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## Legalizing Heroin -- Why These High-Profile Politicians Want It

By Michael P. Tremoglie

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NEW YORK ([MainStreet](#)) — [Now that the legalization of recreational marijuana is a reality in two states and gaining momentum in others](#), there is a nascent movement to legalize heroin. Three high-profile politicians - former Representative Ron Paul (R-Tex), former Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) and former Republican Governor of New Mexico Gary Johnson - support it.

Why would someone want to legalize heroin? For many of the same reasons put forward to legalize marijuana or [prostitution](#) or just about any other vice. It can be regulated and made safer, it can be taxed, it will free up limited prison resources for real criminals and on and on ad nauseam.

"Legalizing heroin - and all other drugs - is a terrific idea," said Jeff Miron, director of economic policy studies for the Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C. libertarian think-tank. "The most important beneficiaries...would be heroin users themselves: they would face lower prices, predictable purity and the availability to buy from reliable, non-criminal sources."

Miron said that lower prices would reduce the incentives to inject heroin. He added that eliminating restrictions would diminish dirty needle use which would in turn prevent the spread of HIV and other blood-borne diseases. Users would not face the risk of arrest, and police could turn their efforts more fully to deterring non-drug crime.

"More broadly, non-users would benefit from reduced crime and corruption," Miron opined. "Violent crime between participants in the illegal heroin market should disappear. And income-generating crime committed by users should diminish as prices decline, allowing users to support their use on less income."

Miron also alleges that tax revenue from legal heroin would be about \$7 billion per year according to his 2010 Cato study. It "would be modest but nevertheless beneficial for the public purse."

Of course, not everyone greets the introduction of heroin to society with open arms.

"It is incredible to me that any thinking, well informed person would advocate legalization of heroin, one of the most dangerous, addictive drugs in the world," said Mel Levitsky, a professor at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy of the University of Michigan. " Do these people think addiction and deaths, like that of Phillip Seymour Hoffman and so many others...would be avoided by legalizing this poison? Legalizing it, making it more widely available, and cheaper - presumably to undercut an illegal black market - would only bring more addiction, more misery, higher health costs and more deaths."

Others think the legalization movement itself needs to be investigated because of the implications regarding national security.

"It is not surprising that there is a movement to legalize heroin," said Cliff Kincaid who is on the Council of Advisors for Drug Watch International. "This crowd wants to legalize marijuana, heroin, LSD, and Ecstasy. We need a committee in the House or Senate to investigate the drug legalization movement because of the implications for national and internal security."

Other countries have delved into legalizing heroin. Switzerland introduced a back door heroin legalization program in 1994 and made it permanent via a referendum in 2008. While not outright legalizing heroin, it is decriminalized and managed - in a matter of speaking - by the government.

This program pursues a four-pronged strategy of "prevention, harm reduction, therapy and repression."

The law came about as part of a "if you cannot beat them join them philosophy." Heroin junkies were so prevalent in Switzerland the police did not know what to do with them. Unable to control the drug use by banning it, the Swiss thought to control it.

The Swiss, ironically, approved heroin but at the same time rejected another referendum for the decriminalization of marijuana.

Germany, the Netherlands and some other countries have followed suit. But this is a far cry from legalization.

On March 10, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder expressed alarm of the "rise in overdose deaths from heroin and other prescription painkillers, categorizing this as an "urgent public health crisis." Holder vowed that the Justice Department would "combat the epidemic through a mix of enforcement and treatment efforts."

"When confronting the problem of substance abuse, it makes sense to focus attention on the most dangerous types of drugs," he said. "And right now, few substances are more lethal than prescription opiates and heroin."

Holder pointed out that between 2006 and 2010, heroin overdose deaths increased by 45%. He said that DEA has initiated more than 4,500 investigations related to heroin since 2011. But he does not think law enforcement alone will solve the problem.

Nonetheless the promoters of heroin legalization are unimpressed by the data or they think legalization will benefit society. Gary Johnson alluded to this Swiss program while making a speech at George Washington University last year.

"Well do you realize that in Zurich, Switzerland, they have a heroin maintenance program where if you're an addict you can get free heroin?" he told the audience.

Johnson maintains the Swiss program was a success story. He cited crime reduction as one reason, because heroin addicts no longer turn to theft or violence, among other malfeasance, to acquire drugs.

But others do not paint such a rosy picture of the Swiss program. They say there is a cost to the taxpayer that is enormous.

"I have personally visited Switzerland and seen the heroin project and how it operates," said Calvina Fay, executive director of Drug Free America Foundation, Inc. and Save Our Society From Drugs (SOS). "The cost to the Swiss government includes not just the heroin but also facilities and doctors with support staff who administer the heroin."

She also said the program includes facilities, funded by the government, where addicts use the Black Market heroin they purchase. The heroin users have access to television, free meals, free needles and free condoms. They can bathe, get free medical care and free clothes or even sleep overnight.

"All at the expense of the taxpayers," said Fay.

"These addicts are maintained on heroin with no attempt to leverage them towards sobriety," she added. The Swiss government creates menial jobs for them and pays them a token wage but, they are not required to actually show up for work if they don't feel like it and let's face it, when one is zoned out on heroin, they don't feel like doing much of anything except dozing off."

Fay made one point that refuted a claim that is routinely stated by vice legalizers, whether it be marijuana, prostitution or in this case heroin. The idea that crime will be reduced.

"I personally interviewed a police chief in a neighboring town of Zurich who told me that the program has changed the nature of crime but not really reduced it," she said. "These addicts no longer need to commit spur of the moment crimes to get their drugs because they can get them free from the government. However, they still want the things in life that other people want such as \$100 tennis shoes, big screen TVs, etc. and since they don't have good paying jobs, the only way to get these things is to steal them."

Criminals, as a result, are more calculating and discretionary in their crimes, without the urgency to feed their addiction, given that the government is already enabling that.

"This has actually made it more difficult for law enforcement to solve some crimes because they are more carefully planned rather than spur of the moment," Faye said.

*--Written by Michael P. Tremoglie for MainStreet*