Case #8: Legalize it All

In 1971, President Nixon launched the so-called war on drugs, declaring drug abuse “public enemy number one.”¹ Despite having spent over $1 trillion over the last 45 years, the U.S. remains the leading consumer of illegal drugs. Meanwhile, the U.S. prison population has grown exponentially, mainly due to nonviolent drug convictions.² As a result, many Americans no longer embrace prohibition when it comes to some illegal drugs, with “74% [supporting] alternatives to locking people up for marijuana possession.”³ Colorado, Oregon, Washington, Alaska, and D.C. now allow the recreational use of marijuana, and 24 states have legalized its medical use.⁴

With the legalization of cannabis now no longer the stuff of controversy, some have begun to push for even greater liberalization of drug use. Writer Dan Baum boldly declared in Harper’s Magazine’s April issue that the time has come to “legalize it all.”⁵ Though most people think of hard drugs like cocaine and methamphetamine as inherently addictive, data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration suggests that only a small percentage of drug users become addicts. Baum proposes a radical alternative: treating the disease of addiction, while letting the government have a “monopoly on [drug] distribution.” Baum envisions a system where private producers would supply federal- or state-managed stores, giving the government control over drug prices. In addition to enjoying the revenues from the sale of drugs, the government would have the power to oversee drug advertising, dosage, purity, and the placement of stores.

Baum’s plan is not without its detractors. Professor Mark Kleiman, a New York University (NYU) public policy expert, predicts that the legalization of hard drugs will lead to a spike in addiction rates, specifically for alcohol and cocaine, as these drugs work in synergy. As Kleiman explains it, “a limit to alcoholism is you fall asleep. Cocaine fixes that. And a limit to cocaine addiction is you can’t sleep. Alcohol fixes that.” Furthermore, some people worry that drug legalization will have a devastating effect on young people. In a recent piece addressing the prospect of marijuana legalization in Arizona, Laurie Roberts cited a 2014 study in The New England Journal of Medicine which argued that “adults who smoked marijuana regularly during adolescence have impaired neural connectivity…in specific brain regions.”⁶ Questioning

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legalization, Roberts asked “why we’d want to expand opportunities for our kids to use substances that are bad for them?”

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