



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on March 12, 2012

Pat Robertson Calls for Marijuana Legalization

"This one" is the issue of legalizing marijuana, a policy that has long been opposed by many conservative Christians, a significant percentage of whom greatly respect the opinion of the longtime host of *The 700 Club*. Robertson, however, is parting company with them on this matter, saying, "I really believe we should treat marijuana the way we treat beverage alcohol. I've never used marijuana and I don't intend to, but it's just one of those things that I think: this war on drugs just hasn't succeeded."



It is difficult to argue with him on that point. The 40-year war on drugs has utterly failed to stem the tide of drug use in the United States. On the other hand, it has succeeded in giving this country the dubious distinction of having "the highest rate of incarceration of any nation on the face of the Earth," as Robertson [pointed out on his show](#) recently, calling it a "shocking statistic" for a supposedly "great land of freedom."

"We've just got to change the laws," he declared. "We cannot allow this to continue. It is sapping our vitality."

It is also [sapping our constitutional liberties](#). Federal drug laws are inherently unconstitutional. Prohibiting alcohol, after all, required a constitutional amendment; why shouldn't prohibiting marijuana, cocaine, heroin, or any other substance? Moreover, the enforcement of drug prohibition has eviscerated the Bill of Rights, militarized local law enforcement, and embroiled the United States in [illegal foreign wars](#).

Once a fervent drug warrior, Robertson told the *Times* "that there had been no single event or moment that caused him to embrace legalization. Instead, his conviction that the nation 'has gone overboard on this concept of being tough on crime' built up over time, he added."

Robertson had [made a similar argument in 2010](#), telling *700 Club* viewers: "It got to be a big deal in campaigns. Lock 'em up, you know. That's the way these guys ran, and they got elected. But that wasn't the answer." Then, as now, he maintained that imprisoning people for 10 years for possessing a marijuana joint is "costing us a fortune and it's ruining our young people," who enter prison "as youths and ... come out as hardened criminals."

Two years ago Robertson explicitly denied being in favor of marijuana decriminalization. Today, saying he can see little difference between smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol, he not only favors legalization but also told the *Times* that he "absolutely" supports ballot measures in Colorado and Washington that would significantly liberalize marijuana laws in those states.

Since its 1971 inception under President Richard Nixon, the war on drugs has been considered part and parcel of the conservative Republican approach to the problem of drug abuse. Robertson, however, argues that it's not conservative in the least to imprison people for smoking a joint. Instead, he told the



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Times, it's part of a "liberal mindset to have an all-encompassing government."

In other words, liberals believe in forcing people to do what is best for them (as liberals see it) even when it is not impinging on others' rights; conservatives prefer to persuade, rather than force, people to do the right thing (as conservatives see it). As Robertson put it, "I believe in working with the hearts of people, and not locking them up."

Neill Franklin, executive director of Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, an organization of current and former law enforcement officials opposed to the drug war, agreed. Franklin, who is also a Christian, told the *Times*, "If you follow the teaching of Christ, you know that Christ is a compassionate man. And he would not condone the imprisoning of people for nonviolent offenses."

Franklin may be on solid theological ground. If Jesus did not favor stoning a woman caught in adultery despite Old Testament laws explicitly mandating such a punishment (the canonicity of this passage, [John 7:53 - 8:11](#), is disputed by some), it seems unlikely that he would favor imprisoning someone merely for harming his own body. Of course, in the same passage Jesus also told the accused woman to "go, and sin no more" to make clear He was not condoning her sin; Robertson, likewise, told the *Times* he was "not encouraging people to use narcotics in any way, shape or form" even though he did not believe individuals should be punished by the state for using marijuana.

Whether Robertson's change of heart on the question of marijuana legalization heralds a sea change in conservative Christian thinking on the subject remains to be seen.

Ethan Nadelmann of the Drug Policy Alliance, which favors drug law liberalization, thinks it might. In a March 8 [statement](#) he said:

Pat Robertson's clearly stated and well-reasoned comments throw a curve ball into the growing debate over legalizing marijuana. Pat Robertson is neither a liberal nor a libertarian. The millions of people who listen to and respect him are mostly conservatives, Republicans and older Americans — who, according to Gallup's latest poll, have been the least likely to support legalizing marijuana. His cogent arguments, and his willingness to speak out clearly on this issue, will prompt lots of people who have opposed legalization to think again.

On the other hand, the *Times* reported, "conservative groups that usually align with Mr. Robertson ... were largely silent when asked for comment on his stance." Focus on the Family, for instance, "declined to respond beyond saying that the group opposes legalization of marijuana for medical or recreational use."

Probably, as with Robertson, it is going to take time for others to come around to his way of thinking; but each prominent person who publicly opposes the unconstitutional, unsuccessful war on drugs drives another nail into its coffin. The drug war's abject failure and enormous expense, combined with a generational shift in attitudes about it (Nadelmann noted that "Americans under age 50 overwhelmingly favor legalizing marijuana"), leave only one question unanswered: Who will pound the last pin into its pine package?

Photo of Pat Robertson: AP Images



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