced status and glamorous life.³² Crack, being cheaper, became associated with crime, low-income areas, and people of color. The different social reputations of two drugs that were pharmacologically almost identical influenced the difference in the penalization of their users. In combination with expanded police powers, the reputation of crack led to more individuals of color being convicted for drug-related crimes. As discussed in Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, the War on Drugs was a significant cause of the mass incarceration of people of color. By the mid-1980s, the number of African Americans in prison quadrupled in three years and steadily rose.³³ A steady drug-use rate and the disproportionate incarceration of people of color led to much of the legislation being deemed ineffective.

The media showed that individuals would solve the War on Drugs. Nancy Reagan appeared to be under the belief that through discipline, moral righteousness, and just saying no, drug use would fade off. Her husband appeared to believe the opposite. His tough-on-crime approach contradicted the idea that the War on Drugs was won through the individual. Instead of focusing on the individual, law enforcement was given much more power to battle drug use. The expanded power of the police, in theory, should have reduced drug use. However, it ultimately diminished the civil liberties of individuals and significantly contributed to the mass incarceration of people of color. This exemplifies another shortcoming of the War on Drugs regarding legal measures. Drug sales and use were not reduced, but the liberties and opportunities of many Americans were.

If personal willpower and strong discipline were the only things necessary to solve America’s drug issue, the increase in the jurisdiction of law enforcement would not have been deemed needed. The War on Drugs showed the slippery slope that was expanding police powers. *Terry v. Ohio* decided

³⁰ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (2020): 123.

³¹ “Rates of Drug Use and Sales, by Race; Rate of Drug Related Criminal Justice Measures, by Race”, *The Hamilton Project*, October 21, 2016.

³² Richard DeGrandpre, *The Cult of Pharmacology*, (2006): 24.

³³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (2020): 123.

that officers are entitled to search an individual and area if the individual is displaying unusual behavior and if the officer has reason to believe the person is engaged in illegal activity.³⁴ This has normalized law enforcement officers' stopping civilians without probable cause. The loosened requirement for stopping people in combination with implicit bias wreaked havoc on many communities of color. When asked to describe a drug user, 95% of respondents described a Black drug user.³⁵ Those working in law enforcement were far from free of that racial bias. Because drugs were more strongly associated with Black Americans, though all evidence suggests equal use of drugs across all races, they were often targeted by police on the suspicion that they could be carrying. Once Americans of color became the primary target due to bias and could be stopped with no pretext, it was a numbers game. If enough drivers and motorists were stopped, drugs would be found, and charges could be pressed.³⁶ The War on Drugs was meant to fight drugs. The sale, use, and social costs of drugs were supposed to be limited. Instead, the legal aspect of the War on Drugs diminished the rights of Americans and people of color who were unfairly targeted for drug-related crimes. This result of Reagan's mission played a significant role in it being an ineffective undertaking.

Ronald Reagan attributed crime and poverty in the nation to drug use. He attempted to solve his nation's issues by eliminating drugs, but President Johnson saw that the issues in America ran deeper than substances. Lyndon B. Johnson's plan for a greater America was to attack the fundamental root issues Americans faced. He planned to attack poverty, housing crises, and racial inequality to build a greater society. Johnson understood that reducing these issues and providing greater opportunities to those in disadvantaged situations would reduce drug use and crime. With his tough-on-crime approach, Reagan attacked a secondary issue that stemmed from poverty and disadvantaged situations. The over-policing of low-income areas, mandatory minimums, and racialized drug policies further harmed the communities needing support. The goal of the War on Drugs was to create a better society, but it was fighting a side effect of the more significant societal issues that plagued the United States.

The War on Drugs failed on both fronts. First Lady Nancy Reagan fought through media and popular culture. The media she created was understood by a very broad age demographic, meaning that they were simple pieces that lacked the nuance the drug issue deserved. The bulk of the pieces played into fear-mongering stereotypes surrounding drugs, drug users, and sobriety. They were very memorable pieces for their simplicity and off-beat humor. The pieces created, particularly the commercials, are pervasive in popular culture because they are funny and over the top. Nancy Reagan's cultural works failed to portray the drug issue in a meaningful and impactful way. The battle waged in the political and legislative world, led by Ronald Reagan, undermined many of the ideas expressed by the media and had its own adverse effects. Nancy Reagan's media argued that the issue of drugs would be solved through personal choices, but Ronald Reagan's choices implied that the only way to fight

³⁴ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (2020): 80.

³⁵ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (2020):133.

³⁶ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (2020): 90.

drugs was through sheer state force. Drug users were heavily penalized, the jurisdiction of law enforcement was expanded, and communities of color were hit hardest by the War on Drugs. Despite this expansion of the law, drug issues in America were not diminished. Drugs are still easily accessible and used. Both Reagan's failed on their ends of the War on Drugs. The War on Drugs undoubtedly has had a legacy on the United States. It was just not the legacy that the Reagans intended.