



James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy
Rice University

Moving Beyond the “War on Drugs”

TRANSCRIPT OF REMARKS

Lee P. Brown, Ph.D.

Mayor of Houston, Texas

PRESENTED AT THE DRUG POLICY CONFERENCE
RICE UNIVERSITY - APRIL 10-11, 2002

These papers were written by a researcher (or researchers) who participated in a Baker Institute research project. Whenever feasible, these papers are reviewed by outside experts before they are released. However, the research and the views expressed in these papers are those of the individual researcher(s), and do not necessarily represent the views of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy.

© 2004 BY THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY OF RICE UNIVERSITY
THIS MATERIAL MAY BE QUOTED OR REPRODUCED WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION,
PROVIDED APPROPRIATE CREDIT IS GIVEN TO THE AUTHOR AND
THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Edited Transcription

Thank you for allowing me to be with you today. This is really a treat for me. [Comments regarding his period of service as a member of the Rice University faculty and a Senior Fellow at the Baker Institute and positive comments about Houston.]

I have been asked to talk about the subject matter that brings us here today, the “war on drugs,” from the perspective of cities, so I want to talk about what we're doing here in Houston to address [these issues], while keeping in mind that I have spent a considerable amount of my career in law enforcement. In fact, my first assignment as a young cop in San Jose, California, was to work in undercover narcotics and, since that time, as you have heard, I have been in charge of police departments and the sheriffs’ departments in Portland, Oregon; Atlanta, Georgia; Houston; and New York City; and, in addition to that, I served as the Drug Policy Director as a member of President Clinton's cabinet, so I have a little familiarity with the subject that brings us here today.

You have had some excellent presentations already, so I will attempt not to duplicate what you have already heard, but to talk about what a local jurisdiction can do to address the problem of drugs. First of all, let me say that I have never used the metaphor, “war on drugs.” I think it is the wrong metaphor, for a number of reasons. First of all, I don't think our country should go to war against its own people. Secondly, I believe that when you have a war, there is a tendency to declare victory and go home. We have done that on more than one occasion here in this country. So, the metaphor, “war on drugs” is one that I tried to get this country to do away with when I served in Washington, D.C.—obviously unsuccessfully. When I was the police chief here, drugs were a major problem at that time, as they are a major problem right now. We attempted to address the problem on a local level by creating, back in 1988, what we called Houston Crackdown. The purpose of this was to bring together all of the entities that were involved, or at least should be involved, in helping to deal with the drug problem—the clergy, the criminal justice system, the medical profession, the educators. Houston Crackdown has survived over the years and exists today because it still serves its purpose. Its major objective is to coordinate the many different activities involved in the drug issue--whether it is prevention, treatment,

education, enforcement—[and] for all of them to work together in a coordinated way to reduce drug use in our community. Houston Crackdown also administers grant programs for community groups and provides local support for those who want to apply for assistance because many times you find that volunteer community groups do not have the expertise to prepare proposals, so we serve in that capacity.

In 1990, Harris County Judge Robert Eckels and I hosted our first regional summit on substance abuse right here at the Baker Institute. We had an excellent turnout because the subject matter is of utmost importance, and it should be of utmost importance to everyone. As a result of that, we achieved our goals. Our goals were to improve the communication among the work of substance abuse providers, to share concerns among the many stakeholders—parents, children, agencies, the clergy, business, educators, and others—and, most importantly, to establish a course of action: “Where do we go from here?” As a result of that summit, we now have a regional Drug Policy Board. It is called the Houston/Harris County Regional Substance Abuse Advisory Council, and it serves as the linchpin for reviewing, assessing, and monitoring substance abuse policies, not just locally but at the federal and state level as well, with the ultimate objective of developing policies for a comprehensive approach to address substance abuse at the local level. In retrospect, the 1988 summit has really served our community well—not just Houston, but Harris County as well. The partnerships have been highly productive. People are working together, whereas before that was not the case. It also serves to reduce the duplication of services. That obviously is important; we have limited resources to address the problems we have. We also maintain relationships with national agencies and organizations that are involved with substance abuse. Houston was recently included in a newly redesigned DAWN program—the Drug Abuse Warning Network. Even though we are the fourth largest city in America, we were left out of that, and I never could understand why. That is an effort, as you know, to record vital information on drug use trends as reported to our emergency rooms and other facilities that would see someone who is having a drug problem. We have teamed up with members of our Texas Medical Center—we do have the honor of having the world's largest medical center here in Houston—to take advantage of the research of institutions that exist here and to apply for federal funds that would enable us to become a national substance abuse research center. Certainly, Rice University could be a very important part of that initiative. If we are successful,

it gives us the opportunity to monitor and study effective treatment modalities that may someday be available to all who suffer from addiction. Let me just mention some other initiatives that we have going on in our city.

