

Duluth News Tribune

Column: Should America legalize drugs?

By: Virgil Swing May 12, 2013

With most Americans favoring legalized marijuana (two states have done so, while California effectively has), shouldn't other illegal drugs be considered also?

Most conservatives oppose the idea, but three prominent ones — columnist William Buckley, ex-Nixon/Reagan cabinet member George Schultz and economist Milton Friedman — long urged this move.

A recent study by economists from Harvard and New York University touts economic benefits of legalizing drugs: \$41.3 billion in savings from ending the war on drugs and \$46.7 billion in new tax revenue.

Police Chief Gordon Ramsay says 80 to 90 percent of Duluth's property crimes are committed by those addicted to illegal drugs and stealing to feed their habit. Surely

he sees the benefits of legalizing drugs. Not on your life.

"I think it's ridiculous!," he says of the idea. He says those with serious addictions can't function well in life and can't hold jobs. Ramsay says they'd still commit crimes to pay for drugs. He also notes the problems facing babies born to addicted mothers.

I agree. I was already skeptical, and the chief persuaded me legalizing drugs would be a terrible idea. So why should Americans discuss this bad idea? Because lawmakers sometimes do the wrong thing. A populace educated on problems of legal drugs can keep a bad idea from becoming policy.

Ramsay isn't as vehement against the idea of legal marijuana but has serious concerns about that also. He said police chiefs in states where medical marijuana is legal tell him the scenes at pot dispensaries tend to resemble what Duluthians see at The Last Place on Earth.

A push to legalize medical marijuana was made in the 2013 Minnesota Legislature to join California and 17 other states. Backers concede prospects are poor this session — but the issue will be back.

Minnesota shouldn't suffer the peril of the early adopters, and instead let the first states make mistakes we can learn from. Medical marijuana use has been around awhile in some states, but I'm not sure Minnesota legislators know all its problems.

Colorado and Washington are in the early months of fully legal pot, with no lessons learned yet. One problem they face is that federal law still makes it illegal to sell and possess marijuana.

Also, a former top official in the National Institute on Drug Abuse says there is scant evidence for medical benefits of marijuana. Unfortunately, federal research money to seek answers has fallen by 31 percent in the last six years.

I was skeptical of legalizing all drugs because I was generally familiar with the experience in China, which, in effect, had legalized opium from the 18th- to the 20th centuries.

Arab traders introduced China to opium as a medicine as early as the seventh or eighth centuries. European traders pushed it further, and the British made it a big-time import in the 19th century despite opposition from China's emperor. The countries fought two opium wars over this.

In 1838 the emperor was told that nine out

of 10 people in two provinces were opium addicts and little productive life was going on. Some Chinese wanted to tax opium to raise money, but the emperor opted to ban it. But it wasn't until the communists were firmly in control in 1950s that opium abuse virtually ended.

Since two of the three conservative legal-drug supporters mentioned above (Buckley and Friedman) are dead and Schulz is in his 90s, does their idea have any political chance?

The Cato Institute, a wealthy and influential think tank, continues to publish scholars' papers that advocate it, and libertarians generally favor ending drug-use laws.

Some folks make a distinction between “legalizing” and “decriminalizing” drugs. On the mean streets where drugs are used and sold, that distinction has the same importance as the question of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

But, if pot becomes legal, a push to accept other drugs will likely follow. Americans, and especially their legislators, should think and talk about this before a popular idea becomes law and American cities come to resemble some Chinese ones in the 19th century.