

“Legalize It”

It’s dark. You’re walking to your car, the subway, or just home. You spot a gang of youths out for a night of fun. Your heart races. Then you see what they’re doing: smoking dope. Oh, no! You might trip over one of them. Maybe they’ll philosophize you to death.

Good thing they’re not doing something legal, like drinking, which might get you a broken bottle in the face.

I’m not such a libertarian that I’m arguing for the legalization of all drugs--I’ve seen what hard drugs can do. But let’s be sensible. Why do we criminalize over a quarter of the population for enjoying a substance whose primary effects are relaxation, the munchies, and an overuse of the word “dude”? I don’t use cannabis, but I also don’t jump out of airplanes, go on ten-day fasts, eat peanut butter, or engage in masochistic sex; and as people who enjoy those things aren’t hurting anybody but themselves, I don’t see the point of banning them. In fact, I think we should mandate cannabis use for politicians; then they might actually tell the truth, as Al Capone’s henchman did when the FBI gave him a joint to loosen him up for interrogation.

But it’s a Drug--that dreaded word. Okay, what’s a drug? “A substance other than food intended to affect the structure or function of the body.” Too broad. “Something and

often an illegal substance that causes addiction, habituation, or a marked change in consciousness.” That covers coffee, video games, and iPhones, not to mention alcohol and tobacco. Okay, I’m queen for a day, and I say they’re bad for people. Now they’re illegal. You’ll call them drugs.

Full disclosure: I have tried, twice, to smoke a joint. I couldn’t; my throat burned, it hurt. I tried hash brownies too, but uttering a sentence was like hauling on ropes to put my brain back together. I ate too many. I couldn’t resist: I’m addicted to chocolate.

That’s my point: a drug would be a medicine, or just a vice, or merely an indulgence, if it weren’t illegal. So why is cannabis illegal?

It’s virtually impossible to figure out why some drugs and not others were made illegal in the first place. The history of criminalization is piecemeal and murky. The first ban on cannabis was a specifically anti-Muslim act, propagated by those guardians of all that is right and good, the Spanish Inquisition--who, when they came to the New World, instantly concluded that the hallucinogenic drugs used in native religion must be tools of the devil. It’s hard not to see racism and power politics at work in all this, especially when you look at old propaganda images of black men high on cocaine raping white women, and sinister Chinese luring the flower of white youth into their opium dens.

If the Puritans had landed further south, found natives smoking cannabis instead of tobacco, and picked up that habit, which substance do you think would have stayed

legal? But it was Mexicans who smoked marijuana--and clearly the cigarette companies weren't going to make big money out of Mexicans. (Besides, the cultivation of hemp, which makes better, and more environmentally friendly, paper than wood does, threatened DuPont's financial hegemony.) In fact, the earliest laws regulating cannabis were to tax it, not ban it; and no law has specifically banned it since. It's illegal only by precedent, and could be legalized with a stroke of the pen if the Department of Health chose to reclassify it.

Serious health scientists are virtually unanimous in agreeing that cannabis is less harmful than alcohol and tobacco, yet last week the UK government fired the head of its scientific advisory panel on drugs, Professor David Nutt, for upholding science over "government policy." If it's not hypocrisy, it's schizophrenia. Why have a scientific advisory panel at all if you're basing your decisions on a century of prejudice? In the U.S., we've moved from the crusading Bush regime raiding clinics of terminally ill people for doing something legal to the Obama regime saying, basically, we know it's a ridiculous law and we won't enforce it, but we're afraid to stand up and change it. Meanwhile, the federal government itself supplies cannabis to seven people for medical purposes while insisting that it has none, and the Supreme Court has been reduced to arguing that since cannabis had no medically recognized benefit in 1970, any recognized benefit now is irrelevant. This, according to those who would keep cannabis illegal, is how we uphold order and instill respect for the law. No wonder it isn't working.

What gets me is that the loudest voices against decriminalizing cannabis are also the loudest voices defending “our freedom” and “our rights.” Here’s the argument: guns don’t kill people; people do. So, marijuana doesn’t do what--make people silly? or if you insist, turn them into depraved criminals, like, maybe, murderers--people do. Why can’t we have sensible regulation for all these things? We can limit sales to minors, specify the places where the substance can be sold and license the vendors, outlaw driving while loaded. Any NRA lobbyist can tell you these prohibitions are almost unbearably onerous on the legitimate user.

What’s so damn scary about cannabis? Reefer madness was a fantasy; if everyone took up pot, we’d have a nation of chilled-out people committing way less violent crime. Or are we talking about the notorious slippery slope? Guess what, we’re already on it. We give people morphine--heroin--in hospitals. Alcohol was decriminalized in the 1930s, after a famously unsuccessful experiment with prohibition. Vibrators, which were patented by Hamilton Beach in 1902 to treat “women’s problems,” have already moved from medical to recreational use. The genuinely frightening slippery slope is from marijuana to the hard stuff. So, divorce the supply lines. License cannabis sales and drastically reduce the chances of a dealer saying, “Sorry, I’m out of grass today, try this.”

The longer we illogically, impotently, try to hold back the waves, the longer we deprive ourselves of a vast financial resource. Cannabis, legal or not, is the number four cash crop in the U.S., with a market credibly estimated at \$36 billion. At a sales tax of 8%,

that's \$2.88 billion in tax revenue lost to the individual states, not to mention the income tax due to both state and federal governments. Not to mention the cost of policing victimless crime. Not to mention the costs of court cases and prison.

What could we do with an extra \$2.88 billion of public revenue right now? Let's argue about that.