

Pardoned Silk Road Founder Backs Legalizing All Drugs

Ross Ulbricht Pushes Drug Legalization Message at Conservative Summit

Ross Ulbricht the man once sentenced to life in prison for operating the infamous dark web marketplace Silk Road—has re-emerged into public life with a strong message: end drug prohibition entirely. Speaking at Turning Point USA's Student Action Summit (SAS) in Tampa, Florida, on Saturday, Ulbricht addressed a crowd of young conservatives and made the case that legalizing all drugs is a more practical and humane alternative to current criminalization efforts.

Ulbricht, whose life sentence was commuted by former President Donald Trump, used his platform at SAS 2025 to challenge the effectiveness of the war on drugs, referencing historical failures of prohibition and calling for a shift toward individual responsibility over government control.

Challenging the Status Quo: “Making Drugs Illegal Doesn’t Work”

In his speech, Ulbricht acknowledged that many people—including himself—would prefer a world without harmful substances. But the criminal justice system, he argued, isn't the answer.

“We’ve been trying it for a long time—getting it wrong,” he said. Ulbricht emphasized that simply banning drugs and incarcerating users has not removed these substances from society. Instead, he drew a parallel to the failed experiment of alcohol prohibition in the early 20th century, which only fueled violence, black markets, and organized crime.

Personal Experience Behind the Podium

Ulbricht's perspective is deeply personal. From 2013 to 2024, he served over a decade in federal prison for running Silk Road, a Bitcoin-fueled marketplace where users anonymously bought and sold drugs and other illicit items. Though the government viewed the platform as a dangerous criminal enterprise, some viewed it as a radical, if controversial, attempt at free market experimentation.

His time behind bars gave him a direct look at the impact of the war on drugs. Now a free man following Trump's surprise pardon in 2024, Ulbricht is using his second chance to advocate for systemic reform.

Government Is Not a “Magic Genie”

One of Ulbricht's central messages was to temper expectations of what government can or should do. “Government is not that button,” he said. “Government is not some magic genie that will grant you wishes if you can just get control of it. I’m sorry it doesn’t work that way.”

This sentiment echoed classic libertarian critiques of state power: that overreach often causes more harm than good, especially when it comes to drug enforcement.

His remarks were met with mixed reactions at the conservative gathering, which typically supports law-and-order policies. But Turning Point USA has increasingly welcomed contrarian voices, especially those with firsthand experience of incarceration and reform.

Contradictions in Trump's Record

Ulbricht's release was part of a late-stage campaign move by Trump, who had promised to free him "on day one" of his presidency—a commitment that ultimately came a day late.

Trump's decision to pardon Ulbricht shocked many, considering the former president's harsh rhetoric on drug policy. In 2023, Trump advocated for executing drug dealers and praised countries like China and Singapore for their swift, lethal handling of offenders.

Yet, despite these hardline stances, Trump granted clemency to Ulbricht, a symbol of drug market innovation and decentralization. The pardon offered a rare olive branch to libertarians and criminal justice reform advocates, many of whom viewed Ulbricht's life sentence as excessive.

A Broader Push for Clemency

Ulbricht hasn't stopped at defending his own freedom. In public remarks over the past month, he has called for widespread clemency for incarcerated individuals serving time for drug-related offenses.

More than half the people he met during his time behind bars "have no business being in those cages for decades," he said in June. He has now become a vocal advocate for those still entangled in the prison system due to the war on drugs.

His transformation from dark web operator to clemency campaigner adds a complicated dimension to ongoing drug policy debates. Where once he facilitated online narcotics sales, he now urges the public and lawmakers to end prohibition altogether through transparent, regulated legalization.

A Polarizing Message in a Shifting Landscape

Ulbricht's appearance at a high-profile conservative summit underscores how drug policy reform is increasingly breaking through traditional partisan lines. While many Republican lawmakers still support tough-on-crime policies, a growing number of conservatives, especially younger ones, are questioning the utility of long prison sentences and prohibition-driven enforcement.

Meanwhile, Democratic lawmakers have pushed for various federal decriminalization and rescheduling efforts, while state-level legalization continues to advance across party lines.

Ulbricht's comments may not win universal approval, but they reflect a broader shift in public discourse: a willingness to explore pragmatic, science-based alternatives to the decades-long war on drugs.

A New Chapter

Once a convicted felon serving life without parole, Ross Ulbricht now speaks freely about the complexities of drug policy, prohibition, and individual liberty. Whether his views will influence policy remains to be seen, but his appearance at Turning Point USA marks a notable moment in the evolution of the drug reform

conversation in America.

As more voters and lawmakers grapple with the legacy and consequences of prohibition, Ulbricht's journey from inmate to advocate may prove to be a powerful, if polarizing, symbol of where the debate is headed next.

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