Beat: Health

Why Legalizing Marijuana Makes Sence

This article explains why it makes sence

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USPA NEWS - For the past several years, I've been harboring a fantasy, a last political crusade for the baby-boom generation. We, who started on the path of righteousness, need to find an appropriately high-minded approach to life's exit ramp. In this case, I mean the high-minded part literally.

For the past several years, I've been harboring a fantasy, a last political crusade for the baby-boom generation. We, who started on the path of righteousness, need to find an appropriately high-minded approach to life's exit ramp. In this case, I mean the high-minded part literally. And so, a deal: give us drugs, after a certain age “” say, 80 “” all drugs, any drugs we want. In return, we will give you our driver's licenses. (I mean, can you imagine how terrifying a nation of decrepit, solipsistic 90-year-old boomers behind the wheel would be?) We'll let you proceed with your lives “” much of which will be spent paying for our retirement, in any case “” without having to hear us complain about our every ache and reflux.

We'll be too busy exploring altered states of consciousness. I even have a slogan for the campaign: "Tune in, turn on, drop dead."

A fantasy, I suppose. But, beneath the furious roil of the economic crisis, a national conversation has quietly begun about the irrationality of our drug laws. It is going on in state legislatures, like New York's, where the draconian Rockefeller drug laws are up for review; in other states, from California to Massachusetts, various forms of marijuana decriminalization are being enacted. And it has reached the floor of Congress, where Senators Jim Webb and Arlen Specter have proposed a major prison-reform package, which would directly address drug-sentencing policy. (See pictures of stoner cinema.)

There are also more puckish signs of a zeitgeist shift. A few weeks ago, the White House decided to stage a forum in which the President would answer questions submitted by the public; 92,000 people responded “” and most of them seemed obsessed with the legalization of marijuana. The two most popular questions about "green jobs and energy," for example, were about pot. The President dismissed the outpouring “” appropriately, I guess “” as online ballot-stuffing and dismissed the legalization question with a simple: "No." (Read "Can Marijuana Help Rescue California's Economy?")

This was a rare instance of Barack Obama reacting reflexively, without attempting to think creatively, about a serious policy question. He was, in fact, taking the traditional path of least resistance: an unexpected answer on marijuana would have launched a tabloid firestorm, diverting attention from the budget fight and all those bailouts. In fact, the default fate of any politician who publicly considers the legalization of marijuana is to be cast into the outer darkness. Such a person is assumed to be stoned all the time, unworthy of being taken seriously. Such a person would be lacerated by the assorted boozehounds and pill poppers of talk radio. The hypocrisy inherent in the American conversation about stimulants is staggering.

But there are big issues here, issues of economy and simple justice, especially on the sentencing side. As Webb pointed out in a cover story in Parade magazine, the U.S. is, by far, the most "criminal" country in the world, with 5% of the world's population and 25% of its prisoners. We spend $68 billion per year on corrections, and one-third of those being corrected are serving time for nonviolent drug crimes. We spend about $150 billion on policing and courts, and 47.5% of all drug arrests are marijuana-related. That is an awful lot of money, most of it nonfederal, that could be spent on better schools or infrastructure “” or simply returned to the public.

At the same time, there is an enormous potential windfall in the taxation of marijuana. It is estimated that pot is the largest cash crop in California, with annual revenues approaching $14 billion. A 10% pot tax would yield $1.4 billion in California alone. And that's probably a fraction of the revenues that would be available “” and of the economic impact, with thousands of new jobs in agriculture, packaging, marketing and advertising. A veritable marijuana economic-stimulus package! (Read "Is Pot Good For You?")

So why not do it? There are serious moral arguments, both secular and religious. There are those who believe “” with some good reason “” that the accretion of legalized vices is debilitating, that we are a less virtuous society since gambling spilled out from Las Vegas to "riverboats" and state lotteries across the country. There is a medical argument, though not a very convincing one: alcohol is

more dangerous in a variety of ways, including the tendency of some drunks to get violent. One could argue that the abuse of McDonald's has a greater potential health-care cost than the abuse of marijuana. (Although it's true that with legalization, those two might not be unrelated.)

Obviously, marijuana can be abused. But the costs of criminalization have proved to be enormous, perhaps unsustainable. Would legalization be any worse?

In any case, the drug-reform discussion comes just at the right moment. We boomers are getting older every day. You're not going to want us on the highways. Make us your best offer. Supporters point to provisions in the legalization measure that call for jail time for anyone who sells or gives marijuana to children. It forbids smoking pot in a public place or in front of minors.

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