

WILL SEPTEMBER 16, 2015 MARK THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE WAR ON DRUGS

At Salon yesterday, I pointed to the most interesting part of the GOP debate on Wednesday – the policy debate over how to deal with addiction. As I point out, one reason this debate is taking place is because New Hampshire is really struggling with heroin addiction right now. But the debate started about pot, not heroin. And even tough on crime candidates like Chris Christie and Jeb Bush struggled to spin their approach as kinder and gentler; Christie pitched his support for decriminalization as another expression of pro-life.

This was the moment, I argued, when the GOP found ways to pitch a more reasonable approach to drugs in GOP ideology (and Rand Paul deserves credit for pushing this).

Even while Christie and Bush, to differing degrees, cling to old-style War on Drug rhetoric, this campaign (and particularly the New Hampshire addiction crisis Bush mentioned) will force real debate about what combination of treatment, decriminalization, legalization, and education might provide some way out of the failed drug war. This discussion framed that dramatic policy shift in rhetoric – states rights and pro life – that Republicans can rally behind.

All this, of course, took place in the Reagan library, the shrine to the man who formally declared the now-failed War on Drugs in 1982. CNN even used his damn plane to ask candidates to project themselves into Reagan's legacy. "Ronald Reagan, the 40th President, used the

plane behind you to accomplish a great many things...How will the world look different once your Air Force One is parked in the hangar of your presidential library?" But one of the most constructive policy discussions in last night's debate constituted a renunciation, finally, of Reagan's legacy.

Mind you, the foreign policy and immigration stances of candidates undermines the value of this – few Republicans will give up the excuse of the War on Drugs to big foot in Latin America, no matter how counterproductive that is. And some candidates – such as Trump, who probably hasn't exactly eschewed drugs all his life – weren't clamoring to look soft on drugs.

All that said, amid all the talk of starting new wars in the shadow of Saint Ronnie's plane, I was heartened by a moment that might lead toward ending one.