- The Houston Crackdown Bright Ideas Community Grant Fund disperses about a million dollars of funds to local schools, religious organizations, and youth service organizations in order to provide prevention curricula to assist in educating young people about the dangers of substance abuse. More than 200,000 youths have served in this program. Many of these children have also received treatment services from the Bright Ideas funds.
- We have the Lee P. Brown Religious Drug Forum. That program brought together about 300 area ministers. We wanted to inform our ministers about available substance abuse services, but in truth, we accomplished much more than that. The Mayor's Ministerial Advisory Board now serves as an active participant in developing a comprehensive strategy to address substance abuse, using the many resources they have at their disposal, whether it is counseling or education. They have turned out to be great partners in helping us address this issue.
- In August 1999, the City of Houston and the Office of National Drug Control Policy, then under the leadership of my friend, General Barry McCaffrey, entered into an agreement to collect, analyze, and disseminate relevant substance abuse data. We think this is potentially a very valuable contribution to the government's forming of a national strategy from the perspective of the local level, where we see the problem.
- In February 2001, Demand Treatment was initiated. We did this with a Robert Wood Johnson grant and joined together with other organizations to increase awareness of assessment, treatment, and intervention services.
- My office has hosted and co-hosted a number of forums to help address the issue, particularly using young people. I have a Youth City Council that works with me very closely on this issue.

There are many other things we have done, such as the DARE program, in which police officers go into the classroom, but the overall objective is to prevent young people from using drugs to begin with, and, when we find people who are on drugs, to provide a mechanism for getting them off. I believe that it has to be a community-wide effort. It should start with the family; it should carry over into the schools all the way from the kindergarten to the 12th grade. In addition, our religious institutions and our community groups all have a role to play to accomplish this objective. But it must start with the family. The family can play a great role in preventing drug use to begin with. I know. I have raised four kids and I know how difficult it is to raise kids. I am very pleased that they're all grown and now I have grandchildren to worry about. But when I was the police chief, I knew clearly that just because I was a police chief, my children would not be immune from the influences out there in the broader community. I remember many times that I would go into my twin daughters' bedroom and search to see if I had a problem in my home. But I would tell them what I was doing. They didn't like it; they would tell me that I was violating their rights and their right to privacy. My response was that, as long as you live in my house, you will follow my rules. Why did I do that? I think parents have the duty and responsibility, first of all, to make sure that our homes are drug free. To do that, we have to do more than just talk. We have to demonstrate that we are concerned by exhibiting what I call "tough love."

I have drawn the conclusion that if we're going to break the cycle of drug use, then what we are going to have to do is make sure that we provide prevention and education programs to our young people, but then at the same time provide treatment programs to those who are addicted to drugs. When I was in Washington, we had about one million people in America who would benefit from treatment that we were not serving. For whatever reason, those who allocate the funds to the drug effort in America seem to think that you're being soft on crime if you put money into prevention programs and treatment. We proposed to Congress a \$550 million hard-core drug-use treatment program and we got about \$50 million. It is easy to get money for interdiction, for the DEA and the FBI, but much more difficult to get money to deal with treatment programs or prevention programs. After having a number of years of experience in

dealing with the issue of criminal justice in America, and the problem as of drugs in particular, it is quite clear to me that the answer has to be in prevention and education and treatment.

You had an excellent presentation about Colombia. I have been to Colombia many times and to Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, and other drug-producing countries all over the world, and I can tell you that we are not going to stop the production of drugs. And even if we were able to stop them—say that we were able to build a wall around America so no drugs would come in—I guarantee you that, with the ingenuity we have here, synthetic drugs would be a substitute for everything that we kept out. Just take the border of Mexico. I don't know the figures right now, but at one point most of the drugs were coming from Colombia to Mexico, but the Mexican cartel was trying to cut off the middle man, so they were growing the coca leaf as well. We have a 2,000-mile border with the country. You're not going to keep drugs out. That's why I reached the conclusion that if we are serious about dealing with drugs, what we have to do is to do everything we can to make sure that our children have a clear understanding that they should not use drugs, and that those who are addicted to drugs are provided treatment. I know no other way to get an addict off drugs than treatment. I don't know any other way.

This is not a problem of the inner city, though we often tend to think it is, “inner-city” being used [in this context] to talk about poor people and minority people. I remember that when I was in Washington, I was asked to go out to Potomac, Md., to talk to a high-school class in a religious school because the person who asked me had a daughter who was using drugs. I went, and all the parents came, and I asked, “How many of you know anyone in the school who uses drugs?” Every hand went up. As they asked me questions, they would start off by saying, “I am [name]. I am an alcoholic” or “I am a recovering drug user.” So, it is not a problem just for low-income people. This is an American problem. I have not seen any segment of our society escape what we are going through as far as drugs are concerned. I believe that the greatest threat to the national security of America really is the drug problem. I also consider the fact that the majority of the people who use drugs also go to work every day. They hold down a job. Drugs in the workplace are a serious problem, and if we want to deal with drugs, we also have to deal with drugs in the workplace. I wish I could come here today and tell you there is an easy solution to this problem, but there is no easy solution. There is no silver bullet that will take this problem

away from us. But if I concluded my remarks by just sharing with you all the things I have experienced in the course of my career, the answer is very simple. Number one, we have to keep people from using drugs. Number two, provide treatment to get those who are on drugs off drugs.

