

The November Coalition

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The November Coalition is a non-profit, grassroots organization that seeks to educate the public about the war on drugs. According to their web site, the Coalition includes “a growing body of citizens whose lives have been gravely affected by our government’s present drug policy. We are prisoners, parents of those incarcerated, wives, sisters, brothers, children, aunts, uncles and cousins. Some of us are loving friends and concerned citizens, each of us alarmed that drug war casualties are rising in absolutely horrific proportions.” It is one of a number of prison reform groups lobbying to rescind current federal and state laws on drugs.

What does the November Coalition Do?

Formed by survivors and victims of the drug war in 1997, the November Coalition uses real life examples to illustrate how a drug arrest can become a “frightening introduction to conspiracy statutes, government’s liberal use of informants, guideline-sentencing laws, and the nightmare usually leaves defendant and family confused and full of despair.” Through individual accounts, they show how long-term imprisonment has dramatic effects on personality and personal relationships. Prisoners suffer from severe restrictions on their human and constitutional rights, and all of these difficulties exact a toll on both the prisoner and those who love them.

The November Coalition seeks to rehumanize the victims of the drug war by telling their stories. This strategy reveals the damaging impact of mandatory minimum sentencing on individuals and their families. Autobiographical accounts help to demonstrate that many drug war victims are regular people, good citizens and neighbors, whose lives have been derailed by a misguided



Drug war vigil in front of the federal building — 2 Million Too Many campaign, February 15, 2000, Spokane, WA

war on drugs. Some of these stories remind us that these imprisoned victims of the drug war have children who are also victimized — in part by the actions of their parent, but also due to the draconian measures used to fight drug use. Other stories share the painful stories of aging parents who have lost their children to the war on drugs. These parents are victimized by a system that prevents children, who may face prison for the rest of their lives, from being able to support aging parents. These stories document the disparate impact that drug policies have on different races and social classes. These stories also relay feelings about politicians who have escalated the drug war, even though they have admitted past drug use that could have sent them to prison rather than to the White House.

The November Coalition argues that the discriminatory impact of drug policies, in which members of minority communities far outnumber whites in prison, should have been predicted. If that were not possible, then the discriminatory impacts are certainly clear to today’s policymakers. According to the Coalition, drug policies have created a situation in which the most vulnerable are least able to defend against injustice. Such policies do not constitute a war on drugs; they have become a war on people. The Coalition also points out the similarities

between alcohol prohibition of the 1920’s and drug prohibition today. Drug users have been dehumanized through demonizing propaganda, in particular “the crack epidemic,” that dominated national media during the late 1980’s.

The Coalition publishes “*The Razor Wire*” to report on drug policy reform efforts, legislative updates, and news about drug law vigils and meetings. This publication also includes letters from prisoners and others who have been victimized by the war on drugs. The organization also publishes “*The Wall*,” which is an online collection of prisoner



The 8th Annual Isidro Aviles Memorial Picnic, hosted by the Bronx, NY Chapter of the November Coalition, Summer 2007

photos and stories that document the impact of the war on drugs. “*The Razor Wire*” and “*The Wall*” can be found on the November Coalition website (www.november.org). The website also includes essays, statistics, and other information that supports efforts toward changing prisons and our views toward punishment. In addition to educating people about the necessity of penal reform, the Coalition has demonstrated that the internet can be an effective tool for information sharing and for organizing those who share an opposition to a policy that has shaped our justice system, filled our prisons, and shaped the societies of America and many other countries.

Conclusion

The November Coalition provides an example of the effectiveness of grassroots challenges to policy. Working with limited resources, the Coalition has made great progress in their efforts to educate the public and policymakers about problems associated with “The War on Drugs.” As we know, this “War” remains in force. However, as states begin to feel pressure related to prison overcrowding, they are beginning to consider alternatives to incarceration-based policies that created the problem. The November Coalition succeeds in providing an arena where prisoners’ voices and stories can be heard. These stories and voices are invaluable in the effort to challenging the status quo.

Further reading

Bonczar, T. and Glaze, L. (1999). “*Probation and Parole in the United States*.” Bureau of Justice Statistics. Washington DC: US Department of Justice.

Harrison, Paige M. and Beck, A.J. (2002). “*Prisoners in 2001*,” Bureau of Justice Statistics. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice.

Irwin, J., Schiraldi, V. and Ziedenberg, J. (1999). *America’s One Million Nonviolent Prisoners*. Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute.

Websites

The November Coalition: www.november.org

Common Sense for Drug Policy: www.csdp.org

Criminal Justice Policy Foundation: www.cjpf.org

Drug Policy Alliance: www.drugpolicy.org

Journey for Justice: www.journeyforjustice.org

Media Awareness Project: www.mapinc.org

National Drug Strategy Network: www.ndsn.org

Students for Sensible Drug Policy: www.ssdp.org

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November Coalition staff and board of directors — Autumn 2007

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP INCLUDES THE RAZOR WIRE
NEWSPAPER AND OTHER SPECIAL NOTICES

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