



BUSINESS EXCHANGE: Cato says Congress Should Legalize Marijuana

by William Reed

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The fight over pot in the District of Columbia has put the GOP in an awkward spot.

The conservative Cato Institute is the group setting a positive tone for economic progress in D.C. and says “Congress should legalize marijuana.” And, Republicans seeking more Blacks, such as Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, worry that the party has gone too far in disrespecting the city and its residents.

Federal law still outlaws marijuana, but numerous states have now decriminalized or legalized marijuana. So, no one was surprised that in the 2014 midterm elections, citizens of the District of Columbia overwhelmingly passed ballot initiatives that legalize the possession of small amounts of marijuana.

Now that the issue is out in the open, it’s become a matter of economics. As lawmakers struggle to find ways to balance their budgets, it’s worth noting that the legalization of marijuana has been a boon to those states that have done so. If all 50 states legalized cannabis, they’d be collectively raking in more than \$3 billion a year in taxes. Economists say pot legalization could save the U.S. \$13.7 billion per year.

After a ballot initiative passed with 70 percent of the vote, elected officials and drug-policy advocates hoped to make the nation’s capital the first place on the East Coast with legal pot. They wanted to use the District of Columbia as further encouragement for states to make their own marijuana laws.

The activity of a Maryland Republican shows why that party faces hurdles in its push to increase its appeal to Blacks. Though D.C. voters cast their ballots in favor of decriminalizing marijuana, Rep. Andy Harris, an anesthesiologist, argues that it would make pot more accessible to young

people. He says their developing brains can be harmed by the drug and submitted an amendment that the House Appropriations Committee adopted, which prohibited the District of Columbia from spending any of its revenues to carry out any law, rule or regulation to legalize or otherwise reduce criminal penalties for marijuana. Harris, who practiced in Baltimore, said: "I saw firsthand what drug use and abuse is doing to an underprivileged population." In a Washington Post op-ed, Harris argues that 1) marijuana is dangerous, 2) Congress has the constitutional authority to dictate public policy in the District of Columbia, and 3) allowing marijuana decriminalization "would create legal chaos."

To many in D. C., Harris is a public enemy. Most in the city's political structure say Harris's interventions are "arbitrary" and "overly meddlesome."

Many feel that in this overly Democratic, largely minority voting bloc, the will of the people is not being respected. Ralph J. Chittams, an African-American senior vice chairman of the D.C. GOP experienced the Harris' staff's abrasiveness when he took a delegation of D.C. Black Republicans to their Longworth office. Despite their party kinship, the group was callously dismissed.

Republicans have had a longstanding emphasis on states' rights. If the bulk of the Republicans really believed their rhetoric against big government intrusion in personal lives, then the Republicans in Congress would not be overturning a citizens' initiative, or telling a city council that it may not regulate the sale of marijuana

Harris and the GOP can learn from Cato. Cato Institute is a public policy research organization – a think tank – dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace. Its scholars and analysts conduct independent, nonpartisan research on a myriad of policy issues. David Boaz says his think tank "remains dedicated to providing clear, thoughtful and independent analysis on vital public policy issues and the long federal experiment in prohibition of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and other drugs has given us unprecedented crime and corruption combined with a manifest failure to stop the use of drugs or reduce their availability to children."

Harris is the sole Republican in the Maryland delegation due to Democratic hijinks. Harris represents Maryland's 1st Congressional District, which includes the Eastern Shore and sections of Baltimore, Harford and Carroll counties. The district has been reshaped several times to make Maryland's other seven U.S. House districts safer for Democrats.