

By Russell Simmons and Dylan Ratigan for [The Huffington Post](#)

As we celebrate the life and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr, it appears we are a far less prejudiced country than we once were. Individual expressions of racism are less tolerated than ever, we have an African-American President, and African-Americans are increasingly being accepted into executive suites. Yet when we look closer, we find that Greedy Bastards have rebranded racism and made it acceptable again, by calling it "the war on drugs."

These statistics compiled by New York Times columnist [Charles Blow](#) and author [Michelle Alexander](#) (author of *The New Jim Crow*) are mind-blowing.

- Since 1971, there have been more than 40 million arrests for drug-related offenses. Even though blacks and whites have similar levels of drug use, blacks are ten times as likely to be incarcerated for drug crimes.

- "There are more blacks under correctional control today -- in prison or jail, on probation or parole -- than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began."

- "As of 2004, more African American men were disenfranchised (due to felon disenfranchisement laws) than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified prohibiting laws that explicitly deny the right to vote on the basis of race."

- In 2005, 4 out of 5 drug arrests were for possession not trafficking, and 80% of the increase in drug arrests in the 1990s was for marijuana.

- There are [50,000 arrests](#) for low-level pot possession a year in New York City, representing one out of every seven cases that turn up in criminal courts. Most of these arrested are black

and hispanic men.

Why is this happening, when personal prejudice is so much less common, medicinal marijuana initiatives routinely pass around the country, and illicit drug use is accepted enough that Steve Jobs could praise psychedelic drugs as key to his creative success at Apple Computer?

The modern drug war in politics can be traced back to political operative named Clifford White, an advisor to Barry Goldwater, who recognized that there were votes to be had in the backlash against the civil rights movement. From the 1970s to the 1990s, the war on drugs became convenient code for politicians who wanted to appeal to certain working class white voters with coded racist appeals. President Reagan used this political support to escalate the war on drugs.

A Federal law passed in 1986 allowed law enforcement agencies to seize drug money, and use it to supplement their budgets. Grabbing cash connected to drugs meant that police departments could buy more tools and training. Like the fee-for-service model in medicine, that pays doctors for performing procedures, not for making people healthier, the "forfeiture laws" effectively pay the police departments for making busts - not for reducing the drug trade.

In fact, if the war on drugs was ever won, it would be a financial disaster for law enforcement. There's so much dirty money funding law enforcement agencies that now, [according to NPR](#), some police departments have become "[addicted to drug money](#)"

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The second significant institutional incentive is of more recent origin, though it too has its beginnings in the Reagan era - the development of for-profit prison companies and their vast lobbying and political apparatus.

- Prisoners now [manufacture and assemble](#) products for Microsoft, Starbucks, Victoria's Secret, Boeing, as well as body armor for soldiers and handcuff cases for law enforcement

officers.

- In 2007, taxpayers spent [74 billion on prisons](#) , with the largest percentage increase of prisoners going to for-profit prison companies.

The Justice Policy Institute noted that these companies make more money through longer prison sentences, but you don't need a report from a nonprofit group to know that. Just look at their own investor reports. The Corrections Corporation of America, the largest for-profit prison company in the country, [lists as a business risk in its 10K to the SEC](#) "any changes with respect to drugs and controlled substances or illegal immigration could affect the number of persons arrested, convicted, and sentenced, thereby potentially reducing demand for correctional facilities to house them." CCA also told investors it would make less money if there were lower minimum sentences and more eligibility for inmates for early release for good behavior.

Putting people in jail and keeping them there is good for business. So that's what these companies lobby for. According to the [Justice Policy Institute](#) , these companies "have contributed \$835,514 to federal candidates and over \$6 million to state politicians. They have also spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on direct lobbying efforts." They are large donors to state-based think tanks like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), who market harsh immigration, drug laws, and prison privatization laws to state level politicians around the country. While the rationale is no longer outright bigotry, the net effect, in terms of stripping millions of blacks of political and economic rights, is the same.

This is the face of racism today. It isn't the racist sheriff in Alabama turning hoses and dogs onto protesters, or the all-white development or country club, but the smooth lobbyist and campaign contributor discussing the efficiency of private prison initiatives or the politician too cowardly to act on decriminalizing marijuana for fear of antagonizing a powerful lobby. It's racism, [Greedy-Bastards-](#) style.

What's the alternative? David Kennedy, the director of the Center for Crime Prevention and Control at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, has highlighted a very simple common sense approach known as hotspotting. He advocates for sitting down the gang members that perpetrate most of the violence, police, prosecutors, and community leaders to talk about their shared problems and the consequences of crime. Such an approach has dramatically reduced

homicide rates in Boston and Chicago, and across the country. Yet these programs and programs like them with proven success in reducing crime are the first to go on the chopping block, because they don't provide the budgetary incentive that forfeiture laws do.

Today, the march for civil rights isn't about convincing Americans that racism is wrong. It is about getting money out of politics, so that the profit from institutional racism is eliminated. The Supreme Court's decision in Plessy vs. Ferguson saying "separate but equal" has been trumped by the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, eliminating all restrictions on corporate cash in politics. If we are to honor Dr. King, let us make this our generation's cause. It won't be an easy fight, but as he said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

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