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Caitlin Troyer, Carroll College, undergraduate student, “Suppressing the Black Male Vote: Ronald Reagan and the War on Drugs”

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which the War on Drugs was wielded as a tool for political suppression, more specifically, how Ronald Reagan used the War on Drugs to suppress the African American male vote during his presidency, and thereafter. This paper focuses solely on the years 1982-1988. The study will consist of examining primary sources such as Ronald Reagan’s speeches and writings, bills passed during his presidency, demographics, and statistics of those incarcerated for drug use, as well as demographics of those who voted for Ronald Reagan. The study seeks to draw a correlation between the drastic incarceration of Black men and the fact that this demographic was not representative of Reagan's voter base to prove that incarceration was used as a tool for voter suppression. Reagan first mentioned the drug issue in a speech in 1982. Thereafter he frequently addressed it and pushed to create more drug policy. The War on Drugs in the United States eventually led to the US having the largest incarceration rate in the world. This means that an incredibly large group of Americans were disenfranchised and a disproportionate number of these individuals were Black men.

Suppressing the Black Male Vote: Ronald Reagan and the War on Drugs

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Introduction

The demographic most affected by the drug policies of former President Ronald Reagan were Black men. Consequently, historians widely agree that the war on drugs was racialized. Incarcerated individuals are denied the right to vote and in most states, felons cannot vote either, thereby Black men incarcerated for drug use are stripped of their role in democracy.

Although Black men were not a large part of Reagan's voter base I argue here that the former president used the War on Drugs as a form of voter suppression to ensure that the black vote did not prove advantageous for his opponent.

Demographics of Reagan's Voter Base

	1980	GROUP	CARTER	REAGAN	ANDERSON
TOTAL	All Voters	Pct.	41%	51%	8%
SEX	Men	51	38	55	7
	Women	49	46	47	7
RACE	White	88	36	56	8
	African-American	10	83	14	3
	Hispanic	2	56	37	7

Table 3, Demographics of Voters, 1980.¹

	DEMOGRAPHIC	GROUP	MONDALE	REAGAN
TOTAL	All Voters	Pct.	41%	59%
SEX	Men	47	38	62
	Women	53	42	58
RACE	White	86	34	66
	African-American	10	91	9
	Hispanic	3	66	34

Table 4, Demographics of Voters, 1984.²

According to exit poll data, in 1980, only 14% of Black Americans voted for Ronald Reagan and in 1984 only 9% of Black Americans voted for Reagan. Conversely in 1984, 91% of

Black Americans voted for Reagan's opponent, Walter Mondale. We can conclude from this evidence that Reagan, especially after 1980, was aware that the Black community was likely to support his opponent, and consequently, sought to suppress a demographic of voters that could possibly threaten his chances at the polls, and later, the goals of his administration.

Ronald Reagan: Drug Sentiments

In his October 1982 speech, Reagan stated, "We're making no excuses for drugs -- hard, soft, or otherwise. Drugs are bad, and we're going after them."³ This speech demonstrates Reagan's strong approach to dealing with the issue of drug use as well as the way he marketed the issue to the public, and thus garnered support for his assertion that drugs were a looming threat.

Similarly, in a speech from July of 1986 Reagan claimed that "Our object is not to punish users but to help them; and not to throw them in jail but to free them from dependency; not to ruin their lives by putting them behind bars but to prevent their lives from being ruined by drugs."⁴ This statement is in direct contradiction to Reagan's actions regarding the issue. By 1986 it was evident that Reagan was directing more federal funding to law enforcement than he was to rehabilitation or education programs and facilities.

In what appears to be a series of mixed messages, in a later 1986 interview, Reagan offers the following regarding penalties for drug dealers. "I would tell you that my own personal view is that if you're talking about the death penalty, I know they deserve it. But, no, I would think that we might be taking on, then, something that would divide our ranks, because there are so many people who don't believe in the death penalty for anything."⁵ Earlier in the same interview, however, Reagan had said otherwise, noting that instead of sending drug users to jail, "I think we should offer help for them."⁶ While it appears that for Reagan there is a distinction between

drug users and drug dealers it is questionable how genuinely he cared about the rehabilitation of those affected by the drug issue.

