

## **Bill Walker: NH needs to end the prohibition of marijuana**

**Legalizing marijuana is the way to go.**

BY BILL WALKER

The United States had no drug laws until 1914. Yet somehow our pioneering ancestors managed to build railroads across the continent, invent the airplane and electric light, and build the biggest economy in history.

America before the Drug Enforcement Administration had no drug gangs, no drug violence, and low crime. Adult drug users just went to the drug store and bought drugs without drama. No one sold drugs in schools. There were no huge drug profits, no overseas terrorist drug lords, and no wrong-address SWAT team raids at 3 a.m.

This week the New Hampshire House is scheduled to vote on a return to personal responsibility. House Bill 492, cosponsored by three Republicans and two Democrats, would decriminalize possession of small amounts of marijuana. The vote is scheduled for today.

The bill is opposed by New Hampshire police chiefs. Perhaps they fear (correctly) that legalization would empty prisons and lower crime rates, just as happened after Prohibition was repealed. It is also opposed by Gov. Maggie Hassan, who, like Gov. John Lynch before her, prefers to tax New Hampshire property owners to pay for prohibition rather than tax marijuana.

Nearly everyone else in the state supports legalizing and taxing marijuana. Most New Hampshire taxpayers are tired of paying to imprison their neighbors for use of a mild drug. I've never used marijuana, but I've paid a lot of taxes for prohibition.

Our economy can't afford to pay for basics, let alone for failed programs like the drug war. The U.S. deficit for fiscal year 2013 was more than \$640 billion, bringing us to more than \$17 trillion in (on-budget) debt. Our GDP is only \$16.7 trillion. We can't just keep adding programs forever. Once something has failed for a few decades, it's time to let it go.

The Cato Institute estimated in September 2010 that the direct cost of drug prohibition nationwide is "roughly \$41.3 billion per year in government expenditure on enforcement of prohibition, \$25.7 billion spent by state and local governments, \$15.6 billion by the federal government."

Their report also estimated that drug legalization would yield tax revenue of \$46.7 billion annually.

The indirect costs are hard to calculate, but they clearly are many times larger. The 1.7 million people arrested for drug offenses every year lose tens of billions of dollars in lost work time and future employability. The crimes committed to get money for overpriced illegal drugs make American cities dangerous and unfriendly places.

Internationally, the Taliban, the FARC in Colombia, the Mexican drug cartels, and many other terrorist groups exist on the funds from selling artificially expensive drugs. According to the Mexican government, drug turf wars killed 28,000 people in that country from 2006-10. None of these groups

would get a dollar from legal drugs.

Legalizing marijuana would have other practical benefits. As has been seen in other states, people who don't use drugs aren't going to run out and start using marijuana. What will happen is "drug switching." People who now may be binge drinkers or OxyContin users will switch to the safer and milder drug. No one has ever died of a marijuana overdose, and it doesn't have the severe physical effects of many other drugs of abuse. While HB 492 will keep it illegal to drive under the influence of marijuana, THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, when in the blood doesn't affect traffic safety as severely as alcohol does.

In addition to the economic and health benefits, ending prohibition is simply part of "Live free or die." New Hampshire doesn't need federal agencies to run our lives for us.

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