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Where Ron Paul Is Right

By Mona Charen (Archive) · Friday, December 2, 2011

Five years ago last month, Milton Friedman died at age 94. To the very end, the Nobel Prize winning economist was astute, tireless and wonderfully avuncular. Thanks to the Internet, his commentaries on subjects ranging from greed, to slavery, to the Great Depression myth and many other topics, can be enjoyed forever.

Of course, great thinkers have been recording their thoughts in books for millennia. And Friedman was no exception. But there's no denying the immediacy and intimacy of video. Wouldn't we have loved to click on Edmund Burke, Alexander Hamilton or Cicero and watch them talk about their ideas? If you do dip into the Friedman oeuvre, start with his exchange with Phil Donahue!

Nothing would be easier than to invoke the great Friedman as the sage of limited government. He was certainly that. If he were commenting on America's current predicament, he would doubtless prescribe a radically smaller public sector.

But Friedman poses challenges to conservatives as well as liberals. He opposed, for example, the war on drugs. That's right. Friedman was for legalization of all drugs, not just marijuana.

It's a position embraced by only one candidate for president, Ron Paul. Congressman Paul holds some ludicrous views. He seems to believe, for example, that if we were just nicer to the Iranians, we wouldn't need to fret about their acquisition of nuclear weapons. Still, Paul deserves full credit for endorsing drug legalization. Friedman would approve.

Governments in the United States, federal and state, spend an estimated $41.3 billion annually to prevent people from ingesting substances we deem harmful, though many unsafe ingestibles -- you know the list -- remain legal. Half of all federal prisoners are serving sentences for drug offenses, along with 20 percent of state prisoners.

In 2009, there were 1.7 million drug arrests in the U.S. Half of those were for marijuana. As David Boaz and Timothy Lynch of the Cato Institute noted, "Addicts commit crimes to pay for a habit that would be easily affordable if it were legal. Police sources have estimated that as much as half the property crime in some major cities is committed by drug users."

Drug money, such as booze money during Prohibition, has corrupted countless police, Drug Enforcement Administration agents, border patrol agents, prosecutors and judges. Drug crime has blighted many neighborhoods. America's appetite for drugs has encouraged lawlessness and violence in many neighboring countries, most recently in Mexico, where its drug violence is spilling north.

Because illegal drugs are unregulated, their purity is unknowable -- accounting for thousands of overdose deaths and injuries. Since we maintain drug prohibition to protect people from their own foolish decisions, those overdose deaths must weigh in the balance, too.

Drug prohibition, Milton Friedman pointed out, keeps the price of drugs artificially inflated and amounts to a favor by the government to the drug lords. "The role of the government is to protect the drug cartels," as he provocatively phrased it. Due to our interdiction efforts, Friedman explained, it's enormously costly for a small competitor to attempt to import drugs. This ensures that only the big operators with large fleets of planes, heavy weapons, et cetera can compete.

Prohibition makes it unnecessarily cumbersome for cancer patients and others to receive painkillers and other drugs. A misplaced fear of addiction sometimes leads doctors and other health care providers to underprescribe pain medicine. Meanwhile, any high schooler can score whatever drugs he wants on the way to gym class.

Harvard economics professor Jeffrey Miron estimates that if drugs were legal and taxed, the U.S. and state treasuries would receive $46.7 billion in added revenue, while saving $41.3 billion in expenditures.

What is the downside to legalization? Friedman acknowledged the possibility that legalization might result in some increase in drug addiction. There was, after all, an uptick in alcoholism after Prohibition was repealed. But not all victims are created equal. The child, Friedman notes, who is killed in a drive-by shoot-out between drug gangs is a total victim. The adult who decides to take drugs is not.

Let's stipulate that some unknown number of Americans will become addicts after legalization, who otherwise would not have. We must ask whether the terrible price we are now paying -- in police costs, international drug control efforts, border security, foregone tax revenue, overdose deaths, corruption and violence -- is worth it.