Anti-Drug Legislation Passed During the Reagan Administration

The Comprehensive Crime Control Act was passed in February of 1984, just a short six months before Reagan's reelection. Title V of this act includes the following Drug Enforcement Amendments:

Increases the fine levels for drug trafficking. Increases the penalties for trafficking in large amounts of controlled substances. Provides increased penalties for distributing controlled substances in or near a school. Amends the Controlled Substances Act to allow the Attorney General to place an uncontrolled substance under temporary controls which provide for registration, recordkeeping and criminal penalties.⁷

This act served to make the consequences of drug trafficking more extreme, particularly the penalties for distributing in or near a school.

Several years later the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, particularly, “Subtitle V: Death Penalty for Certain Offenses”, reflected Reagan’s sentiments from his earlier interview. The act, “amends the Controlled Substances Act to establish procedures for the imposition of the death penalty for certain continuing criminal enterprise drug offenses.”⁸ This act was introduced on September 8, 1986. Exactly five weeks after Reagan said that while he thinks the death penalty is deserved, it is not something he would implement. The amendment became law on October 27, 1986, as illustrative of a disconnect between Reagan’s public interviews and speeches, and his actions.

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, offered still more amendments. For example, Subtitle L: “Serious Crack Possession Offenses” of this act “amends the Controlled Substances Act to increase the criminal penalties with respect to persons convicted for the possession of a mixture or substance containing cocaine base.”⁹ What is significant about this change is that it only addresses crack cocaine, or substances with a cocaine base but does not affect people who are

caught with pure cocaine. Crack cocaine and cocaine mixtures were more widely distributed and accessible in Black communities whereas pure cocaine was more likely to be possessed by white people. This amendment suggests clear prejudice against specifically crack users and dealers which consequently increases penalties for the Black community.

The act also “amends penalty provisions of the Controlled Substances Act to impose a mandatory term of life imprisonment without release with respect to violators convicted for a third felony drug offense.”¹⁰ Drug crimes occur more often in impoverished communities which are also often communities of color and therefore Black individuals were once again disproportionately faced with severe penalties as opposed to receiving the types of assistance Reagan had formerly claimed to support. Additionally the Act “amends the Controlled Substances Act to apply mandatory minimum sentencing provisions to offenses involving the distribution of five grams or less of marijuana to persons under age 21.”¹¹ More likely to be stopped and frisked than their white counterparts, Black men were thus more likely to be caught with a personal amount of a controlled substance than whites who also had small amounts of an illegal substance.

Budget Allotments for the Drug War

In the years 1981 to 1988 the federal government spent more than \$13 billion on the anti-drug effort. A Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report titled “Federal Drug Control: President’s Budget Request For Fiscal Year 1988” includes reports made before Congress wherein the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, James C. Miller III, “recently testified that since FY 1981 resources devoted to all Federal anti-drug efforts have grown by 220 percent in nominal dollars. He pointed out that in terms of outlays, as opposed to budget authority, the FY 1988 request proposes a total increase of approximately \$500 million (\$3.5

billion as opposed to \$3 billion in FY 1987).¹² Reagan continually justified these constant increases in spending on the anti-drug effort, by over-emphasizing that drugs were a threat to society. In fact, when the 1988 budget request was made people accused the administration of slackening their efforts against drugs so much so that the Reagan administration felt compelled to repeatedly state that they were in fact continuing to spend more on the effort. Miller later states that, “to suggest that the President has abandoned his commitment to combating drug abuse is an assertion that simply ignores the facts.”¹³ Traditionally administrations find it difficult to defend increases in spending. The Reagan administration had the opposite problem. Defending what looked like a decrease in spending on the drug war. This indicates that the public and Congress were convinced by Reagan that this was indeed a huge threat to the American way of life.

