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Profile: Charles Rangel and the Drug Wars

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In March 1971, New York City faced a growing heroin epidemic. That year, Charles Rangel — then just 41 years old — was part of a delegation of newly-elected black congressman who won a closed-door meeting at the White House with President Richard Nixon.

It was a historic moment. Nixon had already begun the process of criminalizing drugs in new ways, ramping up the federal effort to crack down on dealers and addicts. Over the decades that followed, those policies would send millions of young black men to prison. Some African American leaders were already voicing doubts and concerns.

But during the meeting, Rangel didn't urge Nixon to rethink his drug war strategy. Instead, the Harlem Democrat urged Nixon to ramp up drug-fighting efforts more aggressively, more rapidly.

"We could bring a halt to this condition which is killin off American youth," Rangel told Nixon.

In their encounter, secretly taped by Nixon's White House recording system and broadcast here for the first time, Rangel called on Nixon to America's military and diplomatic power to stop the importation of drug

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He urged the the president to view the spread of heroin and cocaine as a "national crisis" and warned that if Nixon didn't act fast, more Americans would demand that narcotics be legalized.

"It seems to me that more white America is saying, let's legalize drugs because we can't deal with the problem," Rangel cautioned.

Just three months later, Nixon formally launched his national war on drugs, echoing much of the language Rangel used that day at the White House. "Public enemy number one in the United States is drug abuse. In order to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive," he said.

Rangel would later write warmly of his partnership with Nixon on drug war issues. "Nixon was tough on drugs," he recalled in his 2007 memoir. "[We] worked closely together on what was the beginning of our international war on drugs."

In the decade that that followed, Rangel himself emerged as one of the black community's toughest and most persistent voices on drug issues, pushing for more money and manpower for the police, and for more military drug interdiction overseas.

He lobbied for the creation of a special House subcommittee on narcotics and then served as its chairman, using the post to support creation of the Drug Enforcement Agency and a national Drug Czar.

Under his leadership, many members of the Congressional Black Caucus voted in favor of some of the most punitive drug-war era legislation, expanding mandatory minimum sentences, funding more prisons and boosting penalties for crack cocaine.

In a profile in *Ebony* magazine in 1989, Rangel bragged about pressuring Nixon and President Ronald Reagan to get even tougher on drugs, blasting

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them for what he called a "lackadaisical attitude."

Even as questions and doubts about the drug war grew, Rangel wrote editorials mocking the idea of drug decriminalization and describing narcotics as a "genocidal" poison.

In the early '90s, Rangel appeared in a televised debate with William F. Buckley Jr. Buckley, a prominent white conservative, had concluded that the drug war was a costly, violent and racially divisive mistake.

But again and again, Rangel pushed back. "In order to fight the drug war, we need all of these factors working together," he insisted, praising police effort, as well as overseas drug interdiction. "We should not allow people to be able to distribute this poison without fear that they might be arrested and put in jail," he said.

"Would you describe what kind of fear you have in mind that isn't already there by, for instance, Nelson Rockefeller's suggestion of life in prison?" Buckley asked.

During the debate, Rangel called for the appointment of a more effective Federal drug czar, suggesting that Army General Colin Powell take over leadership of the drug war.

Rangel's views of the drug war did slowly evolve. In the 2000s, he began sponsoring legislation to ease sentencing disparities between crack and powder cocaine. Rangel published editorials acknowledging that tough crime laws — which he called "well intentioned" — were hurting many African American families.

But with nearly a million African Americans behind bars and one out of every 10 young black men tangled up in the criminal justice system, Rangel sometimes seemed out of touch. "I don't remember the last time anyone was arrested in the city of New York for marijuana," Rangel said during a

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2009 congressional hearing in Washington. "I mean smoking marijuana on the streets of Manhattan, the copy may say 'Don't do it on my beat,' but nobody's getting arrested," he said.

In fact, tens of thousands of people, many of them black and Hispanic, are arrested every year for marijuana possession in New York City.

In 2011, however, Rangel did co-sponsor federal legislation that would decriminalize marijuana. That bill failed to pass.

In recent years, many black leaders and organizations, including the NAACP and the Congressional Black Caucus, have called for an end to the drug war that Rangel helped wage. Eric Holder, **the nation's first black Attorney General**, has said that those policies "decimated" some black and Hispanic communities.

But speaking with WNYC, Rangel, now 83 years old, stuck by his long support for the drug fight. He said it's important to remember that the heroin and cocaine epidemics were a horror for families in his Harlem district.

"People were absolutely in panic that the drug dealers had taken over the street," Rangel recalled. "Break-ins and burglaries were prevalent and there was an all-time high in fear of how far this would go."

In his memoir published in 2007, Rangel maintained that America's 40-year drug war did help clean up many black neighborhoods, arguing that "a lot of the drug-related bleeding was staunched."

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