So again, let me thank you for inviting me to be here with you today. If time permits, I will be glad to take any questions that anyone may have.

Q&A

Q: Mayor Brown, I can recall that when you were director of ONDCP, you mentioned that we could never arrest our way out of this problem. I recall your request for increases in the budget for treatment. Yesterday, we were treated to DEA Administrator Hutchinson, expressing his belief that we had to increase. In your day, roughly two-thirds of our federal budget went to interdiction, not into treatment and education. Today those numbers are unchanged. Although the people in a series of related offices have expressed the desire to make that shift, nothing has in fact occurred. Can you just reflect a moment on the resistance and how we might begin to overcome that resistance?

Brown: It is all tied into politics. Those who are making the decisions on the appropriation of resources, as I saw it, and I suspect it has not changed, do not want to be seen back home as being “soft on drugs.” And, therefore, they make decisions that are very uninformed. I started to try to address that when I was back and what I started to do was to take some of the Congress people to drug treatment centers—you'd be surprised, but many of them have never been to a drug treatment facility or [been] taken to a prevention program—and, if you will, kind of convert them. Because I believe that if you go to a place where people are being treated and listen to those who are the addicts and find out what benefit the treatment is to them, you will understand why treatment works. Or go to a good prevention program and talk to some of the kids who understand why that is important. So the brief answer to your question is that I think it is all tied up into politics. It is easy to vote for money for interdiction, but interdiction has not worked. We have had boats out there on the sea and it is kind of like trying to find a pebble out on the beach. With all the vast amount of water, how are you going to find one ship that might be carrying drugs? That's not the answer. The answer has to be, as I said on more than one occasion, prevention, education, and treatment. The short answer to your question is that I think it's tied to elected officials being reluctant to vote money for education, treatment, and prevention, and to be seen as competing with the enforcement and interdiction funds, rather than setting the priority and understanding that treatment, prevention, and education, have to be the top priorities.

Q: My name is Howard Woolridge, retired police officer from Fort Worth. You and I both know the futility of trying to incarcerate our way out of this problem. Would you use your office as Mayor of Houston to direct the police department to essentially not spend the time to bust people for personal amounts of drugs, much as the police in Europe are now doing? As the three-time mayor, you have some political cover to make this move, this change, without committing political suicide.

Brown: As a former police officer, you know as well as I do that police officers have the responsibility to enforce the laws that are enacted by the Legislature. So, unless the laws are changed, the police are responsible for enforcing them. Some people don't like to get traffic tickets, but police officers are charged with the responsibility of writing traffic tickets. As long as we have laws, the police—and I hope it never changes—do not have the luxury of choosing what laws they want to enforce. That would be contrary to our system of government and the separation of powers in America, so I just don't see that happening.

Q: [Legless man in wheelchair.] Mr. Mayor, I am from Houston. My name is Clayton Jones. I am different than a lot of people here. My interest is in medical marijuana. I have stopped using eleven medications that were prescribed for me. If I tried to be a healthy person [by using marijuana], I am subject to your laws. I don't want to lose my home. I don't want to lose everything I have hurt for. What can you do for people like us?

Brown: Again, that is a legislative issue. I had to deal with that issue when I was in Washington and my position then is the same as it is right now. When the medical profession determines that this is a right use of marijuana for medical purposes, that's when we should change policy. Until they come up with that conclusion, through research, then it won't change.

Jones: Mr. Mayor, they have come up with that conclusion, as far back as President Nixon, and long before that. It has been an herbal medicine that has been [recorded as having been] used 170 years before Christ.

BROWN: The information that I received or was at the Office of National Drug Control Policy was contrary to what you are telling me right now. I don't know if it has changed or not, but it is contrary to what you are telling me.

JONES: I'm not interested in the whole country. I am interested in Houston, where I live. Houston is my home - is where I want to stay. I don't want to be chased out.

BROWN: Unfortunately, Houston does not have the authority to change state or federal laws.

JONES: You have the authority to tell the police to look the other way. If they can do that traffic tickets and domestic disturbances....

BROWN: We don't tell the police officers to look the other way. To the contrary, we tell them that their obligation, duty, and responsibility is to enforce the law.

Q: Mayor Brown, my name is Dick Evans. I am a physician and I would like to ask a question about needle exchange programs. I think you are aware that AIDS is decimating our community, particularly the African-American community, and you know that we learned this morning that needle exchange programs are very effective in other parts of the world. Though I don't know this for sure, I think it may be true that Houston is the only large metropolitan city that does not have a needle exchange program. Of course, in most of Texas, those programs are being done with a wink-and-a-nod agreement between the DA and the chief of police in those cities. So I understand your previous response to other questions regarding upholding the law, but I would like to hear any other comments you may have on that.

BROWN: I have also looked at the whole issue of needle exchange programs, and the policy we had at the federal level was that, if it reduces the use of drugs and does not increase the use of drugs, there is nothing wrong with them. In fact, you could use federal monies for needle exchange programs if the Surgeon General would make the determination that it would not increase drug use and would help reduce drug use.

EVANS: That has been proven, of course, not only in this country but elsewhere.