

Last December, a few days after Christmas, Walter Mesler, my uncle, passed away. I didn't know Walter as well as I would have liked. Most of my life, nobody did. His problems began after his only son was born with severe retardation—the kind where you spend your life in diapers and only the desperate love of parents can keep you out of an institution. This was too much for my uncle, a profoundly big-hearted man. He lost himself in a haze of alcohol and drugs, and spent a good part of two decades at rock bottom, roaming city streets as a panhandler, a bum.

Somehow, with the help of a loving family, he got himself back on his feet. I was happy I had a chance to visit with him a couple of months before he passed away. We spent a lot of time talking about current events, which naturally led to some musing about our misgivings regarding our nation's current wars. But there was one war in particular that we talked a lot about, a war that plays out almost nightly on our television news, marked by images of cities beset by chaos, hopelessness and despair, images of young men gunned down on the streets. It is a war that has cost billions of dollars, thousands of lives, and compromised our nation's core values of personal freedom and limited government. We talked about the War on Drugs.

Anthropologists say one can tell more about a society by what they don't talk about than what they do, that a society's most deeply held beliefs are never discussed, and hence never

challenged. In his last press conference as secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld was asked what, if anything, he would have done differently. Rumsfeld, the man whose very name has become an adjective symbolizing hubris and ideological inflexibility, said that he would not have used the term War on Terror. It was, he said, a misleading definition that distorted the nature of the problem. It is telling that Rumsfeld could make that observation, yet after decades of futility no national figure of similar significance has challenged the concept of a War on Drugs. We can contest the War in Iraq, yet we experience the War on Drugs as if it were an earthquake, a flood, an act of God that we are powerless to change. So many of us were born into this war that it is all too easy to forget we are fighting it. We are paralyzed by immobility, an immobility of thought and ideas—the kind that seems all too prevalent in America today.

That we are losing the War on Drugs should be obvious to everyone. I could cite statistic after statistic, tell you that marijuana is America's largest cash crop, and that in some cities more young black men are going to prison than going to college. I could show you images of families ripped apart by violence, lawlessness, a trail of destruction from Colombia to Afghanistan. You know all that already.

We simply cannot "win" the War on Drugs simply because there is no "war" to win. Drug abuse is as old as civilization itself, mentioned as far back as Homer's *Odyssey*.

Drug abusers were almost always viewed about the same as they are today: with a mixture of pity and disgust. But no one imagined a militarized solution that would turn our streets into battlefields and criminalize the very people who are themselves the greatest victims of their own drug use.

For that—and for the very term *War on Drugs*—we can give credit to Richard Nixon, who coined the term to divert the nation's attention from another unpopular war abroad, the war in Vietnam, turning to the failed model of prohibition.

The problem with this approach was anticipated more than two centuries ago by Adam Smith when he laid out his theories of supply and demand in 1776. By criminalizing a commodity, the state simply moves the economic activity into the realm of a black market, which then becomes dominated by criminal syndicates. That was the problem we ran into during Prohibition and the problem we are faced with today. It is simply economics. No matter how many drug dealers are arrested, more will rise to fill the economic demand, just as every poppy and cocaine field eradicated abroad is simply replaced by new poppy and cocaine fields.

There are other answers. We can view drug addiction as a medical problem, the way Great Britain tackled an incipient heroin problem at the turn of the century. England virtually eradicated the use of heroin by allowing doctors (and later establishing clinics) to dispense drugs to addicts, all the while treating them for their addictions. Instead of

purchasing drugs from street dealers with an economic stake in continuing them on their road of addiction, addicts were offered treatment and advice every time they needed a fix. Some will be cured. Others never will. But at least they will live with some modicum of dignity. The only losers will be the drug dealers and drug cartels who will suddenly find themselves without a market. And the vast resources now devoted to stemming the illegal flow of drugs could be devoted to rebuilding communities devastated by the drug trade, by creating jobs and funding educational and social programs.

It is not the only alternative. But it is a new idea, or an old idea, and we are all-too-short of any ideas at all. The status quo isn't working. There is something wrong with a system where a privileged white guy can snort cocaine and go on to be elected president of the United States on a platform of restoring morality to the White House, while a poor black teenager can do the same thing and go to prison and then have a hard time getting a job at Wal-Mart.

We talked about that contradiction when I saw my uncle last. As we spoke, his daughter and grandson sat quietly on the sofa, their heads bobbing gently in unison, like old men falling asleep. They were heroin addicts giving methadone a try. It was a baby step, but my uncle knew how important baby steps were. He knew that anything was better than immobility.

—Bill Mesler

Mule
8mm film digitally transferred
(2 minutes, 35 seconds)
2006

Mule is about resistance. Pulling a three-hundred-pound log encrusted with pressed tin became my metaphor for struggle. In this performance piece, forward progress on an inner-city street becomes damn near impossible. The object that I move has been weathered by time. Dissected from deteriorating Baltimore homes, the log I am pulling is literally the wreckage of past generations. In a struggle to move forward, every ounce of energy

is utilized to create momentum. There is no end in sight. So with my body I pull and submit to the task that lies ahead. Like a mule, I am a beast of burden, not focusing on the end, rather pushing forward with blinders and hoping that the poetry of my labor amounts to a pure meditation of what has come before and what lies ahead.

—Jefferson Pinder

