



## Is U.S. marijuana legalization looming?

By: Lee-Anne Goodman - February 6, 2013

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WASHINGTON – Advocates for the legalization of marijuana in the United States are infused with fresh hope amid changing public attitudes about weed and federal financial woes that are prompting politicians to rethink America’s monstrously expensive war on drugs.

“Everything is going our way,” Jack Cole, a former undercover narcotics officer from New Jersey who co-founded the Law Enforcement Against Prohibition lobby group 11 years ago, said in an interview Wednesday.

“Things are changing rapidly because people are now smart enough to realize how pointless the war on drugs has been.”

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As several Latin-American countries continue to call for an end to the war on drugs, Democrats in the House of Representatives introduced two bills this week that would decriminalize marijuana federally and allow it to be regulated — and taxed — by federal authorities.

While it’s not the first time congressional lawmakers have attempted to push through pro-legalization laws, the new bills are considered historic in scope and were introduced three months after Washington state and Colorado became the first jurisdictions in America to decriminalize the recreational use of marijuana.

Colorado congressman Jared Polis’s bill would change the way the federal government regulates marijuana, aiming for the creation of a new federal bureau that would regulate weed the same way alcohol is regulated. Oregon congressman Earl Blumenauer’s bill would create a federal tax on the drug.

States and municipalities could still choose to prohibit marijuana production, and it would still be illegal to transport marijuana to a state where it is prohibited.

“Congress should simply allow states to regulate marijuana as they see fit and stop wasting federal tax dollars on a failed drug war,” Polis said, adding he hopes the bills will earn support from some budget-conscious Republicans, especially those with a libertarian bent.

“The more states lead the way, the more pressure it puts on Congress to recognize that the drug war has failed policies.”

The U.S. spends an estimated US\$70 billion a year on combating drug use, drug dealing and drug trafficking. In the 42 years since former president Richard Nixon declared a war on drugs, it's cost the country more than \$1.5 trillion.

In 2011 alone, there were over 660,000 arrests for marijuana possession, according to the FBI. A study by the CATO Institute recently showed that enforcing marijuana laws alone costs the United States at least \$5.5 billion a year.

All told, Cole said, there have been 46 million arrests for non-violent drug offences since the war on drugs began, putting enormous strains on the judiciary and penal systems while contributing directly to a host of social ills, particularly for young male minorities. African-Americans are reportedly 13 times more likely to go to jail for drug-related offences as their white counterparts.

A Harvard University study commissioned in 2008 by Cole's organization, known as LEAP, found that \$76.8 billion could flow into U.S. Treasury coffers annually if all drugs were legalized and regulated.

The study found that \$13 billion would come from the legalization of marijuana alone, the study found.

But a spokesman for the Drug Free America Foundation disputed the notion that legalizing marijuana would mean a financial bonanza for the U.S.

“What's going to happen if it gets legalized is that, although there may be some initial tax revenue, the social damage it will cause means we'll be paying out more money in the long run,” said Dave Evans.

There will be more addicted teens needing treatment, more emergency room visits, more impaired driving incidents, he added.

“The notion that you're going to make money for it is really an illusion, and it's not accurate,” he said.

But as the country currently grapples with gun control, Cole says, legalizing marijuana makes even more sense given so much gun violence is tied to drug laws that have created a Wild West atmosphere in many of America's biggest urban centres.

“More than half of all the gun violence in the United States is directly driven by the drug war because these young folks are out there selling drugs that only have any worth at all because they're illegal,” he said.

“These are just plants that will grow anywhere in the world and they have zero value until we say they're prohibited, so marijuana, ounce for ounce, is worth as much as gold and heroin, ounce for ounce, is worth as much as plutonium.”

More than 900,000 teenagers, he said, are selling illegal drugs — and they're carrying guns while doing so.

“If you’re selling a commodity that is so expensive, and you have so much money coming in, you have to control your end of the market,” he said.

“You can’t go to the courts and say: ‘Hey, look, I have a contract for this area.’ And you can’t go to the police and say: ‘Listen, I was just robbed.’ And so everybody has a gun, and the war on drugs has created that situation.”

Cole, 74, started out in law enforcement trained to believe that “people who use drugs would just as soon kill you as look at you — I’d almost imagined they’d have horns growing out of their heads.”

But while working the streets as an undercover officer, Cole came to the conclusion that the war on drugs was not just unjust, but rife with racism.

“After three years being out on the street undercover with these folks, it suddenly occurred to me one day that I liked a lot of the people I was working on better than the people I was working for, so I started to re-analyze what was truly going on. And that’s where we are as a country, now, too — we’re re-analyzing, and we’re seeing what’s truly going on.”

Indeed, polls suggest a growing number of Americans believe marijuana should be legal. A Gallup poll in October showed a record high of 50 per cent of respondents backing legalization, compared to just 30 per cent who held the same view in 2000.

“Congress is frequently a lagging indicator for public opinion,” Polis, the Colorado congressman, said on Tuesday. “Public opinion is that it should be up to states and local governments how to deal with marijuana — it’s just a question of how we’re going to catch up, not if.”