

The Folly of Freeing Ross Ulbricht



Libertarian Party members demand the release of Ross Ulbricht during their national convention on May 25, 2024 in Washington, D.C. Ulbricht is the founder of the darknet drug bazaar Silk Road. (Chip Somodevilla via Getty Images)

Trump's pardon of the drug kingpin repudiates everything he ran on.

By Charles Fain Lehman

A number of drug kingpins were involved with Elon Musk and his SpaceX.

Over the course of his campaign, now-President Donald Trump said he would end taxes on tips. He promised to build “freedom cities” [complete with](#) flying cars. And, in an attempt to secure the endorsement of the Libertarian Party, he promised at their convention that he would [commute the life sentence](#) of Ross Ulbricht, the infamous founder of the online drug market [Silk Road](#). “If you vote for me, on Day One, I will commute the sentence of Ross Ulbricht,” [Trump said](#). “We’re going to get him home.”

Today he made good on that promise, granting Ulbricht a full and unconditional pardon.

Libertarians may be celebrating, but this was a grave misstep. It undermines the law-and-order, return-to-sanity platform that brought Trump back to the White House.

Let's back up. In January 2011, Ulbricht launched Silk Road, a so-called "darknet market." Accessible only through the anonymizing Tor protocol, which disguises users' IP addresses, Silk Road allowed its patrons to buy and sell merchandise using cryptocurrency, letting them make purchases without, at least at the outset, detection by law enforcement.

Unsurprisingly, Silk Road became what Senator Chuck Schumer [referred to](#) as "a certifiable one-stop shop for illegal drugs." [About 70 percent](#) of the 10,000 or so products on offer on the site were drugs. Users could peruse [nearly 350](#) different types, from weed to ecstasy to heroin. Silk Road also hawked fake IDs. [One scholarly estimate](#) found that by mid-2012, the site generated over \$1 million of business per month. If that wasn't bad enough, federal prosecutors alleged that Ulbricht paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to commission [six murders for hire](#) to keep Silk Road secret. Ulbricht's supporters [contest this claim](#), but the evidence supporting it was "[ample and unambiguous](#)" in the trial court's opinion. An [appeals court described](#) "overwhelming evidence. . . . that Ulbricht was prepared, like other drug kingpins, to protect his profits by paying large sums of money to have individuals who threatened his enterprise murdered."

Before the feds shut down Silk Road and arrested Ulbricht in late 2013, the site had become a one-stop shop for debauchery, and Ulbricht, under the pseudonym "Dread Pirate Roberts," was a hero of digital-age libertarians. He was sentenced to [life in prison without parole](#).

Silk Road
anonymous market

messages 0 orders 0 account \$0.0000 \$0.00

Search Go

Hi, **ciirus**
logout

Shop by Category

- Drugs 13,810
 - Cannabis 2,934
 - Dissociatives 199
 - Ecstasy 1,274
 - Intoxicants 75
 - Opioids 367
 - Other 82
 - Precursors 62
 - Prescription 4,659
 - Psychedelics 1,754
 - Stimulants 1,634
 - Tobacco 219
- Apparel 767
- Art 15
- Books 1,322
- Collectibles 27
- Computer equipment 101
- Custom Orders 86
- Digital goods 886
- Drug paraphernalia 512
- Electronics 234
- Erotica 584
- Fireworks 35
- Food 10
- Forgeries 152
- Hardware 35
- Home & Garden 27
- Jewelry 104
- Lab Supplies 29
- Lotteries & games 165
- Medical 60
- Money 258
- Musical instruments 6
- Packaging 95
- Services 168
- Sporting goods 4
- Tickets 4
- Writing 8

From the forum

- Buyer ratings discussion
- Feedback system changes
- HOW TO: Run your own relay and help the Tor network!
- Ask a drug expert physician about drugs and health
- Winning the war on drugs
- New display currencies
- Try Tails for a more secure OS

Favorite vendors

- Dread Pirate Roberts 5.0 - remove
- Libertas 1.0 - remove
- inigo 0.0 - remove

GOVERNMENT EXHIBIT 132
14 Cr. 66 (RSP)

#1 = \$133.74

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Boldabol 200 (B. Dragon), 10ml, 200mg/ml \$86.11	PIRACETAM tbl. 100x1200mg (nootropil) \$92.64	25X LSD BLOTTER \$421.19
7 grams of PURE MDMA Moonrocks. \$378.58	100x Green Android™ (The New Mortal Kombar™) \$547.65	2mg Xanax Bars from Wallgreens. \$5.42
10.0g MDA - Reagent Tested \$550.00	HYDRO BUDS 2G \$40.00	SCIROXX - Nandrodex 300mg/ml 10ml USA ONLY \$114.21
10g Amnesia Haze \$194.77	4 Orange sunshine 300ug \$90.49	1/4 Bubba Kush \$90.20

Today, over a decade later, those same supporters insist that he doesn't deserve the harsh sentence he received. Some raise questions about the case, like the defense's arguments that Ulbricht wasn't really running the site himself. Others point to the two federal agents who used their inside knowledge to extort Ulbricht before he was arrested.

There's also an argument for proportionality. Advocates of commutation [argue that](#) Ulbricht is a “first-time offender” whose convictions were for “nonviolent” offenses and whose “exemplary” prison conduct is evidence for his rehabilitation.

Charitably, this view is naive. That Ulbricht's first offense was to be a drug kingpin does not make the offense any less heinous. Even bracketing the murder-for-hire claims that were not separately prosecuted, calling the sale of drugs that kill lots of people “nonviolent” is, at best, missing the point. Most importantly, Ulbricht had the brains and wherewithal to launch a massive criminal enterprise for which he has been celebrated in certain corners of the internet. He has expressed regret, [writing on his X account](#) that is run by his wife, that he wishes he could “turn back time” to his decision to put Silk Road online. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to ask whether he can be trusted not to try something similar again on release.

Some of Ulbricht's supporters—[those who cheered](#) when Trump told the Libertarian Party he would commute Ulbricht's sentence—take a more radical view. They believe that he did nothing wrong, that all Silk Road did was facilitate transactions among consenting adults. Not only is Ulbricht's imprisonment unjust, in this view, but the laws against drugs that facilitated it are unjust, too.

Traffic in deadly drugs is prohibited for a good reason: They kill people. Prosecutors [linked drugs](#) sold on Silk Road to at least six overdose deaths, including two 16-year-olds who died taking synthetic psychedelics. The sheer volume of hard drugs that passed through the site—hundreds of kilograms distributed by thousands of drug dealers, [according to the Drug Enforcement Administration](#)—suggests six is a radical undercount.

Drugs destroy families, ruin lives, and kill people—[over 100,000](#) in 2023 alone. [Prohibiting them](#), and enforcing that prohibition [at least some of the time](#), is an effective way to reduce these harms. Ulbricht's incarceration is the consequence of his participation in this kind of destruction, and it is an appropriate consequence.

Just because some people believe that Ulbricht's acts should not have been crimes, though, does not make his actions any less illegal. A commutation based on some libertarians' dislike of a law would be lawless in and of itself.

But the libertarian view that Ulbricht should walk free is also at odds with President Trump's mandate. Many of those who voted for Trump in November—for the first, second, or third time—did so because they are fed up with crime, disorder, and the [growing visibility of drug abuse](#). The era of excusing or dismissing “victimless crimes” is over.

Freeing Ulbricht would be a rebuke to all those voters who backed Trump because they were fed up with such libertarian arguments. And it would contradict the sanest policies the president has advocated for. He should reconsider; don't free Ross Ulbricht. The people whose lives he helped end, and a society fed up with libertinism, deserve better.