TABLE 2. Drug Abuse Prevention and Control: Federal Government Budget Authority Summary, FY1981-FY1988
(Figures are in millions of dollars) ^{1/}

	FY1981	FY1982	FY1983	FY1984	FY1985	FY1986	Enacted FY1987E	Revised 2/ FY1987E	Requested 2/ FY1988E
Drug Law Enforcement (Current \$)	\$859.5	\$1,079.4	\$1,272.8	\$1,596.0	\$1,838.4	\$1,877.8	\$3,004.2	\$2,971.3	\$2,468.1
(Constant 1981 \$)	\$859.5	\$1,012.4	\$1,147.3	\$1,386.8	\$1,539.7	\$1,534.2	\$2,381.2	\$2,355.1	\$1,887.0
Drug Demand Reduction (Current \$)	\$371.2	\$305.1	\$347.5	\$366.6	\$394.9	\$391.8	\$959.9	\$959.9	\$565.1
(Constant 1981 \$)	\$371.2	\$286.2	\$313.2	\$318.5	\$330.7	\$320.1	\$760.8	\$760.8	\$432.1
Drug Abuse Prevention (Current \$)	\$133.9	\$104.9	\$121.1	\$135.8	\$159.7	\$164.5	\$505.4	\$505.4	\$321.4
Drug Abuse Treatment (Current \$)	\$237.3	\$200.2	\$226.4	\$230.8	\$235.2	\$227.3	\$454.5	\$454.5	\$243.7
TOTAL, FEDERAL DRUG SUMMARY (Current \$)	\$1,230.7	\$1,384.5	\$1,620.2	\$1,962.6	\$2,233.3	\$2,269.6	\$3,964.1	\$3,931.2	\$3,033.2
(Constant 1981 \$)	\$1,230.7	\$1,298.5	\$1,460.5	\$1,705.4	\$1,870.4	\$1,854.3	\$3,142.0	\$3,116.0	\$2,319.1
OMB Implicit Price Deflator ^{3/} (1981=100)	100.00	106.62	110.94	115.08	119.40	122.40	126.16*	126.16*	130.79*

NOTES: ^{1/} Based on a table prepared by the Office of Management and Budget, included as "Appendix B" in: U.S. National Drug Enforcement Policy Board. National and International Drug Law Enforcement Strategy. Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1987. Pp. 181-188. (Supplemented by data provided by OMB.)
^{2/} President's FY1988 Budget.
^{3/} Deflator for total non-defense outlays of the Federal Government as computed by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).
* OMB projections.

Table 2 outlining Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Spending, 1981-1988.¹⁴

Anti-drug funds were allocated to several different categories of spending: drug law enforcement, drug demand reduction, drug abuse prevention, and drug abuse treatment. Each year drug law enforcement received more funding than the other three categories combined. These numbers suggest that the Reagan administration cared more about putting people behind bars than it did preventing addiction or treating those who struggled with addiction. Had Reagan truly been rehabilitation oriented, the majority of federal anti-drug spending should have gone to drug abuse prevention and drug abuse treatment. In the eight years of Reagan's presidency, law enforcement received almost 7 times as much funding as did treatment.¹⁵ This evidence combined with the acts passed during his presidency indicate that Reagan's actions and his addresses to the public were in direct contradiction to one another.

This document illustrates that "in just two years from 1986 to 1988, overall drug spending has increased by 34 percent. Compared with 1987, the 1988 Budget requests funding for over 1,000 new drug investigators, prosecutors, and associated support staff, and will add approximately 800 new bed spaces to the Federal Prison system for drug violators."¹⁶ These numbers indicate that prisons were running out of space due to the number of drug violators that were being incarcerated. The emphasis was on catching these "drug violators" rather than rehabilitating them. Reagan painted the drug user as a hardened, vicious, criminal who was a threat to those around them and a threat to society as a whole. Because Black men were arrested and incarcerated for drug use at a higher rate than white men, the image of the Black man as a thug emerged.

