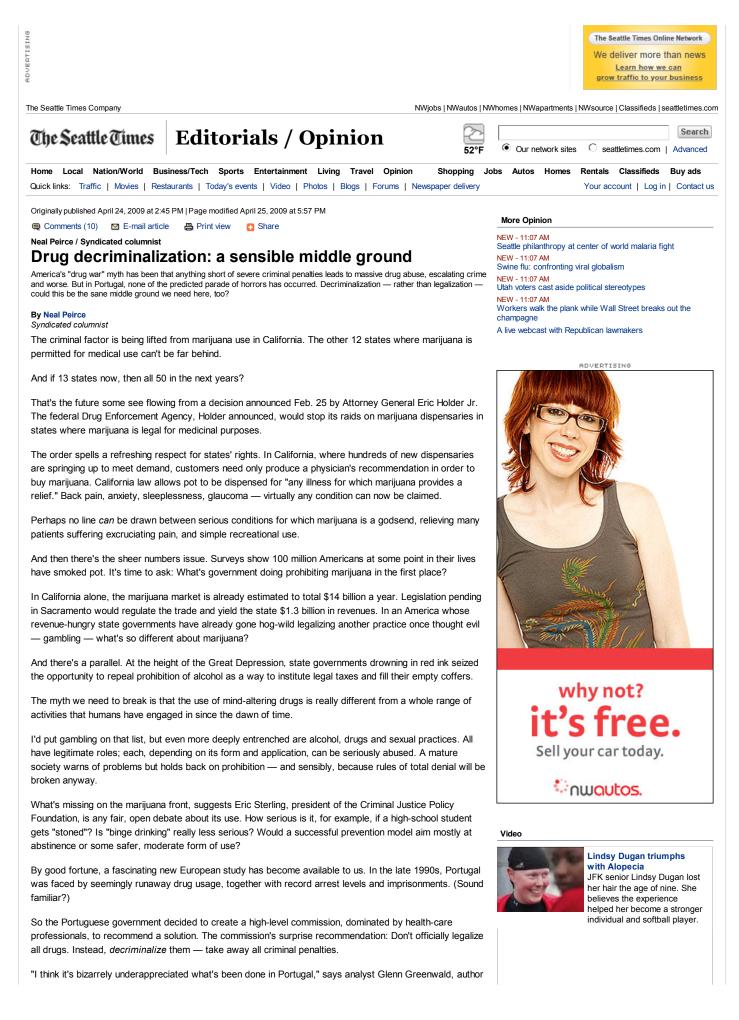
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of a just-published study on the Portuguese experiment for the Cato Institute, a Washington think tank.

The Portuguese parliament didn't "go soft" on drug traffickers - they're still liable to arrest and criminal prosecution. Police can still issue citations to drug users. But under the new law, in effect since 2001, the worst fate an apprehended drug user can expect is mandatory appearance before a "dissuasion commission" - which in turn is most likely to suggest a course of treatment.

The crucial advantage of decriminalization, says Greenwald, is that it removes citizens' fear of government punishment. So they feel free to seek out help for treatment or stopping drug use altogether. The money formerly spent on "putting drug users into cages," as he puts it, is going for counselors and psychologists conducting quality treatment programs.

America's "drug war" myth has been that anything short of severe criminal penalties leads to massive drug abuse, escalating crime and worse. But in Portugal, none of the predicted parade of horrors has occurred. Drug use among youth has actually declined, and surveys show use of marijuana, cocaine and dangerous substances like heroin are all well below Europe-wide averages.

Decriminalization - rather than legalization - could this be the sane middle ground we need?

Neal Peirce's column appears regularly on editorial pages of The Times. His e-mail address is nrp@citistates.com

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