

# Falls Church News-Press

## **From the Front Row: Kaye Kory's Richmond Report**

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My November column focused on immigrant issues I expect to be working on in the upcoming session of the General Assembly. The column was motivated, in part, by the corrosive immigrant-bashing emanating from Republican presidential candidates. This month I want to focus on another issue I will be addressing in Richmond – reform of our costly, ineffective and unjust drug laws. These two policy areas have in common the urgent requirement for courageous, fact-based leadership, which seems to be in short supply when public fears can be exploited to support simplistic responses to complex problems. The widespread acceptance by Trump supporters of his advocacy for unconstitutional limitations on Muslims illustrates the potency of preying on irrational fear. Responsible leaders educate and reassure constituents and seek understanding before proposing action.

Last Friday, I was honored to attend services at the Dar Al Hijrah Mosque in Falls Church, in solidarity with hundreds of Muslim congregants, following the tragedy in San Bernardino. Congressman Don Beyer initiated this visit of more than a dozen local, regional and national politicians to counteract the rising wave of hostility toward Muslim Americans instigated by Trump and the opportunists surrounding him. Inevitably, this scene triggered my memory of a similar gathering at the Mosque 14 years ago. I recall, then, a sense of hope among anguished worshippers that our leaders saw the 9/11 attacks for what they were – the work of a small band of fanatics with diverse, inchoate grievances corrupted by delusions of grandeur. Surely, we needed to respond, but proportionately, with a focus on the real bad actors: al Qaeda.

Our hope was painfully unrealized. What ultimately unfolded from the 9/11 attacks was one of the most grievous failures of leadership in American history. Another, earlier band of opportunists duped their feckless boss into committing an atrocity – the invasion of Iraq – as a part of the War on Terrorism. This history will be written over hundreds of years. We already know the actual threat in 2003 pales in comparison to the direct and indirect costs in human misery of millions of lives diverted and lost, of trillions of dollars wasted that might have been

invested in human needs and of fueling the “clash of civilizations” narrative that the invasion was, supposedly, intended to diminish.

My purpose in this column is to counter one of the most over-used weapons in the demagogue’s toolkit: the noxious “War on...” trope; in this case, the War on Drugs. At the most basic level, the decision by the Reagan administration to mobilize for a “war” in response to rising rates of drug use implied that the criminal justice system would be the principal troops on the front lines. Sadly, if the ultimate goal of the war was to decrease significantly the prevalence of drug use, this war has been a failure. The direct costs of prosecuting the war have been estimated by the Cato Institute to exceed \$40 billion annually, including over \$25 billion for state and local governments. In Virginia the total cost is over \$600 million per year in state and local funds.

The most egregious shortcomings of current drug policies relate to marijuana enforcement, prosecution and incarceration. Cato estimates Virginia’s marijuana-related criminal justice costs in 2010 were \$63.4 million for Police, \$31.8 million for Courts and \$32.6 million for Corrections. Counter to most of the nation, the trend in Virginia is upward. In addition to direct costs, the unlucky minority prosecuted for marijuana offenses – most for possession alone – bear the social costs of diminished employment and educational opportunities, driving privileges and voting. Further, marijuana enforcement is a nightmare in its disparate impact on minorities. A recent article in The Washington Post cited a study showing that in 2013 there were more than three times as many blacks arrested for marijuana violations as whites.

There is an overwhelming case for decriminalization of marijuana possession in Virginia and to dramatically reduce or eliminate penalties. Senator Adam Ebbin introduced a bill to this effect in last year’s legislative session and intends to do so again this year. I will be supporting his legislation in the House of Delegates.