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[ARTICLE]

## Reformer denounces America's drug prohibition

By **SABRINA ROJAS WEISS**

*Contributing Writer*

Calling America's drug prohibition policies "ineffective," Ethan Nadelmann, head of the drug policy and research institute the Lindesmith Center, offered his own pragmatic alternative for reducing the harmful effects of drug abuse in our society in a lecture last night at the Law School.

Nadelmann's talk, "The Case Against Prohibition: Drugs, Politics, and Policy after the Election," was co-sponsored by the Columbia chapters of the Federalist Society and the American Civil Liberties Union.

In a world that increasingly emphasizes inclusiveness and elimination of discrimination, Nadelmann called attitudes and policies toward drug users "the last respectable prejudice in America," arguing that the same principles of bodily integrity used in defending abortion and homosexual rights should apply to drug users.

"The war on drugs is fundamentally misguided. . . it is increasingly costly, it is remarkably counterproductive, and it's immoral," Nadelmann said.

According to Nadelmann, the war on drugs has resulted in many negative consequences mainly affecting America's poor, including an increase in crack use, drug-related AIDS infection, and the number of people in prison.



Instead of advocating outright legalization, Nadelmann said he is working towards a pragmatic approach that combines reducing the harm of drug abuse and the harm of drug prohibition.

“The challenge is to accept the fact that drugs are here to stay. The challenge is how do we learn how to live with drugs in such a way that they cause the least possible harm?” Nadelmann asked.

Nadelmann said imprisonment and treatment programs are ineffective because complete abstinence from drugs is not a realistic alternative for many people.

“Any drug can be good or bad depending on how you use it. I don’t have any moral reservations about people taking any drug if they do so in a responsible fashion in a way that does not impede their obligations to other people,” Nadelmann said.

According to Nadelmann, the United States has not tried an approach called “harm reduction,” which originated in the Netherlands and has spread throughout Europe.

Harm reduction attempts to help people manage their drug use and get their lives together by providing services like needle exchange, methadone, and in many cases monitored heroine injections.

After Switzerland set up a program of heroine distribution, crime and drug abuse went down, Nadelmann said. Such services also reduce the risk of spreading and contracting AIDS, he said, adding that these services are cheaper than having to treat AIDS patients and overdoses.

Nadelmann and the Lindesmith Center played a part in promoting

California Proposition 215, which allows marijuana use with a doctor's prescription, and an Arizona proposition allowing doctors to prescribe any drug and prohibiting incarceration for drug possession on the first or second offense. The Center also funds needle exchange programs and methadone distributors.

Students attending the lecture said they found Nadelmann's methods an interesting alternative to the radical approaches of complete prohibition or complete legalization of drugs.

"The 'harm reduction' idea represents a difference from the way we normally focus on the issue, but I'm still not resolved on it," said Karen Schlossberg, Law '97. "His argument was compelling for research at the very least."