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BODY:

The November 1998 Election Day success of ballot initiatives to legalize marijuana ostensibly for medicinal purposes in Nevada and Washington state undoubtedly encouraged advocates of drug legalization throughout the United States.

Rep. Bob Barr, Georgia Republican, thwarted a similar initiative in the District of Columbia by restricting the use of federal funds to count that particular ballot. Presently, however, the American Civil Liberties Union is challenging Mr. Barr's efforts, the authority of Congress and essentially the integrity of the anti-drug effort, before a federal judge. This challenge ignores the clear socioeconomic and health hazards of marijuana as it seeks to strengthen the foundation of the subtle legalization campaign.

The United States has a rigorous method for determining drug safety prior to legal distribution. Medical marijuana initiatives are intended to circumvent this process through public referendums and eventually achieve a wider agenda - total legalization. This scheme was invented in the early 1970s by a pro-legalization lobby after it failed to convince DEA to "downgrade" marijuana to a Schedule II drug - one that can be prescribed by doctors. The referendum strategy, however, puts the health of Americans at risk by threatening to legalize marijuana for medicinal purposes without the rigorous scientific evidence needed to acquire FDA approval.

Medical evidence shows smoking marijuana is more harmful than helpful - it complicates conditions from which users seek relief and causes new diseases. A 1998 Charles Mott Foundation-sponsored conference of 50 scientists and physicians from five countries determined marijuana smoke is more toxic than tobacco smoke to the lungs, heart, immune system and brain; may trigger or worsen the course of mental conditions; and can damage sexual reproductive functions.

Additionally, Dr. Gabe Merkin, a leading medical talk show host, revealed marijuana smoke contains roughly "30 times more carcinogens" than tobacco smoke, supporting findings from another recent study showing marijuana smokers demonstrate a significantly increased risk for developing lung cancer. The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) indicated marijuana contains more than 425 chemicals that convert to thousands when smoked and whose effects are largely unknown, but may also prove toxic. Marijuana's lone active ingredient, THC, can be taken in pill form, eliminating need to smoke the drug.

Marijuana legalization would also increase employee drug use, adversely affecting

American commercial enterprises. In today's highly globalized economy, American industries rely on worker productivity to remain competitive abroad, increasing the importance of a drug-free workplace. Studies show marijuana use among employees is a consistent cause of absenteeism, accidents and higher use of medical benefits.

The cost to the U.S. from drug-related reductions in productivity and safety is more than \$100 billion annually. With two-thirds of drug users employed, a system of legalized marijuana will magnify this damage to worker productivity and safety. Further, damage to property and loss of life from motor vehicle accidents where drivers were under the influence of marijuana are prevalent and could lead to increases in automobile insurance. A roadside study of reckless drivers not believed to be impaired by alcohol found that 45 percent tested positive for marijuana.

Legalizing marijuana even if only for medicinal purposes inevitably will create opportunity for criminal organizations involved in dark-side capitalist activities to thrive. Proposed medical marijuana initiatives afford little medical or law enforcement supervision of marijuana use and are therefore unable to prevent black market spillover.

The initiative that appeared on the November 1998 D.C. ballot presently in contention allows individuals to cultivate and sell unlimited and therefore unaccounted-for amounts of marijuana. ONDCP stated, "If this initiative were to become law, drug traffickers would be basically shielded from successful prosecution." Now legal marijuana networks would serve to identify customers, train salesmen and provide the bridge for further legalization, as dealers would eventually seek to legitimize 200 other illegal drugs. This expansion would allow drug dealers to become unfettered dark-side power brokers of the 21st century.

Ultimately, these developments would impact on our democratic institutions, distorting the law and corrupting our lawmakers and enforcers.

Initiatives to legalize marijuana for medicinal purposes will destabilize the U.S. anti-drug effort. Proponents of legalization are using these initiatives as a "foot-in-the-door" mechanism, which can lead to dangerous drug use by a new universe of people. Given the dangers, it is surprising President Clinton has not been as intensely vocal against marijuana legalization as he has toward tobacco use.

To counter this lack of leadership, health experts must acknowledge marijuana use is a canard, comprised of contradicting and unfounded theories. Likewise, states must recognize drug legalization efforts fuel dark-side capitalist activity while corrupting democratic institutions.

Hence, "Just Say No" is a slogan not only to be heeded by America's children, but also to be utilized by judges and politicians in the making of sound drug policy.

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