Miller asserts that "the Federal Government has a clear responsibility to help State and local governments combat drug trafficking and drug-related crime."¹⁷ The administration felt that it was their role to provide funding for these expenditures. Miller also states that "the drug

programs contained in the FY 1988 budget clearly fall into this category of essential Government functions.”¹⁸ The War on Drugs was justified as an ‘essential government function’ and the federal government claimed responsibility for helping state and local governments combat the drug issue. Miller concludes his testimony with this statement; “To reiterate, this Administration is committed to fighting the war on drugs -- and winning it. We have not lost our zeal, we have not cut and run. We believe that every dollar that can be used effectively in the drug effort has been requested in the FY 1988 budget.”¹⁹ He emphasizes all throughout his testimony that the administration is committed to spending as much money as is deemed necessary to fight the drug issue. He diligently reiterated just how much is being spent by the administration and emphasizes that, in terms of outlays, this number is increasing.

The administration was willing to justify any amount of spending that would appear to be combating the drug issue, when in fact, more money was being spent on law enforcement with the end goal to incarcerate than was being poured into treatment for people struggling with addiction.

Allocation of Drug War Spending

Additionally in the report it was noted that, “In the area of treatment and prevention, the GAO report noted above found that from 1981 through 1985 Federal spending for these programs declined 16 percent, an effective reduction of nearly 40 percent when inflation is taken into account.”²⁰ Treatment programs were in fact losing funding in the later years of Reagan’s presidency. The decline in funding could be because some of the budget allocations for this area were understood to be one time funds given to boost organizations. However, the continual increase in spending in other areas shows a stark contrast to this. By the end of his administration

more than \$3 *billion* was being spent to combat the drug issue *annually* and the majority of these funds were being poured into the law enforcement aspect.²¹

The implications of how anti-drug funds were being used suggests that Reagan was not so much concerned with stopping the drug issue, as he was with removing drug users and traffickers from communities. Reagan's message of 'rehabilitation' and 'helping the drug user' are in stark contrast to his actual handling of the issue. Were Reagan truly rehabilitation oriented, more spending would have been directed to treatment rather than law enforcement. Additionally, prisons became more punitive under his presidency as a result of the Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988 which directly contradicts Reagan's supposed desire to help drug users.

Conclusion

It can be inferred from the rhetoric Reagan used about drugs, the demographics of Reagan's voters, the legislation passed during Reagan's administration, and the ways in which money for the war on drugs was allocated, that Reagan was aware of the implications that a War on Drugs would have on those targeted by it. Historians and scholars have already proven that the War on Drugs was racially motivated and that Black American men were the primary targets of the drug war. Reagan undoubtedly knew the implications of what being incarcerated meant for individuals. He knew that those currently incarcerated were stripped of their right to vote. He knew that it was harder to find a job with a criminal record and he knew that in most states, felons could not vote even after they served their time.

The combination of these various sources of information indicates that Reagan knew and understood that the War on Drugs could be a powerful tool of voter suppression. Reagan had almost no support from the Black community as is made evident by the demographics of his voters in both his 1980 and 1984 elections. To solidify more support Reagan was able to use

harmful rhetoric to gain support for his anti-drug policies and massive amounts of anti-drug spending. By then targeting communities of color and specifically Black men, Reagan was able to ensure that these individuals would not be able to vote and therefore not be able to vote *against him*. Reagan used the War on Drugs to put citizens who opposed him politically behind bars. The implications that incarceration has on the ability for one to do one's civic duty are dire and Reagan used that to his advantage. This paper goes beyond the current scholarship and brings forth a new way of looking at Ronald Reagan and the War on Drugs. This is not the end of the road for this issue. This paper does not address other effects of incarceration nor does it tell the full story of the War on Drugs. There is still much room for research moving forward in regards to the other aspects and effects of the War on Drugs. This paper serves only to address one single, though significant, effect and the implications behind that.

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