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Foreword

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Rethinking Our War on Drugs arrives at an interesting time in American political and cultural history. After a brief period of reform in the 1960s and 1970s (penalty reductions and diversion to treatment), alcohol and other drug problems have been restigmatized, demedicalized, and recriminalized under a philosophy of “zero tolerance” that has spanned Democrat and Republican administrations. A century ago, it appeared that the United States was moving toward a very consistent policy of prohibiting alcohol, tobacco, and the nonmedical use of opiates and cocaine. After brief state and national experiments with alcohol prohibition and local and state tobacco prohibition in the early twentieth century, new policies were forged, based on the notion of good drugs and bad drugs. Newly defined good drugs such as alcohol and tobacco were celebrated, commercialized, and aggressively promoted while bad drugs such as heroin and cocaine and later marijuana and hallucinogens were increasingly demonized and criminalized, with prescription psychoactive drugs existing on the border between these two worlds. Most of the policy debates of the past century

have occurred within this enduring good drug–bad drug dichotomy. *Rethinking Our War on Drugs* is, among other things, a call to transcend this dichotomy.

There is a critical need to elevate the discussion of American drug policy, but several factors work against this. Individuals and families personally impacted by addiction are collectively silenced within the shame and stigma in which these problems have been culturally encased. At the same time, the existing framework of drug supply reduction and drug demand reduction feeds billions of dollars (\$145 billion in the past 10 years) into institutional economies: innumerable governmental bodies, law enforcement agencies, the court systems, an ever-growing prison system, addiction treatment institutions, prevention agencies, and all the subindustries (e.g., equipment, training, research) that support them. One of the problems this creates is that nearly everyone professionally close to alcohol and other drug problems is financially rewarded within the current infrastructures that define cultural ownership of these problems. Sadly, those with alcohol and drug problems constitute a crop to be regularly harvested

for institutional and personal profit. Such rewards buy considerable silence and limit open debate about drug policy. There are, however, voices that have broken and continue to break this silence.

American drug control policies have undergone critical analysis since the basic architecture of these policies was first established. The analysis of these policies has ranged from scholarly histories (e.g., Dr. David Musto's *The American Disease: Origins of Narcotic Controls*, 1973) through expert panels of the American Medical and Bar Associations to rhetorical diatribes (e.g., Thomas Szasz's *Ceremonial Chemistry*, 1974). Falling between these poles is a tradition of careful analysis suggesting that the intentions of these policies have not been met and have instead created unanticipated and quite harmful effects on individuals, families, communities, and the country as a whole. The most significant contributions within this latter tradition include Henry Williams' *Drug Addicts Are Human Beings* (1938), William Eldridge's *Narcotics and the Law* (1968), Rufus King's *The Drug Hang-up: America's Fifty Year Folly* (1972), Troy Duster's *The Legislation of Morality* (1972), Alfred Lindesmith's *The Addict and the Law* (1973), and such recent contributions as Dan Baum's *Smoke and Mirrors* (1996) and Michael Massing's *The Fix* (1998). Gary Fisher's *Rethinking Our War on Drugs*, in its critical analysis of National Drug Control Strategy between 1996 and 2005, is the latest offering within this tradition of dissent.

Criticism of American drug policy has often come at a high price. Local and national politicians, judges, police chiefs, law enforcement officers, treatment specialists, and even surgeon generals as well as prestigious groups like the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association have paid high prices for their candor. The risks of financial punishment (e.g., withdrawal of government funding), political harassment, and professional scapegoating have been so great that only those in the most insulated positions (e.g., tenured professors at private universities) have risked the backlash of their published criticism of current drug policies. Future

sacrifices are likely as momentum builds for a fundamental reevaluation of these policies. Those who claim the king is wearing no clothes (that the American drug policies have not and are not working) will be branded as misguided and dangerous and blackballed until the political winds shift. In the aftermath of that shift, today's provocateurs will be lauded as courageous visionaries. What will propel this shift more than any single factor is the emergence of a global village. As American citizens become more closely connected to the world community, their awareness of alternatives to our current drug policies will force a more critical examination and reevaluation of American policy. *Rethinking Our War on Drugs* is another straw on the back of American drug policy—another call for us to step back and rethink how we got into this war and how we can get out of it.

There are several things that commend this book. First, Fisher has a distinguished history of working within the existing policy framework. He brings no axe to grind about particular policy leaders or institutions. What follows are not the disgruntled words of a whistleblower, but the words of a reformer convinced that a better way must be found. Fisher argues not for a particular policy or single strategy but for fearless scrutiny and dialog about present policies and their potential alternatives, including the most controversial and politically tabooed (from harm reduction, decriminalization, and legalization to increases in alcohol taxation). As a person in recovery, Fisher also brings the perspective of one who has experienced alcohol and other drug problems and their solutions at a most personal level. As an individual who has long chosen to use none of the drugs discussed in this book, his arguments cannot be discounted as the self-justifications of an active drug user (a suspicion often cast on those advocating changes in current drug policies). Fisher views our current predicament as a function of flawed policies rather than of inadequate resources, organizational malaise, or professional ineptitude. He is offering one of the most eloquent arguments to date (using the

government's own established objectives and performance benchmarks) of what is becoming obvious to a growing number of citizens: American drug policies and strategies are impotent to achieve the noble goals to which they aspire.

There is a deep thread of irrationality within the history of American drug control policies. Presidents and Congress have repeatedly created expert panels only to chastise and ignore the reports of those panels when their recommendations are not politically palatable. It is time the American citizenry wrenched this issue from the politicians who exploit this issue and the equally rabid drug warriors and drug legalizers. It is time citizens in local communities across the country reclaimed their investment in this problem. There is some evidence that the citizenry is reaching this point of readiness. It is becoming increasingly clear that our renewed efforts to incarcerate our way out of alcohol and drug problems are failing. Citizens are disillusioned that illicit drugs are more available, more potent, and cheaper in local American communities in spite of billions of tax dollars that have gone into drug enforcement. Citizens are also looking more critically at the degree of effectiveness of both prevention programs and addiction treatment programs. Perhaps the time is right to revisit a policy discussion that began more than a century ago and led us down a path whose destination was unclear. It is not too late to re-chart that path, but it will take courage.

Alcohol and other drug problems have an importance that far surpasses their harm to individuals and society. Policies related to these problems touch on some of the most critical issues in our society: race, social class, gender, the health of families and communities, intergenerational conflict, corporate greed, and America's relationships with other countries. The stakes involved in all of these are too important to tolerate continued policy inertia and cultural silence about the premises that lie beneath our current policies. This book is a report card on what we are doing in this policy arena and a bold call to reevaluate those policies. It is a reasoned call for conversation—a call to rethink not our goals of preventing and resolving these problems, but the strategies we are currently using to achieve those goals. Gary Fisher is challenging us to begin that conversation today and to not let anyone arbitrarily limit the options that we can include in that conversation. Let the conversation begin.

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