

Not An Idle Question

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There are some questions worth answering, no matter the consequences. And that is the case in Texas, where George W. Bush, the leading aspirant for the Republican Presidential nomination, has evaded reporters' insistent queries on unsubstantiated rumors that he used cocaine in the distant past. He has employed such circumlocutions as, "When I was young and irresponsible, I was young and irresponsible."

But the questions will not go away, nor should they. Contrary to what some pundits would have you believe, the stakes are far higher on this matter than with the superficially similar matter of a candidate's sexual misbehavior. That's because we are prosecuting a "war" against illegal drugs in this country with an unprecedented intensity.

Mr. Bush's cavalier dismissal of inquiries about past behavior and his vague references to youthful indiscretions provide a striking contrast to the tough-on-crime image he has cultivated throughout his political career in Texas.

In his successful gubernatorial campaign in 1994, he went out of his way to characterize Ann Richards, the incumbent, as soft on crime. A major plank in this effort was a commitment by Mr. Bush to toughen the juvenile justice system. After his election, he did precisely that, tripling the number of inmates in state juvenile prisons, lowering the age at which juveniles can be sent to adult court and increasing the maximum sentence for youthful offenders to 40 years. Clearly, if one is going to be "young and irresponsible," Texas is not the place to do it.

But Mr. Bush is not entirely to blame for this situation. In large measure he was merely telling the voters of Texas what they wanted to hear. And, when it comes to drug use, a justified concern for the welfare of our children has led voters to demand sharply punitive policies against the selling and possession of controlled substances. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Americans, mostly nonwhite and mostly poor, have had to pay a very high price.

Anti-drug law enforcement is the single most important cause of sharply rising prison populations, in Texas and across the country. Yet, despite all of this effort, drugs like cocaine and marijuana are available just about everywhere in America. Why? Because millions of people with time and money to burn, mostly not poor and not black, are willing to spend billions of dollars in the hedonistic pursuit of a proverbial good time.

I speak from experience about this temptation: I used illegal drugs for several years, and in 1988, when I was a professor at Harvard and after being considered for a top position in the Department of Education, I was arrested for possession of cocaine and marijuana. I

was never convicted, and the charges were dropped after I complied with the court's requirement that I attend a drug treatment program.

One need not be an advocate of drug legalization to see that the current debate brings up troubling questions of public morality. There is a failing of character in our society that knows no racial or class or geographic bound.

Yet, we have encouraged politicians to promote a drug policy that imposes the bulk of its cost on our most marginal citizens. We make "them" the site of the moral struggle, when in fact this is really a fight for our own souls.

No, I do not believe that Governor Bush should be disqualified from holding high office if he acknowledges using cocaine or any other illegal drug a quarter-century ago. I suppose I could hardly believe otherwise, given my own history.

But neither he nor anyone else seeking public office should be given a pass on the question of past drug use. Indeed, the question itself, "Did you use cocaine?" highlights our society's appalling hypocrisy on drugs. Instead of dealing with the consumptive habits of our society, we instead vote for politicians who promise to be tough on crime and to punish thousands of inner-city youth who are less fortunate but no less virtuous than a middle-class guy like me.