

THE WAR ON DRUGS: A CASE STUDY IN OPINION FORMATION

By John Bare

The Bush administration's declaration of war against drugs — which has been echoed by many groups in the US — triggered a flood of newspaper stories and helped galvanize public concern that drugs were the country's most important problem. Ironically, Bush's war began amidst a steady trend of declining drug use.

According to an August 1989 press release from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the percentage of people who said they used illegal drugs within the past month has been decreasing since 1979, with the fastest drop between 1985 and 1988. "Between 1985 and 1988, current drug use declined significantly in all age categories, among both men and women, and for blacks, whites and Hispanics," the press release said. "The decline also was seen in all regions of the United States and for all levels of educational attainment." This conclusion was based on NIDA's 1988 national survey on drug usage (Figure 1).

A few commentators have picked up on the discrepancy between the usage statistics and drug-war rhetoric. Berkeley researchers Franklin Zimring and Gordon Hawkins, in a January 1990 *New York Times* column, called the drug crisis a "counterfeit epidemic." They questioned the manner in which Bush's drug czar, Bill Bennett, presented NIDA's survey results. While noting the tragedy of drug abuse, *Washington Post* Ombudsman Richard Harwood wrote earlier this year that the available evidence concerning drug use does not justify the win-at-all-costs attitude of the drug war. He cited the NIDA finding that the number of current (at least once a month) drug users fell from 23 million to 14.5 million from 1985 through 1988. "At a time when drug usage is declining significantly, the press and politicians are doing a number on people's heads. Drugs, the polls now tell us, are of greater concern to the public than war, peace, poverty, unemployment, inflation, the environment or the national debt," Harwood wrote.

Harwood was correct in holding the media partially responsible for the public's skewed perception of the drug problem. Despite declining usage, newspaper stories on the drug war erupted in 1988 and soared even higher in 1989, Bush's first year in office. As Figure 2 shows, 73 *Post* stories made reference to a drug war in 1987. Two years later, the number of stories increased eight-fold, to 571.

Survey results support Harwood's notion that Bush's war declaration and the rapid rise in news stories did "a number on people's heads." As the graph of CBS/*New York Times* polls shows, no respondents named drugs as the nation's most important problem in 1985. In 1986, 1987, 1988 and even early 1989, the percentage of people who named drugs as the top problem fluctuated between 3 and 16 percent. But in September 1989 — after Bush had been in office nearly eight months and the media bombardment was peaking — more than half of the people polled named drugs as the most important problem. Recently, of course, in the face of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, tax and budget woes, and the economic slowdown, etc., the proportion naming drugs the most important problem has fallen off sharply (Figure 3).

This progression from political rhetoric to newspaper stories to public sentiment is a circular process, sort of a wheel of public opinion. The Bush administration successfully transferred the theme that "drugs are everywhere" to the nation's daily newspapers, as illustrated by results of a VU/TEXT count of the number of drug-war articles that appeared in recent years. There are other research strategies that could be used, such as searching for references to "drugs and crisis" or searching only for headlines that mention drugs. But there is no compelling evidence that alternative methods would produce significantly different trends. The number of stories can be compared with fluctuations in public opinion regarding the importance of drugs.

We saw that drug-use stories climbed dramatically in the *Washington Post*. The same increase is evident in other papers as well. For example, drug war stories in the *Houston Post* jumped from 60 in 1987 to 518 in 1989; in the *Chicago Tribune*, from 69 in 1987 to 446 last year; and in the *Lexington Herald Leader*, from 23 to 215.

The course of public opinion, as illustrated by Figure 3, parallels, with a slight time lag, the rises and drops in the number of drug-war stories. The plot traces the percentage of respondents in the CBS/*New York Times* Polls who said drugs were "the most important problem facing this country today." It shows that drugs were not a central national concern until 1988. These data tend to support the agenda-setting theory of professors Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, who have demonstrated that the issues reported most in the media are the issues the public believes are most important.

Drug-war stories and the salience of the drug problem in public opinion both fell in 1987. Then, as the drug-war coverage increased through the election and Bush's first year in office, public concern over drugs also rose sharply. The drug war message rolled along the

wheel of public opinion from the president to the media to the public. By September 1989, 54 percent of the respondents said drugs were the country's most important problem. It is particularly striking that such a strong majority was unified in its concern over drugs, considering that the CBS/NYT polls utilize an open-question format.

A closed-question format, in which people have a limited set of answers from which to choose, constrains respondents to a few alternatives, according to a study reported in March by University of Maryland sociologist Stanley Presser. On the other hand, the CBS/NYT polls utilize an open-question format, which allows people to give any answer they want. This usually generates a greater variety of responses and makes it less likely that a majority will name the same problem, as occurred in the September 1989 survey.

Kathleen Frankovic, director of polling for CBS, gave two possible explanations for why so many people name drugs as the country's most important problem. First, some say drugs are a problem because they see the effects drugs have in their home or neighborhood. Various statistics tend to show that drugs are associated with increased violence. The government's Data Center and Clearinghouse for Drugs and Crime said that in 1983 only 2% of the nation's homicides were linked to narcotics. By 1988, however, narcotics were a factor in 5.6% of all killings. It's generally accepted that drug-related turf wars are also more common.

A study of 414 homicides in New York City found that 218 (53%) of the killings were primarily drug-related, according to the Drug Policy Foundation's March/April 1990 newsletter.

The second reason for the increased concern over drugs is the emphasis drugs have received from politicians and the media, Frankovic said. Apart from those who observe directly the effects of drugs, another larger segment of the population that essentially has no first-hand contact with drugs has been influenced by White House rhetoric and the ensuing media coverage. This process "legitimizes the issue" for people not immediately affected by drugs, Frankovic said, and they too name drugs as the nation's most important problem.

By 1988 and 1989, drug use, though still high, clearly was declining. In contrast, press coverage of a "war on drugs" increased, as did drug-related crime. In direct response, the public came to see the nation's drug problem as something surging out of control.

The usage trends, public opinion shifts and increases in coverage and crime raise a question: Does a desirable policy goal, such as reducing abuse of illegal drugs, justify a hard-sell strategy in which a president may trigger an unusually high level of fear among the public? If such a strategy is justified, the next question is whether it will succeed. These are matters presidents continually face in their attempts to balance the need to communicate passionate messages to the public with the need to put forth viable policy options.

John Bare is a graduate student in the School of Journalism, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

Figure 1

Annual Use of Illicit Drugs
(Number of Users; NIDA data)

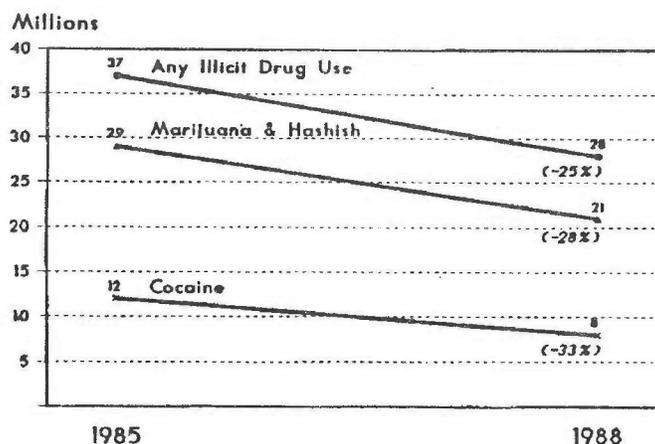


Figure 2



Figure 3

