

Eugene Jarecki's *The House I Live In* Documents the Failure of the War on Drugs

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The United States has only five percent of the world's population; but five decades into the war on drugs, it has 25 percent of the world's prisoners – many of them convicted of nonviolent drug crimes. Despite huge numbers of drug-related incarcerations, illegal substances are cheaper, purer, and more widely available than ever. This begs the question: Why does the United States imprison so many of its citizens to so little effect?

In his documentary *The House I Live In*, Eugene Jarecki examines the political and economical motivations behind the war on drugs. Jarecki documents how U.S. politicians – both liberal and conservative – gain political power by portraying drugs as a great evil facing America and then passing increasingly harsh laws that allow them to claim toughness on crime. Rather than solve the drug problem by addressing the economic and social factors contributing to drug abuse or even offering treatment to addicts, politicians have created public policies that promote higher numbers of arrests and mandate longer sentence

minimums to boost their statistics. As a result, our most socioeconomically at-risk communities are further marginalized and weakened.

By basing overtime pay and promotions on arrest statistics, law enforcement policy creates incentives for police to prey upon addicts and low-level dealers rather than encouraging the more difficult work of taking down kingpins. Because the American public has embraced the fear and hatred of drugs and drug users promoted by politicians, we have enabled the creation of entire industries of law enforcement and incarceration that depend on a supply of humans to jail. These industries (and the politicians who have helped create them) target racial minorities and lower classes because, not unlike those who accepted the marginalization and abuse of Jews in Germany, the majority of Americans – middle/upperclass White Americans – don't care enough to stop them.

Director Eugene Jarecki, Federal District Court Judge Mark Bennett, and recovered addict Dennis Johnson answered questions after the world premiere of *The House I Live In* on Saturday, January 21, 2012.

Q: Your documentary addresses not only the racial element in the drug war but the class element as well. Do you think the U.S. is primed to better understand that because of current economic challenges?

Eugene: I don't want the answer to that to be yes. The majority of Americans – White Americans – should not tune into the moral wrongness of the drug war only because it affects white people now; we ought to be better than that. It's hard to penetrate in hard times when people work multiple jobs to pay the rent. It's hard enough to keep your own ship afloat, but obviously we want to think of the plight of others; that is what makes us human.

Black people have known for a long time that the drug laws are obscene; it has now spread from race to class just like so many other things. This is an industry; it needs market share, and it needs customers. It doesn't care what color or class they are.

Q: What is the solution?

Eugene: There is something wrong with making nonviolent drug activity in this country so illegal that it is often punished more harshly than violent crime. It is the function of an industry that wants to feed on people, so I am for the legalization of nonviolent drug activity. That is my view and only one view, but what I really want to see is someone who says, "I don't really agree with Eugene, but I think this stuff is wrong in my way, and I'd like to pursue change."

Judge Bennett: The problem is the mandatory minimums. They are politically

driven, and they make no sense. We are incarcerating generations of young people for ungodly sentences – twenty and thirty years. Of sixty or so federal district court judges in our circuit, I am the most reversed judge on sentencing issues; I have a rap as being a lenient sentencer, but my average sentence on drug cases last year was seventeen and a half years. There is nothing lenient about that.

I bristle when I hear the phrase, “temper justice tempered with mercy.” Justice should include mercy, and mercy and justice are totally inconsistent with mandatory minimums. Judges read my opinions – particularly on sentencing – and a lot of judges around the country have started to follow. It only takes one.

Dennis Johnson: I lost two kids to addiction when, instead of putting me in prison, somebody could have stepped in and said, “Can we help this man?” Nothing was in place for that. I am dealing with one son who has passed away and another one I may not get back in my life. Am I a bad person? Not today. I wasn’t a bad person twenty years ago, but society said I was. Today, I changed on my own, but I could have done it twenty years ago with a little help and understanding from society instead of saying, “I’m just a bad man. Throw the key away.”